

How to Talk So Others Will Talk Back

Effective communication isn't just about accuracy in the transmission process. Social scientists are helping us understand the critical role of *context* in communication—especially when it concerns the communication *climate*.

A Definition

The climate of communication isn't so much about specific activities or behaviors of people as it is about how people *feel about each other* as they carry out those activities. The climate is about expectations, attitudes, and preconceptions. Certainly, your expectations will be shaped by the behaviors of those around you. But it's just as likely that *your* expectations will also shape *your* behavior. Here's the point we're trying to make: The more you understand the link between communication behavior and climate, the more skilled and effective you will be as a *leader* as well as a *communicator*.

Positive Climate = Job Satisfaction = High Performance

Why study this at all? Research has linked communication climate in the workplace with job satisfaction and productivity. The connection is a direct one—employees who experience a positive communication climate have a higher level of commitment to their work; experience greater job satisfaction; and perform better at work (Pincus 1986; Guzley 1992; Odden & Sias 1997).

It's About Value

What creates a positive communication climate? Ultimately, communication climate is a function of how well people feel *valued*. When workers feel valued, respected, and appreciated, they describe the climate as *positive*. And in a positive climate, workers are much more likely to be open, honest, and transparent—with one another and especially with their boss.

The Leader Sets the Tone

It shouldn't surprise us that the leader of a group, team, or organization has a major impact on the communication climate. If you're a leader, that's good news for you—you have the power to affect the climate of your team's communication and ensure a more effective exchange of information between you and your people. That's exactly what you need, to leverage the creative thinking of your team; get accurate information for better decision-making; and be one step ahead of problems and crises.

The first part of this issue will help you do the right things to build a positive communication climate for your team. The second part will equip you for a tougher task—countering a negative climate between you and *your boss!*

The Personal Trainer is a resource for growing leaders produced by Dr. Jim Dyke, the Founder and Director of **Corporate Leadership Initiatives, Inc.**—an organization dedicated to equipping men and women with skills and principles pertinent to the role and life of a transformational leader of the 21st century. This is a specially-designed tool for personal reflection and discussion that will help you and your team apply the ideas and principles presented in the matching edition of the **Leadership Tracks** newsletter. Log on to **www.CLIonline.com** to discover more ways **Corporate Leadership Initiatives, Inc.** can bring its resources and expertise to your organization and help your people become better leaders and better followers. Copyright 2020 James R. Dyke — all rights reserved.

Part 1

Setting the Pace for Your People

Start building a positive communication climate by tuning into the subtle, but powerful basics that send the right messages of value and acceptance. It begins with simple acts of social and personal *recognition*. These are things that are so simple for many of us, that it is easy to overlook them or take them for granted. *Don't!*

Start With The Basics

Social Recognition. Don't avoid contact with your people. When you see people, be sure to greet them. Use non-verbal amplifiers to send a positive, confirming message—a smile; direct eye contact; a wave of the hand or a nod of the head. Return your phone calls and e-mail messages promptly. When a team member wants to talk or meet with you, follow-up on their request as quickly as you can.

Personal Acknowledgment. Become a good listener—it is the most powerful way that you can acknowledge the ideas and input of your team members. Take the power of listening to the next level by taking the initiative, and *asking* for your team's ideas and opinions.

Individual Affirmation. Anytime you affirm a team member's idea, opinion, feeling, or point of view, you are sending a powerful message of value. Even your disagreement with a team member can be expressed in a way that confirms their value to you and the rest of the team—*"I'm not sure I agree with you completely on this, but I understand your concerns."*

6 Key Behaviors

Now add six specific behaviors to your communication tool kit. These are approaches that build a positive communication climate by sending very specific messages of personal value. In each category, I will give you examples of the opposing, *disconfirming* behavior along with matching examples of a positive, confirming equivalent. Use the examples as illustrations. Feel free to also use them as models for crafting your own positive messages.

Judgment vs. Description

When you use *judging* statements, you are sending definite messages about the *value* of things—good versus bad; proper vs. improper; acceptable vs. unacceptable. When you use judging statements that focus on *people*, you quickly erode any positive communication climate.

It's better to use *descriptive* language that focuses on the specifics of behavior, feelings, or concrete qualities. Descriptive language avoids making blanket evaluations or judging character and motives. Aside from being more positive, descriptive language also has real value—it points out specific ways that the hearer can improve the situation; their performance; or behavior. Look at these examples:

Judgment	Description
This report is unacceptable!	<i>This report doesn't contain last year's production figures. We need those for comparison.</i>
You're rude and inconsiderate!	<i>This is the third time this month you've been late for the staff meeting.</i>
Can't any of you new hires get this right?	<i>I've seen some of the other new hires struggling with this same issue.</i>
You're not making any sense!	<i>I'm not sure I understand your point.</i>
Your presentation materials look terrible!	<i>It doesn't look like you used the recommended presentation template.</i>
You're a failure as a manager!	<i>Your production totals are still below acceptable levels.</i>

Control vs. Collaboration

Control statements are commands! They are used by speakers who are trying to impose their own solutions or decisions on others. They send the message, *I know what’s best for you—just do what I say and we’ll get along fine.* *Collaborative* statements focus on collective problem-solving, and send a different message—*There’s a problem here, so let’s figure out how to solve it—what do **you** think?*

Look at the examples below, and see what a difference it makes when you replace bossy, controlling statements with inclusive invitations to partner in the work. Notice also how the use of *I* and *you* in controlling statements is replaced by the powerful use of *we* in collaborative messages.

Control	Collaboration
I want you in my office right now!	<i>I need to talk to you ASAP. How soon can we schedule a time to meet?</i>
Fire that person, or I will!	<i>You have a team member who is not performing well—what seems to be the problem?</i>
You have two choices: get busy or get fired!	<i>Your production numbers are lower than we expected. Have you thought about some ways to bring them up?</i>
I want you on board with this policy immediately!	<i>We’ve all made a commitment to support this change—do you need help understanding or implementing it?</i>
If I were running your department, I would be producing results, not whining about overwork!	<i>We’ve tried to make sure you have the resources you need to succeed. Help me understand why you feel you are still understaffed.</i>
Get that project done on time!	<i>We have a no-debate deadline for this project. If you need help deciding how to adjust for that, let me know and I’ll be happy to help you with it.</i>

Subterfuge vs. Honesty

Which kind of person do you prefer working with: someone with hidden motives, or someone with clear intentions? Most of us want to know where we stand with other people. We don’t want to feel manipulated. We don’t like the idea that someone might be trying to take advantage of us—even if they are saying or doing the right things in the process. Let’s be clear about this—even *these principles for building positive communication climate can become tools for manipulating others.* Unless you really *care* about the people you lead, you are in danger of becoming just another narcissistic, egocentric leader (albeit one with a bit more sophistication in your approach!) Let’s put it another way: *If you ever find yourself using these communication behaviors in order to control and manipulate other people, it is time to take fresh stock of your motives, values, and ethics.* Are you searching for real leadership power? Let me recommend the sheer simplicity and ethic of pure altruism! Use the examples provided on the next page, to help you understand the difference between statements of subterfuge and messages that represent honest, open motives.

Subterfuge	Honesty
What are your plans for Saturday?	<i>I need someone to man our company booth at the Heart Association 5K run this Saturday. Are you interested in helping out?</i>
Have you ever considered transferring to another division?	<i>I'm concerned about your job performance over the last 6 months—let's set up a meeting to talk about it.</i>
Would you like to earn some points with the higher-ups?	<i>I have a tough job that needs to be done. I'd like you to consider taking it on. Can we talk discuss it this week sometime?</i>
I'd like to help you fill that administrative position that is open in your department. Are you interested?	<i>I have a person in mind for that open position—I'd like you to hire them as a personal favor to me.</i>
Have you noticed that Bob is always in his office a half-an-hour before anyone else is around here?	<i>I'm concerned about your performance. I'm not sure you're being disciplined enough about your time and work schedule.</i>
Great job on that last project! You're just the caliber of leader I'm looking for, for a special assignment I need done.	<i>I've got a dirty job no one else wants. I'd like you to consider doing it for me.</i>

Indifference vs. Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and appreciate what other people are experiencing, thinking, and feeling. Having true empathy doesn't necessarily mean that we must also agree with others. But it does enable us to see things from another person's point of view. Empathy sends a powerful message of respect, value, and caring concern. Empathy also requires appropriate non-verbal expressions to match the content of its message.

In contrast, messages of indifference underscore the impersonal nature of a workplace or working relationship. Indifference says: You really don't matter to me as a person—you are just another cog in the wheel of our company's organizational machinery.

Indifference	Empathy
Don't let this success go to your head.	<i>Congratulations—you did a great job! I hope you're as proud as I am!</i>
Whining about family issues is no excuse!	<i>I'm sorry to hear about your wife's illness. Is there anything we can do to help you take care of family needs and still manage your workload?</i>
I don't want to hear any excuses—just show up on time when you're supposed to!	<i>I know this is going to be difficult for you—but we really do need your contribution in order for the team to meet its deadlines.</i>
You win some; you lose some. That's life.	<i>I'm sorry this assignment didn't turn out the way you wanted—I know you put a lot of time and effort into it.</i>
Maybe you'll do better next time.	<i>I don't care that you didn't come in at the top of the list this month—I'm proud of the job you all did!</i>
Business is one thing. Personal stuff is another. That's just the way it is. You're just going to have to snap out of it.	<i>I know this is a tough time for you right now—but I don't want your current circumstances to cause you to lose your way at work here.</i>

Superiority vs. Equality

Statements of *superiority* send the message, *I'm better than you*. Nobody likes to be patronized, so this kind of communication really alienates people. To be clear, these are not statements about differences in skill, experience, knowledge, or even status—they are references to personal value and worth. In fact, many leaders with superior skill or knowledge are still able to convey the attitude that they see other human beings as having just as much value and worth as themselves. They communicate this perspective through messages of *equality*. Use the examples below, to help you understand the distinction between these two contrasting messages.

Superiority	Equality
You think you know everything there is to know about this, don't you?	<i>I respect your expertise in this area, but I wonder if you might be missing something here.</i>
You have no idea what you're talking about!	<i>I'm not sure I agree.</i>
Who do you think you're talking to?	<i>That's a pretty strong statement. Help me understand how you came to that conclusion.</i>
When you become the boss, then you'll understand.	<i>Tell me how you see it from your perspective, and then I'll share how I see it from mine.</i>
You're doing it all wrong.	<i>I don't think you're going to get the results you expect with your current strategy. If you're interested, I'd be happy to show you what I'm talking about.</i>
If I were you, I'd keep my mouth shut.	<i>I know you're upset. I can appreciate that. Why don't we both cool off a little, and talk about this later when we're better able to have a more logical, cool-headed discussion of the problem?</i>

Dogmatism vs. Open-mindedness

Dogmatic statements send the clear message, *I'm right and you're wrong*. It's no wonder that these messages shut down communication. They clearly signal that debate and discussion are over. Worse, they also indicate that other people's ideas and opinions have no value. Even worse, they imply that other *people* have no value! *Open-minded* statements send the opposite message—*I have a strong opinion, but I don't believe I have a corner on the truth*.

Open-minded statements invite the sharing of ideas, opinions, and differing points of view. Behind that invitation is the subtle, but strong message that other people *matter*—their *ideas* matter, and *they, themselves* matter! Study the examples in the table on the next page, and learn how you can state your own strong opinions, but still affirm and respect other people in the process.

Dogmatism	Open-mindedness
That's never going to work!	<i>I think there may be some problems with that approach.</i>
The head of accounting is an idiot—you're going to hate working for him!	<i>The head of accounting has high expectations and can be very demanding. He is challenging to work with, but isn't that true of many managers and executives?</i>
This Total Quality Management approach is a joke!	<i>There are many high-performing companies that don't use the Total Quality Management concepts, and some companies that do, that don't show particularly impressive results. Maybe there is more to this issue than meets the eye.</i>
He's an outsider—why should we listen to him?	<i>I think we'll have to weigh his opinion very carefully, because he is not familiar with our company and its unique qualities.</i>
That's not what our customers want!	<i>Our customer surveys haven't yet shown that to be a high priority.</i>
That approach is totally outdated.	<i>Maybe there are different ways to approach this that might still meet our goals, but fit our new circumstances more appropriately.</i>
You're never going to get anywhere without a degree.	<i>I think you may find a college degree to be a lot more important than you first thought. I know a fair number of people with your career goals who decided to go back to school to get one.</i>

Notice the “definite” terms we use when making dogmatic statements—words like *can't*, *never*, *always*, *must*, and *have to*. Contrast these with the “indefinite” terms we use when making open-minded statements—words like *perhaps*, *maybe*, *possibly*, *might*, and *may*.

When you send out messages that create a positive climate of communication, you are using a respectful approach that scholars call *invitational rhetoric*—statements that strive to understand others and invite them to see your point of view. This is how leaders use communication to attract, motivate, and inspire people. It is how they cultivate loyalty and support in the people they lead. It is how they create impact and influence through others.

Now you have some practical tools that will help you become a better leader, manager, and boss. But what do you do when you are facing a very negative communication climate with *your* superior? What do you do when your boss is assaulting you with the negative messages that we've just criticized—judgment, control, indifference, superiority, manipulation, and dogmatism?

In the second part of this issue, you will learn how to counter a negative communication climate by using positive responses that avoid heated confrontations, and position you as a supportive and collaborative colleague.

Part 2

Transforming a Negative Climate

It's difficult to respond calmly and dispassionately to a critical boss or coworker, especially when the criticism is on target! How do you keep your cool and keep your head while deflecting negative statements in a way that warms up the communication climate and leads to a more positive atmosphere for collaboration and teamwork? There are two basic methods that are sure to help you get through your next confrontation with a much better sense of control and personal empowerment.

Method 1—Get More Information

Most negative messages are so general and broad that they are usually of little value in pinpointing specific issues or behaviors. Now's your chance to respond in a constructive way that will ultimately promote better communication; generate constructive criticism; and introduce creative change. Here's all you have to do: listen open-mindedly *without necessarily agreeing with your critic*. To do that, you will have to exercise some careful restraint, and play a little mental game. The mental game you are going to play is this one: *Pretend that your critic may be right*. If your critic is correct, then you will learn from their feedback. If your critic is *wrong*, you will gain information that will help you to better present your side of the issue. If you play this mental game and listen carefully, you will always gain an advantage. Here are some specific ways you can get more information...

Get the details.

Since most negative messages are general and vague, pump your critic for more specific information. Abstract accusations—e.g. *You're not pulling your weight*—need explanation. So ask for it! (One important word of caution is in order here: Watch your tone of voice and be sure your non-verbals match your words! All it takes is a slight vocal inflection or a minor facial expression, and your request for information can easily be mistaken for barbed sarcasm!) One magic response that will help you deflect even the most provocative attack is this simple one: *Tell me why you would say that*. Here are some more examples of how to go fishing by using non-defensive questions:

Help me understand...what is it exactly that I am doing that brings you to that conclusion?

I'm not sure I understand how you came to that conclusion. What am I doing that is giving you that impression?

I guess I'm not seeing what you are seeing. Can you clarify more specifically what you are referring to?

Can you give me a specific example of what I am doing, that is giving you this impression?

I guess I'm not sure exactly what you are referring to. Can you give me a specific example?

Suggest some possibilities.

Your critic may not be able to (or willing to) describe the exact nature of your offense.

No matter. You can take the lead and turn the confrontation into a collaborative exercise, instead of an adversarial one. Do this by suggesting the missing details. Again, keep your cool and maintain a spirit of goodwill, otherwise this will feel like an interrogation to your critic.

Here are some examples...

When you say I'm not pulling my weight, are you referring to my production numbers for last month?

What is it, exactly, that makes my report unacceptable? Is it the format? Is it My conclusions? Is it the data I used?

How, exactly, does my letter need revision? Is it my grammar? My choice of words? Is it the actual content?

How, exactly, would you like to see me handle this employee's problem behavior differently—with harsher discipline? A longer period of probation? A demotion? Termination?

What, specifically, would you like me to change about my presentation? Is it too long? Too dull? Too much information at once?

Where, exactly, do you think I'm off-base with my strategy? Am I expecting too much of my team? Too little? Do you think I'm being too demanding of other departments?

Rephrase the criticism.

We've already recommended using the powerful active listening skill known as *clarifying*. You can use a second active listening skill to great advantage as well—*paraphrasing*. For even greater effect, add a third—*amplifying*. Skillful use of these techniques will encourage your critic to help you resolve the confusion. Your positive approach will also position you as a cooperative and receptive listener. Here is an example:

Boss: I'm sick and tired of your lack of support!

You: Boss, I can see that you're upset! I apologize if I'm the reason—I certainly don't want to be perceived as being unsupportive! Tell me why you would think that.

Boss: Are you kidding? I'm referring to your comments at the staff meeting.

You: So... it was something I said at the staff meeting that upset you? Is that it?

Boss: Not just me—your criticism upset the rest of the team, too! Couldn't you tell?

You: No... I wasn't aware that my comments at the staff meeting came across as unsupportive to you and the others.

Boss: Of course it did! It showed a lack of support and a lack of respect!

You: Was it my choice of words? Was that the problem?

Boss: No, not your words—it was because you just started firing away at the approach we all had just agreed on!

You: Let me see if I understand you correctly. You felt disrespected because I was offering what I thought was constructive criticism?

Boss: That's my point! The approach wasn't up for debate!

You: I can see why you might interpret that as being disrespectful. I want you to know that I never want to send that message to you or anyone else on the team. At the meeting, I was under the mistaken impression that, once we had agreed on a particular approach, we would all be open to a team discussion that would focus on ways to improve or add value to the strategy. I'm actually glad you brought this to my attention, so I could clear up any misunderstanding. Next time, I'll check with the team to correct my assumptions about the meeting agenda. I certainly don't want to be misinterpreted as being unsupportive or disrespectful!

Find out what they *really* want.

Sometimes people will tell you *exactly* what they want—e.g. *Turn down that music!* Sometimes they won't. People aren't always clear about what they *really* want. You may have to dig a little deeper with a carefully worded question or two. Study the following exchange for an example...

Boss: What do you think you're doing, giving my secretary an assignment?

You: I was just compiling that report I was assigned, and I needed some figures from your department. I thought I would go straight to her, instead of bothering you with the request. I hope you didn't think I was trying to overstep your authority.

Boss: No, that's not it. She was totally confused about what you really needed. If you had come to me first, I would have been able to clarify the request for her right at the outset, and help her to compile the right information. Next time, feel free to come to *me* with your request. I'll take it from there, and make sure you get what you need.

Find out how your behavior is impacting them.

Sometimes we can be totally oblivious to the problems our behavior is creating for other people. We can gain a better understanding just by asking a carefully worded question. Often our newly-gained insight can help us change course immediately, and repair any damage we have caused.

Here's an example...

Boss: Where have you been??!!

You: I had a breakfast meeting with one of our clients! You seem upset—why?

Boss: Because when the exec asks me where you are, I really feel on the spot. I don't want to say "I don't know" because that makes me look bad, but I don't want to try and make something up, either, and risk making us *both* look bad.

You: You're right, of course. I'll add a new item to my weekly tasks—I'll copy you on my calendar for the coming week. That way you'll know exactly what's going on.

Find out what else is wrong.

Why ask for more trouble, right? You might think it would be best to answer a criticism and move on as quickly as possible! But often this is the ideal time to ask a simple question and find out what is *really* bugging your critic. All it takes is a quick inquiry—*Is there anything else?*

Boss: Are you and I "okay?"

You: Of course! What makes you think we aren't?

Boss: At the company Christmas party, it seemed like you were avoiding me!

You: No, not at all! I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. Before I could do much circulating, I got cornered by one of my direct reports who was very enthusiastic about a new idea. I got stuck in a conversation with him, and just couldn't shake loose! But you seem a bit concerned regardless—*is there anything else?*

Boss: To be honest, I'm wondering if you are happy with your new responsibilities. I gave you those assignments because I believe you have a real future in the company. I would hate to lose you to a competitor at this stage, after we have invested so much in you—especially if it comes as a result of your promotion!

Method 2—Agree

This is the intellectual equivalent of Judo, which is a form of martial arts in which you use your opponent's strength to *your* advantage. It means going with the flow of the criticism, instead of trying to defeat it with a frontal assault. It involves finding something in the criticism to agree with, even if you don't accept the basic point of the criticism itself. There are many ways to do this—many ways to agree even when you *disagree*.

Agree with the fact, but not the judgment.

Remember the distinction between judgment and description? Most critics don't just describe—they also add their evaluation. And it's the *evaluation* that we resist. You can respond more positively by screening out the *judgment* and simply affirming the *description*.

Boss: That sarcastic attitude of yours has no place in a team meeting!

You: I guess I *was* being a little sarcastic.

Agree with the possibility, but not the certainty.

Sometimes people share possibilities with us as a genuine way of helping us see potential dangers and consequences. But sometimes they are just trying to manipulate us to do what *they* think we should. It's counter-productive to try and deny the possibilities they suggest. A better approach is to accept *all* the possibilities, including those that are *favorable*.

Boss: If you don't go on-site every day and keep your eye on things, you're going to run over budget!

You: You're right about the need for close supervision—these projects are notorious for getting out of hand quickly. Believe me, I will be keeping a close eye on things!

Agree with the principle, but not the application.

Sometimes you will have to deal with abstract ideals and generalities that your critic will point to as unassailable truth. Denying the principle is useless. Instead, invoke the *exception* to the rule (after all, every rule has an exception!) and continue on course with your behavior.

Boss: Are you sure you know what you're doing, promoting one of your programmers to department supervisor? It's usually a problem when a peer becomes a manager of former peers.

You: You're right; promoting a peer is usually a problem. But Diane is an exception—her peers respect her, and she's already demonstrated management skill in the way she has taken the lead in special projects.

Agree with the perception, but not the reality.

For most of us, our perception of reality *is* reality—that's human nature! When you are confronted with someone else's perception of reality, you will have a tough time denying their impressions—*because every person's view of things is so personal*. It belongs to *them*, not to *you*. Don't even try to dissuade them or prove them wrong. Agree with their perception, whatever it is. *Just agree that it is just that—a perception.*

Boss: Are you putting in enough time on the job? You're never around when I need you!

You: I can certainly see why you might think that! I'm finding that I'm having to spend more and more time out on the job sites, making sure our projects are staying on schedule and staying under budget. I guess that's why you don't see me in my office very much. If you ever need anything from me, just let my assistant Lois know—she'll make sure it gets on my radar and I'll be sure to get back to you in a timely manner.

Summary

If you use these non-defensive techniques, you may not feel that you are being very strong in standing up for your own ideas and feelings. A more confrontational approach may feel more assertive to you and more representative of your genuine passion for your point of view. But a more direct approach may cost you dearly in the end. You may lose the respect, support, and goodwill of your boss and your colleagues. Consider how much wiser and more helpful it may be to exercise a little care, diplomacy, tact, and skillful technique—and to set the stage for a calmer and more constructive dialogue.