

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

With TAFE and AUWU trainer, Valerie Farfalla

In the AUWU Advocacy Hotline context, communication skills are needed in three ways: face-to-face, over the phone and through the written word (emails).

Some people prefer personal one-on-one communication or training workshops, others prefer responding to queries by phone and in the age of online technology, many are accustomed to the written word.

The Advocacy Hotline uses a combination of these communication methods, recording details of phone or email queries online to support our mailing list and database information, which is confidential.

We need to take a look at our active listening skills. Given that the hotline is often dealing with stressed, anxious, overwhelmed and disempowered unemployed workers, we must be equipped and prepared to handle their job agency problems with care, sensitivity and empathy, remaining strong and calm.

To achieve good communication skills we need insight into our own barriers to communication which include a range of behaviours we need to challenge. Check out the following examples in the first group of bullet points and ask yourself honestly if you sometimes create barriers to communication. The second set of bullet points provides some alternatives that aid communication.

- Do you often try to have the last word in a conversation?
- Do you wait impatiently to the speaker to finish so you can say something?
- Do you get annoyed when the speaker is emotional over a subject in which you're not interested?
- Do you prepare questions to trap the speaker?
- Do you interrupt, or talk over the person, or finish their sentences for them?

OR:

- Do you adopt a flexible attitude and look for central ideas in the speaker's explanation of a problem?
- Do you put yourself in the speaker's place and try to understand the reasons behind what they're saying?
- Do you fight distractions and actively concentrate on listening?
- Do you listen for ideas and underlying feelings?
- Do you try to judge the value of the message's content – not the speaker's ability?
- Do you verify the difference between fact and opinion?

Empathy/Critical Thinking activity

Look at the following scenario which gives an example of a very distressed woman, 'Mary'. This exercise is essentially about working out her job agency problems and noting them down on our online form, but of course she has other personal problems and needs some emotional support and a way to 'vent' her stress to a caring listener.

Scenario

Mary: "Is this the Unemployed Worker's Union? I'm feeling really wrecked – I hope you can help me. My job agency sent me a text message to come in but my son has borrowed my mobile phone and I didn't know when the job agency appointment was. I've run out of credit for my phone and I'm ringing from a borrowed phone. The dog's escaped and the car battery is dead. I can't afford another breach – I'm down to my last piece of bread. How did I get myself into this situation? What? A Computer? No I couldn't afford the Optus bill so my computer is down. I might as well go back to bed."

It wouldn't be surprising if you were overwhelmed by the range of Mary's problems, not knowing which to focus on, apart from trying to empathise with her feelings. This is where critical thinking is required.

You need to take notes about her problems regarding her job agency issues and sort these from her other problems.

Active listening includes confirming understanding by paraphrasing, summarizing or asking questions to ensure there is no misunderstanding. Open questions allow for further discussion and are more useful when trying to gain greater understanding.

For example:

'What did you mean by...?'

'Can you describe..?'

'Tell me more about

'Please explain.....

Dealing with difficult calls

If on the Advocacy hotline you encounter someone who is angry, upset and irrational (difficult to deal with) don't take it as a personal insult. The objective is to help them deal with their issue.

- 'Actively' listen to what they say. Don't interrupt, disagree or 'evaluate'.
- Make brief acknowledging comments to show you 'hear' them.
- Without being awkward, repeat back the gist of what they just said, from their frame of reference in a measured way
- Inquire. Ask open questions that show you've been paying attention and that move the discussion forward such as: 'Sounds really tough. Tell me how it all happened'.

- It is important that your tone is calm and non-judgmental. Underneath the anger is often perceived hurt and giving them the space to 'vent' may take the heat out of their pain or angst.

Mental health awareness

Mental ill health can include a wide range of conditions that affect mood, thinking and behaviour. Unemployed workers and other welfare recipients often struggle to cope with lack of money, housing, employment, transport and demonisation in the community. They also have to deal with the job agencies which depend on the threat of penalties, intimidation and the ignorance and isolation of individuals to achieve profits. Many job seekers feel shamed, disempowered and suffer with lowered self esteem, anger, anxiety and depression as a result of this punitive treatment by the Government.

Common Mental Health Disorders

Major depression

A brain disorder characterised by persistently depressed mood or loss of interest in activities, causing significant impairment in daily life.

Anxiety disorder

A mental health disorder characterised by feelings of worry, anxiety or fear that are strong enough to interfere with one's daily activities

Bipolar disorder

A disorder associated with episodes of mood swings ranging from depressive lows to manic highs.

Dementia

A group of thinking and social symptoms that interferes with daily functioning.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

A chronic condition including attention difficulty, hyperactivity and impulsiveness.

Schizophrenia

A disorder that affects a person's ability to think, feel and behave clearly.

Obsessive compulsive disorder

Excessive thoughts (obsessions) that lead to repetitive behaviours (compulsions).

Autism

A serious developmental disorder that impairs the ability to communicate and interact.

Post traumatic stress disorder

A disorder characterised by failure to recover after experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event.

Advocacy hotline officers need mental health awareness in order to communicate with fragile people in a sensitive way and refer them on, if needed, to suitable organisations that deal with mental health and drug and alcohol issues.

Assertiveness Training

Part of our role as AUWU advocacy officers is to make unemployed workers aware of their rights and help empower them to stand up for themselves when dealing with job agencies and the bureaucracy, with assistance from our union and website information and advice.

This requires assertiveness and the ability to negotiate with others and deal with conflict. We need to model that behaviour.

Assertiveness is a communication style. It is being able to express your feelings, thoughts, beliefs and opinions in an open manner that doesn't violate the rights of others.

Aggressiveness, on the other hand, is a style that violates the rights of others.

If you are 'passive-aggressive' you are essentially being aggressive, but in a passive or indirect way. For example, someone may be angry but they don't act in an overtly aggressive way by yelling or hitting, instead they may sulk or slam a door.

Then again, if we are passive we violate our own rights.

Being assertive does not guarantee that you get what you want but you may reach a mutually satisfactory compromise with the other person.

The main thing is that you express yourself in a way that respects both your needs and the needs of others.

You can choose when to be assertive. In some cases it won't be the right choice. For example, if you are in a bar and someone becomes very aggressive or violent then being assertive may place you at risk as the other person is not being rational. In this case you may decide a passive approach is better.

The Effects of Being Unassertive

The main effect of not being assertive is that it can lead to low self esteem. If we

communicate in a passive manner we are not saying what we really feel or think. This means we can end up agreeing with and fulfilling other people's needs or wants rather than our own. This can result in a lack of purpose and a feeling of not being in control of our own lives.

If we never express ourselves openly and conceal our thoughts and feelings this can make us feel tense, stressed, anxious or resentful. It can also lead to unhealthy and uncomfortable relationships. We will feel like the people closest to us don't really know us.

6.

Lack of assertiveness is very common in social phobia. People with social phobia tend to think that other people are being judgmental and critical about them

and will avoid social situations because of this.

And if we constantly communicate in an aggressive manner we will eventually lose friends and people will lose respect for us. Again this can lead to low self esteem.

We learn how to cope with conflict largely through family and peer group experience. For example, if these groups dealt with conflict by yelling and arguing, you may have learnt to deal with conflict that way.

Or if your family taught you should always please others before yourself, then you may find it hard to be assertive about your needs. Or if they taught that you shouldn't express negative emotion, and ignore or ridicule you if you do, you will quickly learn not to express emotion.

Some questions to reflect on how you may have learned to become unassertive are:

- How did your family handle conflict?
- What did they do when they disagreed with somebody or were upset with people?
- How did your parents teach you to deal with conflict?
- What were their messages?
- In what ways did you learn to get what you wanted without asking for it directly? (e.g. crying, yelling, making threats etc)
- Do you still use these ways to get what you want today?

What stops us from being assertive?

A number of factors can stop us from being assertive:

Self-defeating beliefs, such as:

- It is uncaring, rude and selfish to say what you want.
- If I assert myself I will upset the other person and ruin our relationship
- It will be terribly embarrassing if I say what I think.
- **Anxiety and stress:** We may know how to be assertive but get so anxious we can't carry out the behaviour. We may be so stressed it

becomes difficult to think and act clearly. We need to learn how to manage our anxiety and reduce physical and mental stress.

Less assertive people have a greater likelihood of substance abuse, however, those who are more assertive tend to be less depressed and have better health outcomes.

Negotiation Skills

These skills go together with assertiveness. It can be difficult to negotiate with someone who has more power than you, particularly if they represent authority within a job agency or government department. But if you are informed about your rights as well as responsibilities and obligations you have more bargaining power.

The AUWU website letters and templates can help provide you with a paper trail record of your meetings, as can the ability to record your job interviews, take notes or bring a friend or advocate for support. Learn to say 'no' sometimes.

The following five points may help:

- **Learn nonverbal body language cues.** Subtle cues, like the excessive blinking of the eyes or an uncomfortable shift in a chair, can give you insight into what's going on in the other person's mind - but you need to be attuned to this body language. The only way to do that is through study and practice, observing the body language of people you already know, and strangers when you get the chance.
- **Listen to other people.** Saying less and listening more puts you in a position of power during a negotiation - it means the other person is giving you more information than you're giving them. Add in the fact that quiet people are seen as better, more respectful communicators, and it's clear that being a better active listener will make you a better all-around negotiator. But like all the other skills on this list, it takes practice to perfect. Start out with your friends and family, listening more intently and speaking less often, until it becomes a natural element of your conversational rhythm. From there, it will be easy to integrate in your higher-profile negotiation scenarios.
- **Conduct better research.** Before you walk into any negotiation 'practice' research by getting access to the most reliable sources of information. Learn what questions to ask to get to deeper, more detailed pockets of data.

- **Negotiate everything.** The more you do it the more comfortable you're going to be, leading to more natural confidence. You'll become a better speaker, a better listener and you'll learn the rhythm of negotiation better as well.