

Beyond 9-5: How to Effectively Communicate When You Live with Your Co-workers

By Paul Rutter

When your co-workers are also the people you live with, communication challenges are bound to occur. Why? Because when you live and work with the same people, whether you're married and in business together, in a family business, or even in a profession that requires lots of "together time," such as on a cruise ship or in a firehouse, misunderstandings are bound to happen. People who are together the majority of the time tend to feel comfortable with each other, and as such they say and do things they may never say or do in a traditional 9-5 job. After all, when you're accustomed to seeing your co-workers nightly at the dinner table, in casual situations, and even in some cases in pajamas, some of the traditional workplace formality goes right out the window.

Unfortunately, all this together time makes miscommunication common. Since 70-90% of all communication is non-verbal, it's often what we don't say to others that carries the most impact. For example, suppose you walk into a co-worker's office or workspace because you have something urgent to say. However, the other person keeps typing while you speak and barely makes eye contact with you. What message does that send? Even if the other person *is* intently listening, the non-verbal message states otherwise. While you may think the other person is not interested in what you're saying, he or she may simply feel very comfortable around you and not realize the impact of the non-verbal communication.

When communicating with people you both live and work with, you need specific communication strategies in order to keep challenges to a minimum. Following are some guidelines to keep in mind.

1. Know your own natural responses to situations.

In order to communicate effectively with people you are very comfortable with, the first step is to know how you respond in various situations. For example, when you're stuck in traffic, how do you react? Do you get mad and honk the horn and let the traffic ruin your day? Or do you view being stuck in traffic as an opportunity to listen to music or to the latest audio book? How you react to any situation is your choice. You can choose to be mad or you can choose to look at any situation creatively.

The same is true when communicating with others. When you're rushed, do you tend to ignore people? Do you snap at others? Or do you seek other people's assistance? Make a list of the common situations you experience on a daily basis and identify how you typically react during each. The more you know your own natural tendencies in various situations, the better idea you'll have of what kind of non-verbal messages you'll be giving others when those situations occur. You can then be mindful of your non-verbal messages to help reduce communication mishaps.

2. Don't take anything personally.

When you're living with those you work with, it's easy to take all communications personally. After all, when you spend a lot of time with someone, you often develop a deeper camaraderie than you would in a typical office setting. And it's easy to take things personally when they come from someone you feel a deeper connection to. However, just as in any professional relationship, you can't take *anything* personally.

Realize that the thing you're taking personally may just be a normal action on the other person's part. For example, suppose you talk with someone and he rolls his

eyes at you. You can take that non-verbal communication personally and think the person doesn't like you or your ideas. However, that person may roll his eyes at everything—that's just how he reacts in any situation. If you're living and working with someone, you're going to see the good, bad, and the ugly of that person more often than in an office job. Therefore, you need to expect such things and never take it personally.

The best solution is to give someone the benefit of the doubt. Or, if you don't understand why someone is reacting in a certain way, ask for clarification. For example, with our eye-roller example, you may ask, "I notice that you rolled your eyes at my suggestion. What about the idea don't you like?" Then the person can give you some solid feedback about the suggestion. And if he didn't realize he was communicating such a message, now he can be aware of his non-verbal messages and make some changes.

3. Be a good listener.

Listening is one of the most important aspects of communication. By now we've all heard of "active listening," where you nod and agree and paraphrase. While that's an important part of listening, even more important is to be a committed listener.

Often, people listen actively, but they're still focused on what they're going to say next, not on what the speaker is saying. They don't want to totally commit to listening and take in what the other person is saying. So rather than nod and paraphrase and think of what you're going to say next, just sit and listen with an open mind. Focus on what the other person is saying without thinking up responses. The person you're talking with will sense your interest and will feel that he or she is truly being heard. When that occurs, the other person is likely to return the gesture, and that's when you'll have true communication.

4. Show respect.

When you live and work with a group of people, everyone knows each other's business. No matter how hard you try to keep your personal life personal, others will learn what you're doing, and they'll talk. But realize that gossip and sharing even the private truths of others can kill a team.

If you happen to hear some gossip, whether it's true or an exaggerated retelling of events, have the courage to walk away from the discussion. Be a role model by showing respect for your fellow team mates and their right to privacy. And if you feel the need to share the hottest bit of news you've just learned about a co-worker, talk with the co-worker first to be sure it's okay that you share the news. Be honest in all your communications. Be direct and tell the truth. Nothing kills morale faster than a feeling of betrayal and discontent.

Communicate for Success

Realize that there's no right way to communicate. We each communicate based on our upbringing and environment. So be mindful of your own communication style and show respect for others at all times. And remember that just because you live and work with someone and are comfortable with the person, you still need to communicate in a way that promotes mutual understanding and harmony. Ultimately, be grateful for your unique work environment and use the opportunity to develop lifelong friendships that extend well beyond the workplace.

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