

Guidelines for Ethical Communication

1. Look at your own "agenda" within the group or interaction.

An “agenda” is the goal or purpose *you* seek to accomplish. Personal agendas are valid when they are shared with the group. Being transparent promotes group cohesiveness and helps to assure that decisions are based on everyone's input. Secret agendas – withholding information and your opinions or negative feelings from the group – are dishonest.

2. Consider the consequences of uncivil behavior.

Uncivil behavior can be direct (put-downs, verbal attacks, threats, using innuendo) or indirect (teasing, minimizing, interrupting, non-verbal communication like eye-rolling). The effects often silence and even oppress others. Uncivil actions or words, *intended or unintended*, serve to establish or enforce power imbalances, causing distress, suppression, alienation, and/or disempowerment. If one person in the group feels oppressed, the whole group is denied the power of that person's input.

3. Be honest about your own individual responsibility.

It is up to you to take responsibility for your reactions and to be personally accountable for your words, actions, and judgments. The goal of ethical communication is to create a positive, well-functioning environment built on strong relationships and an openness to different perspectives. Examine self-imposed silences. Be clear about what triggers you. Take responsibility for your own anger. If the conversation is stirring up old issues, be conscious about whether it is productive to process them with the group.

4. Acknowledge the various levels of power, and that the group itself carries responsibility for monitoring power dynamics.

When working within a group committed to ethical communication, it is everyone's responsibility to create an environment conducive to participation. Everyone in the group must be treated with respect. No one should fear that their opinions could be dismissed out of hand, mocked, or gossiped about. Every view is important and it is healthy to respectfully pose direct challenges to each other in an effort to address unexamined issues, power imbalances, or privilege.

5. Conflict is inevitable and all around us.

We have choices around how we communicate and how we seek resolution to conflict. If our pattern is to avoid addressing conflict directly, we can contribute to an unethical environment. The process may involve courage, as we assess the risks involved in voicing our concerns (including the differentials in power and privilege). The goal is to address conflict directly, with personal accountability and genuine curiosity.

6. Precisely-focused anger and frustration can be informative and useful.

Feelings of anger and frustration can be useful and may provide some information about what the real problem is. It can also be used as a survival skill if someone has been consistently disempowered or marginalized by a racist, sexist culture. Remember that anger can have a constructive focus as well as a destructive one. It may take some time to clarify where it stems from, but the end result is often worth it. The goal of ethical communication is to have anger and frustration be constructive and not suppressed or used as a tool to punish or silence others.

7. Be part of the solution.

Facilitators are mindful individuals who provide clarity and direction. Their focus is on process and resolution. Agitators are unethical communicators who feed into the conflict with negativity and by avoiding resolution. They create cliques or divisions that can result in group fragmentation. We've all been both...choose to be a facilitator!

8. Be proactive.

Process-oriented people are committed to resolution, pay attention to timing, and are direct in their dealings. Problem-oriented people may misuse anger, exaggerate, retaliate, get impatient, or want an all-or-nothing outcome (e.g. either everyone is happy or we should just drop it).

Ethical Communication Checklist

- When conflicts or transgressions arise, **go inward**, and take responsibility for your own reactions and personal growth.
- **Make a commitment** to yourself, the other person, and the group that you will reach resolution to conflicts. This is different than wanting to prove that you're right or a "good" person. It can be effective to plan ahead for addressing conflict by discussing what "resolution" would look like for each of you.
- If you have a concern about someone in the group or something that was said or done, **go directly to the source of your concerns**. This eliminates gossip, group fragmentation, and putting people in the middle of a situation that has nothing to do with them.
- Use **"I" statements, clear language, and as many specific examples** as possible. This might require taking some time to first determine what the key issues are. You may want to process with an accountability partner before bringing a concern to the group. An accountability partner is someone that you trust will not join in your complaint, but help you move forward.
- **If you make a mistake**, process until you are clear or use an accountability partner before returning to the person you impacted. Ask for a conversation to repair. Do not try to explain yourself or make excuses. Instead, focus on the impact your mistake had on the person. Share your understanding of how your racism/sexism/uncivil behavior played out. Ask for feedback, apologize, and commit to doing better.
- **Be prepared to take the time** to work through concerns or conflicts. If a resolution is not attained in the first meeting, then make a commitment to ongoing discussion.
- Allow yourself to be challenged by new ideas. **Constructive criticism is ethical**. Debate and disagreement can be healthy. It might not always feel comfortable, but as long as it's done in the spirit of respect and genuine curiosity and goal of understanding, it's an opportunity for you to GROW!
- Keep the goal of ethical communication in mind: **resolvable conflict and unity**. Reaching resolution creates power and cohesion in a group committed to equity, inclusion, and social change.
- PRACTICE! PRACTICE! PRACTICE!