

A climate of communication refers to the social tone of a relationship – the way people feel about each other as they carry out duties or activities. Communication climates develop relative to how, or if, people see themselves as valued.

Confirming Communication

Confirming communication helps to build and maintain rapport. Three positive types of messages that have the best chance of being perceived as confirming:

- **Recognition** – the most fundamental act of confirmation is to *recognise* the other person.
- **Acknowledgement** – of the ideas and feelings of others (a stronger form of confirmation than simple recognition).
- **Endorsement** – to agree with the person speaking. This is the *highest* form of confirming.

Disagreeing Messages

These lie between confirming and disconfirming and communicate that the other person is wrong. There are three types of disagreement:

- **Argumentativeness** – presenting and defending own positions on issues while attacking positions taken by others.
- **Complaining** – a way to register dissatisfaction without arguing.
- **Aggressiveness** – the most destructive way to disagree with another person.

Disconfirming Communication

Disconfirming communication dismisses the value of a person and can increase feelings of distrust and frustration. There are seven types of disconfirming *responses*:

- **Impervious** – a failure to acknowledge the other person's attempt to communicate.
- **Interrupting** – these occur when one person begins to speak before the other has completed making their point.
- **Irrelevant** – comments totally unrelated to what the other person is saying.
- **Tangential** – will acknowledge the other person's communication, but the acknowledgement is used to steer the conversation in a new direction.
- **Impersonal** – monologues filled with impersonal, intellectualised and generalised statements enabling the speaker to avoid interacting with the other individual on a personal level.
- **Ambiguous** – contain a message with more than one meaning.
- **Incongruous** – contain two messages that seem to deny or contradict each other (one verbal, one non-verbal)

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Communication Skills

Creating Positive Climates for Communication

It is possible to achieve a *positive communication climate* by using strategies that increase the odds of expressing yourself in ways that improve communicative relationships with others. You can reduce defensiveness, for example, by sending supportive rather than defensiveness-triggering messages:

- **Use description** – rather than evaluation, offers your thoughts, feelings and requirements without judgement of the listener.
- **Try to have a problem orientation** – *controlling communication* occurs when a sender tries to impose a solution on the receiver with little or no regard for the receiver's requirements or interests; whereas *problem orientation* focusses on finding a solution that satisfies the needs of both parties and all others involved.
- **Strategy vs spontaneity** – *strategy* typically includes defence-arousing messages which hide the ulterior motives of the speaker, in contrast, *spontaneous behaviour* is more honest rather than manipulative.
- **Balancing neutrality & empathy** – *neutrality* can arouse defensiveness due to its lack of concern for the welfare of another. *Empathy* provides support by acknowledging and accepting another's feelings.
- **Equality over superiority** – people who feel *superior* deliver patronising messages due to an inner belief that they possess more talent, knowledge or skill. *Equality* is achieved when the speaker communicates that, even though they *may have greater ability* in certain areas, they see others as having just as much worth.
- **Provisionalism over certainty** – people who insist they are right project the defence-arousing behaviour of *certainty*, while *provisionalism* allows for strong opinions, but also acknowledges the possibility of being wrong.

Constructive Criticism

Consider the following tips when offering constructive criticism:

1. **Check your motives** – Sometimes, telling others what you think, feel or want is primarily for your own good, not theirs.
2. **Choose your moment** – It's best to arrange a time when both parties are able to calmly and rationally discuss the issue of concern. Check in with how you're feeling before speaking up.
3. **Use the sandwich method** – buffer your criticisms with *praise and acknowledgement*. The sandwich method is effective because it helps the recipient to perceive the comments as *constructive* and *well-intentioned*.
4. **Follow-up!** – it is essential to acknowledge any positive changes that result from constructive criticism.

Transform a Negative Climate

There are two constructive ways to react to negative communication that enhance communication:

1. Seek further information first:

- Ask for more specific information from the speaker, or critic.
- If the speaker is unable to provide specific details, guess at them and ask if your understanding is correct.
- Paraphrase the speaker's ideas, using reflective listening skills (particularly helpful when assisting someone to solve their own problems).
- Ask what is needed. If the demand is not obvious, you may need to investigate further.
- Enquire about the consequences of your behaviour to ascertain how it has affected the critic.
- Ask what else may be wrong. By asking about other possible complaints, problems can be properly identified.

2. Agree with the critic

In every situation, it is possible to both honestly accept the other person's position and still maintain your own. There are several ways to do this:

- Agree with the truth when the criticism is factually correct.
- Agree when the chances of a positive response are good. This encourages hidden agendas into the open and brings previously unconsidered consequences of your actions into awareness.
- Agree in principle. This allows you to accept the basis of the criticism without a change in behaviour.
- Agree with the critic's right to perceive things their way, you acknowledge any reasonable perceptions even though you may not agree or wish to change your behaviour.