

**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.