

# Tailor Communication Techniques to Optimize Workplace Coaching

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Whether it is in a formal progress review or appraisal interview or during an informal discussion of a workplace incident or performance issue, how you respond to what an employee says during a coaching session reveals *how you feel* about the conversation you are having; and about the employee with whom you are having it. Your communication approach in every coaching session should be *an appropriate combination* of one or more of the following 24 established techniques:

- CLARIFYING
- ATTENDING
- ACKNOWLEDGING
- SHOWING RESPECT
- REFLECTING
- ECHOING
- INTERPRETING
- PROBING
- BEING SPECIFIC
- TELESCOPING THE PROBLEM
- BEING FUTURE ORIENTED
- BEING OPEN
- ENGAGING IN SELF
- DISCLOSURE
- CREATING IMMEDIACY
- EMPATHIZING
- SUMMARIZING/RESTATING/PARAPHRASING
- EVALUATING/ASSESSING
- BEING CONSTRUCTIVE
- BEING CONCRETE
- RESOURCING
- CONFIRMING
- REVIEWING
- PLANNING
- AFFIRMING/SUPPORTING

Each of us, without thinking much about it, automatically uses one or more of these 24 interpersonal communication techniques many times each day. The skillful supervisor is the one who *deliberately selects the particular technique that is most appropriate to each issue or behavior which surfaces in a coaching session*. The following definitions and examples are intended to help you select and apply the most appropriate interpersonal communication techniques in coaching discussions with the employees you supervise. No matter how good your current “people skills” might be, periodically reviewing and practicing these techniques will make you a more confident and effective coach and an even better supervisor than you are now.

## ■ **CLARIFYING**—establishing objectives for the coaching session

“Let’s discuss the difficulty you are having with the new job classification procedures and see if there’s a way you can overcome it.”

“I would like to help you figure out which jobs would make the best use of your talents when you’re ready to move on.”

“I would like to make sure you are satisfied you understand the key steps in the new procedure before we finish this conversation.”

“I’d like to help you become more comfortable supervising someone who used to be your peer.”

■ **ATTENDING**—using non verbal behaviors to communicate; listening without judging

The supervisor faces the employee, establishes good eye contact, maintains body language that indicates openness and interest, and is animated.

The supervisor listens to the employee **uncritically**—that is, without taking sides or deciding that the employee's statements are true or false, right or wrong.

■ **ACKNOWLEDGING**—giving verbal and non verbal indications of being involved in the conversation

"Yes, I can understand that," or "I see."

"So that's how it happened."

"Uh-huh," "O.K.," "yes," "right," or "I understand."

■ **SHOWING RESPECT**—avoiding the use of behaviors that ridicule, generalize or judge

The supervisor avoids **discounting** behaviors that communicate to employees that their problems are unreal, exaggerated, of no importance or simply belong to a general class. ("You're making too much of this. Everyone has trouble with her.")

The supervisor avoids **ridiculing** behaviors that exaggerate an employee's mistakes or apparent failures. ("You seem to have found the only wrong way to do it.")

The supervisor avoids **judgmental** behaviors that indicate the employee is to blame for whatever may have happened. ("Maybe you used a tone of voice that set him off.")

■ **REFLECTING**—stating in one's own words what the other person has said or seems to be feeling

**Employee:** "Top management says safety is our first priority, followed by quality and then schedule—but just let a test slip a day, and all hell breaks loose."

**Supervisor:** "You think you're getting mixed messages, and it still looks to you as if schedule is number one."

**Employee:** "With all these changes coming at once, my group is confused, and I'm tired of telling them I don't know any more than they do."

**Supervisor:** "From where you sit, it feels like there are no answers to anything right now, just questions."

■ **ECHOING**—asking questions that repeat a word or phrase the employee has used in order to encourage further explanation

"Lack of response?"

"Not enough authority?"

- **INTERPRETING**—giving an employee your impression of the real meaning of what they have been talking about and offering explanations to clarify it

**Employee:** “I’m satisfied with the Commendable rating I got last year. I don’t see why I should make the extra effort to try for an Outstanding.”

**Supervisor:** “What you really mean is that a merit increase of a couple of hundred dollars in your annual income doesn’t seem like much when you compare it with the added work you would have to undertake to achieve an Outstanding rating.”

- **PROBING**—asking closed or open-ended questions to learn more about the situation described, clarify part of what was said that may have been confusing, amplify what the employee has been talking about, or assess their understanding of the situation

“How much money is left in the budget?” (closed probe)

“Have you discussed this with your lead person?” (closed probe)

“Which new requirements are you referring to?” (closed probe)

“How is the project going?” (open probe)

“What are your general career expectations at this point?” (open probe)

“Why do you think that happened?” (open probe)

- **BEING SPECIFIC**—giving a clear statement of the perceived performance problem

“I expect everyone in the group to be present for our training sessions. I haven’t seen you at the last two sessions.”

“Our rule is that travel requests must be submitted at least forty-eight hours prior to actual travel. I have received three memos from the travel office saying that you have not been following this rule.”

- **TELESCOPING THE PROBLEM**—limiting the problem statement to a single performance incident

“My boss complained to me this morning about the way you responded to her on the telephone. She said she told you she wanted to find me and you just said you had no idea where I was and hung up.”

- **BEING FUTURE ORIENTED**—pressing for specific behavior change

“I need all members of the project team to show up on time for our weekly status review meetings. What can you do to make sure from now on that you get to these meetings on time?”

“You missed our last budget-submission cutoff date by two days. What can you do to make sure you hit the date in the future?”

- **BEING OPEN**—giving feedback to and asking for feedback from an employee to show that you want them to know how you see them and you want to know how they see you

**Employee:** “I did everything you told me to do and I think I did it more effectively than Kitty, but you rated her Outstanding and me only Fully Successful. How come?”

**Supervisor:** “I see you as someone who pays a lot of attention to guiding and developing subordinates, but your unit still doesn’t put out as much work as Kitty’s does and you seem to have more trouble than Kitty does in getting along with your counterparts in other work units. What would you like me to do to help you in these areas?”

- **ENGAGING IN SELF-DISCLOSURE**—indicating that you have had a similar experience

“I have felt like that.”

“A similar thing happened to me.”

- **CREATING IMMEDIACY**—drawing attention to what is happening in the conversation

“You are clearly very angry right now. Maybe we should talk about why that is happening before we discuss anything else.”

“This subject seems to have caught you by surprise. Do you want to continue talking about it now or wait until you’ve had some time to think about it?”

- **EMPATHIZING**—focusing on the employee’s concerns instead of your own

“I want to talk about the contractor’s complaint that you are not accessible for review meetings. You clearly want to talk about your disappointment at not being promoted. We need to do both, but let’s start with your disappointment.”

“If my having raised this performance issue is making you feel unappreciated and not respected, then first let’s talk about your reasons for feeling this way.”

- **SUMMARIZING/RESTATING/PARAPHRASING**—pausing in the conversation to recap key points or restate in your own words what you think you heard the employee say in order to make sure you understand what they meant

“Here is what I think I heard you say: A sudden increase in your workload, losing your best lead person, and confusion about priorities are the major reasons why we’ve fallen behind schedule. Have I understood you correctly?”

“Let me see if I’ve got this right. You’ve had difficulty moving into the new space because: one, the customer-service people didn’t get out on time; two, the space utilization plan was changed at the last minute; and, three, you’ve had trouble breaking away from the office to supervise the move. Is that about it?”

- **EVALUATING/ASSESSING**—giving an employee your impressions of their personal strengths or weaknesses in a particular situation and suggesting what you consider to be an appropriate course of action for them

**Employee:** “With the quality of people I’m responsible for, how can I do better than the standard for the critical element of staff supervision?”

**Supervisor:** “I know it seems impossible to surpass the standard on that critical element, but with your natural ability to motivate people, I really think you could surpass the standard if you held weekly staff meetings and followed up with one-on-one coaching sessions.”

- **BEING CONSTRUCTIVE**—offering suggestions, as appropriate, that credit and build on the employee’s good ideas and actions.

“Following up on that timely conversation might be helpful.”

“Focusing your regular staff meetings with issue-driven agendas might produce the results you’re looking for.”

- **BEING CONCRETE**—providing objective details when communicating information and expectations

“Keep all of your incident reports in a three-ringed binder in chronological sequence, with the most recent incident being in the front of the binder.”

“I want each of your research reports to begin with a two-page executive summary that describes the problem, the study method, your major findings, and recommended next steps.”

- **RESOURCING**—giving information, advice, instruction, a demonstration or a referral

“David got good results using a work simplification technique to streamline his group’s operation. Run the technique on a part of your operation and let me know if you think it’s applicable.”

“If you’re going to use flip charts in your oral report, you may want to put only some of the information on the charts and write in the rest as you refer to it. That would give your presentation a more dynamic feel.”

- **CONFIRMING**—ensuring that information has been received, learning has occurred, or the performance problem and its causes have been accurately identified

“Based on what I’ve been saying, what do you now see as the key points that should be covered in your next status review?”

“How about extending and refining the conclusion of the report—following the guidelines we have agreed on—and getting back to me tomorrow?”

“It seems the major problem you have in ensuring my phone is answered is that the other secretaries don’t think covering for one another is part of their jobs. Is that an accurate description of the problem?”

■ **REVIEWING**—going over key points to reinforce common understanding and the employee’s responsibility for corrective action

“I think you’ve pretty well got your strategy together for meeting with the personnel committee. First, you’re going to try not to be the most outspoken critic of the new time-card policy. This is the Director’s own idea, and it’s not in our best interest to be identified as the “bad guy.” Second, you’re going to make sure you comment on the positive features of the policy. Third, you’re going to show how the changes we are requesting are mainly ways of cutting down on paperwork.”

“It seems to me now that we have agreed on the basic issue: the contract really doesn’t permit you to tell the contractor exactly what to do. I felt you were not giving the contractor enough guidance, and you believed you were abiding by the contract. So what we have to change is the contract. In the meantime, though, we need to come up with a temporary solution.”

■ **PLANNING**—building strategies and agreeing on follow-up action steps

“I suggest you try your new approach with John—giving him more latitude in the sequence than he has had in the past—and see how it goes for a week. Then get back to me about how it’s going.”

“After you’ve had a chance to find out from our bank examiners exactly what they do, we can discuss whether you want to get trained to make that move. Let’s plan for you to make your inquiries and get back to me no later than 10 days from now.”

“O.K., our plan is for you to review with me the critical meetings on the new information system that are planned for each week. We will agree on the ones you must attend and the ones you will attend if you can work them into your schedule. We will also take a few minutes each Friday to see how this procedure works for you.”

■ **AFFIRMING/SUPPORTING**—recognizing the validity of an employee’s views or feelings without necessarily agreeing with them, or commenting on an employee’s strengths and positive prospects

“It’s hard to understand how a junior person could outperform you on a job that you have doing for 25 years. I would feel exactly the same way you do about Jim getting an Outstanding rating if I were in your position.”

“I can understand why you might have thought that.”

“You’re really getting a feel for what makes this division work. Economists are a funny lot, and you’re clearly getting a handle on what makes them tick.”

“Your technical work has always been excellent. I think you now know how important it is for you not to have negative relationships with other analysts, and I believe the plan we’ve put together is going to work because you want it to.”