



Working with People who Challenge Us

Self-Guided Learning Package

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About Self-Guided Learning Packages

Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email psc@gowrievictoria.org.au

Working with people who challenge us

You have chosen to complete the 'Working with people who challenge us' package. The aim of this package is to further develop your communication skills to enhance working relationships with educators and families. You will explore your current communication style and develop a further understanding of the different personalities and communication styles that make up the workplace, consider the value of having a range of different personalities and improve strategies for ensuring effective communication occurs.

Introduction

To maintain an effective work environment it is important to explore all aspects of communication and reflect upon your own communication style. We cannot always change other people's style of communication, but we can alter our own which, in turn, will affect how people respond to us.

This package will take you through a number of activities that will assist you to become more aware of your communication style and then be better able to consciously alter how you respond in different situations. It will give you useful strategies to more effectively handle situations that you may have found challenging in the past.

There are a number of elements that are critical to the establishment and maintenance of all workplace relationships. The first is having an understanding of the elements of communication. How effectively are we communicating with our educators and families?

What Is Conflict?

'Conflict. 1a. a state of opposition or hostilities. 2a the clashing of opposed principles etc,' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1995, p.231).

Conflict is described by Rodd as 'a form of interpersonal interaction in which two or more people struggle or compete over claims to beliefs, values, preferences, resources, power, status or any other desire' (Rodd, 1998, p.51). Many writers highlight that conflict can be used to strengthen group relationships when dealt with in a positive way. 'Conflict only becomes unhealthy and unproductive when it is not dealt with effectively' (Rodd, 1998, p.51).

So conflict can be:

- A healthy debate
- A misunderstanding
- A minor or major disagreement
- An inability to compromise (Tafe Frontiers, 1994, p.23)

Causes of Conflict

- Different opinions on important matters
- Poor communication
- Lack of information
- Lack of role clarity

- Lack of leadership/management
- No clear goal or direction
- Environmental stresses
- Power struggles

There are a range of methods which can be used to work through difficult situations that can prevent them from becoming a conflict. The most critical element is positive communication strategies. So what exactly is communication?

Communication

Effective communication skills are essential for positive team work. We will review some of the key aspects of communication.

When we communicate with people we are sending a message. For most of us, the content and feeling of the message is contained in the following three elements of communication:

- Words
- Tone
- Body Language

Self Help Question 1

In the spaces provided, write the percentage of the total message you think is held in each element of communication? Check your answer in Appendix 1.

Body Language = _____ %

Tone = _____ %

Words= _____ %

It is critical to consider all three of the above elements of communicating and to be aware of their impact on the person receiving the message.

For positive communication, body language needs to be open and welcoming. We need to show we are listening and interested and provide feedback. Crossed arms and legs present a barrier, leaning back in the chair sends a message of disinterest, and being too close can make the other person feel uncomfortable. 'Arms length' is the usual rule.

Tone of voice should be friendly, calm and reflect a positive message. Speech that is emotional, fast and high-pitched is hard to listen to, whereas a low tone and slow speech can also be menacing. Tone of voice should be varied to reflect the nature of the communication.

The words only tell us the topic of the message but they are still important. We need to consider what we are saying and how we are presenting the information. As we do when communicating with children, we must be careful to avoid blaming. A better strategy is to talk about how we feel and how we have been affected. This will be further explored under assertive communication.

It is important to be aware of body language, the tone and the words used to ensure that we are not inadvertently sending a negative message that could elicit a negative response.

What do we say and how do we say it?

The process of communication

You gather information through your senses

You hear the tone of voice and words. You observe the body language. You may also have your sense of smell activated. Be aware of how you are receiving messages and of other influences, such as our emotional responses to smells. They can greatly affect our ability to be objective.

You decide what the information means

You consciously think about what the message is and ask “What are they really saying to me?” based on the information you have taken in.

You have a feeling based on your interpretations

You may feel relaxed and happy. However, if you perceive the message as being negative, you may feel the twinge we get in the stomach if we feel threatened. If you get that feeling of fear in your stomach, it means that the body has released adrenalin and it can be difficult to control your emotions and response when this happens.

You decide how to express your feeling

If you interpret the message as a threat, you will have a ‘fight or flight’ response. You could become angry and aggressive or passive and upset.

You express your feeling

If this is an angry, defensive expression, the communication will become negative and difficult.

It is between having a feeling and deciding how to express our feelings that we need to pause and analyse our response, then consider the most appropriate response, rather than just REACT!

Self Help Question 2

Consider a situation when you reacted to a message you considered to be an attack

Was it really an attack on you?

Was your reaction appropriate?

What is another way you could have responded that might have had a better outcome?

Often when we feel threatened we are responding to our own emotions rather than the reality of the situation. It is important to pause before responding to other people and consider what is really happening. Am I feeling grumpy or over-tired and therefore sensitive to tone and body language? Am I taking this as a personal attack when it is really the other person who is having a bad day and just 'letting off steam'? It is important to manage our emotions, particularly anger.

Managing Your Own Anger

Own the anger

Say to yourself "I am angry because....", rather than, "He/she made me angry because..."

Calibrate the response

That is, measure it realistically against the incident that caused the anger. Ask yourself if you have a strong reason for being angry.

Diagnose the threat

Is something really serious about to happen, or can you, upon reflection, see that the matter is not really so serious?

Share the perceived threat (if appropriate)

Tell somebody, if it's serious.

Forgive (yourself, others, as necessary)

And try to forget.

(Fleet and Clyde, 1995)

Responding to Someone Else who is Angry

If you find yourself in the presence of a person who is angry with you, Kelley suggests that a helpful response is to:

- 'Affirm the other's feelings (they are genuine, whether or not you are to blame).
- Acknowledge your own defensiveness (if it exists).
- Clarify the reason for their anger with you.
- Diagnose the part you have played in the arousal of their angry feelings.
- Renegotiate the relationship. (It may be desirable to allow some time to elapse before this renegotiation, so that there is time for cooling off and reflection, for both people),' (Tafe Frontiers, 1994, p.183).

Self Help Question 3

The following activity is from 'What's in a Day?' (Fleet and Clyde, 1995)

Think about a situation in which you felt angry. Go through the above steps and describe what you might say or do in the situation.

- Over-use of questions, particularly closed questions
- Absence of feedback

By using effective communication strategies you will minimise the likelihood of differences of opinion developing into conflict.

The Three Intentions of Communication

There is often a subconscious intention behind communication, particularly when it is an important conversation. The intention will colour how and what we say.

1. **We raise others** to encourage, motivate, support, inspire and strengthen their confidence
2. **We lower others** to redress an imbalance we feel, to win, feel superior
3. **We level with others** to acknowledge differences, to diffuse conflict, to negotiate a 'win/win' outcome.

Self Help Question 4

Think about a time when you have:

Raised a person

Lowered a person

Levelled with a person

We are all capable of 'lowering' people in a variety of situations. This usually occurs when we are feeling threatened, lacking confidence or feeling insecure. Whatever the outcome, whilst

satisfying in the short term, this does not effect change or foster positive attitudes. This style of communication is best avoided.

Working relationships should aim to level and raise people. Our communication needs to be about negotiating and reaching agreement with people. The ideal is that we provide others with inspiration, enthusiasm and confidence.

When you develop an awareness of these intentions behind your communication, you can ensure that you are not 'lowering' the person you are communicating with, but that you are 'levelling' or 'raising' as is appropriate. This will always have a positive effect on the communication. 'Raising' a person is a very effective way to turn around a situation where a person may be feeling threatened or insecure. This can diffuse power struggles and avoid conflict.

Self Help Question 5

When was the last time you raised:

Yourself?

An educator?

Your manager?

A family member?

Effective workplace relations with educators and families

To establish effective work relationships, we not only need to consider our own communication style, we also need to reflect upon our attitudes. We develop our attitudes throughout our life. They come from our upbringing and family's beliefs, our education, the media and the society we live in. The information below illustrates the many influences that shape our behaviour and make up our attitudes to different people and situations.

Mutual respect should underpin these negotiations and a collaborative partnership is the desired goal in the interests of the child. Such a process can provide effective role modelling for the child and others involved and longer term benefits for all concerned.

Listening Skills

Effective communication is dependent upon effective listening skills. The most effective method of problem-solving is to use active /reflective listening to support educators to solve problems and to work with families. People are then able to think through issues and reach a solution that is appropriate rather than have a solution that is recommended which some individuals might not be comfortable with.

Active Listening is:

- Listening to what the person is actually saying. This involves giving the person all of your physical and cognitive attention.
- Listening to the person's tone and reading their body language. It is important to pick up on these aspects of their communication as well as the words.
- Reflect back to the person what you think they are saying/expressing, to check you have interpreted it correctly.
- Using open-ended questions to support the person to work toward their own resolutions to concerns, where appropriate.

Assertive Communication

One element of positive communication is self assertion. Assertive behaviour is about levelling with the other person as opposed to an aggressive or passive communication style.

Self Help Question 8

Complete the questionnaire below to explore what is your primary communication style. Appendix 3 gives the answers to help you explore this further.

1

Your child was asked to tidy his bedroom before he went out to play. The room is still a mess.

Do you:

- a. Firmly tell him that the room is still untidy, that you are unhappy about this, and you want him to tidy it up.
- b. Roll your eyes in exasperation and tidy the room yourself.
- c. Growl about how untidy the room is and how fed up you are with always cleaning up his mess

2

When you arrive home from buying a new pair of shoes, you find the stitching of the shoes is faulty. Do you:

- a. Return to the shop and 'tell them off' about the poor quality of their goods.
- b. Return to the shop, explain the shoes are faulty, and request them to exchange the shoes for another pair.
- c. Grumble about the poor quality of the shoes and forget it.

3

Your child arrives home quite late from school. You have been worried. Do you:

- a. Angrily demand, "Where have you been? You've made me sick with worry!"
- b. Say nothing, but think I suppose I can't run his life".
- c. Say that you have been worried and ask where he has been.

4

You go to a party at a friend's house but find you do not know many of the other guests. Do you:

- a. Walk up to a group of people and ask if you could join them.
- b. Say "this is not much of a party" and go home.
- c. Sit in a corner until someone comes up and talks to you.

5

Next day is a school day, and your child asks if he can stay up and watch a late television show. When you hesitate, he says, "All my friends are going to watch it". Do you:

- a. Allow him to watch it. Sharing experiences with friends is important.
- b. Say that as tomorrow is a school day, going to bed at his usual time was more important. If his friends watched the show they could tell him about it.
- c. Tell him that you didn't care what his spoilt friends were allowed to do; no child of yours was going to sit up all night watching television.

6

A friend offers to do you a favour which would really help you. Do you:

- a. Say, "Oh no that's too much trouble," and regret saying it.
- b. Say, "You were never around when I really needed help. Forget it this time".
- c. Express your gratitude and accept the offer.

7

You have prepared a nice meal and your family has sat at the table. As soon as you put the plate in front of your child he says "Yuk - I hate that!" Do you:

- a. Glare at him, tell him he must eat it, and give him a lecture about how much food costs, and how much time you have spent preparing it.
- b. Tell him that you're sorry he feels that way about good food, and that if he really can't eat it, he must go without.
- c. Take the plate away and ask him if he would like something else to eat.

8

Your friend becomes very angry with you but you cannot understand what she is angry about. Do you:

- a. Say "You seem upset about something, but I don't know what. Please explain what is wrong.
- b. Say nothing, but inwardly you are quite upset.
- c. Be angry and exclaim that you haven't done anything.

- humiliating others

FLIGHT: Passive behaviour (lowering)

This behaviour results in anxiety, disappointment, anger and resentment and possible low self-worth:

- don't express own feelings needs and ideas
- ignore own rights
- allow others to dominate
- allow others to infringe upon an individual's own rights

FLOW: Assertive Behaviour (levelling and raising)

Assertive behaviour results in the achievement of shared goals. Self confidence and self-worth will increase. Relationships will become stronger based on honesty, openness and trust:

- expressing own feelings, needs and ideas
- standing up for legitimate rights
- not violating the rights of others
- respecting the feelings, needs and ideas of others whilst being open and honest

(Adapted from the Conflict Resolution Network, n.d.)

Methods of being assertive in communication:

- ✓ Using "I" statements – 'When you say I feel that you are ignoring me.'
 - I feel – (describe how you are feeling)
 - When you do this... happens – (describe the action)
 - Because – (explain the importance to you/the organisation)
 - I would rather – (give an alternative)
- ✓ Broken record - Repeating what you have said.

Be confident in your skills and knowledge. If you then practice using assertive communication, you will find that most difficult situations are handled without aggression and result in positive outcomes.

Self Help Question 9

Consider a communication situation when you felt you handled things poorly. Consider how you could have handled the situation better thinking about your tone, body language and using assertive communication?

It is a useful tip to practice what you will say either in front of a mirror or with someone else, before you deal with a difficult situation (if you have time to plan a response).

Positive Steps to Resolving Conflict

- 1.** Recognise conflict as early as possible. Do not delay dealing with it. Conflict left unresolved will lead to increasing anger and frustration.
- 2.** Check basics e.g. role clarity, job satisfaction, morale. Is the conflict a result of poor communication concerning work responsibilities?
- 3.** Try to define the drivers of the conflict. This is part of the process of identifying what is causing the conflict. Be objective about what is involved. Is it emotions which are unrelated to the current situation?
- 4.** Initiate communication. Set up a time to talk with the other person that is suited to both of you. Use a setting that is non-threatening for all, that is relaxing.
- 5.** Involve all those affected. This involves further identification of who is affected by the conflict.
- 6.** Insist on clear, concise and factual information. Keep the conversation on track and avoid distractions or diversions to personal attacks.
- 7.** Find common ground. What do you agree on?
- 8.** Problem solve – brainstorm. How can this be resolved? Be willing to consider a range of solutions. Have some ideas for resolution prepared.

Developing a Grievance Policy

All services should have policies for the resolution of complaints and grievances. These need to be developed by all key stakeholders and regularly reviewed.

There are many guidelines available for the development of grievance procedures. The procedures will vary according to whether it is a policy for educators to express their grievance, for management when they have a grievance with an educator, or for families using the service. Grievance procedures should always aim to resolve the issue as soon as it arises.

The key first step in grievance resolution is the same as for resolving any conflict; to enable the person with a concern to air their concern and have their concern acknowledged. The concern is valid for that person.

The next step should always be for the parties with a grievance to discuss the matter together aiming for resolution. This discussion may be facilitated by a third person.

If discussion cannot reach resolution, then the next step would involve a more formal meeting including management and the parties involved. This would follow the guidelines for conflict

Conclusion

Reflect on what you have gained from this package:

- What have you learnt about your communication style?
- What do you want to change?
- What will you think about when you are next in a difficult situation?
- How will you respond to that difficult situation and how has this changed?

We cannot change other people, but we can influence how they react to us by managing our emotions and considering what is appropriate communication for each situation.

Working effectively with others can be hard work and takes practice but is satisfying and worthwhile to all involved.

Appendix 1

Self Help Question 1

Body Language 58%

Tone 40%

Words 2%

Appendix 2

Self Help Question 7

http://www.personalitypathways.com/type_inventory.html

Appendix 3

Self Help Question 8

ANSWERS

PASSIVE

1b
2c
3b
4c
5a
6a
7c
8b
9c
10a

ASSERTIVE

1a
2b
3c
4a
5b
6c
7b
8a
9b
10c

AGGRESSIVE

1c
2a
3a
4b
5c
6b
7a
8c
9a
10b

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Assessment Task

Using the information from the package, your service and the self help questions, complete the following task and return it to Community Child Care for assessment.

Case Study One

Choose one scenario for Case Study One, then address the following

- What communication style did the established team member use?
- What communication style did the temporary team member use?
- How could the established team member have responded more appropriately to the new team member's response?

Jenny is the team leader in the room. She has been working there for 5 years. She has run the room with her educator Sally, for 2 years. Jenny has a group time every day before the children go to lunch. Sally does nappy changes during this time. Sally is sick and takes 4 weeks leave. A reliever, Annie, takes her place for the 4 weeks. Jenny continues with her routine, expecting Annie to do all nappy changes. Annie tells Jenny that she is sick of doing all of the nappy changes and would like them to share this routine. Jenny grumbles saying that it is Annie's job and she is not going to change things while Sally is away.

OR

Jeremy is the coordinator of the After School Hours Care service. He has been working there for four years. He runs the service with the educator Marcia, who has worked there for the last three years. Most afternoons Jeremy stays inside and organises the indoor activities while Marcia (who is studying Physical Education) takes a group outside for games and activities. Marcia gets married and takes four weeks leave to go on her honeymoon. Janice takes her place. Jeremy continues with the same routines, expecting Janice to take the outside games and sports. Janice tells Jeremy she doesn't want to be outside, especially seeing its winter and that she doesn't like sport. Jeremy tells her that this is the way we do it here and he doesn't want to change things just for a few weeks.

OR

Rachel is a coordinator for a Family Day Care service. As Julie, one of the Field Workers, is on Long Service Leave, Emma is temporarily filling the position. Julie and Jenny have had a long working relationship and have found that Julie meeting with potential families and educators works best for them as that allows Rachel to catch up on paperwork and home visits. Emma tells Rachel she does not want to be responsible for meeting with all the potential families and educators as she feels this is limiting her time with educators and children. Jenny tells her they have done it this way for a long time as that works for them and so Emma just needs to get on with the job.

Case Study Two:

A new educator has started working with you and your educator in the service. You are the person in charge. She has been ignoring the things you say related to what needs to be done in the service and refers to another educator rather than you. She spends a lot of time chatting with the other educator and they both go quiet when you approach.

Describe in detail how you would handle this situation.

Outline:

- When, where and how will you first approach her/them?
- Write a script of what you will say
- How will you follow this up?

Case Study Three

One of the educators at your service comes to speak to you in confidence. She/he is concerned about one of the other educators who, it is rumoured, has tested positive for Hepatitis B. Her/his concern is that the person is not practising correct infection control practices when working with the children. She/he says that they will confront this person if this continues. The person they are accusing of having Hep B is a long time educator. You need to prevent a blow-up.

Describe in detail what you will say to support them to handle the situation, remembering confidentiality principles.

Case Study Four

It has been raining for the past week and the children have not had any time outside. It stops raining and you all go outside for fresh air. A child falls over, getting their tights wet on the knee. It was 10 minutes before the parent was due and the child did not want to change her tights, becoming quite upset, so you left it and brought her inside. The parent arrives, greets her child then approaches you, looking very angry. She yells at you saying that you had no right to let her child outside, she has wet tights and do you have any idea how expensive it is to visit the doctor these days. This occurs in the room in front of some children and other educators

What will you say to the angry parent? Write a script.

How will you settle things down so she leaves without feeling angry?