

Key Communication Techniques

Working with Families: Technical Assistance Brief 1

Strong communication skills are the foundation of Ombudsman program work and are vital to advocacy success. Your communication – both how you speak and how you listen – builds trust and meaningful connection, which is critical throughout complaint intake, investigation, and resolution.

Basic communication skills are addressed during [initial certification training](#). Information provided in the Initial Certification Training for Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs focuses on communication with residents, but many of the communication techniques apply or may be adapted to apply when communicating with family members. The following key communication techniques are provided as reminders as they are particularly useful in problem solving and conflict resolution.

“I” STATEMENTS¹

These are statements in which a person “owns” what she says and does not claim to be speaking for others. They are also a way for a person to express what she wants and needs without blaming another person or making her defensive.

The composition of “I” statements can vary. One approach is to use “I” statements that have the following components.

The Action

In this part of the I-statement, you describe what is happening in an objective way because the other person may not interpret actions in the same way as you.

- The word “when” can be very helpful (e.g., “when ____, I ____”).
- Avoid the use of “you” because it makes people feel they are being accused. For example, avoid saying “you never respond to resident complaints.”
- Avoid emotive words that are tied to a person’s perception. For instance, when you say that someone “barged” into the room, the word “barged” carries a negative overtone, and the other person may not perceive her entry into the room in that way. You could express this more neutrally by saying that the other person came into the room suddenly.

¹ Conflict Resolution Network. Conflict Resolution (CR) Trainers’ Manual: 12 Skills. 2008. <https://www.crnhq.org/cr-trainer-manual/>

Your Response

The purpose of this part of the I-statement is to convey your feelings because the other person may have no idea how you are feeling.

- Can use "I feel" or "I feel like."

Your Preferred Outcome

The last part of the I-statement is to define the outcome that you would like without specifying how it has to be done.



INSTEAD OF SAYING: "You're making me so frustrated when you interrupt me."

SAY: "When I cannot finish what I'm saying, I feel frustrated. I'd like to be able to communicate my complete thought."

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Asking questions allows a person to gain and clarify information and perceptions. A "closed" question is good for gathering very specific information when all you want is a yes or no. However, in problem-solving and conflict resolution asking open-ended questions helps you build understanding and show empathy. These types of questions also encourage people to talk and provide more information – which is always helpful in problem-solving.

Interrogatives that help in asking open-ended questions include:

- How
- Tell me
- What

It is helpful to avoid using "why" because using "why" can appear confrontational and make the respondent feel defensive.



INSTEAD OF SAYING: "Why wasn't your work completed today?"

SAY: "Help me understand the reasons your work did not get completed today."



INSTEAD OF SAYING: "Why didn't Mrs. Sullivan get her physical therapy today?"

SAY: "I understand that Mrs. Sullivan didn't get her physical therapy today, can you tell me what happened?"

REFLECTIVE LISTENING²

Reflective listening or responding is the process of restating in your own words the content and/or feeling of what someone has said. It does not mean that you agree with the speaker. By reflecting back to the speaker what you believe you understand, you validate and affirm that person by giving them the experience of being heard and acknowledged. You also provide an opportunity for the speaker to give you feedback about the accuracy of your perceptions, thereby increasing the effectiveness of your overall communication.³ Reflective listening is one of the most important steps you can take in problem-solving and conflict resolution, because it indicates that you are truly listening and seeking to understand the other person.

Types Of Reflective Listening

Paraphrasing. This is a concise statement of the content of the speaker's message. A paraphrase should be brief, succinct, and focus on the facts or ideas of the message rather than the feeling. The paraphrase should be in your own words instead of just repeating exactly what the speaker has said.

Reflecting Feeling. This approach involves identifying the feeling under the speaker's words and then reflecting the feeling back to the speaker in a way that conveys understanding.

Summarizing. In this type of reflective listening, you combine paraphrasing and reflecting feeling. You pull together the main ideas and feelings of the speaker to show understanding. This skill is used after a considerable amount of information sharing has gone on and shows that the listener grasps the total meaning of the message. It also helps the speaker gain an integrated picture of what he or she has been saying.⁴

² Much of this section is adapted from Rod Windle and Suzanne Warren's Collaborative Problem Solving and Dispute Resolution in Special Education. The Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education <https://cadreworks.org/resources/collaborative-problem-solving-and-dispute-resolution-special-education-training-manual-0>

³ Windle and Warren, *ibid.*

⁴ Windle and Warren, *ibid.*

In Practice

In response to concerns you share about food service, the administrator says:

"We've had a lot of trouble with our dietary department lately. We can't seem to keep our food services supervisor for more than a few weeks. You have to understand that we're doing the best we can."

To paraphrase what the administrator said, you could say:

"The food services supervisors keep leaving and this is creating problems in the dietary department."

To reflect feeling, you could say:

"The turnover in food services supervisors must be frustrating as it affects the functioning of the dietary department."

To summarize, you may say:

"So, if I understood correctly, you see the problems in the dietary department due to the turnover of food services supervisors, and you feel that you are doing everything you can considering the circumstances and want more patience from everyone."

POWER OF "WE"

When you say "we" in your conversation, it creates a sense of team and partnership between you and a family member or between a family member and the facility administration and staff. This sends a message that it is all of you working together to make sure a resident gets good care – not you on one side and staff on the other. This can send an important message and help promote open communication.

In Practice



INSTEAD OF SAYING: "What are you doing to address this issue?"

SAY: "Can we talk about what we can do to address this issue?"



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