



## Direct Report Communications

Communications is the core of human interactions, and communications skills are key to your success as a people manager. It's important to be clear about what you need to communicate, and how to be effective in doing so. Most of us focus on building skills in what we say, while under-valuing listening.

This document helps you consider:

- Various purposes of your direct report communications;
- How biases and beliefs hinder effective communications; and
- Listening as a powerful managerial skill that helps direct reports feel respected and supported.

### Purposes of direct report communications

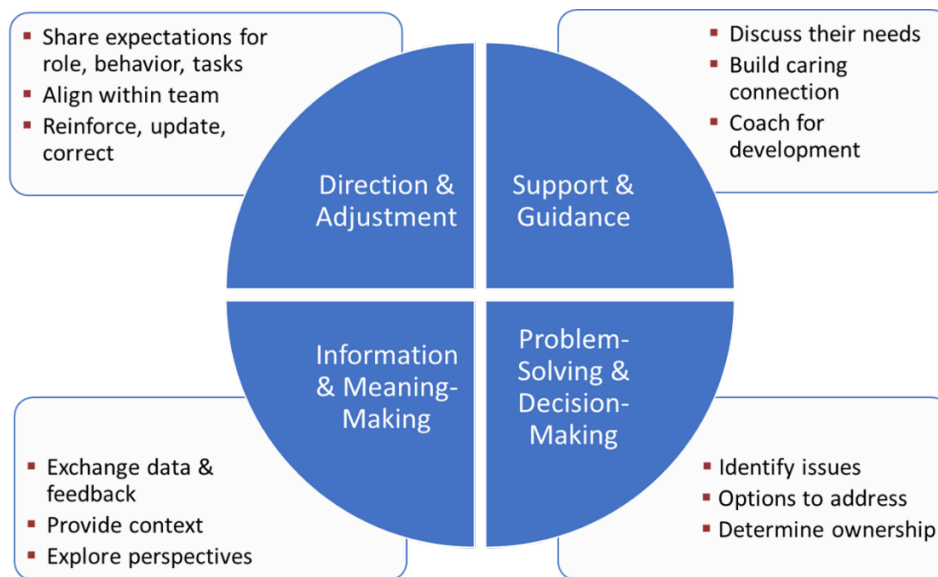
Below is an inventory of 1:1 managerial communications. This is not a conclusive list!

Direction & Adjustment: What expectations do I have for their role, behaviors, and specific tasks and assignment? How does this person's role fit within our team's portfolio of work? How will I recognize their accomplishments and provide feedback to ensure their success?

Support & Guidance: How can I help them recognize and get support for their needs? How can I demonstrate care and concern for them and in what ways can I fulfill some of their needs? What skills or experiences do they want to develop in their current role and beyond?

Problem-solving & Decision-making: How can I help them to define a problem well and then address it? Are they aware of their biases and beliefs? Do they have an inclusive method for exploring options to solving problems? How can they work even more collaboratively with others?

Information & Meaning-making: What information do they need to achieve their goals and fulfill their roles? What do I see or know that they don't? How can I help them make sense of their experiences as they go about their work and interact with others?



***How does this inventory reflect your experience? How could it help you plan your communications?***

**4 Step Model of Conversations with your direct reports: Being effective starts with listening**



Listening to understand



Asking powerful questions



Challenging and supporting



Establishing next steps and accountability

Words matter, and working on what you say and how you say it is time well spent for leaders. Listening well is a more influential tool, especially with direct reports, than speaking. Here is a 4 Step Model of High Quality Conversations. (See “Better Culture” article in Resources for a complete description of the model.) Note that the first step is “listening to understand.” While hearing is usually an automatic function, listening is a choice. But not all listening is the same.

Listen with the intent to understand, not with the intent to reply. When you take in your direct report’s words, without preparing your response

while they speak, you give yourself a chance to gain valuable information, before you decide or act. You are also giving them what they need: the sense of feeling heard, too often a rare experience.

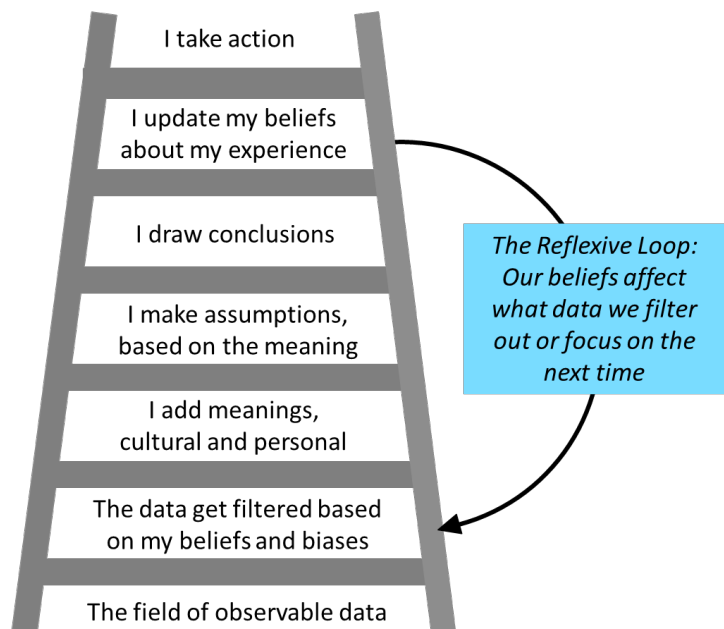
**How much time do you spend listening to understand your direct reports?**

**How your biases and beliefs impact your ability to listen well to your direct reports**

Humans are meaning-making creatures, creating stories from our experiences, which include conversations. These stories are affected by the beliefs and biases we have, which in turn affect the conclusions we make and the actions we take. The “ladder of inference” is a model that explains how this happens (see video in Resources). As an unconscious process, inferences help us in many ways, but they can also limit our ability to listen well and respond in appropriate and supportive ways.

For example, if two of your direct reports were to say the same thing – “I didn’t understand the email you sent today” – your response to each person could be different. Let’s say you view one as a challenging personality; you might think they were being difficult or criticizing you. Your response might be less than helpful. If you have an easy-going relationship with the other, you might be more inclined to assume they are genuinely unclear and assist them.

Without minding your beliefs about these two, your understanding will be limited. In this way, your ladder will have steered you in two directions.



**What biases and beliefs do you have about your direct reports? How do they impact your listening?**



## Ensuring your direct reports feel supported and valued: Listening with empathy

The human process of delivering messages is complex and often quite inaccurate. We think far faster than we speak. This fact makes it hard to say what we mean. It's also challenging for the listener, whose mind races ahead of what their hearing takes in. Thus, the need to develop listening skills.

The listener's job is to help the speaker attain successful message transmission. Understanding a speaker's message usually takes time, especially if the topic is uncomfortable. The speaker may be unsure of what to share. They can get tripped up if they think you won't listen. When we listen well, the speaker will know whether what they've *actually* said is what they *hoped* to communicate.

In workplace conversations, we tend to focus on facts, opinions, logic, etc. With empathy, we pay attention to other elements speakers also wish to convey, consciously or not. Empathy is perceiving and relating to the thoughts, emotions, or needs of others. It's centering your listening on *the speaker's experience in their shoes*, not what you might experience if in their shoes. This subtle but impactful difference is illustrated in a "golden rule" revision: treat others as *they* want to be treated.

Empathy is not a fixed trait. We all can develop our skills. It's important to practice, especially when we ourselves are not feeling heightened emotions or stress. Taking time to do this is a worthy investment for long run returns: reduced faulty inferences, improved trust, increased connection and engagement.

### *Empathic Listening Process (5 steps)*

1. Listen to yourself first. Are you ready for listening to understand, managing your biases and beliefs?

Consider reviewing Active Listening tips and decide how you will manage your ladder of inference.

2. Listen between the lines too. What are their *feelings* and *values*, as well as their *facts*?

Note that, in this case, the category of facts could also include opinions or beliefs. Feelings help us gauge our reaction to our experiences, while values are what's important to the speaker. The more powerful the feelings they express, the more we might look to see how their values are being impacted.

Don't try to listen to every word they say, or all 3 categories simultaneously. Focus on whatever type of information they seem to be emphasizing the most. It can be helpful to have a sheet to write notes as they are talking, with sections for "facts," "feelings," and "values," for your initial impressions.

With time and practice, listening between the lines gets easier. Regardless of your skill, however, it will always be important for you to check in to confirm you are clear on what they want you to know.

3. Mirror or Rephrase what you hear (including clarifying and confirming questions) Are you clear on what they said? Have they conveyed what they intended?

By repeating back or rephrasing what someone has said to you, it gives the speaker a chance to hear what you heard. Let them talk for a bit, and when they conclude or there's a pause...

- "Here's what I think you want me to know...." or "If I'm hearing you correctly, you said"...
- Then, "Did I get that right?" and "Is there more?"
- Repeat this process in 2-3 rounds of mirroring/rephrasing
- Summarize their themes or points

If they talk for a while and you are losing track of what they are saying, break in politely: "Excuse me, I want stay on track with you. Let me summarize what I think you've said...". Then, use the process above.



4. Acknowledge their message with compassion Do they know that you heard what matters? Do they know that you care?

Acknowledging is not agreeing. This is important to remember. You can acknowledge what they've said and what their experience is, even if you can't relate to their experience or can't give them what they may ask for. You are showing them you recognize *their* reality – their facts, feelings, values – is valid.

Here are some potential talking points:

- "I'm so sorry for your loss. What do you need and how can I support you?"
- "I see how hard you're working on this, and the effort is painful for you."
- "You really enjoyed working with your previous manager, and our transition has felt awkward to you. Would you tell me more about this?"
- "Sounds like doing X makes you happy, and you'd like to do more of that."
- "You feel unsettled when I don't give you feedback; you care about learning and feeling valued."

Again, as you did in mirroring, confirm whether your responses accurately reflect what they said, how they feel, and what's important to them.

5. Close the loop to confirm that they are fully heard. What else do they want you to know?

Now that you've confirmed what they've shared so far, you need to confirm that the entire message is complete. If necessary, the full conversation can take place over multiple meetings. You'll just want to know where the conversation stands, especially if you need to close the meeting for time constraints or because one or both of you need a break.

Here are some potential questions and talking points for closing the loop:

- "Does it sound like I understand what you wanted to share with me?"
- "What I'm understanding so far is that you need X from me. What else?"
- "I would like to take this up again, when we have more time." (Schedule it)
- "We can continue this conversation, if you'd like."
- "I hope you will share more as you need to."

You can certainly reach quick agreements on whatever you feel clear about, but try to stay in listening mode as long as possible. Refer back to the "4 Step Model of Conversations" (p.2) to advise your process from here.

You may be thinking, this all sounds very different from what your conversations usually sound like. That's the point, yes? If it sounds different, then this process is likely to feel uncomfortable at first. That's true of those practices you aren't used to doing, or that your direct reports aren't used to experiencing.

Consider telling them that you are trying something new, along with what you hope it will bring to you as a manager, the relationship between you, and to them as individuals. They will appreciate the effort you are making, and the process should feel less awkward or daunting. Keep practicing and it will be a worthwhile tool.

***How soon will you try this process with your direct reports? Who could help you practice or prepare?***

## Resources

- [Better Culture Starts with Better Conversations \(article\)](#)
- [Ladder of Inference YouTube video \(3:33 minutes\)](#)
- Active Listening to Build Trust and Connection (MIT HR worksheet, soon to be available on HR website)
- [The Importance of Empathy in the Workplace: A Tool for Effective Leadership \(article\)](#)