

talking at work: effective communication in professional contexts

Communication is at the top of the list of major issues for managers of New Zealand workplaces. However, there are no simple rules for effective communication: good communicators use a diverse and sophisticated range of strategies. They modify their style according to the context: who they are talking to, where they are talking and the purpose of the interaction.

The Language in the Workplace Project team has studied interactions in a range of workplaces from government departments to commercial organisations and factories to discover how New Zealanders use language at work. The team found there is a range of ways that effective workers communicate.

strategies for successful communication

What appears to be the most economical or efficient communication strategy may not always be the most effective one. For example, repetition often serves an important purpose such as clarifying information or instructions, and people may choose to use indirect expressions to be polite rather than risk causing offence.

Successful communicators use various strategies to ensure that:

Information is successfully conveyed

e.g.

- Breaking a complex message or instruction into smaller parts;
- Repetition and/or summarising of key points, important details;
- Questions to check understanding, or to elicit further information;
- Elaborating reasons for a decision or opinion;
- Restating a directive in a more explicit form if necessary.

The interaction achieves its goal(s)

e.g.

- Being explicit about the purpose or agenda of a discussion where necessary
- Clarifying which 'hat' is being worn;
- Contributing proactively or listening as appropriate;
- Summarizing key points or decisions to focus the discussion;
- Active listening - facilitating contributions of others, e.g. verbal feedback, explicit agreement or approval.

They express appropriate social meanings

e.g.

- Making their assumptions or opinions explicit where in doubt;
- Style shifting: adapting their talking/listening style to that of their audience;
- Giving advice or complaining indirectly to avoid loss of face;
- Hedging opinions or disagreements;
- Use of humour, small talk to create solidarity.

possible sources of miscommunication

On the whole, people are very good at preventing misunderstandings or repairing them as they occur. But sometimes they still manage to 'talk past each other'. These are the five most common problem areas:



Unclear information or instructions

e.g. leaving gaps, details not clear, poor sequencing, no checking/clarifying;

Misreading of intentions and attitudes

e.g. being too direct or not direct enough for the situation, working on different assumptions, cross-cultural misunderstandings;

Differing styles of interaction

e.g. different 'rules' about turn-taking, different meeting styles

Non-communication

e.g. failing to provide feedback or withholding information

Language form

e.g. use of specialised jargon or technical vocabulary.

about the project

The Language in the Workplace Project aims to identify the characteristics of effective interpersonal communication in business contexts. To date the project has recorded and analysed over 2000 interactions in 16 government and private sector organisations. Some features of workplace talk we are currently investigating include:

<i>Directives</i>	What is the most effective way of getting things done?
<i>Miscommunication</i>	How do people prevent or fix misunderstandings?
<i>Style shifting</i>	How do people adapt their talk to their audience?
<i>Email</i>	What role does email play in workplace communication?
<i>Problem solving</i>	How do people collaborate to solve problems or complete tasks?
<i>Meetings</i>	What structures and processes are typical of effective meetings?
<i>Humour and small talk</i>	How does "social talk" work as a communication tool?
<i>Workplace culture</i>	How is an organisation's culture reflected in their communication?
<i>Knowledge work</i>	How is knowledge created and advanced through talk?

The Research Team

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We would like to express our thanks to those who allowed us to record their interactions

Where can I get more information?

Visit our website to see a list of our publications and the latest project information:
<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp/>

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