

M.E.E.T.

Manager Employee
Effectiveness Training



Merkis & Hunt Counselling

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Manager Employee Effectiveness Training

Fourth Edition

28 January 2014

The twelve hour interactive training program that will make you
a more effective manager or employee

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Manager Employee Effectiveness Training

Welcome to the Manager Employee Effectiveness Training program, or, M.E.E.T., for short.

This is a 12 hour interactive course held over two, six hour days and its goal is to help improve communications between managers and employees. But, that's not all the M.E.E.T. program is designed to do. During the course, you will learn about how to communicate really badly and why we do that. After that, we will move onto the key to the program - mutual need fulfillment and communication styles. You will also learn effective listening and assertive speaking, handling defensiveness, assertiveness options and finally "win-win" problem solving.

This program has been developed not only to help you become the most effective manager or employee that you can be, but it can also help you get more out of your job and enjoy it more! That's quite a claim to make, but the results of this program are supported by a wealth of social psychological research. Everything taught in the MEET program has been tested in the laboratory and also in the real world, corporate and domestic. Nothing is "made up" as we go along or used in the hopes that it "might work".

We teach MEET because it works.

MEET is not a new program. Its roots are in the works of such great students of human relationships as Carl Rogers, the noted American researcher. Rogers laid down the fundamentals of this program during World War II and continued developing it into the 1970s. Today, further work in this field has been done by such notables as Erich Fromm, Thomas Gordon, Robert Bolton and the University of Manitoba's David Martin.

But this program is not something that belongs in behavioural labs and university research projects. Versions of the MEET program are taught to managers of some of the largest and most successful corporations.

We have taught this program to many individuals and groups. Most people are pretty skeptical at first, they often feel pretty "set in their ways" and often feel that there is no point in changing their style of working with others. Our question to them is, "Is what you are doing now working for you?" If not, then perhaps we can give you some new approaches to get your needs met. Contrary to what you may think we are not trying to change "who you are", just "what you do". By the time we get into the program a little, most people find that it is easy and fun to work with and they enjoy the course. When we are done you will get a chance to tell us what you think, too.

For us, as trainers, one of the real benefits of this program is that it will not just help you become a more effective employee or manager. If you use this approach outside work it will also help you become a more effective parent, customer, teacher, coach and spouse. We use these methods everyday ourselves, because they work very well. We hope that you enjoy the program.

Barriers to Communication

They are known as “the dirty dozen”. These are the main roadblocks to communication that we generally tend to fall into. Briefly, they include:

- Criticizing – “You asked for this. If you hadn’t taken that day off...”
- Name-calling – this is pretty self-explanatory
- Diagnosing – “Just because you have a bigger office, you think you’re better than I am.”
- Praising Evaluatively – “You’re such a hard worker; I know I can count on you to stay late...”
- Ordering – “Get this to head office now. Why? Because I’m the boss.”
- Threatening – “If you don’t finish this report right away, I’ll make sure you stay late to finish it.”
- Moralizing – “You shouldn’t have got angry at him. Tell him you’re sorry.”
- Excessive or inappropriate questioning – These are closed-ended (i.e. one or two word answers that don’t require any thought) questions generally asked in a rapid-fire way whose answers don’t contribute to the conversation. Examples include, “Really? When did that happen?”, “Are you sorry you did that?”, “Was it early in the day when this happened?”
- Advising – this is a common barrier to communication: giving the other person the solution to the problem. (i.e. “Oh, that’s really easy. First, you should....”) Giving advice tends to lead the listener to conclude that she or he is perceived to be too stupid to solve things by her or himself.
- Diverting – This is the “Oh, you think you have it tough? Well, let me tell you about my situation!” Or, sometimes it sounds more like, “Look, let’s not talk about that, okay?” or “Can we change the subject to something a little more pleasant?”
- Logical Argument – “If you hadn’t taken those two days off, we could have completed the report on time.”
- Reassuring – This is another too-common roadblock. Here is where we often hear, “Oh, don’t worry, everything will be okay.” Or “It’s always darkest before the dawn.”

There is a 13th roadblock that creeps in now and again: it’s telling others what roadblocks they’re using (“Hey, my supervisor uses almost all of these roadblocks. Wait ‘til I tell him the next time he does that.”). Doing this will only further sour relationships.

Poor Communication...an Example

You’ve seen this before when someone arrives late for work. This is what one manager said:

Manager (shouting and obviously staring at his or her watch)

“Where the blazes have you been? You’re late!”

Employee – (feeling shouted at) replies, “The traffic was awful.”

Manager – “Well, maybe get up earlier next time and you won’t be late! We have an important meeting with a client this morning!”

Employee – “I know that. I can’t help it if they’re tearing up Bank Street.”

Manager – “That’s not my problem. If you’re late one more time, you’re fired!”

Now, let’s revisit this scene, except we have a different manager.

Manager – (glancing at her or his watch and *not shouting at all*) “Where have you been? You’re late.”

Employee – (sensing that the manager was more concerned than angry) “The traffic was awful.”

Manager – “That’s really frustrating. Getting stuck in heavy traffic is never any fun, is it?”

Employee – “Yeah, it was really terrible. I had no idea they were tearing up Bank Street like that.”

Manager – “Construction really slows everyone down and we have an important meeting this morning with a client.”

Employee – “That was all I could think of, too. I really don’t like showing up for work late.”

Manager – “You’re already pretty frazzled, eh?”

Employee – “Yeah, I think I’ll take a different route tomorrow so this doesn’t happen again.”

Manager – “That sounds like a plan.”

What is the difference in how the players handled the scenario? Remember that the situation is exactly the same but the outcome is entirely different.

In the first scene, the employee arrives late for work and the manager gets upset at the employee’s actions. Shouting at the employee, the manager focuses on the fact that the employee is late. The employee, already feeling distressed at being late, feels attacked (which is true) and immediately becomes defensive, which only aggravates things. The manager mentions that the employee’s lateness may very well threaten the success of a meeting with a client and, finally, threatens to fire the employee if he or she is late again.

In the second scene, the employee arrives late for work and while the manager is not happy about the lateness of the employee handles the situation in at least three different ways.

1. the manager does not shout at the employee
2. the manager demonstrates empathy towards the employee’s predicament.
3. the manager does not impose a solution to the employee – but rather allows the employee to arrive at his or her own solution instead.

In the first scenario, the manager is very angry at the employee for coming into work late, but the employee who is already distressed at being late, has to now put up more “emotional shields” to prevent being further assaulted. The employee resorts to very defensive statements in the first scene (“I can’t help it if...”) whereas in the second scene, the employee demonstrates an awareness of the impact of being late (“Yeah, that was all I could think of...” and “I really don’t like showing up for work late.”). Best of all, in the second scene, the employee takes responsibility for arriving late for work by coming up with a solution by him or herself. When we make decisions for ourselves we are far more likely to follow through with them than when we have decisions imposed upon us, like the manager in the first scenario did.

Yet, how often does the first version of this scene play out? Though not as often as it once was, the first version of this scenario is still played out far too often. The result is that the employee doesn’t feel listened to. The manager also feels threatened by the circumstances, too, because the employee may then start coming in later and later as a way of getting even with the manager for shouting in the first place.

So why do we communicate so badly?

It's common to assume that we ourselves don't communicate badly but that everyone else does. The truth, however, is that none of us is absolutely perfect at communicating effectively. Why we communicate so badly is that we have learned to communicate badly. More specifically, we have learned to not listen to what the speaker is saying. Unfortunately, our generally poor listening skills are very thoroughly taught to us at home and at school. How often it is that most of us have heard parents, teachers or even friends say to us:

Four Common Statements that Teach us how not to listen

"Just ignore him and he'll go away."

"Look the other way."

"We don't talk about those things here."

"Okay, people, that's enough talking of that nonsense."

Exercise 1

Discuss the four statements above and answer the following questions: What are those messages saying? How do you feel when you hear those statements? What would you say to someone who makes statements like that?

In that last example, the speaker, though perhaps well-meaning, has not only stifled any conversation about a topic but has also made a negative value judgement ("...nonsense.") on the topic at hand.

The lack of listening overall is both staggering and insidious. Especially in schools, teachers are expected to teach vast amounts of knowledge to young kids who cannot possibly listen effectively for six to seven hours per day. It's no wonder so many of us wind up daydreaming – our minds simply cannot absorb all that information from teachers.

That's not to say we don't hear what people are saying, but that we don't actually listen. It is here where we must differentiate between hearing and listening. Hearing involves the receiving of sound and of reacting to it. Listening, on the other hand, is actively attending not just to the sound of someone's words but of the meaning behind the whole message, including body language, tone of voice, physical proximity and facial expression.

If we don't listen very well, how can we learn to communicate?

The good news about poor listening and communicating skills is that because these are learned they can be unlearned, too. Attending seminars and workshops like this can go a long way towards improving your listening and communicating skills.

Exercise 2

Think about the scenario presented at the beginning of this lesson and recall a similar scene you may have either witnessed or even experienced yourself. Did the situation turn into what you had hoped for? If so, think about how you can repeat that. If not, think about how it did play out and how it could possibly be different next time. Write down your thoughts on this issue.

Listening – the skills we need to be really good at it

Remember when you were learning to drive a car, tie your shoelaces, read a book or learn a new language in school? You probably weren't just given all the tools you needed and then expected to do it right. More likely, you were given the basics first with your teacher giving you information and showing you the skills you needed first. Think back to how your teacher knew you were learning the necessary skills. You were tested, verbally and then asked to demonstrate the skills you had practiced. Well, thankfully, learning how to listen effectively follows the same pattern. Effective listening can be divided into three skill sets: attending skills, following skills and reflecting skills. Let's begin with attending skills.

Attending skills

Robert Bolton defines attending as, "...giving your physical attention to another person." ⁽¹⁾ By that, it is meant that the listener is making appropriate eye contact with the speaker, is sitting, generally face to face with the speaker about 1-3 feet away and has a somewhat forward leaning posture. Attending skills are non-verbal, and also include having a non-distracting environment (i.e. no television or stereo playing, no one else making demands on your time, some people even unplug the phone!). If an employee comes into the office of a manager and that manager sits back studiously, nervously tapping his or her pen or otherwise just staring intently at the employee without even blinking (is the manager even breathing?), this is not attending behaviour any more than if this manager walked up to the employee, took his or her hand and had that employee sit in the manager's lap! Let's explore this in more detail.

Posture of involvement – the listener needs to look both relaxed and alert. The simple act of leaning forward slightly tells the speaker (in this case the employee) that the manager has the employee's undivided attention.

Facing each other squarely – both the speaker and listener need to face each other. However, as many offices aren't structured in this manner, the manager may need to move out from behind the desk (which is generally perceived as imposing anyway) and to sit in a chair facing the employee. Sitting and facing each other at a table is appropriate where possible, but do try to step away from the desk, otherwise, the employee will sense that there is "something between us" and there is...the manager's work.

Maintaining an open position – you've probably read and/or heard quite a bit on the power of body language. Psychologists study the powerful effect of body language on communication. In effective listening, it is vital to develop and maintain an open position. The manager who sits there with his or her legs and arms tightly crossed is communicating an unwillingness to listen or discomfort in trying. Do employees who see this feel like talking no matter how earnestly the manager may try to elicit communication? The answer is a certain "no".

Appropriate distance – This is a bit of a tricky area to cover because what one group or culture feels is appropriate is not necessarily the same as what another group feels. In India, for example, it is expected that men who are talking with each other hold each other's hands. Many Latin American, Mediterranean and Arab cultures feel most comfortable communicating at distances many Scandinavian, North American and British cultures find intrusive and very uncomfortable. Conversely, many Arab cultures find our Western sense of appropriate distance to be too cold and informal. If you're uncertain, a good measure is to place chairs approximately 3-6 feet from each other. Any further than that, and you may be seen as avoidant. Any closer, and you risk the speaker feeling anxious about you "being too close for comfort".

Eye contact – This is also a bit of a tricky area to cover, but not as tricky as appropriate distance. Staring intently without blinking is as uncomfortable to the speaker as is the listener who looks away habitually or who looks away as soon as the other person speaks. The unspoken message there is unmistakable: I'm not comfortable here. I'd rather be doing something else. Please go away. It bears mentioning that there is a cultural value here to consider. For example, American Blacks often look away when someone is speaking to them and many Whites see this as a sign of disrespect. It isn't. For many Blacks, looking away means that they can better concentrate on what the speaker is saying. Another example is the socialization process that we undergo. Girls are raised (generally) to look down and away when speaking with a man whereas boys are raised to look at you "square in the eye". Eye contact used like this is a way of demonstrating who has power over whom; typically, men have more power over women. Thankfully, this is changing, but it's changing only very slowly.

Non-distracting environment – Can you read with the stereo playing? Can you have a discussion with someone (anyone) while the phone keeps ringing and the manager keeps saying, "Excuse me a moment."? Many places of employment have open-door policies where employees can walk into the manager's office to talk about anything. Such open-door policies certainly encourage employees to stop by to chat about something important, but it is necessary for manager's to then close the door over (not shut completely) and to let others know that a closed over door means that the manager is not to be disturbed. In this day of sexual harassment awareness, closing the door completely may leave many speakers (especially women) feeling vulnerable in the face of a (usually) male manager. While a completely closed door is certainly a non-distracting environment, it may violate a person's sense of appropriate space.

Exercise 3

Find a partner in the classroom and position yourselves in your chairs using appropriate distance. Demonstrate to each other a posture that says, "I am interested in what you have to say." Then, demonstrate the opposite message. Discuss how each of you is feeling about this exercise. We will regroup for subsequent exercises in which we practice listening skills.

Door Openers

These are phrases listeners use when they wish to invite a person to speak. It's very common for people who want to talk about something to transmit non-verbal clues. The perceptive listener will make a comment about what he or she sees and then offer to the speaker the opportunity to speak.

Exercise 4

Think about some other non-verbal clues that you may have seen in others that would lead you to think that they would want to talk about something. Write out a list of some of those clues.

What makes a good door opener?

Thankfully, good door openers are pretty easy to create and we use them more often than we may believe. The ingredients of a good door opener include:

1. a description of the other person's body language – are they bouncy? Are they wringing their hands a lot? Shifting weight from one foot to another?
2. an *invitation* to talk or to continue talking – emphasis on invitation. Sometimes, good intentions interfere and prospective listeners may try to not only invite the speaker to talk but insist that the speaker talk. Remember that door openers are just that – they are a non-coercive invitation to speak.
3. silence – and that means giving the speaker the time and emotional space to consider your invitation. We're not generally that comfortable with silence. We feel edgy and compelled to offer advice or to ask questions. This is generally because our society is

structured more on the pragmatics of getting tasks done, rather than on helping people deal with the feelings they may have about the tasks. Try to resist the urge to break the silence with words. How long is long enough? Initially, a few seconds of attentive silence is what beginners are most comfortable with, so try that and see how it goes.

4. attending – this is the posture of involvement we practiced earlier. Remember, the goal is to help the listener feel that they have your undivided attention.

What makes a poor door opener?

Poor door openers are ones which have a judgemental tone to them. Sometimes, they reassure or they give advice but they do not foster any communication. In fact, poor door openers block communication and, when used frequently, will lead to resentment from the other person.

Examples of poor door openers include:

1. who spit in your coffee?
2. keep your misery to yourself
3. oh, it's not that bad. Things will look better in the morning.
4. why don't you go do something else instead?

Exercise 5

Can you think of any other examples of poor door openers?

What ones have you experienced?

Can you remember how you felt?

Minimal Encourages

As the title suggests, minimal encourages are small expressions the listener says to the speaker which attempt to encourage the speaker to continue. They also let the speaker know that they have been heard, although making summative or reflective statements will let the speaker know they have been understood. We'll get to that section a little later.

Examples of minimal encourages

"Mm hmm"

"Yeah"

"Wow"

"Say more about that"

"Oh?"

"Then what happened?"

"Like?"

Minimal encourages are really best when accompanied by appropriate facial and body gestures. Nobody will be fooled by a listener who says, "Tell me more about that" when they are staring unblinkingly at the speaker or when they are reading a magazine or if it sounds like it came from a computer. To use minimal encourages best, nod your head slightly and maintain the posture of involvement.

The emotional side of minimal encourages

When a speaker is talking about a subject that is very emotional in nature, such as problems in a romantic relationship, one's job or medical concerns, the listener can mentally create and call upon a list of minimal encourages that have an emotional component to them. As you progress in your communication skills, make use of some of the more emotionally tinged minimal

encourages. The important point, though, is to make sure you are accurately reflecting the speaker's emotional state. That takes a bit of practice but it isn't especially difficult to do. Examples of more emotional minimal encourages include:

"Oh, no"
"Yikes!"
"Awesome!"
"And?"

As with all listening, make use of appropriate body language and eye contact. Generally, when we are excited about something, our eyebrows are raised and we tend to not blink as frequently (perhaps we feel that by blinking we may miss something crucial). Eye contact also tends to be more intense and that can make some speakers a bit uncomfortable. What some listeners do is deliberately blink slowly and look away only for a moment as if they themselves were processing the information. The speaker will generally take that cue as an indication that the listener needs to break for a moment before continuing the conversation.

Infrequent Questions

Notice the first word of this section. Infrequent. Overall, we tend to ask far too many questions too often and too quickly. It isn't really anyone's fault – this is a part of our culture, the information age.

Questions also tend to focus more on the speaker's own issues, their own intent and not at all on the listener's needs. Questions such as, "How much damage was done?" or "Who said what to whom?" are all related to facts or events and not at all on the feelings associated with events. When police, fire or ambulance crews first arrive on an accident scene, the first question they ask is not, "What happened?"...they'll get to that one soon enough, but, "Is everyone all right?" It's a small question but the message it conveys is very big: it tells listeners that their wellbeing is of utmost importance.

When we speak of questions, it's important to make a distinction between closed and open questions. Closed questions are ones which require a simple yes/no answer whereas open questions require a more complex answer. When communicating, it is much more preferable to ask open questions because they're like invitations to speak. Besides, who can answer a simple yes/no to most questions anyway? Life isn't always so cut and dried.

In our mad quest for information, we often ask many questions in a row and often before the speaker has had a chance to answer the first one. After awhile, it all starts to feel like an interrogation and that's a sure fire way of making sure no communication takes place.

Reflective Skills, or, making the speaker feel understood

Communication is a two way flow of expressed thoughts, feelings, ideas and comments. We've focused our course on listening skills but now we are going to turn our attention to reflective skills.

By reflective skills, we mean those behaviours which let the speaker know that they have not just been heard, but understood. When we feel we have been understood, we are going to want to say more.

Learning reflective skills not only improves your standing with your employees – they will feel that you are a good listener – but you will invariably wind up teaching reflective skills to your employees who also want to be known as good listeners.

The Four Reflective Skills which will help you to improve your communication skills

As the title states, there are four reflective skills you will learn in this section. They are all interrelated and include: paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, reflecting meanings and summative reflections. Let's begin with paraphrasing.

Paraphrasing

When we speak of paraphrasing, we are simply putting into our own words what we think the speaker has said. Paraphrasing is not the same thing as only repeating precisely what the other person has said. That's known as parroting and will offend even the most patient speaker. In paraphrasing, we're telling the speaker what we think he or she said and, in doing so, asking for confirmation that we heard correctly.

Example:

Speaker – *“Oh, man, I am so tired. What a crazy day I had at work. The phones wouldn't stop ringing, the e-mail just kept piling up and the secretary just kept dumping endless paperwork on my desk. I didn't even have time to eat a decent lunch. I had to eat at my desk and even then the phones just kept ringing. I had to answer a phone call while I had food in my mouth.”*

Listener – (paraphrasing) *“You're really exhausted because you had too much work today and no time to even eat lunch in peace.”*

The above is a typical example of paraphrasing. The listener reiterated what the speaker had said using his or her own words. The paraphrase is also designed to ask the speaker if the listener had heard correctly. The conversation continued:

Speaker - *Yeah, I'm just too wiped to even think straight. And we've got a budget meeting tomorrow morning so that'll mean I'll get that much more behind.*

Listener – (certain he or she had heard the speaker properly) *“It's far too busy at work and you've got yet more work to deal with.”*

Speaker – *“That, too. Don't get me wrong, I really like my job if I ever get the chance to do it properly.”*

Listener – *“You like the work. You want to do as good a job as you possibly can and it's really difficult when you're swamped with one task after another.”*

This sample is based on an actual conversation and it's also indicative of the corporate world these days. With downsizing and companies becoming “leaner and meaner”, those employees who are left have to do more and more work with fewer and fewer resources.

In the example, the body language is not described. That's because it must be observed but it's safe to say that body language should mirror the speaker's. Sitting rigidly like a mannequin will unnerve anyone as much as hovering half a centimetre from their nose will.

Exercise 6

Find a partner and position yourselves in an appropriate seating position. Have one of you ask the other person to talk about something that happened to them recently. It should be a fairly

straightforward, every day kind of event. It can be anything from having been cut off by another driver, to finding a good bargain on shoes. Try not to pick something too controversial. Use attending skills (don't be afraid to look those up again), door openers and reflective statements. This exercise shouldn't take longer than a minute or two. Then, switch roles so that the first "listener" becomes the "speaker".

Reflecting Feelings

We tend to focus too much on facts and practicalities and ignore feelings. In our society, however, women are socialized to deal with feelings more than men are but it's men who also occupy more managerial positions than women. This sets the stage for communication problems, as if we didn't have enough challenges.

In this section, we will learn about reflecting feelings and how this skill is absolutely crucial to communicating.

In the scenario above, we'll change a bit what the listener had said:

Speaker – *“Oh, man, I am so tired. What a crazy day I had at work. The phones wouldn't stop ringing, the e-mail just kept piling up and the secretary just kept dumping endless paperwork on my desk. I didn't even have time to eat a decent lunch. I had to eat at my desk and even then the phones just kept ringing. I had to answer a phone call while I had food in my mouth.”*

Listener – (paraphrasing and now making reflective statements on the speaker's feelings) *“Wow, you sound really frustrated. You're exhausted because you had too much work today and no time to even eat lunch in peace.”*

Speaker - *Yeah, I'm just too wiped to even think straight. And we've got a budget meeting tomorrow morning so that'll mean I'll get that much more behind.*

Listener – (certain he or she had heard the speaker properly) *“You sound overwhelmed and really annoyed. It's really busy at work and you've got yet more work to deal with.”*

Speaker – *“That, too. Don't get me wrong, I really like my job if I ever get the chance to do it properly.”*

Listener – *“You like the work. You want to do as good a job as you possibly can and it's really difficult when you're swamped with one task after another. It really sounds like you're very frustrated.”*

I changed some of what the listener had said to the speaker, adding in statements about how the listener perceived the speaker's feelings.

Reflecting the speaker's feelings can also refer to the body language of the speaker. If in the above scenario, the speaker had just slumped into a chair at the end of the day, the listener could have made a reflective statement on that observation, “You look bushed.” or “Gee, you seem really flustered.” The speaker hasn't actually said he or she was bushed (not yet) or flustered; the listener simply made a reflective statement of the speaker's emotional state based solely on the body language. One of the nice things about making statements that reflect the speaker's perceived emotional state is that these are often door openers in disguise. “You look bushed” is generally seen as an invitation to say more, especially when, “You look bushed” is then followed by, “Want to talk about it?” as the listener turns the TV or stereo off or otherwise makes the environment as non-distracting as possible.

Exercise 7

Find a partner and sit facing each other in an appropriate way. As in exercise 6, have one of you act as speaker while the other acts as listener. Have the speaker tell the listener how he or she feels about taking this course. Keep the statements fairly short if possible. Then, the listener should make reflective statements about the speaker's thoughts and feelings about taking this course. If the speaker feels that the listener has understood what was said, then let the listener know and then switch sides.

Reflecting Meaning

Reflecting feelings about a given situation or topic is crucial towards improving communication but reflecting the meaning behind statements is equally crucial. In this section, we will learn about and practice reflecting meanings in statements speakers make.

It is impossible to make reflective statements about meaning without understanding the associated feelings. Try to keep in mind the question that if you were in the same situation as the speaker is, how would you feel?

Making reflective statements about meaning can be summed up in the formula, "You feel..." (insert feeling word here) "...because..." (insert the situation or event as the listener understands it here). It may sound stilted and many who take this course report feeling artificial when using these strategies initially. Trust me, it gets easier with practice.

Example:

Speaker – "I didn't think the package would actually get here. I'd been waiting and waiting for weeks, expecting hold ups at customs and then brokerage fees added on top of everything. Now, it's finally here and I can get on and finish this project."

Listener – "You're happy and relieved because you don't have to wait to finish your project."

In the above example, the listener made a reflective statement which incorporated the perceived feelings of the speaker and the practical significance of those feelings. The speaker sounds happy and relieved to have finally received the package and the listener attributes the reason for the speaker's feelings to not having to wait anymore to finish a project. Let's listen in further.

Speaker – "Yeah, I was so sick of waiting for this to arrive. Every time I called the sender, he kept telling me to be patient but it was driving me nuts."

Listener – "You felt worried and anxious because nothing was in the mailbox."

Speaker – "This cost me a lot of money and the last thing I needed were delays."

Listener – "You spent a lot on these parts and you wanted some kind of return on your investment."

Et cetera...

The conversation could go on and on, but the point is that the listener made reflective statements on the speaker's feelings and their significance. The speaker felt listened to and understood.

So far, we've presented examples of conversations where everyone communicated properly. The listener felt listened to and the speaker was encouraged to continue. But reality doesn't always look like that and so we will now present a few examples of really poor communication.

Speaker – “Oh, man am I ever wiped. What a rotten day at work, on top of a lousy night’s sleep and no time for lunch.”

Listener – “Well, at least you have a life. Try doing housework all day with the phones ringing and those idiots outside making a racket.”

Speaker – “I have a life? You mean, working your guts out and never seeing daylight is a life?”

Listener – “Do you work with other adults? I don’t even get to see adults, unless I go to the store and the clerks there all have the intelligence of mushrooms.”

Speaker – “At least you get to choose where you go during the day.”

Listener – “And do what? Not be productive?”

Speaker – “That’s not my problem.”

Listener – “I didn’t say it was. I’m just trying to tell you that your life isn’t nearly as tough as you think it is.”

Et cetera. This could go on forever but you will notice that neither party was listening to the other. But, perhaps more importantly, neither party was really able to listen to the other. This is a common problem in relationships. In the working environment, poor communications often look like this:

Speaker – “This is a new program which should help make your job easier.”

Listener – “I don’t have time to learn it.”

Speaker – “What do you mean, you ‘don’t have time’? Why? What else is going on?”

Listener – “I’m so busy with all my other tasks, I couldn’t possibly take any time to learn it.”

Speaker – “Everyone else has got new programs and they’re taking the time to learn them.”

Listener – “I’m having problems at home.”

Speaker – “Well, keep ‘em there. I’m trying to run a business here and I can’t afford to have employees bring their personal problems into the office. I expect you to learn that new program.”

Listener – “I can’t do it.”

Speaker – “Then we’ll have to find someone else to do your job.”

Et cetera... In the above scene, the listener (employee) was immediately tasked to learn a new program which the employee stated was not possible. After some aggressive prodding by the speaker (manager) the listener stated that there were some personal problems which appear to be interfering with the listener’s ability to learn a new program. The speaker (manager) did not display any empathy at all and rephrased the situation solely in terms of what she or he needed and not what the listener (employee) needed. In the end, there was the implicit threat to the listener’s job, (“...we’ll have to find someone else to do your job.”) This is a far too common situation and, sadly, many times the story ends with the employee losing his or her job. It looks just as poorly for the manager, too, as the flow of business is interrupted by having to re-train a new employee. Here, reflective listening isn’t enough to resolve the issues. That would involve conflict resolution and we’ll return to that a little later in the course.

Summative Reflections

Often, when we're communicating with someone about an issue or a problem, we're dealing with a set of complex and interrelated concerns. It becomes difficult (or even impossible) for a speaker to stick to only making one or two statements and then pausing long enough for the listener to make a reflective statement. Sometimes, the listener needs more information about the speaker's concerns before being able to make sense out of it all, let alone describe what he or she heard.

Yes, it's example time:

Listener – *“You feel that your work situation is spiraling out of control. The phone calls won't stop, the email won't stop coming in and the projects you're trying to work on don't get touched at all. You know you're supposed to be working for the members but the endless interruptions make your job more difficult than it should be. You'd like to find a better way to get what you need to get done without being interrupted constantly by others.”*

The summary just given by the listener highlights the main points and themes in what the speaker has just said. Summative reflections give the speaker the opportunity to not just check to see if the listener has fully understood the scope of the problem but to see if there are any common themes in the problem. Sometimes, this allows the speaker some new insight into the problem and can lead to the formulation of new ideas. Often, summative statements are used whenever the problem put forth by the speaker is an ongoing or very complex problem.

Speaker – *“Yeah, that's about it. I am feeling overwhelmed by the demands and I know I've got to change things before I wind up on disability. Maybe I ought to declare Tuesdays and Thursdays as no phone call days or no e-mail days. I guess I'm still getting used to the job.”*

In the above, the speaker not only confirms to the listener that he or she had heard correctly (“Yeah, that's about it.”) but also allowed the formulation of a possible strategy (i.e. declaring Tuesdays and Thursdays as “no phone call days or no e-mail days”.) Also note that the speaker's concern about the situation included a reference to consequences if no change takes place (“... before I wind up on long term disability”). That alone would encourage anyone to take action towards resolving the dilemma.

So, why learn reflective listening skills?

Winston Churchill once referred to democracy as the worst possible method of government – except for all the other alternatives. The same could be said for learning reflective listening skills.

If what you are doing currently isn't working, if you are experiencing high turnover rates, sabotage and employee complaints then learning to listen reflectively is one step towards changing your situation. In this section, we will touch on the many issues participants face when learning reflective listening skills.

Many people report feeling silly and artificial when they're first practicing reflective listening skills. This is a normal reaction to learning any new skill. Think back to when you were first learning to drive or a new language or any new skill. Didn't it feel awkward and perhaps even embarrassing? But, after learning the new skill, after mastering parallel parking on a busy street, conjugating irregular verbs in French or a better way to build a mouse trap you probably didn't feel awkward or embarrassed at all. In fact, you probably felt pretty good about your newfound skill.

Another difficulty many people have in learning communication skills is that they tend not to feel “natural” when practicing attending behaviour and making reflective statements. In our society, “natural” communication seems to consist of talking non stop, making sure we get to say what's on our minds and, consequently, paying little attention to what anyone else has to say. It's

“natural” to want to be first, second and third in communicating; it’s trickier to know when to shut up and just listen. In this section, we will touch on the six oddities of human communication.

Words – we don’t always say what we mean

Filters abound in human language and that generally means that the words we use don’t quite adequately (or even accurately) express what we’re feeling.

Let’s take a particular feeling like anger. How many words can you think of to describe anger? There are many words and we don’t always pick the right one to fully describe our feelings. The reasons are many. Perhaps we don’t have as large a vocabulary as others do, perhaps we’re feeling very uncertain about using certain words or perhaps we ourselves are afraid of our own feelings. This last possibility is often seen, for example, when people are in denial over their own feelings over the death of a loved one. Using reflective listening skills and paying particular attention to how the words seem to match the speaker’s tone of voice and body language will go far in helping communication flow.

Coded messages

Children are really good at coding their messages to their caregivers. Endless requests for cups of water or bedtime stories are not usually about being thirsty or in need of intellectual stimulation, they’re about needing the other person to stay with them a little longer. But, we adults do the same things also. When a person gives his or her partner a quick kiss at the front door, the message there is likely to mean, “I love you and I wish I could stay with you a little longer but I don’t want to miss my bus either.” When a partner makes a favourite dinner, the message there is likely to mean, “I want to bring you pleasure.”

Exercise 8

Think about the last time an employee stayed late to finish up extra work. Think about the last time a manager gave you a day off. What are the messages there?

Decoding messages is a very good skill to acquire but it’s also fraught with risk, for you may be wrong in your conclusions. The main reason for this is that while you can easily see the other person’s behaviour, you can only infer what that person’s motive was. Was that kiss at the front door really meant to say, “I love you” or was it meant to say, “I hope you’ll remember that I kissed you because I’m about to do something harmful to our relationship”?

What you hear is not necessarily what the problem really is

How often do we hear that we shouldn’t burden anyone with our problems? How often are we told that others suffer far worse than we do and so we shouldn’t complain... et cetera...et cetera...? The answer is too often and this is especially the case when we’re dealing with emotional or psychological problems with other people.

In the example earlier where the manager didn’t seem to care about his employee’s personal problem, the implicit message there was that the needs of the business (and of the manager) were far more important than anything else and that the employee’s problems weren’t nearly as important. There isn’t enough digging to see what the root of the situation really is or we miss those opportunities because of our own agenda.

A school teacher may go to the principal of the school to discuss a child’s bullying and how it’s disrupting the class. The presenting problem, the child’s bullying, is not likely to be the real or major concern. Digging will likely reveal that the child has a very troublesome home environment, is being bullied by his or her older sibling, classmates, parent or step-parent and feels that the

only way to vent his or her own anger is to bully others. Suspending the student's privileges, the more likely outcome to many of these encounters between teachers and principals, may work in the short term but it will not solve the underlying difficulties. Robert Bolton writes:

“Coming up with good solutions to minor problems while the deeper concerns are not even addressed is one of the biggest sources of inefficiency in industry, government, schools, families, churches, counseling centers, and other institutions.”

A woman who is almost always in an angry state who, when asked, mentions that she is very angry because of indigestion, is not really telling the whole story. A rule of thumb here is that whenever a reaction is disproportionate to the circumstances as presented, then it isn't about the circumstances as presented. There is something much deeper there. The person who relies on not really saying what's really on his or her mind should not be forced into counselling or cajoled into talking. Rather, make a door opening statement such as, “Care to talk about it?” or “Can you tell me a bit more?” and leave it at that.

The speaker may be blind to, or blinded by feelings

We generally find that those who are blind to their real feelings relate to others in a submissive way. This is the person who will go along with nearly anything and be “just fine” with it, actively remaining oblivious to his or her own real feelings. Conversely, we tend to find those who are blinded by their own feelings are those who relate to others aggressively. Regardless of being blind to, or blinded by, one's feelings, the intent is the same: avoiding conflict.

The submissive man who “willingly” goes along with his wife to a restaurant he really doesn't like but who doesn't say anything, will certainly avoid any conflict, but he won't enjoy himself either.

The aggressive woman who shouts at the children and husband until she “gets her own way” will certainly gain compliance, especially if there is a risk that her emotional outbursts will likely become violent behaviour, but she won't gain commitment from anyone.

Distractions...or, “Did I leave the iron on?”

No matter how well practiced we are at reflective listening, we can't do it for any great length of time and we certainly can't do it forever. It's stated that our ability to think outpaces our ability to speak. We are well able to process information much more rapidly than it takes to say it. Here is the oft stated, “It would take me ten times longer to explain it to you than if I just did it myself.”

For many listeners, we are usually able to get the gist of what the speaker is saying but it is not likely to be accurate. When the speaker starts to say something, we tend to get the first two or three words before our minds drift to other issues, such as wondering if we left the iron on or planning next week's lunch date. The listener may be physically there but emotionally, she or he is on another planet. A typical example follows:

Speaker (Manager) to her employee – *“People from the head office are coming into town this Thursday. They're going to need to see our sales figures for this quarter. I know you've been working on that report, but I'm going to need it completed by Wednesday so I can take it to the meeting on Thursday.”*

Employee to speaker (manager) – *“Meeting? What meeting?”* (employee seems to have completely forgotten what her manager just said. Her eyes are open but she seems to have a bit of a vacant stare to them)

Speaker – *“What do you mean, ‘what meeting?’? I just told you that people from head office are coming into town on Thursday.”*

Employee to speaker (manager) – *“Thursday? You mean, this Thursday?”* (employee has heard the words but has not processed the information. She has been thinking about other things, like her mother’s upcoming visit, problems with her partner or her kids.)

Speaker – *“I just said this Thursday.”* (angrily making an observation an inference and a threat) *“You seem to be out of it. You aren’t really interested in helping, are you? You better have that report ready by Wednesday or there will be hell to pay and it’ll come out of your paycheck.”*

In the above situation, the speaker, the manager, requested that a report the employee was working on be ready for an upcoming meeting but the employee didn’t seem to “be there”. The employee seemed to be distracted by other thoughts and was hardly able to listen to the manager’s request. The manager, sensing the employee’s “mental absence” from the conversation observed the employee’s apparent lack of understanding but then inferred that the employee ‘wasn’t interested in helping’ and made a threat to the employee.

While we recognize that many managers don’t always have the time (or energy) to listen effectively to employees, it is vital to take at least some time regularly to listen reflectively. What many organizations do is have a weekly meeting in which concerns are aired, problems are raised and solved and any conflicts are fairly dealt with. We’ll get to problem solving a little later in this course.

Filters – we all have them

It’s been pointed out that filters actually have a useful purpose – they allow us to gather our mental resources so that we can defend ourselves from attack. That’s all very well but filters also have this tendency to block and/or distort our understanding of a situation.

Emotional filters that we use (and we all use them) are notorious for making sure we fail to fully understand what the speaker is saying. This is a learned behaviour and comes from years of careful teaching from parents, teachers, society in general and even our friends. Emotionally laden terms such as “communist”, “homosexual” or “Christian” will likely cause our ears to clamp up tightly and prevent us from listening and perhaps even learning a thing or two.

Think back to the cartoon, *The Grinch who Stole Christmas* and the idea becomes a little more clear. The Grinch, a rather ugly green creature with a “heart that was two sizes too small” only needed to listen to the Whos down in Whoville before he finally realized the folly of his way. His emotional filter, that Christmas was a noisy and bothersome time of year, prevented him from fully grasping the message of the Whos, that Christmas to them was a time of coming together in love and sharing.

This is all about the expectations we have of others and how we immediately apply those expectations in communication. The distressed parent who really doesn’t think that teenagers can be trusted to tell the truth, will likely apply that filter when asking his adolescent son why he is an hour late.

But, this is also about expectations we have of ourselves. If we have low self-esteem, then we are far more likely to interpret many comments from others as criticism of ourselves and we react accordingly. When “black looks good on you” is interpreted as “you think I’m fat and wearing black to make myself look slimmer than I am”, then emotional filters have been employed.

In its worst format, emotional filters are prejudices and they will not only distort what a speaker has to say but will actually prevent anything from coming through. One only needs to recall the frightening case of Jim Keegstra’s anti-semitic teachings to Eckville, Alberta high school students – an impressionable group of society’s youngest members to understand the seriousness of emotional filters.

So, what can be done?

Things which are learned can be unlearned and new methods of behaving can be learned instead.

We all learn ways of doing things and some of them are far more functional than others. We learn how not to stall the engine of a standard transmission car, so we can also learn how not to stall the communication process.

So, what can be done? Quite a bit and, thankfully, it isn't too painful to learn.

Check for Accuracy – or – Is that what you're saying?

It is difficult for most of us to accurately state what's on our minds and nobody can be that forthcoming all of the time. So, this is why it's crucial to get as much correct information as you possibly can from the speaker.

1. adopt the posture of attention (refer back to attending skills)
2. make appropriate eye contact with the speaker
3. make reflective statements about what you think the speaker said in terms of both meaning (content) and feeling (emotion)
4. if necessary (and it isn't always necessary), reflect the speaker's body language as well
5. keep your voice steady but not monotonous (easier than you may think)
6. DO NOT shout, use offensive language or make any kind of threats, which is not always easy when dealing with a highly emotionally charged issue

Improving listening skills

There are several ways to help you improve your listening skills. If nothing else, demonstrating improved listening skills will result in you being sought after as someone who "really listens". Also, others will pick up on what you're doing and will want to imitate you.

1. Don't fake understanding – This is a simple one. If you don't know what the speaker is trying to say, don't pretend you "get it". You will be found out. Instead of bland nodding and smiling, don't be afraid to ask for clarification. If your impression is incorrect, the speaker will gently correct you. If the speaker's correction is more hostile sounding, reflect that perceived feeling back to the speaker

Example: "When you come home late without calling first, I get frightened because I don't know what's happened to you."

Poor reflection – "You want to know where I am every single minute."

Speaker – (calmly) "No, I don't need to know where you are all the time. I just need to know you're okay."

Good reflection – "You want to make sure I'm not hurt or in trouble."

Or

Speaker – (angrily) "No! You got it wrong! I don't care where the hell you are! I don't need you frightening me!!!"

Better reflection – “Wow! This is really important to you. You want to make sure I’m okay and not knowing if I’m all right really scares you.”

In this final reflection, the listener reflected not just the message but the expressed emotion of the speaker. That alone will go far in deflating any hostility we are generally so scared of evoking.

2. Don't tell the speaker you know how he or she feels

The reason for this is simple – it's not possible for anyone to precisely know how anyone else feels. At best, we can infer feelings from what we perceive, but to tell someone you know how they feel is, at best, a guess. Also, if the speaker believes you know precisely how they feel, then there is no point in discussing things any further, which is likely to result in further miscommunication. Besides, if you did truly “know” how the speaker felt and the speaker believed that, then you would have to “prove” you know exactly how the other felt.

Here's an example: a woman in excruciating pain from a long and arduous labour tries to describe the pain to another woman who had never had a baby but who had experienced pain. If the woman who had never had a baby simply says, “Oh, I know exactly how you feel...” the woman who had had a baby will surely not believe the second woman.

3. Vary your responses

If every single time you make a statement and the listener responds with, “that must be frustrating”, it will block communication severely. It would be like speaking with a computer that had a limited repertoire of answers. Eventually, the speaker will wonder if the listener is even capable of saying anything else. Varying responses also allows for varying the degree of emotion reflected back. A dull monotone would put an insomniac to sleep but a shaky voiced, shrill series of exclamations will frighten people, too.

4. Focus on the feelings

We get tied up with facts and practicalities of events so much that we often overlook the feelings that go with it. When someone is outside in the pouring rain on a dark and miserable night trying to change a flat tire, their description of events should result in a reflection of the emotional experience of the person. Hearing, “That must have been very frustrating for you to have to look for the jack in the dark...” though probably very accurate, won't reflect the annoyance or anger of the speaker. Rather, hearing, “Gee, you must have been really angry at having to look for the jack in the dark.” Will say more to the speaker that you have understood the feelings.

5. Choose the most accurate feeling word

If you win the lottery and are trying to describe your feelings to someone, is it accurate for the listener to say you were merely pleased at winning the lottery? More likely, the listener would say you seem to be “overjoyed”, “ecstatic” or even “deliriously happy”. Conversely, though getting breakfast in bed on a Sunday morning is a very pleasant experience, few people would state they they felt “ecstatically overjoyed” at having fresh squeezed orange juice.

Exercise 9

Take a piece of paper and, in one minute, write down as many feeling words as you can think of. This isn't a race so don't worry about having a bigger list than anyone else. Then, once you've done that, think of as many adjectives to each of the feeling words as you can. (Adjectives are words that describe or modify nouns)

6. Develop vocal empathy

Reflecting to a listener that they seem very angry while your own voice is quiet or almost indifferent will not be taken seriously. If you are talking with someone and you're hiding your face behind a monthly sales report or a newspaper, the speaker will most certainly feel as though you are not really "with them".

A second aspect of vocal empathy is that appropriate use of body language is called for here. Even if the listener truly expresses amazement that all of the computers crashed at once. If the listener is standing half a centimetre from your face when he or she is saying this or is flailing her or his arms about, then the speaker is more likely to conclude that the listener is trying very hard to conceal something else.

7. Strive for concreteness and relevance

If a speaker starts to talk about a problem by launching into a thirty minute long dissertation about the situation, it becomes nearly impossible for the listener to participate. Remember, this is supposed to be a dialogue and it is important to give the listener opportunities to participate actively.

8. Provide a non-dogmatic, but firm response

This is an expansion of the idea of checking for accuracy. One of the reasons why listeners are reluctant to engage in checking for accuracy is that there is the very real fear that the speaker will lash out at the listener, calling her or him "stupid" or "uncaring" for not instantly grasping what the speaker said. Here is the opportunity for speakers to eradicate that fear by providing non-dogmatic but firm responses. By "dogmatic" it is meant narrow and inflexible and we exude any dogmatic tendencies in our vocal inflection. In other words, we are striving for sensitivity.

Speaker – "The sales reports all have to be in and on my desk by this afternoon so I can review them. Otherwise I won't be as prepared for the meeting with the board members as I need to be."

Listener – "You want to have all the information on your desk by 1 pm."

Speaker – "Well, (thinks), yes but it's more important that I have the time to read the reports for the meeting."

The listener made an accurate reflective statement but didn't quite grasp the concerns of the speaker. The speaker's concerns focused more on having all the information needed to take the time to be prepared for a meeting. Having all the information on the desk by a certain time could just as easily mean having it all on the manager's desk with two minutes to spare before the meeting begins.

Exercise 10

What responses could the listener have made which would have better reflected the concerns of the speaker?

There are some times, however, when reflective listening is necessary before one acts. Many (usually costly) mistakes can be avoided if managers did more reflective listening. Here is a list of when reflective listening is crucial:

Before you act – teaching employees to paraphrase and seek clarification before taking action has probably saved much accidental shredding of important documents

Before you argue or criticize – you may not agree with what the speaker is saying, but everybody has a point of view that is valid. Reflective listening does not imply that the listener agrees with the speaker, just that the speaker has been understood.

When the speaker has strong feelings about an issue or would like to talk about a problem

– when we have strong feelings about an issue or a problem, we are generally very emotional about things. This is a perfect time to make reflective statements about the speaker’s words, the perceived emotions (remember, don’t make judgements) and body language.

When the speaker is talking in “code” (aka veiled speech) – reflective listening works very well, especially since human beings are not mind readers. We can’t guess what someone else is really saying, we can only infer meaning. But, we can reflect the words and our perception that the speaker is using coded speech.

When someone simply wants to sort out feelings or find a solution to their problems – some people need to talk out their feelings about a situation (the September 11, 2001 WTC terrorist attack is a good example there). Other times, people want to find a solution to their problems. As listeners, we don’t tell speakers what to do or how they should feel, we allow them the opportunity to sort it out for themselves. By making reflective statements, we allow the speaker the chance to consider how others are perceiving his or her words, actions and body language.

In direct mutual conversation – by this, it is meant an actual sharing of attention - the roles of listener and speaker shift and the situation affects both parties equally.

When not to listen reflectively

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we just can’t listen reflectively. Maybe we’re tired or too emotionally wrought ourselves or otherwise preoccupied with other things. That’s okay, but it is important to both know when you’re feeling unable to listen reflectively and to let the speaker know that now is just not the time.

- **When you are not able to be accepting** – sometimes, the issue at stake is one which is very close to our hearts and we can become quite moralizing or judgemental. Any time we make reflective statements we convey the message of both acceptance and an invitation to continue, but if we don’t think we can be accepting towards the other person, then we should politely and calmly let the speaker know this.
- **When you don’t trust the other to find his or her own solution** – this is one most often seen in those who adopt an authoritarian, hypercritical stance in which they are convinced that the person with the problem could never solve it themselves. Sometimes, these people want to assume responsibility for finding the solution because they don’t trust that the person with the problem can sort it out for themselves.
- **When you are not separate from the other** – by that, we mean emotionally separate. Enmeshment is a far too common sight and, in the business world, this is generally manifest in micromanagement, where the boss becomes over-involved with everything the employees do. Micromanagers will attend meetings they really don’t need to be at and otherwise hover over the employees, preventing anyone from getting any work done.
- **When listening is a way of hiding oneself** – listeners sometimes fall into this role when they don’t want to disclose their own feelings or concerns about an issue.
- **When you are feeling very pressured, hassled or depleted** – to listen reflectively, one needs to “be there” emotionally. It’s pretty difficult to listen reflectively to someone else’s problems if you are preoccupied with deadlines, your own difficulties or anything emotionally heavier than what the speaker is presenting.

Five Styles of relating (and why only one of them works)

Social scientists have “divided” relational styles into five fairly distinct categories. In this section, we will discuss those five categories and highlight why only one of them works. Relating styles are directly connected to needs and conflict, especially in avoiding conflict. We generally assume that conflict is something we want to avoid but that is impossible. Any time there is more than one of you, there will be conflict at some point. How we resolve conflict determines how and if we get our needs met.

The first style is termed “destructive”. Here, the speaker doesn’t know what anyone, even what she or he, needs and isn’t interested either. This is the realm of abuse and those who use this style are to be avoided. Here is the verbally and/or physically abusive person who invariably will wind up in legal problems and serious psychological intervention is generally required.

The second style is termed “aggressive”. Here, the speaker is well aware of what he or she needs and will take whatever steps are required towards getting her or his own needs met. These people aren’t interested in what anyone else needs. Their overall message is: “I get what I need and I’m not interested in your needs”. These people have great difficulties, because no one wants to work with them and thus ultimately they don’t get what they want.

The third relational style is called “passive/aggressive”. This is a sneaky one which many companies see. This is the person who arrives for work ten minutes late, leaves ten minutes early, takes slightly longer coffee breaks and who “accidentally” forgets things on a fairly regular basis. Their actions aren’t enough to get them fired but they are annoying enough to interfere with the running of the business. Many companies have little (if any) tolerance for any deviation from “the rules” and will act ruthlessly towards employees who show up for work a minute late. These are the same companies that experience very high turnover rates and can’t figure out why they wind up always hiring troublemakers. Here is a quick way to uncover the source of the trouble: if you have one or two employees only who display passive/aggressive behaviours then the problem is most likely with the employees. However, if nearly everyone acts like this, then the problem is with management. In that case, nothing will change until management’s approach to the running of their business changes. In passive/aggressive behaviour, we see acts of sabotage, too, such as “accidentally” revealing company secrets to competitors, although the more common act of passive/aggression includes more mundane events like making too many personal calls during the work day or shipping orders to the wrong address.

The fourth relational style is what is termed “passive” and this is the opposite of “aggressive”. Here, the person completely overlooks his or her own needs and will allow others to get their own needs met. This is the person whose relational style says, “I don’t matter – whatever you want to do is fine with me.” It really isn’t, but these people are too afraid to say otherwise for fear of not being liked. As with aggression, passive styles avoid conflict.

Finally, the fifth relational style is known as “assertive”. Here, the person knows what he or she needs and seeks to get those needs met but will also make sure that others get their needs met, too. This is the person who is both self-aware and other-aware and will make sure that everyone, including themselves, get what they need. Here is the person who will suggest weekly meetings, who can accept criticism and, best of all, who listens to what others are saying. It is only assertive behaviours that work because everyone is getting what they need. There is a price to assertion, however, which contributes greatly to why it is not generally used: assertive behaviours tend to attract conflict. Yet, it is conflict itself which facilitates change. Take a look at union negotiators, they only ever work in a highly conflictual situation. Their job is not to minimize conflict so much as bring about solutions to the conflictual situation so that each side gets what they need. In a more mundane scenario, assertive behaviours allow people to live their own lives, knowing that they’re getting what they need and that others are, too. It does *not* mean that conflict is resolved (far from it) but that there is a mechanism in place to resolve conflicts.

It is worth noting that some people who have serious psychological disorders often have relating styles that are classified as destructive, although their relating style may be more characterized by psychosis (delusions and hallucinations) and they may seem more incoherent than anything. In many cases effective listening and assertive speaking may be less than entirely effective when dealing with people suffering with serious psychological problems.

Developing three part assertion messages

In three-part assertions, we are making non-judgemental descriptions of the behaviour we want changed, a disclosure of the speaker's feelings and the clarification of the tangible effects of the listener's behaviours (in other words, we are stating why).

The formula is fairly simple but we'll discuss why it isn't always so simple to follow. The formula is:

"When you (behaviour), I feel (feelings) because (tangible effect)..."

Sounds easy, right? Well, technically, it is but we generally make it a lot tougher on ourselves (not to mention others) than we really need to. Let's examine the more common problems with this formula and how to fix those problems!

Part I – "When you..."

It is often very difficult to make a non-judgemental statement about someone's behaviour. We're emotional beings and our own feelings do tend to creep into the scenario. If we're feeling very upset that an employee is late for work for the third time that week, we're far more likely to say something like, "When you drag your ass into work...". The result will be defensiveness on the part of the listener because he or she will feel assaulted by the judgemental terms. If the purpose of this first part of the three-part assertion message is to make a non-judgemental description of the other person's behaviour, what would be a more appropriate way to describe an employee's coming into work late for the third time that week?

Exercise 11

Try and list as many judgemental terms as you can in the following scenarios. Make a list of more appropriate ways to describe the person's behaviour.

- An employee is taking half hour coffee breaks when company policy allows for fifteen minute breaks
- A co-worker parks in your parking spot every day
- An employee often shouts and swears at others
- A manager makes sexist remarks

Part II – "I feel..."

Here is the second part of the three part assertion message and is generally a little easier to analyze than the first part. We usually (though not always) know how we're feeling, the main difficulty tends to lie in not knowing what feeling words to use.

If someone parks in your spot, you are not likely to feel infuriated, but if your boss repeatedly comments on how women can't be managers, you probably won't feel a little irked, especially if

you're a woman. We have a list of feeling words (one is also provided in this course) but it is perfectly acceptable to add modifiers to our feelings. Do we feel "extremely", "mildly", "sort of" or "very" happy/angry/sad? Spend a bit of time on your own to think about how you would feel about the above four scenarios.

A note to managers – any time a reaction seems disproportionate to the circumstances, then there is something else going on. Nobody should become homicidally furious if they are asked not to take half hour coffee breaks.

Part III – "Because..."

This is the third part of the assertion message and the one that completes the communication. Here, the speaker not only makes a non-judgemental description of the behaviour he or she wants changed and not only adds how the listener's behaviour affects the speaker's feelings but of what effect or impact the action has in the first place.

The main difficulty in many of these situations is that we can't always find a concrete or tangible reason why someone's behaviour annoys us. It helps to write out the three-part message first. Spend a bit of time thinking about the situation and don't be afraid to ask yourself what the tangible effects of the listener's actions are on you. Remember, this is as much about you getting your needs met as anything else, so don't be afraid to spend a bit of time thinking about things.

Tangible reasons include (but are not limited to):

- Having to work late because someone else didn't do their job
- Having to walk further to get to the office
- Having to spend extra time apologizing to a customer because of an employee's rude behaviour
- It costing extra money to replace parts that had been lost
- It costing extra money in overtime for employees who have to stay late and do extra work

Keeping it concrete!

When making three-part statements, it is important to keep it simple. Stick to mere descriptions of behaviour, no matter how difficult that can be at times, be honest about your own feelings and, most critically, *keep the third part as concrete as possible*. Here is a good and a bad example:

Good example:

"When you spend half an hour on coffee break, I feel very angry because *the front desk is unattended...*"

Bad example:

"When you sneak away for a long coffee break, I feel very angry because *it isn't respectful of company policy...*"

Exercise 12

Take a look at the three part assertion messages below and see which ones are good statements and which ones aren't. What is it about each statement that makes it a good or bad one?

"When you don't refill the paper tray on the photocopier, I feel annoyed because it takes longer for me to get my copying done."

"When you act like a male chauvinist pig, I feel outraged because those comments hurt my feelings."

"When you leave tools lying around the floor, I feel really angry because it's a safety hazard."

"When you show up late for meetings, I feel annoyed because we have to delay our meeting until you arrive."

The first statement, "When you don't refill the paper tray on the photocopier, I feel annoyed because it takes longer for me to get my copying done" is a good three part assertion message. The speaker has made a non-judgemental description of the behaviour he or she wants changed. The second part describes the speaker's feeling. The third part of the message described a tangible effect of the behaviour.

The second statement is a poor example of a three-part assertion message. The first part of the message clearly contains a judgemental term, ("male chauvinist pig..."). The speaker's feeling statement is quite accurate, however. Most people who don't like sexist statements would feel very angry or outraged. The third part of the statement, however, is a little less clear. The speaker states that sexist comments "hurt my feelings..." and while quite accurate and reasonable, is not that tangible. How would sexist comments hurt the speaker's feelings? Specifically, which feelings? This is why it is a good idea to write out your message first. Spend a bit of time asking yourself how someone's undesirable behaviour has affected you in a concrete way? Perhaps the speaker could have stated that sexist comments result in the speaker having to spend more time convincing customers to work with that person.

The third comment is a bit of a fuzzy one. The speaker has accurately described the behaviour and the feeling, but the third part, "...it's a safety hazard..." probably could have been better phrased. "It's a safety hazard..." though quite accurate, is perhaps not as concrete as could be phrased. The speaker could have said that the tangible effect of leaving tools around is that someone will trip and fall.

The final scenario is a good one. The speaker has accurately and simply described the behaviour she or he wants changed, the feelings behind the current behaviour and the tangible effect on the current behaviour. Nobody has accused the employee of "dragging their butt" or that the speaker is ready to explode in a fit of rage or that the effect of the current behaviour is just that it goes against company policy.

Assertive Conversation: How to handle the "push-push back" phenomenon

By now, you've covered a lot! You've learned about attentive posture, relational styles, communication styles and have even begun to analyze how behaviour affects you and how your own emotions can act as filters, blocking out real messages. You've learned about reflective listening and how to overcome some of the barriers to communication and now we're going to put your skills into practice. Don't worry too much if it doesn't feel natural or sounds silly, you'll get the hang of it soon enough and you'll be communicating far more effectively in a shorter period of time than you think!

In assertive conversation, we state our needs to someone such that an unwanted behaviour changes. Don't expect anyone who hears you make a three-part assertion message to feel particularly happy about it. There is a very real tendency for humans to be defensive.

In assertive conversation, it is almost guaranteed that the listener will interpret your carefully worded three-part assertion message as a personal assault and will react accordingly. It is at this point where you, the caring speaker, shift gears from making a three-part assertion message to reflective listening.

It's pretty hard for someone who feels defensive to respond in a hostile manner when the speaker is accurately reflecting the listener's thoughts and feelings. When we feel that we are understood, our shields will lower and we will be more receptive to the assertion message. Here's an example of how this works:

Scene: An employee has left his computer running continuously for over a week even though he knows he is supposed to switch it off at the end of the day. His boss approaches him at the end of the day.

Boss – “Hi Bob. Have you got a couple of minutes to talk?” *The boss makes sure he and Bob are alone.*

Bob - “Sure, what's up?”

Boss – “Bob, I need to talk with you about your computer.”

Bob – “My computer? What's wrong?”

Boss – “Bob, when you leave your computer running continuously, I feel annoyed because it costs the company more money in electricity.”

Bob – “That's pretty small of you, isn't it? Boy, the others sure were right. You just like going on power trips, don't you?”

Boss – “You think that what I said about you leaving your computer on is my attempt to wield power over you.”

Bob – “Isn't it? Geez, you guys think you're so big. You just pick, pick, pick on stupid little things and don't even look at your own habits.”

Boss – *(who is not on any power trip)* “Managers really get under your skin sometimes. You feel like you're constantly on guard in case one of them gets pissed off with you for any reason at all.”

Bob – “You bet. It's to the point where I can't even go to the bathroom without someone complaining to me about it.”

Boss – “You feel pretty trapped sometimes and always having to account for your every single whereabouts at all times.”

Bob – “Makes me nuts. Don't I even get a chance to grab a coffee?”

Boss – “Bob, when you leave your computer running continuously, I feel annoyed because it costs the company more money in electricity.”

The preceding was a mere snippet of the conversation, but it makes the point pretty clear. The boss didn't fall for any of the defensive traps that Bob tried to lay. Bob accused his boss of going on a power trip and being nit-picky about little things. Bob even complained about how he felt he

couldn't go use the washroom without someone else complaining. But, the boss stuck to the three part assertion message and handled the push-push back phenomenon pretty well.

In real life, Bob would most likely have made more defensive comments. If the boss were smart (and let's assume he is), he would have continued to listen reflectively to Bob's statements. In the above, the boss even suggested that Bob was "...feeling trapped sometimes..." . When the boss sensed that Bob's stance had softened slightly, he reasserted his message to Bob.

Some of the more common traps in assertive conversation

Questions – some people will try to sidetrack the speaker by asking questions. Don't answer questions; turn the question into a reflective statement. Using the above example, if, after the first time the boss made his assertion, Bob had replied with, "Do you always keep track of whose computer is on for how long?" that would be an example of asking a question. The boss can avoid that trap by reflecting what he thinks is Bob's real concern, saying, "You feel watched by me."

Sidestepping debates – these are the people who think quickly on their feet and will try to turn the most simple, basic event into a world class debate. In the above example, Bob might have said, "Boy, it's amazing what you have to do to get promoted to your position."

Coping with tears – this is a strategy which women are encouraged to resort to, although men can sometimes resort to manipulative tears too. Had Bob burst into tears with a, "You just can't stand me!", the boss could have come back with a reflective statement such as, "You're very upset by this..." take the tears seriously but refuse to be controlled by them, reassert and, if the tears are renewed, re-reflect but add that you two should make an appointment to resolve this issue. Don't leave it at that because you will be delayed and delayed until the end of time. Instead, make an appointment to speak about it, one that is mutually agreed upon and then *keep that appointment*.

Overcoming withdrawal – some people will shrink to a small size if they think they are being threatened. This is inappropriate silence and can be noted by the boss with, "I take it by your silence that you don't want to talk about this and that you will turn off your computer at the end of each day. I'll touch bases with you next Tuesday to see how it's working for you." Notice that the boss does not make any inflammatory statements such as offering/threatening to "check up" on Bob – that would play into his idea that managers hover over the employees.

Helping the other to express an understanding – this is simple ownership of their part in the situation. If, at one point, the boss can lead Bob towards understanding how the act of leaving the computer on at all times costs the company money, and Bob can express that understanding by saying something like, "Yikes, I had no idea how much money it costs to run one computer..." then you will have gone far towards getting that behaviour changed.

In general, when we are at the receiving end of an assertive message, we tend to become defensive and the result of that is that we tend to not listen to the assertive message. The speaker may wish to "recycle" the assertion, knowing that he or she will have to change gears from assertion to reflective listening. In fact, you may have to do this a few times before you manage to find a solution, which we shall now turn to.

Focusing on the Solution

The whole point to making an assertive message is that the speaker's needs are not being met by the behaviour of the listener. The listener, feeling sheepish and embarrassed, will likely adopt a defensive posture. Eventually, however, the conversation will turn to finding a solution to the problem.

We will discuss conflict resolution skills later in this course but, as a “sneak preview”, resolving a problem is a matter of identifying what each person’s needs are and then coming up with a solution that meets the needs of all parties.

When we’re dealing with a difficulty between two people, however, it may help to “soothe” battered egos if it is the listener who comes up with the solution. In the above scenario, Bob may solve the problem by having a small alarm clock on his desk which will go off when he needs to turn his computer off. Perhaps Bob can solve the problem by writing out a checklist which he can post on his desk which will include shutting the computer off. A creative manager may even put Bob in charge of making sure any other employees turn off their computers too by making his checklist available to anyone who wishes to have a copy.

But, regardless of what solution is used, *it is far more likely to be instituted if it is the listener who arrives at a solution.* Nobody likes to have a solution imposed upon them. Of course, please make sure any solution chosen meets the needs of the speaker.

Assertiveness Options

This section is devoted to the many ways you can state what you need. By that, it is not intended to teach people how to thoughtlessly say the word “no”, rather, how to assert yourself without the other person trampling on your rights. There are a few different ways to assert yourself and we often use these methods in some way, shape or form.

The first kind of assertion is simply a “natural” assertion. In this way, we non-aggressively get our needs met without following any particular style or method. Examples include,

Manager – “I need the sales figures by Friday so I can complete the report on time.”

Parent – “I don’t like it when you leave the towels on the floor in the bathroom.”

In both scenarios, the speaker simply stated what she or he needed. We use this method often, although it is more common for us to shout or express hostility. That puts people on the defensive and leaves the door open for increased conflict.

The second kind of assertiveness option is the self-disclosure of feelings about a particular experience. It is, basically, “feeling talk” and a common example of this includes the too often expressed sentiment that, “He never told me how he felt about me” or “I didn’t know my supervisor’s job was on the line if I didn’t give her that report”. I strongly advise caution when using self-disclosure because many of us tend to go to extremes. For self-disclosure to work best, you must consider the following:

Disclose to the right person – the clerical staff are not the best people to disclose to if they are only peripherally involved in an important project. Similarly, if it is the clerk whose behaviour is troubling you, talk to the clerk and not your supervisor.

Disclose to the right degree – this is where the acronym TMI comes into play. TMI stands for Too Much Information. A person who is feeling fear about a medical test result from the lab should not be giving excessive detail to the janitor.

Disclose for the right reasons – The idea is to promote communication, not burden others or “show off” just how brilliantly you handled a similar problem

Disclose at the right time – not on the phone at 3 am either or when everybody is getting ready to leave for the day

Disclose in the right place - not in the lineup at the grocery store

Descriptive recognition is the third assertiveness option. You may have seen the Dilbert comic that features a “manager” who says to Dilbert, “I award you this award.” We all would like to have our accomplishments recognized but it gets confusing if that recognition is vague and abstract. If nothing else, the valued employee won’t know exactly what he or she did right and will likely not know how to repeat it.

Rather than:

Manager – “You did a great job. Thanks!”

...which will leave the employee utterly confused because she or he doesn’t know what precisely he or she is being thanked for.

Try:

Manager – “Thank you for working late every night last week to get those reports done on time.”

...the employee knows why she or he is being thanked. It will also increase the chances that the employee will repeat the rewarding action.

The final assertiveness option we will explore here is natural and logical consequences. While this area is more useful in the realm of parenting, it has its uses in the workplace too. There are consequences to all actions (and inactions) and employees as well as managers need to make sure everybody knows about this.

There is a slight difference between natural and logical consequences which bears clarification and it is this: a natural consequence is something that occurs in that part of nature which humanity has nothing to do with. Leaving tools unattended and outside in the rain will result in them rusting, which is a natural consequence. The process of rusting is not anything imposed by human law. A logical consequence is one which occurs as a result of human influence. Leaving tools unattended outside in the rain may result in their being stolen which is a logical consequence. Logical consequences are related to behaviour, ask anyone who has had their illegally parked car towed away.

So, when do you use the natural/logical consequences method of assertion? Begin by asking yourself the following question: “What would happen if I didn’t interfere?” If a shift supervisor doesn’t pick up the tools left outside by someone else, what would happen if they were then stolen? Who would pay to have them replaced?

When it is necessary, you can make the following statement, “When you (insert behaviour here in a non-judgemental manner, of course), “then...”(statement of the consequence). “You will have another chance to...”(state when this can occur). In the above case, the shift supervisor can say to the worker, “When you leave your tools outside in the rain (statement of behaviour), then (they may get stolen (statement of consequence). You will have another chance to use the tools you need when you pay to have them replaced (statement of when this new chance will occur).

It is really easy for some managers to assume responsibility for these sorts of events. Perhaps the actions of their subordinates will adversely affect their own chances for promotion and, not wanting to take unnecessary risks, will quietly pick up the tools and perhaps speak with the employee later. Such conversations should generally focus on the facts of the matter and not on the feelings behind the matter itself. This isn’t a call to lapse into pure emotionality, rather it is a call to balance both sides of the issue. Otherwise, quick conversations may work in the short term but it won’t result in any long term changes. Here, the employee needs to take ownership of the

problem and the manager needs to apply the logical consequences consistently and without any emotional **over**involvement.

Conflict... a brief outline

We tend to equate conflict with something that ought to be avoided at all costs. Remember the passive relational style? These are people who always work late, who volunteer to do the unpleasant jobs and who let abrasive and abusive colleagues insult and terrorize them – all in the name of keeping the peace. Remember the aggressive relational style? These are the people who use their job status in order to get people to run errands for them during their lunch hour or else they won't get such a favourable review, who will leave early without due cause but then insist on not allowing anyone else to do the same for any reason. What do you notice about these two styles? They both avoid conflict. The passive person caves in to any demand while the aggressive person rules by tyranny and you don't dare say anything for fear of rocking the boat.

In this section, we will outline the reality of conflict, touching only briefly on some of the theory surrounding this highly contentious issue. In the last section of this course, we will show you how to handle conflict appropriately and, more importantly, how to resolve conflict so that everybody gets their needs met!

When there's more than one of you...

When there's more than one of you, conflict will occur. No matter how smoothly things run for most of the time, there will come a point when conflicting needs result in instability. However we understand this fact, we are still very wary of finding ourselves in conflict. Conflict seems to equal "war" where there are clear winners and losers and, as we don't want to find ourselves on the losing side, many people prefer to avoid the whole thing in the first place.

There are some office environments which tend to breed destructive conflict and they include offices which are very bureaucratic (which generally means a place where creative thought is shunned or, at best, ignored entirely) and which are very centralized with a small and pretty tight nucleus of power. These are places which experience the highest turnover rates with the higher ups generally blaming the "personality" of the employee who has had enough of the job.

Yet, conflict is also an opportunity for positive change and it is good to see that some more enlightened businesses are adopting a more positive structure. You can tell that the people who work at these places like their jobs – they actively look forward to going to work every day knowing that their contribution is not only acknowledged but valued.

The key to keeping the destructive conflict to a bare minimum is to have policies and practices put in place where, and here's the crucial point, *every employee from the CEO to the mailroom clerk has a direct say in those policies and practices*. Companies whose managers adopt an authoritarian, you-will-do-this-because-I-said-so stance have an unhappy lot working there resulting in high turnover rates (as much as 100% every six months) and passive-aggressive reactions to perceived absence of control.

Good companies to work for also have a non-partisan mechanism in place for resolving conflicts. The agreement reached is not quite as important as the machinery in place.

Conflict Resolution – the emotions and the practicalities

Conflict really has two strongly interlaced components to it – emotions and practicalities.

When we first become aware of a problem it is because we feel annoyed or angry or frustrated about something. For instance, if we work later than normal most days while everyone else leaves early, we're going to feel annoyed at this behaviour. If we're working on an important project (like compiling those sales figures for this quarter) with several other people and only you and one other person are doing all the work while the others slack off, we're going to feel very angry about this, especially if credit is equally distributed among the group members. The message there is that slacking off will be rewarded. Since the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour, the chances of the non-contributing employees repeating their behaviour are close to 100%.

So, in conflict resolution, the first step is to deal with the emotions. No one likes to feel angry or annoyed or frustrated and managers don't like to hear about other people's anger, annoyance or frustration but if the feelings are not dealt with, the conflict will spiral into something a lot uglier. There are three main steps in working with the emotional aspect of conflict.

- **Treat the other person with respect** – this is a term tossed around a lot. “You don't treat me with respect.” How do we show respect? Well, we show this by our actions. We adopt our posture of involvement – we sit squarely in front of the other person and maintain appropriate eye contact. We don't shout or, worse, lower our voices until we are growling through gritted teeth. It means not committing character assassination. You don't have to like the other person's point of view, but that's no reason to insult her or him.
- **Listen to what the speaker is saying until you can feel or experience the other side of the issue** – not too many older managers have to contend with the difficulties of a new baby in the house and all that entails. What about the employee who requires extra medical intervention for a chronic illness?
- **State what you need, your own feelings on the matter and your own point of view** – this is intimately connected to the first step – treat the other person with respect. It is quite reasonable to expect to be treated with respect, especially if you have demonstrated it yourself.

Here is an example of conflict resolution in action:

Carol takes a lot of sick days from work and Louise, her co-worker, often has to take up the slack. Louise notices, though, that Carol tends to take sick days on Mondays or Fridays which leads Louise to assume that Carol is really getting a three-day weekend. This bothers Louise and she approaches her boss, Brenda, about the situation. They set up a meeting with Carol to discuss the problem.

- 1) Brenda (to Carol and Louise) – “You both seem to have a problem with Carol taking so many sick days off work.”
- 2) Louise – “You bet I do.” (to Carol) “It's funny that you only seem to be sick on Fridays or Mondays.”
- 3) Carol (to Louise) – “I don't recall it saying anywhere in my contract that I have to make sure the days off I take meet with your approval.”

- 4) Brenda (who senses that this will escalate rapidly if she doesn't step in) – "It sounds like you don't believe Carol."
- 5) Carol – "I can't decide when I'm sick."
- 6) Louise – "But that means that I have to do your work as well as mine. That's not fair."
- 7) Carol (to Louise) – "You resent the extra work you have to do when I'm off sick."
- 8) Louise – "Well, yes, but it just seems as though it's only on Mondays or Fridays. The way I see it, you're getting a three day weekend with pay and I'm doing two jobs for no extra pay."
- 9) Brenda – (to Louise) "You can't handle the extra work." (to Carol) "What can we do about this?"
- 10) Carol – "I can't help it when I'm sick. I take sick days only when I need them."
- 11) Brenda (to Carol) – "That may be the case, but it doesn't help the situation as far as Louise is concerned. What can we do about this?"
- 12) Louise – "Whatever we pick, I can't do two jobs anymore."
- 13) Carol – "And I can't predict when I'll need to take a sick day."
- 14) Brenda – "It looks as though things won't immediately change." (to Louise) "You can't do both yours and Carol's job..." (to Carol) "...and you can't tell what day you'll need to take off. But, we need to find a workable solution here."
- 15) Louise – "Well, you're the boss, you decide."
- 16) Brenda – "Well, I could make a decision but then it may not work and we'll wind up back here. Personally, I'd much rather we all make a decision since this problem affects all of our productivity."
- 17) Louise (who is evidently flustered) – "Well, this is no surprise to me! Management thinks nothing about having us work harder until it's a problem. Then they tell us to figure it out by ourselves. Some leadership."
- 18) Brenda (to Louise) – "You're really frustrated by all this. It's unfair for you to be doing double duty like this and you want it stopped."
- 19) Louise – "You bet. Why should I have to do Carol's job and mine when I don't even get paid extra for it and she gets time off for being sick?"
- 20) Carol – "I do my fair share. You aren't the only one who has to work hard, ya know."
- 21) Brenda – "Look, it's obvious this isn't getting us anywhere and bickering about it will only make things worse." (takes out a folder with Carol's name on it) "Carol, I see by your records here that you have taken many sick days off."
- 22) Carol – "I can't predict when I'll be sick."
- 23) Brenda – "I realize that, but it's starting to become a problem and we need to find a solution here. Louise can't keep on doing your work as well as hers and..." (to Louise) "...

Carol can't ask for help if she's too afraid to take a sick day." Pause. "So, I'm open to ideas."

- 24) Louise – "I just can't do both our jobs. My job is tough enough. Sure, I know we can't help when we get sick. If we could, we would take steps ahead of time, like maybe bringing work home and sending it in via e-mail "
- 25) Brenda – "You're already tasked. Adding new tasks will result in lower productivity." *Pause* "You bring up an interesting idea, Louise. What I'm hearing is that perhaps taking work home to do while on sick days is a way to help resolve this problem."
- 26) *Carol* – "Look, I know it's tough doing one job, let alone two. I can't tell when I'm going to be ill, but I know that when I'm home sick, I often get really bored by mid-morning. I mean, those talk shows and gossip rags get pretty old by then.
- 27) *Believe it or not, the three women chuckle a bit.*
- 28) *Carol* – "I don't want to come in when I'm sick because I don't want to make anyone else ill. That would really cut down on production."
- 29) Brenda (to both women) – "Well, I know it's pretty unconventional to e-commute but I do know that some companies allow for this." *Pause*. "I know that Patty over at MegaCorp sometimes does work from home. Why don't we try this for a few months?" *Brenda looks at both women who seem to be thinking about this idea. Eventually, they all agree, but Brenda adds, "After a few months, we'll see how things are going. Does that sound like a plan?"*

Both women nod. The meeting adjourns and all three head back to their own offices.

Okay, that may have sounded rather simplistic. Certainly union negotiations don't generally go that smoothly, but this exchange bears some analysis.

In the first line, Brenda (the manager) identifies the problem. She uses plain, concrete terms devoid of judgement and harshness. This puts everyone somewhat more at ease. However, by line (4), Brenda has had to step in to eliminate the start of what appears to be a spiralling conflict cycle.

By line (7), Carol has demonstrated reflective listening to her co-worker but she does it knowing that Louise will add to the situation from her perspective. For Louise, it is not just that she has to do both jobs, but that she doesn't get paid to do the extra work while Carol gets a three-day weekend. This is the risk of making reflective statements in a conflict situation but the result is better working relations.

Line (9) features Brenda making a reflective statement to Louise. She then turns to Carol and asks what she thinks ought to be done. This is a crucial step in conflict resolution – all participants need to take an active role in finding a solution to the problem. Brenda knows that Carol, no doubt, feels ganged up on and under the gun. So, Brenda puts the control of the problem back into Carol's hands.

An interesting hiccup occurs by line (15) when Louise suggests that Brenda impose a solution. Brenda asserts quite calmly that while she could impose a solution that it would basically mean that she would have to assume responsibility for the outcome, so she quietly declines, opting for a group based solution. Line (17) has Louise making unkind remarks about management but Brenda is not distracted by this attack. Brenda, the good manager that she is, is sticking to the issues at hand. Yet, for all that, she still makes a reflective statement to Louise in line (18) about the latter's feelings of frustration.

Lines (22) to (24) see the situation slowly beginning to resolve as both Carol and Louise demonstrate some understanding of the other person's perspective. This goes very far in finding a solution to the problem. Louise takes advantage of Carol's repeated statements that she can't predict when she will be ill. By reflecting that sentiment in a non-hostile way, she unwittingly continues that train of logic by suggesting that if illness could be predicted that preparatory measures (bringing work home) could be taken.

By line (25), Brenda recognizes Louise's suggestion. Carol, perhaps seeing that conflict resolution isn't such a scary thing after all, continues to demonstrate an understanding of Louise's perspective while not compromising her position. In fact, it is Carol who not only suggests that bringing work home may be helpful but that it may even be preferable given how bored she is by mid-morning when she is ill.

Brenda acknowledges the unusualness of Carol's solution but does not see it as unworkable.

One final note on this: Brenda did not take responsibility for the solution, however, she did take responsibility for seeing how well the solution would work. This is a crucial point in conflict resolution: always make an appointment to see how things are working out! This is the mark of a superior manager – allowing employees to come up with workable solutions on their own, while taking a leadership role in making sure the solution remains workable.

Six steps in resolving problems...

There are six steps which companies who wish to retain good employees use in resolving problems.

- Define the problem in terms of needs, not solutions (i.e. *"I need to have the final sales figures for the report"* and not *"I need you to work late every night this week."*)
- Brainstorm possible solutions – quickly write down possible solutions on a whiteboard, flip chart or chalk board so everyone involved can see them, without any praise, condemnation or comment on the usefulnesses of the idea. Don't assess ideas as they are being written. That comes later. The idea is to be as creative as possible and even "silly" suggestions may just inspire someone else to come up with something - anything goes here. If you're having a problem starting, you can begin by writing out what you're doing now as an option.
- Assess the ideas, based on needs. The best solution is the one that will best meet everyone's needs, but consider the possible consequences (i.e. if you want an employee to work late every night this week to finish collating sales figures, do they get time off in lieu and can you afford this?)
- Plan who will do what, where, when and how. This is crucial – everyone needs to know where they fit in the solution
- Implement the plan – pick a concrete time. "Sometime soon" is not a good solution there because each of us defines "soon" in different ways
- Check on the outcome at a planned later date – this is evaluating the effectiveness of the plan as discussed and as implemented. In the scenario above, Brenda stated that she would check on things in three months time.

Final Thoughts...

In having run this course, I am often told that while the ideas presented are good ones, that nobody who participates in this course actually knows of any company that works this way. I am often told of tyrannical bosses or perpetually late employees who could “stand to learn this stuff”.

Admittedly, it was tough finding a company that demonstrated all of these effective communication styles but I did manage to find one company that demonstrated many of these effective communication styles.

I spoke with Jim Cummings of Cummings Mitchell, a graphic design company here in Ottawa with 6 full time employees. The interview included questions about how the company recognizes and handles conflict. Jim answered that one can “feel” when there’s a problem, when morale is down, he knows there are problems.

Jim mentioned that he has an open-door policy for anyone who feels they need to talk with him about a problem. That’s not to say everyone takes advantage of this open-door policy but he recognizes that informing employees that he’s there if they need to talk is sufficient, and it is. Employees (anyone, really) who need to talk about a problem have to take that step themselves – this is assuming responsibility for oneself. Jim also emphasized that any discussion is and remains confidential – here is an example of “respect”.

At Cummings Mitchell, the people there understand that the corporate structure (the culture, really) is non-hierarchical and Jim prefers to cultivate a “fertile ground” where problems and difficulties can be discussed and resolution achieved without any “words from above”.

“Management...” Jim stated, “...needs to invest in human resources.” adding that work is “... about people.” Yet, Cummings Mitchell also recognizes that one has to have a balanced life in order to work well.

He also outlined the very real need to set out the expectations of the job. It does nobody any good if they have to guess what is and what isn’t acceptable. For Jim Cummings, he sees himself as a “student”, as someone who is always learning about people and he is always open to new and creative ways of solving problems. He doesn’t see his employees as children who need to be told to “play nicely now”. Jim Cummings assumes his employees are intelligent and reasonable adults who are quite capable of sorting things out on their own.

I mention this because it is important. Gone are the days where the manager merely sits at (mostly) his desk, chewing on a cigar and propping his feet on his desk while the haggard employees toil away for very little pay. Good managers provide leadership without imposing it haphazardly. Good managers recognize that their employees may need a day or two off for personal reasons and good managers see their employees as people, not machines. It’s impossible to completely hang up the “home” person when you arrive at the office or warehouse and Jim Cummings understands this reality.

That’s not to suggest it is a perfect working environment at Cummings Mitchell, rather, that it is one of the more enlightened places to work.