

10 TIPS FOR IMPROVING YOUR REMOTE CONVERSATIONS

Written by John R. Stoker

Due to an increase in employees working in off-site locations, one of the biggest challenges for leaders in recent years is managing these remote employees. Because managers are not working with these people in a face-to-face environment, they are forced to communicate by text, email, phone, internet, or teleconference. The most challenging types of communication occur without being able to either see the person speaking (e.g. phone) or hearing their voice (email, text). In the absence of these additional communication cues, it's easy to misinterpret to frustrating interactions and even negative results.

Here are 10 tips that can help you be more effective in your communication with others, especially when you're not able to interact in person.

1. Prepare beforehand. Taking a minute to deliberately think about and identify your intention and purpose for holding the conversation will help you focus on the desired outcome. You might also reflect upon what you know about the person, the impact of the topic upon the individual to whom you will be speaking, what you want to gain from the interaction and how your past relationship may influence the desired outcome.

2. Establish an agenda. You might prepare an agenda as part of the preparation process. Or, when speaking with an individual, ask them what they would like to accomplish. Once they have had an opportunity to share, then describe your goal for the conversation. Although you have a distinct purpose in mind, expect that when you ask the person what they would like to address, they may not know. If this occurs frequently, it would be helpful to ask the person to identify what they would like to discuss or accomplish before the conversation actually takes place. Outlining your intention in advance establishes mutual understanding and purpose prior to the interaction.

3. Agree upon a time limitation. Often the amount of time spent in meetings can be overwhelming as well as distracting. Establishing a specific length for a meeting with a hard stop time should increase preparation and contribution. If the time expires and the meeting has not achieved its purpose, then everyone must agree to continue or another meeting needs to be scheduled when everyone can be in attendance. Identifying and sticking to an agreed-upon completion time will increase your credibility as a leader and show that you value others' time.

4. Give your full attention. It's just as important to schedule uninterrupted time for remote conversations as it is for in-person meetings. If you let other outside calls, interruptions by people in the office, or incoming emails distract you during your interaction, the person on the other end will be able to tell that you are not giving them your full attention. Eliminate any potential distractions, maintain focus and be fully present during your scheduled meeting time. Your care and attention to the other person will increase their respect and trust for you.

5. Identify virtual cues. I have heard it said that in spite of our efforts to suppress our thoughts and feelings, we are "outed" by our body. Meaning, what we are thinking and feeling is often displayed in the body language that we portray. If you have the opportunity to interact with someone where you can't see or hear them, these behaviors can give you an idea of what they are truly thinking or feeling:

- **Silence/long pauses.** People often engage in this kind of behavior because they are not engaged. Their attention is usually elsewhere. Or sometimes they may not speak up if they aren't sure what to say, are trying to formulate a response and need time to think it through. Or, perhaps they may be worried about how their response may be received. At other time, the absence of participation may signal disagreement with a topic you are discussing. Notice these behaviors and then invite people to participate if they are not already active.

- **Sighs.** Sighing can be viewed as the expression of a negative emotion when one is feeling frustrated, anxious, stressed, afraid, tired or sad. When a person begins to sigh in conversation, you may consider asking questions to identify what the sigh is signaling.
- **Hesitation.** This behavior may be indicative that the person is uncomfortable with where they are, and they are being asked to do something that they don't agree with or that they don't want to do. Again, you will want to ask a question to understand the meaning behind the hesitation.
- **Word choice.** Noticing the words or phrases that people use is a strong indication of what is going on with them. For example, if someone were to say, "I hate this!" you might ask what's to "hate" or what does "this" refer to? You must first recognize the words people are using and then ask them for the meaning those words represent for them.
- **Energy or negative emotion.** Tone often defines the emotion that accompanies or is manifested in the way that words are spoken. Consequently, word intonation is usually more revealing of a message than the use of words themselves. When tone is misaligned with the verbal message, you know you have some work to do to discover the meaning behind the message. It's important to note that negative emotion represents a violated value. When such negativity is expressed, you must seek to clarify the meaning behind the emotion.

-
- **Tempo.** The pace or speed with which a message is delivered is considered the tempo. The tempo may increase as a person becomes more nervous or anxious about how their message will be received. It is as though the person wants to finish the message as quickly as they can in order to move on to other activities.

Being able to recognize these vocal and verbal cues, and then trying to explore what they mean will help create understanding and clarity in your conversations.

6. Clarify meaning of virtual cues. Once you have identified the virtual cues we discussed previously, don't hesitate to ask what those cues mean to the individual. For example, if someone hesitates to agree with something that you are proposing, you could simply say, "I noticed you hesitated; does that mean you don't agree or have misgivings? Please share your thoughts with me."

7. Ask more than you tell. Because you are not face to face, it's important to ask questions and listen to the responses to make sure that you are not misunderstanding what is being communicated. Ensure that you have adequate time built into your schedule to allow time to ask clarifying questions. Take the time to identify what the remote person may want to know. Then ask them what they would like or need that might help them to perform effectively.

8. Invite confirmation or disconfirmation. When you are not the one performing a remote task, the person working off-site may know more than you do about what is or is not working. When offering solutions or making decisions that may affect how

these remote employees are doing their jobs, invite their feedback on your decisions or proposals. To ignore this opportunity may frustrate your results. Taking the opportunity to solicit opinions and thoughts on a course of direction will increase commitment, involvement and efficiency.

9. Surface evidence. Sometimes when people disagree, the negative emotions of the conflict override the content of an issue. When a disagreement arises, take the time to surface and explore the evidence or data that individuals are using to formulate their differing opinions. This allows the decision-makers to access the information that should be used to formulate an effective solution. Looking for evidence that supports a problem-solving conversation tends to take the negative emotions out of the conversation while allowing you to focus on the issues at hand.

10. Summarize. Whether you are making decisions or just clarifying what was discussed or agreed upon, making a deliberate attempt to summarize and check your understanding will assure that all parties are on the same page and have reached a clear, mutual understanding.

Communicating with remote employees can definitely be a challenge. Part of the challenge arises from the infrequency of conversations overall. Not being with them in person is another issue that can cause misunderstandings. Being more deliberate and precise in the way that you converse with others will help avoid frustration and misinformation. Taking the time to implement these tips will not only improve the quality of your conversations, but the quality of your results as well.