

# Communications

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**C**ommunication plays a major role in most aspects of the working relationship between you, the employer, and your employees. The manager's communication skill is critical to successful hiring and training processes, maintenance of employee motivation, and employee willingness to provide information. Most fundamentally, you must be able to send understandable messages to your employees, if they are to be able to do what you want.

## Communication Skills

Communication between two people is effective when both understand a message the same way. In a situation of work being assigned, it is desirable for both parties involved to come away knowing clearly what needs to be done and feeling good about the process. It is said that 90% of conflicts at work arise because of miscommunication.

In one-to-one communication, three types of skills are required. These are listening skills, speaking skills and silent communication skills (use of expressions, gestures, symbols).

### Listening Skills:

1. Stop talking. You cannot listen while talking.
2. Concentrate on what the other person is saying.
  - look past the words to meaning
  - watch hands, facial expressions, eyes
  - control your emotions, they impede understanding
  - react to ideas, not the person
  - make no value judgements
3. Respond. If you understand, say so. If you don't, ask for clarification.
4. Listen for feelings as well as content.
5. Good listening is essential to communication - only part of the responsibility rests with the speaker.

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## Speaking Skills:

1. Assigning tasks
  - give clear, concise, positive directions as opposed to wishy-washy instructions.
  - have confidence as opposed to cockiness
  - make instructions detailed enough to be understood
  - follow up
  - ask questions designed to make sure the listener understood
  - invite participation and discussion
2. Voicing complaints, objections, disapproval
  - both employer and employee should have this right
  - for both, there are proper times and places
  - a constructive criticizer is an asset; a chronic complainer is a liability.
3. Communicating unfavourable news
  - don't pass the buck
  - do it orally
  - do not delay or avoid the issue
  - start favourably
  - present possible benefits
  - justify unfavourable information
  - allow for freedom of discussion
  - pick the best time for the employee
  - talk directly to the person involved
4. Be aware that jargon and colloquialisms can confuse
  - pity the new employee who was told "Take the blue goose over to the Gerken place and pick up the green cattle". What the employee may not know is that the Gerken place is where the Browns now live, the green goose is the trailer that was painted red last year, and green cattle have nothing to do with colour.

## Silent Communication Skills:

1. A smile, a frown or some other gesture may communicate more than the accompanying words. It is said that when speaking, only 7 per cent of the message is in the words; 93 per cent is in body language.

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## Tips on Communication

2. Actions speak louder than words
3. Both supervisors and workers soon catch on to someone who says one thing and does another.
4. "Do as I say, not as I do" works only in a completely autocratic situation and is seldom effective.

Effective communication starts with a positive and appreciative attitude towards yourself and others. Unless you can respect others as being as worthy of respect as you are yourself, communication that motivates and results in high productivity is almost impossible. If you have such a positive attitude, you'll find the following tips easy to use.

### Communication Tips

- When expressing feelings, "I am upset about..." is more effective than "You make me mad..."
- When asking for help, "Let's do..." is more effective than "You help me do..."
- When assigning work, a request works better than an order. "Would you please...?" is more effective than "You go do..."
- Make sure your body and words give the same message. Body language gives strong messages. It can enrich and emphasize our words. However, if you do not mean what your words say, your body will give a conflicting message. If you say "I'm not angry" with your face flaming red and your teeth clenched, no one is likely to believe you.

## How Well Do You Communicate with Your Employees?

Be honest as you rate yourself. Circle the best answer.

	All/most of the time	Sometimes	Rarely or never
<b>Listening</b>			
I listen to all members of my staff as one person who respects another.	3	2	1
I obtain necessary details from each conversation.	3	2	1
I refrain from making value judgements while listening.	3	2	1
I allow enough time to listen.	3	2	1
I reply as soon as possible when a reply is required.	3	2	1
I provide follow-up.	3	2	1
<b>Informing</b>			
I know the value of keeping employees informed.	3	2	1
I give equal information to everyone who needs to know.	3	2	1
I create time to inform.	3	2	1
I make a point of updating those who are absent.	3	2	1
I informally share information to help others on a regular basis.	3	2	1
I withhold no more information than is necessary.	3	2	1

*Look back at your scoring. On items you scored 2 or less, consider if your communications could be more effective.*

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## Giving Advice

Sometimes an employee may come to you and ask for help in solving a problem. Many managers feel uncomfortable about giving advice to a worker with a personal problem.

What is required is the ability to listen, to provide an opportunity to discuss and to suggest rather than issue directives. Surprisingly, good advice is not the main thing employees want out of a counselling situation. Often they know what they should do and resent being directed, especially regarding personal problems. Your role is to provide them with a private setting in which to talk and to assist them in getting the help they need.

*The main determinants for success in offering advice are empathy, warmth and genuineness.*

Work together with your employee in coming up with a solution.

1. Ask the employee to write down a list of possible solutions to the problem.
2. While the employee writes, you also list what you think may be solutions.
3. The employee presents his or her solutions first.
4. You add only those solutions the employee did not mention.
5. The employee rates the various solutions good, bad or indifferent.
6. You then assist the employee to choose the best solution.

## Giving Criticism

No one enjoys criticism. Most people don't enjoy criticizing someone else, either, so they often put it off. But criticism can be positive and productive. It all depends on how you do it.

1. **Think carefully before you say anything.** If you are angry or too intent on fixing the problem, you may barge ahead with very little thought. Stop and ask yourself exactly what you want to change and why. What is the best way and time to approach the other person. Remember: be quick to praise but slow to criticize.

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2. Remember that the purpose of criticism should be to help the person improve performance. You should never criticize to hurt, embarrass, shame or insult. You should never criticize to make yourself feel superior or powerful or to enhance your ego.
  3. Show concern and desire to help. Make it clear that they will have a chance to improve. Offer specific solutions and directions. It does little good to tell people to do better if they don't know how.
  4. Try your best to affirm and strengthen the person's self-esteem. Don't say, "That was a stupid move." Say instead, "I know you want to do your best. Have you considered doing it in other ways." Go over the pros and cons of doing a job in different ways.
  5. Don't attack the person. You can't change a person's attitude no matter how much you might want to. Focus on performance; you might be able to change the person's behaviour.
  6. Always deliver criticism in private, in person. Never reprimand or criticize an employee in front of other workers. Never issue a written criticism as a first exchange.

If you follow these guidelines for positive criticism, you can give your employee something to feel good about. This kind of criticism is a useful tool, not a callous club.

## Staff Meeting

Involved workers are the key to increased productivity. One of the primary tools to involve employees is an effective staff meeting. The staff meeting is an opportunity to report on the general status of the business, to discuss business goals and plans, and to try to solve problems.

### When to Conduct a Staff Meeting

- A regular meeting time needs to be set and respected. The meeting should start and end on time - this shows respect for the participants' time.

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- When a big change or crisis arises, it may be beneficial to hold meetings more often. During slow times when some staff members are on vacation, meetings can be cancelled.

### How to Conduct a Staff Meeting

- Prepare an agenda and share it with the participants prior to the meeting. Participants presenting reports should be notified in advance. Try to eliminate surprises.
- Develop a feeling of respect for each participant in the staff meeting. Encourage their input. For a family farm business, all family members involved in the business should get together.
- Encourage an open exchange of information and ideas but not an unproductive airing of beefs.
- Encourage teamwork.
- Use the staff meeting as an opportunity to establish a personal and earnest relationship with your employees. Promote caring, good will and trust.
- Keep minutes of the decisions made, responsibilities delegated and time frame established.

### Where to Hold a Staff Meeting

- In a farm business, the meeting of the management team could be over coffee and rolls in the farm business centre.
- A meeting of the crop production team might begin at the start of the day in the building where the material and crop production records are maintained.
- A meeting of the whole staff should be held in a location that makes everyone feel that “this is important business”.

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## Written Documents

When something is written down, it is more clearly understood by all parties. It is a record that can be referred back to and it can serve as a benchmark for making changes.

Businesses and employees use many types of written documents to communicate, from memo to union contracts.

Some common written documents that a farm employer might use are:

- **Employment understanding**
  - an understanding between the employer and employee that covers wages, hours, vacation time, benefits etc. See Book 2, Hiring, of this Handbook series for more details on an employment understanding.
- **Employee handbook**
  - a document that states the purpose and goals of the business and gives details about the rights and responsibilities of all parties concerned.
- **Housing contract**
  - very important when housing is provided. Such a contract should spell out, among other things, who is responsible for repairs and maintenance.
- **Code of Behaviour**
  - written rules about the standard of behaviour you expect from your employees. See Book 2, Hiring, of this Handbook for more details on how to prepare a code of behaviour.

A word of caution:

Farmers often fear, and with good reason, that when something is stated in writing it may come back to haunt them in the form of evidence in a lawsuit. This is a valid concern so leave out those items you are worried about or check with a lawyer. However, don't let legal concerns prevent you from using relevant documents and the advantages they provide.