COMMUNICATION ESSENTIALS FOR MANAGERS

Core Skills Every Manager Should Master

Managing people is both a huge responsibility and a great honor. For the first-time manager, making the transition from being an individual contributor to a manager can be a dramatic shift. A common mistake organizations make is to promote high-performing individuals into the role of manager, assuming that their track record of success alone will assist them in making this shift. The reality is that the skills that served a person as an individual may not serve him or her as a manager.

Another pitfall for many managers is that without proper support and development, they can misjudge their role or become paralyzed from fear of doing the wrong thing. Additionally, they may not receive adequate training to prepare them for their new role. For these reasons, managers can fail to accomplish their goals and develop meaningful relationships with their people.

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Being a successful manager is something that's learned and reinforced over time. It requires a sense of partnership, commitment, and patience to cultivate. Managing is something you do *with* people, not *to* them. Being a successful manager requires the individual to involve his or her people in the process of their own development by partnering to create clear goals and providing positive reinforcement or redirection, as needed, and closure at the end of a project or assignment. But if organizations aren't providing training and support, especially for their managers, the failure rate of these new managers can be colossal.

An initial challenge most managers face is learning to shift their perspective from

- Going it alone to collaborating with others
- Getting *their* work done to getting their work done *through* others
- Being one of the team to being the manager of the team

When people think about their best manager, it was most likely someone who truly listened, was flexible, acknowledged their work and contributions, and made them feel like they made a difference. He or she was probably trustworthy, accessible, and a good role model, and gave helpful and appropriate feedback. This is what all managers should aspire to. And purposeful, intentional, quality conversations between managers and direct reports are the lifeblood to creating these types of relationships.

Managers need to focus on these key areas:

- The Four Communication Essentials: Listen to Learn, Inquire for Insight, Tell *Your* Truth, Express Confidence
- The Four Core Conversations: Goal Setting, Praising, Redirecting, Wrapping Up

The Four Core Conversations

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The Four Communication Essentials

Managing takes place through conversations. In fact, it happens minute by minute as the conversations unfold. Because of this, some conversations are useful and others are not. Through our research we've found that there are four essential skills managers use to help them interact more effectively with their people. These skills promote clarity and a positive sense of regard for the individual and are both people- and results-oriented.

LISTEN TO LEARN

Listening is one of the most important skills any manager can have, regardless of tenure. It makes their direct reports feel valued and heard, and it builds trust. Listening at a deep and purposeful level requires a shift in attitude. This isn't listening just to check a box. Effective managers listen to learn something they might not have known before. They listen for opportunities to have their minds changed. They listen in service to the person and the conversation.

In a listening situation, managers need to be aware of their aims and intentions. Are they listening because they want to offer advice or share their perspective about a similar personal situation? Or are they listening with the intent of understanding and being open to influence by the other party? In any interaction with a direct report, it's crucial that managers do the latter. Any other behavior isn't active listening and will only frustrate employees.

It is important that managers set aside distractions and focus on understanding what direct reports are saying. It is critical to be present, turn off the phone, and turn away from the computer. Effective managers focus on what the other person is saying and respond so that their direct reports feel heard, valued, and better able to resolve challenges.

When listening to others, ninety percent of a manager's questions should be prefaced with "What" rather than "Why." "What" questions draw the person out and encourage sharing, while "Why" questions can discourage dialogue and put the person on the defensive by making them feel criticized or challenged.

INQUIRE FOR INSIGHT

Great managers draw their people out. They ask questions that allow their people to share insights and ideas that can benefit projects, tasks, and the team in general. And it helps the manager understand the underlying motivations in regard to what drives behavior. When inquiring for insight, it's important to focus on the future rather than the past and to avoid placing blame. It's also important for managers to

- Ask open-ended questions
- Focus on moving forward, not on the past
- Emphasize *what* and *how* rather than *why*
- Encourage the direct report to recap after the conversation ends in order to check for understanding
- Be open-minded

Listen more than you talk.

Listen more than is comfortable.

Listen more than you already do.

—Scott Blanchard and Madeleine Blanchard

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It is key for managers to ensure not only that they *hear* what their direct reports are saying but also that they *understand* what they are saying. This method of questioning helps open up and generate more dialogue. Asking open-ended questions gives people an opportunity to think, reflect, and clarify things that are important to them. "Why" questions should be avoided, as they tend to sound judgmental and can close down a conversation.

TELL *YOUR* TRUTH

Being honest can be a challenge for anyone, especially managers who are reluctant to be truthful for fear of hurting or offending others. But done properly, sharing your truth with others can be empowering to both parties.

Because the goal is to create purposeful action through clarity, telling your truth is an opportunity to shift gears and give feedback when needed to accomplish the goal. Being truthful builds trust and authenticity and allows managers to share information that is needed to help move the person forward. And when the first two steps, listening to learn and inquiring for insight, are done well, it builds confidence and creates a safe environment in which both the manager and the direct report can share their feelings honestly and respectfully. When telling their truths, managers need to

- Be brave, honest, and respectful
- Be open to other perspectives
- Avoid blame or judgment while they focus on forward movement

People want to perform for a manager they know has confidence in them.

EXPRESS CONFIDENCE

People want to perform for a manager they know has confidence in them. Managers who acknowledge the person and maintain a respectful, positive regard for his or her contribution are building the confidence of the people they manage. It's important to separate the subject matter from the person. Expressing confidence allows a manager to preserve a good relationship regardless of the type of conversation being held.

Expressing confidence in the person builds self-assurance and enthusiasm. It's important that managers

- Build self-assurance and enthusiasm in others
- Highlight relevant qualities or skills
- Cite previous successes
- Offer support as needed

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The Four Conversations

Good management is about the quality and frequency of Four Core Conversations. In any conversation it's important to plan the agenda beforehand. It's important that managers think about what they want to say and how they want to say it. They should be clear about intentions and mindful of their tone of voice and body language. For important conversations, managers should be prepared with responses to questions direct reports are likely to have.

GOAL SETTING CONVERSATIONS

All good performance starts with clear goals. They set people up for success, growth, and development. The goal should be written in a way that illustrates what a good job looks like, documents the milestones to mark progress, and stretches the individual beyond their current performance. Clearly written goals give people a chance to succeed, while vague goals can lead to trouble.

New managers need to know how to facilitate goal setting so both parties come away from the conversation with goals they agree on. Goal setting works best when the manager and the direct report plan the goals together. It's also important to ensure that the goals are clear and compelling.

Clear—The best goals are discussed at the beginning of a project and are clear to both the manager and the direct report. It's imperative that the steps toward goal achievement are spelled out, there is clarity about when the goal needs to be accomplished, and there is agreement on how results will be tracked and measured. Finally, it's important that the goals be written down and reviewed often throughout the year.

Compelling—It's important to have a discussion regarding the goal to improve buy-in. Managers must find ways to make the goal meaningful by clarifying its relevance to both departmental and organizational initiatives. They need to ask direct reports whether working on the goal will add to or drain their energy and whether it is realistically within their control to achieve it. Finally, managers should ask direct reports whether they have any concerns about accepting the goal while making it clear that, as a manager, their role is to help them succeed.

During a goal-setting conversation, it's important for managers to

- Link the goal to the person's strengths, interests, and capabilities
- Introduce the goal
- Get feedback to refine the goal
- Identify steps to make progress on the goal
- Be willing to be honest and brave enough to say what needs to be said
- Document the goal before leaving the meeting
- Clarify next steps and plan check-ins
- Express confidence in the person's ability to achieve the goal

The best goals are discussed at the beginning of a project and are clear to both the manager and the direct report.

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If people make mistakes when they know better, that's a *won't-do* problem rather than a *can't-do* problem.

PRAISING CONVERSATIONS

Praising Conversations reinforce good behaviors and support stronger relationships beyond the goal. Praising is servant leadership in action. If people are asked whether they receive too much praise, the answer is likely to be no. Praising is a powerful catalyst for reinforcing the behaviors managers want to see over and over from their direct reports. And they illustrate the behaviors that lead to success in achieving the goals.

When praising an individual, it's important that it be done as soon as possible. Managers should be specific and praise behaviors, letting people know what they did right and how good the manager feels as a result. It's important that the managers be specific about how the behavior helped them and the department. They should deliver the praising and then pause, allowing the feedback to sink in so the person has time to feel good about what was said. Then he or she can be encouraged to do more of the same. It's important because, ultimately, by modeling the Praising Conversation for direct reports, the manager is teaching them to recognize their own successes and to begin praising themselves.

When having a Praising Conversation, it's important for managers to consider these points:

- Communicate the praising
- Discuss how the behavior is helping achieve the goal
- Encourage the person to reflect on the accomplishment
- Express confidence and encourage continued good work

An example is an individual who has just produced a report for his manager to use in an important meeting. His manager might say, "Joe, I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated your work on the product life-cycle report. Not only did you deliver an accurate report 24 hours before I needed it, but it was clear you'd spent a good deal of time on the formatting so it would be easily understood." After pausing for a moment, the manager might continue, "It was so helpful to me and the entire team and allowed us to make some critical decisions on how to proceed with the new product rollout. I felt great being able to share such timely information. Keep it up; I'm glad I can count on you."

REDIRECTING CONVERSATIONS

There are times when even a great performer will slip up. This is when managers must have a critical Redirecting Conversation. If people make mistakes when they know better, that's a *won't-do* problem rather than a *can't-do* problem. This is when it's time to redirect.

Redirecting guides people toward their goals by helping them recognize when specific behaviors are out of alignment with the goal, why their actions matter, and that their manager wants them to succeed. With Redirecting Conversations, it's important to be immediate and incremental, honest and kind, and goal focused, without blame or judgment.

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Redirecting is about clarifying an agreed-upon goal and confirming where and how behavior and performance fell short. A manager should describe the mistake and voice his or her issues with it, pausing afterward to let the individual feel his or her own concern. Next, the manager should reinforce that the direct report is better than the mistake and that the manager values him or her. Then it should be let go.

During a Redirecting Conversation, it's important that managers adhere to the following guidelines:

- Clarify the goal
- Share an observation about a behavior or result the manager wants to change
- Ask for the person's perspective or confirmation, being sure to listen to learn!
- Encourage reflection on impact and solutions
- Communicate honestly what needs to be different and gain agreement—the manager must be willing to tell his or her truth
- Ask for a review of next steps and actions
- Pay attention to and ask about verbal and nonverbal responses
- Express confidence in the person

An example of a redirecting discussion is, "Joe, I noticed you missed the deadline on the product life-cycle report. This is concerning to me because we were counting on that report for our meeting. When we reviewed the project last week, you assured me that the deadline was no problem. I know that you are better than this. I really value you and your contributions, so in the future if you feel you are not going to be able to keep your agreements, let's have that conversation before the deadline is missed."

WRAPPING UP CONVERSATIONS

Wrapping Up Conversations should occur at the end of projects or goals to celebrate results, acknowledge learning, keep people energized, inspire engagement, and promote development by honoring the work that's been done.

Wrapping Up Conversations recognize what's been learned and address anything that's lingering. These conversations also promote reflection. In a Wrapping Up Conversation, begin by endorsing the person and celebrating the achievement. If something could have been handled differently, be willing to tell your truth. Listen for wisdom gained and inquire about personal development. Remember to finish by endorsing a job well done.

Guidelines for Wrapping Up Conversations include

- Asking how the person feels about the goal or project
- Discussing the results and impact collaboratively
- Asking about key learnings or areas for improvement

Wrapping Up Conversations recognize what's been learned and address anything that's lingering.

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For example, a manager might ask what the direct report thinks went well and what he or she learned from doing this project. The conversation might include what the direct report or manager could do differently next time. Finally the conversation might focus on the benefit the team derived or team learnings that occurred as a result of the project. And, if an apology is needed that has not been expressed, be sure to include it in the Wrapping Up Conversation.

Additional Considerations for All Managers

BUILDING SELF-AWARENESS

Some managers may not spend much time on introspection and self-examination, but the best managers understand themselves well from having learned to leverage their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. Self-awareness breeds authenticity. For managers, knowing who they are, how they see themselves, and how others see them is critical. People want to follow authentic managers.

But even the best managers have blind spots. People can't see themselves as accurately as others see them. If managers want a true assessment of their impact, it's important to get feedback from others. Using a reliable assessment or simply asking for feedback is a good place to start.

Even the best managers have blind spots.

The second challenge is being open to feedback and being willing to change. It's important to seek out feedback and to do something with it. A lot of managers appear to seek feedback—because they think it is politically correct—but they have no intention of letting themselves be influenced by it or taking action because of it. This can be detrimental to a manager's credibility.

Some managers react to feedback by defending themselves, explaining it away, or rationalizing the behavior. But it's important to be open to feedback. Even if managers aren't happy with what is being said, they should consider, "What if they're right? What could I learn from this?" Another reaction might be to discount the feedback, especially if it's delivered by someone they don't like or respect. But to do this is to waste an opportunity to learn about themselves.

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BUILDING TRUST

For all managers, it's critical to establish an environment of trust. Building trust is an investment of time, offers many rewards and builds strong relationships. There are two ways that managers break trust with their people. The first is dramatic—a manager betrays a confidence, engages in self-serving behavior, or has a serious moral or ethical lapse. This type of breach usually ends up being very public—and once it occurs, the only remedy is damage control.

The second way that managers break trust with people is more common, happens slowly, and is usually obvious to others but unknown to the manager. This pattern of behavior—often well-intentioned—results in the undermining of the manager's credibility with his or her people. This type of trust-busting behavior is fixable, but only if a manager can identify the situation early and take steps to correct it.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF TRUST

There are four key elements that managers need to be aware of when they are looking at building or restoring trust with the people they lead. The four elements are Able, Believable, Connected, and Dependable.

1. ***Able*** is about demonstrating competence. Do the managers know how to get the job done? Are they able to produce results? Do they have the skills to make things happen—including knowing the organization and equipping people with the resources and information they need to get their jobs done?
2. ***Believable*** means acting with integrity. Managers have to be honest in their dealings with people. In practical terms, this means creating and following fair processes. Direct reports need to feel that they are being treated equitably. It doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is treated the same way in all circumstances, but it does mean that people are treated appropriately and justly based on their unique circumstances. Believability is also about acting in a consistent, values-driven manner that reassures employees that they can rely on their managers.
3. ***Connected*** is about demonstrating care and concern for other people. It means focusing on direct reports and identifying their needs. It is supported by good communication skills. Managers need to openly share information about the organization and about themselves. This allows the manager to be seen as a real person whom a direct report can identify with. When people share a little bit of information about themselves, it creates a sense of connection.
4. ***Dependable*** is about reliably following through on what the managers say they are going to do. It means being accountable for their actions and being responsive to the needs of others. If managers promise something, they must follow through. It also requires being organized and predictable so direct reports can see that the managers have things in order and are able to follow through on their promises.

Managers need to openly share information about the organization and about themselves.

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When managers commit a serious breach of trust with their people, all too often they prefer to act as if it didn't happen, try to justify the mistake, or use hierarchy and status to make the problem go away. This is exactly the wrong approach.

A healthier and more productive approach to restore trust involves five key actions.

1. **Acknowledge and Assure**—Managers begin the process by addressing and acknowledging that a problem exists. While acknowledging the problem, they assure the other party that their intention is to restore trust between the two of them; they also express their willingness to take the time and effort to get the relationship back on track.
2. **Admit**—The next step is admitting their part in causing the breach of trust. Managers must own up to their actions and take responsibility for whatever harm was caused, even if they don't feel they're entirely at fault. They admit to their part in a situation.
3. **Apologize**—The third step for managers to repair damaged trust is apologizing for their role in the situation. This takes humility. They need to avoid making excuses, shifting blame, or using qualifying statements—these will only undermine the apology.
4. **Assess**—Managers then invite feedback from the other party about how he or she sees the situation. They use the Elements of Trust Model to identify the behaviors that have damaged the relationship. Next, they discuss the issues and identify clearly what needs to change.
5. **Agree**—The final step in restoring damaged trust is working together to create an action plan. After they have identified each other's perceptions and the specific ways that trust has been broken, they can identify and agree to the behaviors that will build trust going forward.

When people believe they are working for trustworthy managers, they are willing to invest their time and talents in making a difference in an organization. People who feel more connected will invest more of themselves in their work. High trust levels lead to a greater sense of self-responsibility, greater interpersonal insight, and more collective action toward achieving common goals. Trustworthy managers are rewarded by employees who stretch, push their limits, and volunteer to go above and beyond. When managers create a high-trust environment that is consistent over time, collaboration increases and organizations leap forward.

Becoming a manager doesn't need to be daunting or overwhelming. Having the skill, intent, and capacity to engage in effective conversations is a key competency for success as a new manager. These strategies can get new managers off to a fast start by easing and supporting their transition and improving their performance, not only for them but for the entire team as well.

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ENDNOTES

- The content in this paper regarding the Four Essential Skills was adapted from The Ken Blanchard Companies' training program, Blanchard Management Essentials®, developed by Scott Blanchard, Ken Blanchard, and Linda Miller.
- The content in this paper regarding the Four Conversations was adapted from the book *The New One Minute Manager®* by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson.
- The content in this paper regarding building trust was adapted from TrustWorks!®, Cindy Olmstead's original research and program development on the topic of trust.

To speak with a representative about the Blanchard Management Essentials program,

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