

CHAPTER 1

The Supervisor as Communicator

Studies show that, over the course of a normal work week, supervisors spend about 75 percent of their time engaged in two activities—talking and listening. If you're like most supervisors, you probably enjoy and are good at these two skills. After all, if you didn't like to interact with people, you would not have become a supervisor in the first place. But now that you are, you will find that “communicating” begins to take on a number of new dimensions. The challenge for you as a supervisor becomes how to use your communication abilities in the context of the wide variety of roles you must play. In a given day, you may be called upon to act as parent, counselor, boss, manager, negotiator, and referee to different people at different times. In playing some of these

roles, simply talking and listening are probably not enough.

The three critical communication skills you must call on if you hope to be a helper and a leader are

- Active listening,
- Providing feedback, and
- Conflict management.

These skills are highly interrelated in the sense that they build on one another: Active listening encourages feedback; conflict is less likely to erupt when feedback is asked for and given appropriately; and regular feedback promotes open discussion and active participation. In essence, good communication is the beginning of building trust between you and your members/volunteers, not to mention between you and other staff.



Whether you were first exposed to these terms and tools years ago or days ago, you may want to review them again in preparation for the next time someone looks at you and says, “Oh, is that what you meant when you said...?”

Supervisor's **TOOL KIT**

(These tools begin on page **1** 23)



Active Listening

Active Listening: A Primer

Active listening and how you do it

Tips for Effective Active Listening

More insights on how to listen actively

Asking Questions

A discussion of open and closed questioning techniques

Listening Blocks

Things that stand in the way of really hearing what someone is saying

“What Did You Say?” Communicating With Those Whose English is Limited

Helpful advice for working with people whose native language is not English

Giving Feedback

Giving Praise and Encouragement

Suggestions for how to give positive feedback and sound genuine about it

Criteria for Effective Feedback

Essential guidelines for giving and receiving feedback

The DESC Model for Performance Feedback

A simple four-step model for giving feedback by using a collaborative problem-solving approach

Self-Test on Giving Feedback

A self-assessment tool to determine how well you give feedback

Conflict Management

A simple guide for beginning a feedback statement with “I” instead of “You”

How To Cope With Difficult People

Tips and strategies for communicating with members/volunteers who present challenges

Eight-Step Conflict Resolution Process

A process for resolving conflicts between peers (member/volunteer-member/volunteer or colleague-colleague)

The Nature of Positive Confrontation

Advice on how to use anger successfully

Thomas-Kilmann Model of Conflict Styles

A description of five options for dealing with conflict: competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, and compromising

A Day in the Life ...



It's been a long week for Juggling Jamal. The crew's been working hard on the park restoration project, and their efforts have paid off. Even local residents and passers-by have made comments about how much better the playground looks. Jamal smiles to himself when he thinks of how proud the members seemed at the end of the week. Even Valerie cracked a smile! He wishes every week could end on a high note like that, where everyone feels like part of the team and happy about what they're accomplishing together. Unfortunately, it isn't always that way. One week the team is working well together and the members are going the extra mile for one another. Then, all of a sudden, something throws them out of whack. Like a band whose guitar player suddenly pops a string, they start to seem a bit "off-key." Jamal leans back in his chair and puts his feet on his desk. "Okay, so a few of our instruments need a little tuning," he thinks. "But doesn't every band go through this? We were really together this week. We can do it again." He puts his hands behind his head and starts to think about a couple of his members who need some help before the team can really perform well on a regular basis.

First on the list—Devon. He left his shovel at the work site on Wednesday, and by the

time they realized his mistake and ran back to the site, the shovel was gone. How can somebody who is such a great worker be so careless? He lost his pliers the week before! The shovels belong to the Parks and Recreation Department, so somebody has to reimburse them for the cost—about \$30. Jamal knows Devon has limited funds and wonders whether he should just repay the Parks people himself, then tell Devon never to let it happen again. On the other hand, if any of the other members found out that Jamal did that for one of them....

Jamal looks down at the paperwork on his desk and frowns. There are the time sheets, reminding him of item #2, the meeting he has scheduled this afternoon with Valerie. "I'll trade two lost shovels for this confrontation any day," he sighs. According to her team leader, Valerie is putting more hours on her time sheets than she's working. The rules are pretty clear about this, but still it's not pleasant to tell someone they've been caught lying, especially Valerie. Sometimes it's hard for Jamal to look at her without thinking "prima donna," even though he knows he shouldn't stereotype people that way.

A knock on his door shakes Jamal out of his preoccupation with Valerie. It's Elena, with a long face and wrinkled brow. She's just returned from making her project proposal

presentation to the Hispanic Youth Center board of directors. Jamal knows how nervous she was before leaving. Now she's back, and she isn't smiling....



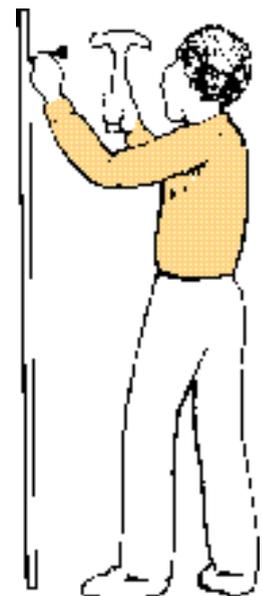
Active Listening

Why You Do It

National Service members/volunteers experience life's problems like everyone else. Given the communities they live and work in, some members/volunteers may have more than their fair share of issues to deal with. If economic, social, and family problems are not present in their own lives, these issues certainly appear in the communities they serve.

Members/volunteers also have hopes for the future—emotional, professional, financial—and they may want to take some risks to realize those hopes. For example, they may want to apply for a job, enter college, buy a car, rent an apartment, or retire. Whether dealing with their own issues, aspirations, and risk-taking, or with those of the community, members/volunteers often turn to their supervisor for help. How do you respond?

Helping members/volunteers (and colleagues and friends) deal with their concerns requires clear, two-way communication. First, you need to listen to understand—What is this person expressing to me about how she or he is thinking and feeling? Second, you need to check to see if the person with whom you are interacting understands the meaning or message of what you are saying in response. The greater the diversity of your member/volunteer group (or staff), the more challenging clear communication becomes because everyone filters what they hear differently. What you mean to say may not be at all what some of your members hear. Furthermore, the way you listen and respond to a particular member may be influenced by your assumptions about factors such as the person's cultural group or educational level. Active listening is one of the surest ways to understand and be understood by others.



“Listening, not imitation, may be the sincerest form of flattery.”

Dr. Joyce Brothers,
American
Psychologist

How You Do It

As an active listener, you try to understand what a member/volunteer is saying, feeling, or thinking by putting your understanding into words and feeding it back to the member/volunteer for verification. You don't tell your own feelings or thoughts about the situation, only what you think the member/volunteer means. Then the member/volunteer can tell you whether you have correctly interpreted or understood. Active listening helps you to hear the emotion and affirm the person. It communicates these messages clearly:

- I hear what you are feeling.
- I understand how you see things right now.
- I see you as you are right now.
- I am interested and concerned.
- I do not judge or evaluate you.

Active listening includes four sub-skills:

Attending

Using body language (e.g., eye contact, leaning forward) to communicate that you are hearing her or him

Paraphrasing

Listening well and putting what the member/volunteer says into your own words

Reflecting Feeling

Capturing and expressing the underlying feelings the member/volunteer may have but may not put into words

Reflecting Meaning

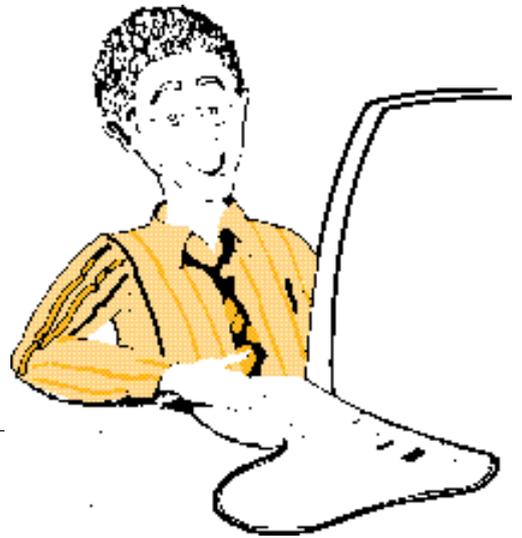
Restating the member's/volunteer's feeling and combining it with the reason for the feeling—for example, “you feel discouraged because three of your highest-risk kids dropped out of your after-school program”

Given all the things that may interfere with the ability to really hear what someone is saying—environmental distractions, cultural barriers, and the like—active listening requires some study and practice. Check out the active-listening tools at the end of the chapter for further insight.

As with any communication technique, there is always the potential to overuse or overdo it. For example, if you “over-attend” (too many head nods, sitting too close, etc.), you may make the person you’re listening to feel smothered. If active listening is a new skill for you, try practicing with a friend or colleague before using it to counsel a member/volunteer.

Here’s Jamal doing some active listening with Elena to help her talk about her problem...

Jamal Is All Ears...



Patting the extra chair in his office, Jamal gives Elena a concerned smile and invites her to sit down. He can't exactly tell whether she's mad or distressed, but she's obviously not happy [attending].

J: How was your meeting at the youth center?

E: You know, I don't know why I bothered to go in the first place. I just hate talking in front of a group of VIPs!

J: (Leans forward.) It's okay, Elena. Take a second to relax a bit, then tell me what happened [attending].

E: (Not relaxing.) What happened? More like, what didn't happen? I got up. I did my presentation. They asked all these questions I didn't know how to answer. I got all mixed up trying to explain things to them. Then, as soon as my 20-minute time slot was up, right in the middle of a sentence, they just cut me off and said, "Thank you very much...we'll be in touch." Yeah, right, I bet they'll be in touch.

J: Now, let me see if I understand exactly what happened at the meeting. You stood in front of the group and gave the presentation you'd worked up. If I remember correctly, it was about a 10-minute talk, right? (Elena nods yes.) Then, some of the board members started asking questions you didn't exactly know how to handle [paraphrasing]. You got a little flustered, maybe, trying to respond to them and, before you realized it, the presentation time was up, and they cut you off [reflecting feeling].

E: Well, they didn't shove me out the door, but I was just starting to remember a couple of key points that might have sounded more convincing, then all of a sudden it was, "Well, Ms. Vega, sounds like an interesting project, and we'll review the information you've provided..." blah, blah, blah.

J: So you feel frustrated because you were unable to field their questions

and didn't get a second chance before the time was up [reflecting meaning]?

E: Stupid is more like it. At least that's what they probably think about me, especially after the next guy.

J: So there was someone else making a presentation after yours?

E: Yeah, and he was good. I know because I stood outside the door and listened to the first part of his talk. He was so convincing. Jeez, I wish I had practiced my talk more!

J: It sounds as if you're feeling sorry you didn't come off as polished as this other guy, and now you think the board may be more persuaded to fund his project than yours [reflecting meaning]. (Elena nods her head slowly, but firmly. Jamal continues...) Elena, I know how hard you worked on your presentation, and your project ideas are so good. I really hate to see you feeling so upset with yourself over this. How do you think we can work with this situation to figure out what your next step should be?



Providing Feedback

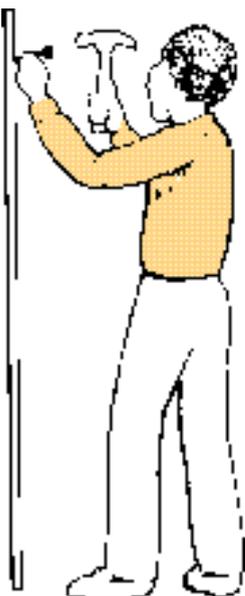
Why You Do It

One of the strengths of National Service is the diversity of its members/volunteers and supervisors. Members/volunteers may be young or old, experienced or inexperienced, unskilled or very skilled, and may come from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds. Members/volunteers also bring very different expectations to their work. As a supervisor, you need to establish a positive working relationship and a set of expectations with each member/volunteer. If expectations are clear and members/volunteers are motivated and capable, then they are likely to perform well. When this happens, it's important to offer praise. If, on the other hand, member/volunteer motivations are in conflict with those of the project and team, or there is a disagreement on expectations—or perhaps members/volunteers don't have the technical skills needed for a particular project—then their performance may be less than acceptable. In this case, the supervisor may need to give corrective feedback and work with the member(s)/volunteer(s) on how to make improvements.

As a supervisor, you not only need to give feedback, you must also ask for it from others (including members/volunteers, bosses, and colleagues). Understanding how other people perceive you is one of the first steps toward knowing what to do to improve your job performance.

How You Do It

You communicate work expectations to members/volunteers. You have members/volunteers express their expectations for support from you, from agency partners, and from other members/volunteers. You explain who assesses their performance and how that information is communicated, and to whom. Last, but not least, you describe the consequences tied to the process. There are rules of the game and you explain how to play by them. Like a coach on a playing field,



you have to decide who is playing successfully and who needs more coaching. You reward good plays and criticize poor ones, and you do it in a constructive way. In other words, you provide feedback to the players on how well they are doing and, if necessary, how they can do better.

Providing feedback is the primary skill for performance assessment and coaching (we talk more about coaching in chapter 2, The Supervisor as Advisor). There are two types of feedback:

Praise—for exemplary work or behavior that exceeds expectations; and

Corrective feedback—for behavior that does not meet agreed upon expectations.

Praise for exemplary behavior is important in order to clarify what good performance looks like, reinforce commitment, and balance out any negative emotions caused by corrective feedback. Praise given by the supervisor must also be genuine. Insincerity and flattery will be quickly detected by members/volunteers and will eventually diminish the impact of truly felt and deserved praise.

The DESC Model

Corrective feedback is important in clarifying what poor performance looks like, discouraging it, and providing positive support for changing specific behaviors. People usually accept praise more easily than correction or criticism. The DESC model (in your tool kit) is a particularly useful approach for giving corrective feedback, because it focuses the corrective feedback on the person's behavior, not on the person. This allows the supervisor to depersonalize the discussion, separate the member/volunteer from the problem, and engage the member/volunteer as a partner in finding a solution. To begin the feedback process, the supervisor writes out or carefully thinks through the problem at hand in four steps.

“A stumble
isn't a fall.”

West African
Proverb

4 STEPS

- Step 1 **D**escribes what the member/volunteer is doing that creates problems;
- Step 2 **E**xpresses why that behavior is a problem for the supervisor and for the project;
- Step 3 **S**pecifies what the supervisor wants the member/volunteer to do instead (with input from the member/volunteer); and
- Step 4 **C**larifies consequences for changing or failing to change the problem behavior.

By using this simple four-step model, you will be able to get your constructive message across, and members/volunteers will be more likely to accept and do something with your criticism. Although the model is logical and straightforward, it still requires study and practice. Please thoroughly review the DESC model description and guidelines in your tool kit before you attempt to use it with a member/volunteer or a colleague.

Now, let's take a look at how Jamal uses this approach in giving feedback to Devon.

Shovels and Feedback: Important Tools



Remember Jamal's issue with Devon and the lost shovel? Here are Jamal and Devon as they meet in the parking lot...

J: Devon, we need to talk about the shovel, man.

D: I left it behind by accident, and some creep stole it. What else is there to say?

J: Well, I'm not sure if you know this, but all the large tools belong to the Parks people. Anything we lose comes out of our budget. We're on a shoestring here, so we really can't afford to lose anything. How can you work things out so you can replace the cost of the shovel? It's about \$30.

D: (Half serious, half joking) Oh man, I don't even have any shoestrings! (A couple of seconds of silence.) I guess I'll have to scrape it together, huh? (Jamal nods yes.) But could you wait 'til next month? I'm tight right now.

J: Sorry, brother. I'd like to help you

out on that, but I just can't keep the Parks people waiting. I could do it like this, though. I could take \$15 from you now, and another \$15 after the next pay period. I'd want you to sign a letter so neither of us forgets.

D: Okay, that's more do-able for me.

J: Alright, then. But I also want to get your thoughts on how we can prevent this type of mishap in the future. Since this isn't the first time we've lost a tool, I wonder if we should start getting the team leader to remind everyone to pick up things at the end of the day. What do you think?

D: Yeah. I wish we'd had an equipment check yesterday. But you know, I wouldn't ask the team leader to do it—she's got too much already. Maybe we can rotate who does the check every week. But hey, put me down last on the schedule!

Feedback Is:

- Information about how someone else perceives or experiences you in a given situation;
- Essential for self-development, member/volunteer development, and team development;
- As much about the person giving it as about the one receiving it; and
- Yours to agree with or not.

Feedback Is Not:

- A statement of who you are as a person, or how you behave all the time; and
- Something you have to agree with in order for it to be useful.

Three Feedback Pitfalls

You may fall into several bad habits that will make confronting members/volunteers on performance issues more difficult:

AVOIDING THE CONFRONTATION AS LONG AS POSSIBLE

Putting off confrontation can cause two problems. One is that history may blur the facts. The other is that the behavior may become entrenched.

FAILING TO GIVE SUFFICIENT PRAISE FOR GOOD TO SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE

By failing to praise, you are essentially failing to encourage the member/volunteer to continue good work. If you only notice poor performance, you may be perceived as one-sided and hard. Your praise also helps soften the potential emotional blow of constructive criticism.

FAILING TO COMMUNICATE CLEAR PERFORMANCE STANDARDS IN THE FIRST PLACE

It's unfair to hold a member/volunteer accountable to a standard you have left vague or ambiguous.

By avoiding these pitfalls, you will lessen the potential for more serious conflicts between you and your members/volunteers.

Conflict Management

Why You Do It

Listening actively and providing ongoing feedback will reduce the amount of conflict you encounter as you supervise members/volunteers. Unfortunately, these two skills don't always work. Sometimes you must use conflict resolution and mediation skills for turning conflict into constructive problem solving.

CONFLICT: any situation in which the goals, methods, values, or needs of two or more people are, or are perceived to be, in opposition.

For our purposes, we'll define conflict as follows: Sources of conflict may be competition, authority issues, diversity and sensitivities related to it, and differences in ideas, desires, or needs. Regardless of the source, active listening and feedback are the skills on which conflict management is based. Be sure to review the materials related to those two skills (presented earlier in this chapter) before jumping into conflict management and mediation.

How You Do It

Sometimes you can avoid conflict over minor issues by using "I" statements instead of "you" statements. "I" statements make

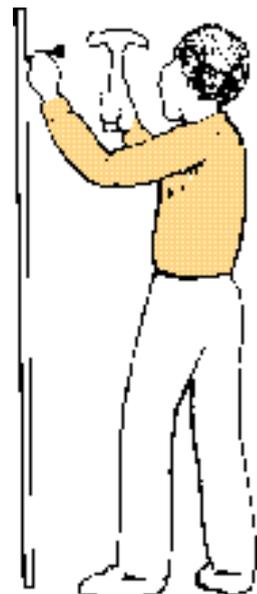
"You" Statement

"You aren't making any sense."

"I" Statement

"I couldn't understand what you said."

it easier for a member/volunteer to hear corrective feedback instead of rejecting it. For example;



“You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist.”

Indira Gandhi
Prime Minister of India

Sometimes, when you're trying to give corrective feedback to a member/volunteer, it backfires and the member/volunteer lashes out at you with strong feelings, either about the issue at hand or about other hidden “hot topics.” Instead of a nod or a handshake of agreement to do something differently, you wind up with, “Well, let me tell you something, supervisor.” In that case, use active listening to lower the emotional heat, translate what the other person says into constructive criticism, negotiate a change in behavior, and review the positive and negative consequences. The easiest way to explain this process is to demonstrate it.

Let's see how Jamal manages the conflict he has with Valerie over her time sheets.

Jamal and Valerie Discuss



Jamal has just started his meeting with Valerie. He's trying to give her corrective feedback about reporting her hours incorrectly on her time sheet. Jamal begins the conversation and carries it through the four steps outlined below. Notice he's using the DESC model we discussed earlier.

- Describe behavior
"Valerie, your time sheets don't match your hours. You were three hours short last week and four hours short this week."
- Express why it's a problem
"I don't falsify time sheets, and I really want you to qualify for the stipend. It's breaking the rules to approve hours not served."
- Specify what you want (in terms of action)
"I want you to at least meet the minimum hours by putting in the time required."
- Clarify consequences, if necessary
"I'd like to know if there's any reason you can't do that, and if there is, what I can do to help."

Let's say that Valerie interrupts Jamal between Step 2 and Step 3 with the following:

"That creep of a team leader's lying! I put in the time and he says I don't! Besides, everybody else skips out. You're only picking on me because I'm white!"

Jamal's first concern, whatever his response, is not to let Valerie interrupt him until he has finished his entire statement. If she insists, Jamal should use the "broken record" technique, i.e. keep repeating, "I want to hear what you have to say, but I'd like to finish my thought."

Jamal's next step is to help Valerie to transform her response from an attack into a constructive criticism (of himself and the team leader). To do this, Jamal actually uses the same formula as he used in the four steps above, only this time he states the behavior, the problem, and so forth from Valerie's point of view. Here's how Jamal does it:

Valerie's statement: "That creep of a team leader's lying! I put in the time, and he says I don't!"

Jamal's translation: "You think he lies about the time you put in and that makes you angry because it creates a problem between us. You want to know if I'll check on the accuracy of his reports?"

Valerie's statement: "Besides, everybody else skips out. You're only picking on me because I'm white!"

Jamal's translation: "You see other members missing hours and getting credit for them, and you feel

angry with me because you think I ignore them and single you out because you're white? You would like me to agree to apply the same standards to everyone?"



Jamal Translates Conflict into Constructive Criticism

Negotiating

The first time Jamal translates a statement he may not get it exactly right, but he continues to use active listening until he gets acknowledgment from Valerie that she thinks Jamal understands her. The fact that he finally gets the message right, does not

necessarily mean that he agrees with it. It just means that he knows what behavior Valerie is reacting to, why it's important, how she feels, and what she wants Jamal to do. With that kind of clarity, he can begin to negotiate what he is willing to give and what he'd like in return. For example, to get Valerie to comply with the service requirements, Jamal may agree to tighten up her control of service hours and/or change her team leader. By this stage, Jamal is no longer in conflict. He and Valerie are solving problems together.

Reviewing Consequences

If Jamal needs to put more muscle into the confrontation, he may add one more step to the feedback formula. He may describe the positive consequences related to the behavior he wants and the negative consequences for continuing the undesirable behavior. In this case he might say:

“Regardless of how your leader’s honesty checks out, I want to say something just for the record. My policy is, I don’t falsify service records, and I don’t allow members or leaders to falsify them either. I will make sure you get credit for the time served and will write letters of recommendation for you to schools if you complete your time. But, if you don’t meet your obligations, I will not certify that you qualify for the stipend. I’d like to talk to the team leader to get his perspective, so why don’t we meet again in a week and pick things up from there?”

Addressing the Race Issue

In this particular case, Jamal must deal not only with the specific issue of Valerie’s false time sheets; he must also address her more general allegations regarding racial bias. Jamal will do well to negotiate with Valerie on the issue of the time sheets first. Once he senses they are solving that problem together, he can begin to tackle the sensitive subject of bias. On this matter, Jamal needs to initiate a dialogue with Valerie to learn her real feelings about prejudice among and between members and staff. This exchange may take one meeting or several. Depending on what Jamal discovers, he may want to do several things, including 1) talk to others in the group about their perceptions, 2) ask one or two of his colleagues for feedback on his own interpersonal skills with people of different races or ethnic backgrounds, and 3) ask someone with appropriate expertise to help him assess the problem. The essential thing is to address the issue and to do so by creating an ambience in which people feel comfortable expressing themselves calmly and openly.

Mediating Conflict

When conflict breaks out among two or more people, you can use the same skills to mediate or get the parties involved to talk in problem-solving language. First use active listening with both sides to calm their emotions. Be aware that people respond to conflict differently (see the description of conflict management styles in the next section). Then use the following questions to bring the conflict to the negotiating table:

- What has the other side done or not done that bothers you? Ask who, what, when, where, and how questions until you get specific descriptions of behavior.
- How do you feel about that [if that is not abundantly clear already]? Why is it important?
- What do you want the other side to do or not do instead?
- [Sometimes] What are the consequences if the other side does or doesn't do what you want?

Once you get both sides clear on the answers to these questions, use your problem-solving skills to help generate options for agreements in which both sides win. Help them agree on a plan of action with clearly defined tasks, responsibilities, and deadlines.

Conflict Management Styles: A Few Options

The supervisor's job is often stressful, and under stress people tend to react to conflict in a knee-jerk, rather than a thoughtful fashion. It is helpful to look at the different options or modes most people have for dealing with conflict to understand when one mode may be more appropriate than others. The Thomas-Kilmann conflict management model is one conceptual way to assess an individual's behavior in a conflict situation. In this model, the person's behavior is described in one of two ways:

ASSERTIVE—the extent to which the member/volunteer attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns; and

COOPERATIVE—the extent to which the member/volunteer attempts to satisfy the other person’s concerns.

These two basic descriptions can then be used to understand five options for handling conflict:

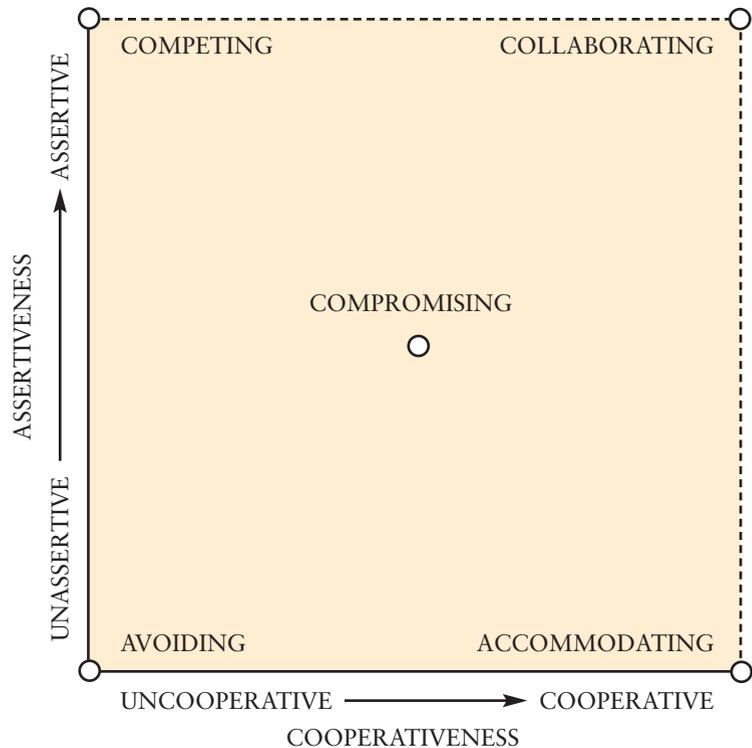
COMPETING—a power-orientated mode. You want to get your way at the other person’s expense.

ACCOMMODATING—the opposite of competing. You neglect your own concerns in order to satisfy those of the other person. There is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode.

AVOIDING—choosing not to address the conflict by postponing, side-stepping, etc. You don’t pursue your goals or those of the other person.

COLLABORATING—the opposite of avoiding. By collaborating you attempt to involve the other person to find a solution to the issue at hand. It means digging into the issues to find an appealing alternative.

COMPROMISING—you try to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution that is at least somewhat satisfactory to both of you.



Conflict Management Styles

Two men were walking along a crowded sidewalk in a downtown business area.

Suddenly, one exclaimed, "Listen to the lovely sound of that cricket!" But the other could not hear. He asked his companion how he could detect the sound of a cricket amidst the din of people and traffic. The first man, who was a zoologist, had trained himself to listen to the voices of nature, but he did not explain. He simply took a coin out of his pocket and dropped it on the sidewalk whereupon a dozen people began to look about them. "We hear," he said, "what we listen for."

Shagwan Shreeh
Rajneesh
"The Discipline of
Transcendence"

No one of these conflict management options is "the best." The basic point of the model is to make you aware of the choices and of people's tendency to use one mode more often than another. All five options are useful depending on the situation. The effectiveness of a given option depends on the requirements of the specific situation and the conflict management skills of the people involved. If you find yourself confronted with serious conflict situations, you may want to study some of the books on conflict management recommended in the bibliography in Appendix A. You may also want to consider enrolling in a focused workshop that provides guided practice in negotiation and mediation skills.

In your tool kit you'll find more information and examples of the Thomas-Kilmann model.

REFERENCES

Pages 1 21 and 1 22 adapted from: Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann. XICOM, 1974.

Active Listening: A Primer



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One of the most critical communications skills for supervisors is active listening. Active listening helps you to “hear the emotion and affirm the person.” It includes attending, paraphrasing, reflecting feeling, and reflecting meaning. When you listen actively, you do so with your body, eyes, ears, and instincts and—temporarily—you suspend judgment.

Attending: Listening with your body is called attending. It communicates that you are listening through body language, by

- sitting or standing within a comfortable distance of the member speaking,
- facing the person directly and leaning slightly forward,
- maintaining an appropriate amount of eye contact,
- nodding approval or agreement when you feel it,
- reflecting the emotion and information from the speaker by facial expression, and
- conveying “relaxed intensity” with your body language.

The body language of attending varies by culture. When in doubt, discuss cultural differences with the member/volunteer, asking how he or she would know that you were paying attention and acting concerned.

Your eyes listen to the speaker’s body language. Body language may alert you to issues when what you’re hearing is different from what you’re seeing. The member/volunteer who slumps in a chair with a downturned mouth and eyes that avoid yours while telling you how happy she is with her agency supervisor is sending you a mixed message.

Suspend judgment while you are listening with your ears. The mind gets so busy judging the “rights” and the “wrongs” and planning what to say next that it forgets to hear what is said. The speaker is absolutely right in his mind. Your job is to get into the speaker’s mind. If you listen well, you should be able to repeat to the listener exactly what was said after every two or three sentences.

Paraphrasing: If you listen well and can put what the speaker says into your own words, that’s paraphrasing. A paraphrase is a short statement that covers the content of what was said, not the underlying emotion. If done correctly, your paraphrase should elicit a “Yes” or a “That’s right” from the speaker. There are many lead-in phrases to introduce a paraphrase, such as “In other words” or “I’m hearing that....” Other active-listening lead-in phrases are:

Active Listening: A Primer

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- I'm picking up that...
- As I get it, you felt...
- If I'm hearing you correctly...
- To me, it's almost like you're saying...
- What I guess I'm hearing is...
- So as you see it....

percent of communication is nonverbal. Focus on listening with your eyes, listening to the tone of voice, and listening to what your instinct tells you about what could be going on with the other person.

Your guess about what the speaker is feeling may be right on target, and, if it isn't, the speaker will often give you more verbal cues. When you express the underlying feeling(s) and get confirmation, you have successfully reflected feelings.

Reflecting Feeling: Even when you correctly paraphrase what the speaker is saying, she or he will not feel really heard until you capture and express the underlying feelings that may not be expressed verbally. Research indicates that more than 80

Be careful of thoughts disguised as feelings. "I feel she doesn't like me," uses feeling, to

	Anger	Elation	Depression	Fear
Mild	annoyed bothered bugged irritated	glad comfortable surprised relieved confident	unsure confused bored resigned disappointed hurt	uneasy tense concerned anxious worried
Moderate	disgusted harassed mad put upon set up	cheerful happy up elated great hopeful eager	discouraged drained distressed down unhappy sad	alarmed threatened afraid scared frightened
Intense	angry hostile hot burned furious proud	joyful excited enthusiastic moved free fulfilled	miserable ashamed humiliated hopeless despairing	panicky overwhelmed terrified

Active Listening: A Primer

CONTINUED 3 OF 3

express a thought. Some active listening might get you closer to “You think she doesn’t like you and you feel hurt.” Hurt is the feeling underlying the thought. A list of feeling words follows:

Reflecting Meaning: Meaning combines both the content of what is communicated and the associated feeling. A simple formula for expressing meaning is to restate the feeling(s), followed by “because” and a statement that explains the reason(s) for the feeling(s). Some examples follow:

“You are furious because the agency director didn’t acknowledge your

recommendation. You suspect this means you don’t matter to her.”

“You feel sad because your girlfriend broke up with you and you’re afraid that any new relationship will make you feel the same kind of pain.”

Summary

The skills of active listening described above may seem awkward and forced at first, but with practice they will feel more natural. It is difficult to respond with patience, understanding, and empathy when you may consider the other person’s ideas wrong. However, active listening, if practiced faithfully, will generate attitudes of tolerance, understanding, and nonevaluative acceptance of the other.

[Feeling words adapted from *Listening, the Forgotten Skill: A Self-Teaching Guide*, by Madelene Burley Allen, Wiley & Sons, 1995.]

Tips for Active Listening



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1. Find a quiet, private place to listen. Hallways, shared offices, and other busy places are not conducive to active listening. In a quiet spot you'll be better able to focus your whole attention and create a nonthreatening environment.
2. Want to listen. Almost all problems in listening can be overcome by having the right attitudes. Remember, there is no such thing as uninteresting people, only uninterested listeners.
3. Act like a good listener. Be alert, sit straight, lean forward if that's appropriate, let your face radiate interest.
4. Listen to understand. Do not just listen for the sake of listening; listen to gain a real understanding of what is being said.
5. React. The only time a person likes to be interrupted is when he is applauded. Be generous with your applause. Make the other person feel important. Applaud with nods, smiles, comments, encouragement.
6. Stop talking. You can't listen while you are talking. Communicate—don't just take turns talking.
7. Empathize. Try to put yourself in the other person's place so you can see his or her point of view.
8. Concentrate on what the other is saying. Actively focus your attention on the words, the ideas, and the feelings related to the subject.
9. Look at the other person. Face, mouth, eyes, hands will all help the other person communicate with you and help you concentrate, too—show you are listening.
10. Smile appropriately. But don't overdo it.
11. Leave your emotions behind (if you can). Try to push your worries, your fears, your problems away. They may prevent you from listening well.
12. Get rid of distractions. Put down any papers, pencils, etc., you may have in your hands; they may distract your attention.
13. Get the main points (the big story). Concentrate on the main ideas and not on the illustrative material. Examples, stories, statistics, etc., are important but are not usually the main points. Examine them only to see if they prove, support, define the main ideas.
14. Share responsibility for communication. Only part of the responsibility rests with the speaker; you as the listener have an important part. Try to understand; if you don't, ask for clarification.

Tips for Active Listening

CONTINUED 2 OF 2

15. React to ideas, not to the person. Don't allow your reaction to the person to affect your interpretation of words. Good ideas can come from people whose looks or personality you don't like.
16. Don't argue mentally. When you are trying to understand the other person, it is a handicap to argue mentally while you are listening. It sets up a barrier between you and the speaker.
17. Use the difference between the speed at which you can listen and the speed at which a person can talk. You can listen faster than anyone can talk. Human speech is about 100 to 150 words per minute; thinking is about 500. Use this rate difference to your advantage by trying to stay on the right track, and think back over what the speaker has said.
18. Don't antagonize the speaker. You may cause the other person to conceal ideas, emotions, and attitudes in many ways: arguing, criticizing, taking notes, not taking notes, asking questions, not asking questions, etc. Try to judge and be aware of the effect you are having on the other person. Adapt to the speaker.
19. Avoid hasty judgments. Wait until all the facts are in.
20. Develop the attitude that listening is fun! Make a game of seeing how well you can listen.
21. Put the speaker at ease. Help him or her feel free to talk.
22. Be patient. Allow plenty of time. Do not interrupt. Avoid heading for the door.
23. Hold your temper. An angry person gets the wrong meaning from words.
24. Go easy on argument and criticism. This puts others on the defensive and they may "clam up" or get angry. Don't argue: even if you win, you lose.
25. Ask pertinent questions. This is encouraging, shows you are listening, helps to develop points further, and is essential for clarification.

Asking Questions



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Different kinds of questions provoke different emotional and intellectual responses from people. To be an effective communicator and group leader, you need to select and pose questions so that people feel encouraged to share ideas and opinions within the bounds of the subject or issue at hand. Most questions fall in one of two general categories “closed” and “open-ended.”

Closed Questions

Closed questions can be answered with a simple yes or no, or with one or two other words. For example:

Question: Are you satisfied with the project tasks assignments we made this morning?

Answer: Yes/no/sort of/I guess so.

Question: How many shovels will we need at the park site tomorrow?

Answer: About ten/a half-dozen.

Use closed questions to elicit short answers and very specific or pointed information. Do not use them when you are trying to encourage people to exchange their ideas and opinions. They will only stifle the discussion.

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions usually begin with words like how, what, and why, and require more elaborate answers than closed questions. For example:

Question: How do you feel about the community center burglary?

Answer: I feel like the whole project has been violated. It's shaken my trust in the neighborhood, but it woke me up to some problems that I hadn't seen before.

Question: What kinds of goals have you set in your work group?

Answer: We decided it was important to identify goals that address three areas of concern: getting the task done, developing ourselves as professionals, and getting recognition from the community at large.

Question: Why do you think the project failed the first time? **Answer:** I'm not sure we have enough information to answer that, but I think it may be critical to find out. Maybe we could interview some of the organizers and beneficiaries who would remember.

Asking Questions

CONTINUED 2 OF 2

Use open-ended questions to promote discussion and explore problems and solutions, but take care that the group stays on track. Here are several types of open-

ended questions and ways to formulate them to help individual members or groups solve problems and make decisions:

Diagnostic questions:

What is your analysis of the problem?
What can you conclude from this information?

Challenge/testing questions:

Why do you believe that?
What might someone offer as an opposing opinion?

Action questions:

What needs to be done to get this project going?
What are our first steps?

Prediction questions:

If your conclusions are correct, what do you think the reaction of the seniors (youth, parents, etc.) might be?

Hypothetical questions:

What would have happened if we had decided not to include the housing authority in the first phase of the project...?

[Adapted from: "The Discussion Teacher in Action: Questioning, Listening, and Response" by C. Roland Christensen in *Education for Judgment*, eds. C. Roland Christensen, David A. Garvin, and Ann Sweet. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1991.]

Listening Blocks



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Comparing	Saying “I have more information or experience...”
Mind Reading	Saying “I know what you’re really thinking...” or “I know exactly how you feel...”
Rehearsing	Preparing what you will say before the other is done
Filtering	Selective listening
Judging	Jumping to a quick decision, labeling
Dreaming	Getting lost in your own private associations
Identifying	Confusing the other’s need with your own
Advising	Immediately suggesting a course of action, without being asked
Sparring	Disagreeing: “Yes, but”—also known as playing the devil’s advocate
Being Right	Maintaining an unshakable point of view
Derailing	Changing the subject
Placating	Pretending to agree
Criticizing	Explaining how the person is wrong
Threatening	Talking about negative consequences

“What Did You Say?” Communicating With Those Whose English Is Limited



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It was December 23 and I ran into my local 7-11 to get a few lottery tickets as last minute stocking stuffers. Because I was in a rush and harried by holiday season pressures, I blurted out my usual rapid-fire speaking style to the unsuspecting Korean clerk behind the counter, “I’d like five rub-off lottery tickets.”

I couldn’t understand what she said, but I could read the confusion on her face. So, I repeated my original request, only this time louder and slower. “I’d like five rub-off lottery tickets.” Again she said something unintelligible to me, this time looking even more bewildered. For the third time, louder and with even more exaggerated mouth movements, I repeated my request. In exasperation, she went to the computerized ticket machine and punched out a ticket with five quick picks.

By this time my burn had turned to a boil and I said between clenched teeth, “This is not what I asked for. I want five rub-off tickets!” At this point another clerk came to her rescue, saying a few words in their native language. The no longer frantic clerk turned to me and with a smile of relief on her face “Scratch-off, scratch-off,” she kept repeating.

This incident points up some of the difficulties and frustrations experienced on both sides of the language barriers we face regularly in our multicultural society. It also clearly shows the mistakes we often make in communication with people whose command of English is limited.

What Doesn’t Help

The biggest stumbling block in situations like these is the anger that often comes from the frustration of not understanding or being understood. That anger becomes a powerful saboteur of communication in two ways. First, a message that comes out of anger threatens the receiver, making him/her less able to use the little English they may know. Anger also blocks the thinking of the sender, preventing that person from finding creative solutions to the impasse. So, the sender keeps repeating the same unsuccessful behavior, each time louder, slower and with more irritation.

What Does Help

Avoiding anger is a beginning, but that’s not enough. The following tips will help you find alternatives to louder and slower.

“What Did You Say?”

CONTINUED 2 OF 4

1. Make It Visual

As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Using pictures, signs, diagrams, and symbols gives you another dimension beyond words with which to make yourself clear. Had I drawn a picture of a lottery ticket, pointed to one or shown a sample, I could have quickly overcome my 7-11 difficulty.

A veteran army instructor who regularly taught courses to allied military personnel from many countries advised that diagrams, charts and graphs were critical aids in teaching his classes where most students had limited command of English. International symbols in road signs have long been used in Europe where there are many languages spoken in a relatively small area and where there is much travel between countries.

2. Show and Tell

Kindergarten isn't the only place where “show and tell” is useful. Demonstrating what you are explaining can often get the message across faster than words in any language. Wouldn't you rather have someone show you how to do something than have to figure it out from written instructions in a manual? I could have taken a coin and made scratching motions to show the clerk what kind of ticket I wanted. In on-the-job situations, this works best when you first show the person how to do a task, then do it together, and finally observe the individual in

action so you can be sure you've been understood.

3. Use Their Language

If getting your message or information across is more important than showing your displeasure at their limited English, then using the other person's language may be your best bet. Don't panic. This doesn't mean you need to speak the other person's language. Emergency instructions, school district letters to parents, and signs in airports are common uses of bilingual or multilingual communication.

However, there are more. A local nursing home was temporarily stumped when its elderly residents kept complaining about not being able to communicate their needs to the mainly Spanish-speaking aides. The solution? Bilingual printed sheets with the twenty or so most common requests. When they need something, they just point to the request in the English column and the aide reads it on the corresponding line in the Spanish column.

Another example of bilingualism in action is the Theatre Para Los Niños (Children's Theater) which performs Spanish/English musicals for San Fernando Valley elementary school children. A recent performance focused on changing role stereotypes, showing that it is okay for boys to cook and for girls to play basketball. Without the use of both languages, many students would not have understood the message.

“What Did You Say?”

CONTINUED 3 OF 4

4. Take It Easy

When a language is not one’s mother tongue, processing information in it takes longer. Not only is the vocabulary often unfamiliar, but grammar and intonation patterns are sometimes new. It is helpful to slow down and pause between sentences so the listener has time to let each segment of your message sink in. Then summarize at the end, pulling all the pieces together.

5. Keep It Simple

“Take the ball and run with it,” “Go the extra mile,” “A tough row to hoe,” “A thumbnail sketch,” and “Beyond the call of duty.” These kinds of idiomatic expressions are common in everyday speech. Most of us probably use many throughout the course of the day. Yet, for a non-native speaker who tries to translate them literally, they make no sense at all. In addition, jargon—words that are specific to a particular business or industry—may also be confusing. In construction, for example, calling mortar “mud,” or talking about “roughing the plumbing,” would be difficult for anyone outside the profession to understand, let alone someone struggling with English. Finally, use simple words that are commonly heard, for example, “problem” rather than “glitch” or “snafu.”

6. Say It Again

When you’re having difficulty making yourself understood, it does help to repeat while using different words. If I had tried to find another way of describing the lottery ticket I wanted, I probably would have thought of “scratch-off,” an expression the perplexed clerk would have understood.

One caution here, however. When looking for another way to say something, beware of cognates, words in other languages which look and sound similar to English words. The most common mistakes occur between Spanish and English. While “largo” in Spanish looks like large, it means long. And if you’re embarrassed, don’t say you’re “embarazada” because that means pregnant.

7. Assume Confusion

Whatever you do, don’t ask people if they understand and then take their “yes” to mean they do. In many cultures, saying “no” is the height of rudeness. Besides, even here in this culture, we often say we understand even when we’re a little fuzzy because saying we don’t makes us feel dumb.

Instead of asking, watch the person’s face for non-verbal signs of confusion. Also watch behavior as the individual begins to act on what you’ve said. In my lottery ticket situation, the clerk’s face told me she didn’t

“What Did You Say?”

CONTINUED 4 OF 4

understand, and when she walked over to the computer to begin punching a quick pick, it was absolutely clear I had not gotten my message across.

8. Get Help

When you’ve done steps one through seven and you still are having trouble, get help. A bilingual friend or colleague can often get you out of a bind. In many organizations, staff who speak other languages are listed and called on a rotating basis to translate interchanges between staff and customers or clients. That way the extra duty is spread more equitably and does not fall on the same person each time. In other organizations, those with bilingual abilities are given pay differential for the extra service they provide. Just make sure the person who is doing the interpreting is fluent enough in both languages to be able to make things clear to all parties.

9. Walk in Their Shoes

To help reduce your frustration and anger when you get blocked by a language barrier, try to put yourself in the other person’s place. Have you ever been somewhere where no one spoke English? How did it feel? What would have helped you? Remembering these times gives you some empathy for the bewilderment that the individual might be feeling.

10. Don’t Laugh

The Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations reports that immigrants’ most common request is that people not laugh at them when they try to speak English. When we’re not confident of our ability in an area, we’re particularly vulnerable and sensitive to slight. While you may not be laughing at the person’s poor English, your joking manner or teasing banter may seem like ridicule.

A local bank executive recounted just such an example. While explaining a particularly complicated form to an immigrant with limited English skills, he turned and made some joking remarks to a colleague. A few minutes later, the customer called from home saying he had not appreciated being laughed at and treated as though he were stupid.

No matter what languages we do or don’t speak, all of us need to be treated with dignity and respect. Communication that has these elements at the base will go a long way beyond language and cultural differences.

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Giving Praise and Encouragement



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We probably all have memories of someone unexpectedly praising or encouraging our work and how that changed our feelings about what we were doing and gave us pride and motivation.

Because you are an authority figure for your team, your words carry a lot of weight. If you praise their actions (whether it be the courtesy with which they served lunch to the elderly or the care with which they stenciled storm drains), they will shine.

It is sometimes hard to feel genuine in giving praise. Emphasizing the positive is a skill we aren't taught much as we are growing up. But if you start to practice watching for the good, you will probably start seeing more of it, and you will be more comfortable giving praise. But be aware that people respond to praise in different ways. If you work with a diverse group, you may want to check to see if your positive comments and encouragement are being received as you intended them, or if you need to adjust your approach to make someone feel more comfortable.

Words for Showing Praise:

- “I really liked how you...”
- “I’ve always found that [fill in] hard to do, but I really learned something by watching you do it today.”
- “You should be proud of how you...”
- “I hope you are pleased with how [fill in] went today. I thought you did a great job.”
- “I know you were completely absorbed while you were working with those children [or homeless men, or site visitors] today, but I was watching, and I wish you could’ve seen the expressions on their faces.”

Words for Giving Encouragement:

- “You looked so confident while you were doing [something that had been giving the team member trouble earlier] today. I was impressed.”

Giving Praise and Encouragement

CONTINUED 2 OF 2

- “It looks like you might be frustrated with [fill in]. Let’s figure out how you can do it differently.”(This is particularly helpful if you can point out some of the strengths this member could use in the situation.)
- “This has been a hard day, but we’re still here. Let’s go get some ice cream in 20 minutes.”
- “I know we’re having to cut back our expectations on this project, but it means we’re working thoughtfully, and it means we’re learning something about how to do this next time.”
- “Wow, look at how this work we did today is so much better than what we were doing last week. We’re really learning.”

[From: *On Being a Team Leader*, by Ann Wysocki for the National Civilian Community Corps, 1994.]

Criteria for Effective Feedback



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Feedback is a communication to a person (or a group) that provides information about how he/she/they affect others and helps them to understand the impact of their behavior. Feedback helps people keep their behavior “on target” and thus better achieve their goals.

Feedback is more effective when the following criteria are used:

1. **It is specific rather than general.** To be told that one is talkative will probably not be as useful as to be told that “just now, when we were deciding the issue, you talked so much I stopped listening.”
2. **It is descriptive rather than judgmental.** Describing one’s own reaction to another’s behavior leaves the other person free to use it or not to use it as he or she sees fit. Avoiding judgmental language reduces the likelihood of a defensive response.
3. **It takes into account the needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback.** Feedback can be destructive when it serves only our own needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end.
4. **It is directed toward behavior which the receiver can do something about.** Feedback is only increased when a person is reminded of shortcomings over which he has no control.
5. **It is solicited rather than imposed.** Feedback is most useful when the receiver has formulated the kind of question that those observing can answer.
6. **It is well-timed.** In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior (depending, of course, on the person’s readiness to hear it, the support available from others, etc.).
7. **It is checked to ensure clear communication.** For example “the receiver” may try to rephrase the feedback to see if it corresponds to what the “sender” had in mind.
8. **It is checked with others to ensure accuracy.** Both the giver and the receiver of the feedback should check with others in the group as to its meaning. Is this one person’s impression or an impression shared by others?

Criteria for Effective Feedback

CONTINUED 2 OF 2

Helping Others Give You Feedback

Feedback is an important source of data that tells you how other people see your actions and that gives you the choice of trying to change your behavior. People act on their perceptions of your actions, and you may be “coming across” in unintended ways. So even if you “disagree” with feedback, it is important for you to hear it clearly and understand it.

Giving someone feedback is sometimes difficult; if you keep the following in mind, you will make it easier for someone else to give you feedback that you can use.

1. Make it your goal to understand the feedback. Asking clarifying questions and paraphrasing are two ways to do this.
2. Wait until the feedback has been given, then paraphrase the major points.
3. Help the giver use the criteria for giving useful feedback (for example, if the feedback is too general: “Could you give me a specific example of what you mean?”).
4. Avoid making it more difficult for the giver of feedback than it already is (by reacting defensively or angrily, arguing, etc.).
5. Avoid explanations of “why I did that,” unless asked.
6. Remember, feedback is one person’s perceptions of your actions, not universal truth. Be active in checking out feedback with others. If two or three people give you similar feedback, there may be a pattern you might want to consider.

The DESC Model for Performance Feedback



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The DESC model, developed by Bower and Bower in *Asserting Yourself* (1976), is a feedback method for constructively bringing an issue to a member's/volunteer's attention and initiating the problem-solving process. An important aspect of the DESC model is that it focuses on the behavior and not on the person. It allows the supervisor to depersonalize the discussion, separate the person from the problem, and engage the person as an equal partner in finding a solution. Essentially, it makes the person and the supervisor allies in finding a resolution.

To begin this process, write or carefully think through the following steps in planning how to approach the member/volunteer:

- D**escribe what the member/volunteer is doing that creates problems,
- E**xpress why that behavior is a problem for you as the supervisor or for the project,
- S**pecify what you want the member/volunteer to do instead,
- C**larify the consequences for either succeeding or failing to change the problem behavior.

By writing out or thinking out what you want to say to a member/volunteer—as if you were writing a script—you are likely to be clearer, more forceful, and less judgmental

in describing the problem in question. Writing out the script doesn't mean you sit down with the member/volunteer in question and read it to him or her. It means you have thought through the presentation of the issues carefully before meeting with the member/volunteer.

The following paragraphs describe each of the four steps of the model in greater detail.

Describe

A good description covers the facts about the issue, not the supervisor's assumptions about what these facts mean. Supervisors in general tend to assume what someone's intentions will be and jump into feedback discussions that sound blameful or judgmental. By describing in writing what the person is doing, the supervisor can review the language for things like "loaded" words that may trigger anger in one or both parties, and the discussion becomes a much more positive one. The description should also be specific so the member/volunteer can clearly understand what behavior is at issue.

Express

Expressing the impact or consequences of the member's/volunteer's behavior is critical

The DESC Model for Performance Feedback

CONTINUED 2 OF 5

because it relates directly to motivation: Members/volunteers will be more motivated to change when they understand other people's perceptions of their actions. The most important reason why the behavior of a member becomes a problem is that it interferes with getting their work done. Other reasons for involving a member/volunteer in such a discussion are that the behavior: a) keeps others from getting their work done; b) breaks the rules/policy/law; c) creates interpersonal problems among the work group; d) damages the status or credibility of members/volunteers within the organization; or e) creates a negative image of the project/organization.

Too often, supervisors assume that the causes of problems are obvious to the member/volunteer in question when, in reality, supervisors usually have broader information and perspective about the project's needs than the member/volunteer does. Another thing supervisors may assume is that they share the same values with members/volunteers about work and how it ought to be done. In expressing the problem, the supervisor opens up the opportunity for learning more about the member's/volunteer's perceptions and motivations. Besides the expressing negative effects of a behavior, it is helpful to point out the positive goals that are being interfered with or delayed by the problem behavior.

Specify

Specifying means deciding with the member/volunteer exactly what steps you and the member/volunteer will take to address the situation at hand; it also means that you (the supervisor) decide what you yourself want to stop doing, start doing, or continue doing relative to the behavior. Sometimes it's simply easier for a supervisor to identify changes in his or her own behavior to preempt a problem than to hope for the member/volunteer to change. When specifying the desired outcome of the feedback, the supervisor should allow and actively encourage the member/volunteer to suggest the means for achieving the end result. (The more motivated the member/volunteer is, the less the supervisor should have to define the means to the end.) During the specifying step, it's helpful to explain what the desired goal is but also to state the bottom line so the member/volunteer is clear on just how far the supervisor is willing to compromise.

Clarify

Identifying consequences can motivate people to change, and it's good to start with the positive ones. When feedback on an issue is being given for the first time, it may not be necessary to state consequences. In general, though, by explaining the advantages to be

The DESC Model for Performance Feedback

CONTINUED 3 OF 5

gained by a change in behavior, the supervisor essentially answers the member's/volunteer's unspoken question: What's in it for me? If, over time, the behavior does not change, or if the problem is a very serious one, then it's appropriate to state the negative consequences that will occur as a result. It's important that the supervisor not state a consequence that he or she would not be willing to carry out. Idle threats do not motivate the member/volunteer, and they damage the supervisor's credibility. When discussing negative consequences, the supervisor should strive for a calm and matter-of-fact manner.

Delivering the Feedback

By writing out or thinking out these four steps, the supervisor clarifies the issues and has a chance to carefully consider how she or he wants to phrase certain points. How the supervisor delivers the message also influences the member's/volunteer's reactions and willingness to be involved productively as a partner in finding a solution.

Keep in mind that it's important to describe, express, and specify (steps 1–3) before soliciting a response from the member/volunteer. There are three reasons for this: First, you will be better able to guide the discussion and keep it on track. Second, you will be able to explain the issue clearly so the member/volunteer has enough

information to become involved. Finally, you will prepare yourself to become a better listener. Until you've fully expressed yourself, it may be hard to really listen to what the member/volunteer has to contribute. Since the goal of feedback is establishing a two-way street, be sure all your own roadblocks to listening are down by stating your important points early and fully.

Guidelines for Using the DESC Model

1. Give feedback as soon after the event as possible, before the behavior becomes a habit and while the member/volunteer still remembers what happened.
2. Focus on the specific behavior the individual can do something about, not on the person. Avoid generalizations—describe actions. For example,

Don't Generalize	Describe Specific Behavior
LAZY	Arrived 10 minutes late 2 days in a row
CARELESS	Left your shovel at the work site today
STUPID	Drained coffee pot and left burner on

The DESC Model for Performance Feedback

CONTINUED 4 OF 5

3. Explain why the behavior, not the person is a problem. Explain the kind of behavior you want. Using the above examples, you might say

“If you keep coming in late other people will start doing it, too. Or they may resent you for not following the same rules as everybody else. I don’t want that to happen. I want you to show up on time.”

“The shovels belong to the City, and any tool of theirs we lose comes out of our budget. We can’t afford to lose any. I want you to return any tool you take by the end of the day.”

“The janitor doesn’t get here until an hour after we leave and the coffee pot either breaks or burns to a crisp. I want you to check it before you leave at night.”

Behavior and action are what you want. Avoid the use of the verb “to be” and judgments about the person. In other words, avoid “I want you to be punctual.” The more specific you are, the more likely the member/volunteer will understand what you want (and why) and act on it. For example, “I want you to arrive by eight in the morning.”

4. Ask whether the member/volunteer can give you what you want. If the member/volunteer has a problem with it, offer to help resolve the problem. Continuing again with the above examples, you might say

“If getting here on time is a problem, the team could help you find a couple of alarm clocks at garage sales so you have to get up and turn off more than one clock each morning.”

“Will that work? Should the leader give everybody a reminder about tools at day’s end?”

“Can you make it a habit to check the coffee pot? Should we put a sign by it so we remember?”

Once you open up to hear the other side of the story, be prepared to use active listening and to help solve the problem. The member/volunteer a) may be late because she or he is temporarily babysitting or has a broken alarm clock; b) may have lent that tool to someone and expected the person to return it; or c) may be absent-minded about details and really need that sign by the coffee pot. Basically, there are three types of reasons for not meeting an expectation:

Don’t know—Either the member/volunteer wasn’t aware of the expectation or didn’t know how to meet it. If so, you have to do more orientation or training. That could be the case with the coffee pot.

Don’t want to—The member/volunteer isn’t motivated to meet the expectation. Your question is, “What would it take for you to want to?” Arriving 10 minutes late could be related to motivation.

The DESC Model for Performance Feedback

CONTINUED 5 OF 5

There are problems—The member/volunteer has personal or work-related problems. If the shovel really was loaned to someone, you need a rule about who is responsible for loaned tools.

5. Finally, choose an appropriate time and place for giving feedback. It may make sense to praise a member in front of others, but constructive criticism is almost

always best given alone. No matter how skillfully you offer critical feedback, you may get anger and defensiveness as the response. Make sure that you have the time for active listening and problem solving or you may make the problem worse.

[Adapted from: *Assertive Supervision: Building Involved Teamwork*, by Susan Drury, Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1984.]

Self-Test on Giving Feedback



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Respond to the items below by indicating yes or no. Be as frank as you can. The quiz will give you a “reading” on your skill in and attitudes about one key area of communication—giving feedback to your members.

	YES	NO
1. Do you avoid giving members/volunteers feedback about their performance?	_____	_____
2. Do you avoid giving members/volunteers negative feedback because they often do not like to hear it?	_____	_____
3. Do you try to give feedback about performance by comparing the member/volunteer with other members/volunteers?	_____	_____
4. Do you avoid giving members/volunteers praise, because they are often embarrassed by it?	_____	_____
5. Do you criticize the person rather than the action or the behavior?	_____	_____
6. Do you give criticism on a number of items at one time?	_____	_____
7. In giving feedback, do you ignore the member’s/volunteer’s sensitivity or receptivity to it?	_____	_____
8. Do you give feedback long after the incident (or behavior) has occurred rather than immediately?	_____	_____
9. Do you feel it is more important to communicate your view than to listen to your member’s/volunteer’s point of view?	_____	_____
10. Is your purpose in giving feedback to prove that you are right rather than to get at the causes of behavior?	_____	_____
11. Do you tend to slip in a criticism between two layers of praise?	_____	_____
12. Do you give feedback to members/volunteers when you are angry or upset?	_____	_____
13. Does your feedback often involve sarcasm or “put-downs?”	_____	_____
14. After you give feedback, do you avoid checking for understanding, thinking that people will get the message if they really want to?	_____	_____
15. Do you tend to interrupt your members/volunteers while they are responding to your feedback?	_____	_____
16. Do you give feedback to others without worrying too much about your future relationship with them?	_____	_____
17. Do you feel that it is more important to point out mistakes than it is to indicate how to correct them?	_____	_____
18. Do you feel it is more important to give feedback than to receive it?	_____	_____

Self-Test on Giving Feedback

CONTINUED 2 OF 2

	YES	NO
19. Do you prefer to give feedback to members/volunteers in writing rather than orally?	_____	_____
20. Do you give criticism to members/volunteers both in public and in private?	_____	_____

Scoring

The above test items are designed to stimulate your thinking about this business of giving feedback to others. The preferred response to all quiz items is NO. Accordingly, give yourself five points for every YES answer. You can use the following table as your guide to your skill as a giver of feedback.

20 points or less:	Your understanding of and skill in giving feedback is very good.
20–30 points:	You have a satisfactory ability to give feedback.
30–40 points:	You have a fair ability to give feedback.
More than 40 points:	You are probably not giving feedback effectively. Develop some new skills before you go back in.

[From: *The Winning Trainer*, by Julius E. Eittington, Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Company, 1984.]

Using “I” Statements



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You can be sure that, no matter how you deliver it, corrective feedback will arouse defensiveness. But if you use “I” statements instead of “You” statements, you’ll help the other person listen to the feedback instead of rejecting it defensively.

“I” Statements Tend To

- Place responsibility with you, the speaker
- Clarify your position, feelings or opinions

“You” Statements Tend To

- Put people down
- Place blame
- Preach about how the other should think or feel
- Elicit a negative or defensive response

Notice how easy it is to point your finger at someone when you use “you.”

Examples of “I” Statements	Examples of “You” Statements
I couldn’t understand what you said.	You aren’t making any sense.
I missed having your input at the team meeting.	You didn’t care enough to come to the meeting.
I’m worried about meeting the deadline.	You won’t be able to make the deadline.

How to Cope with Difficult People



PAGE 1 OF 3

Step 1 Assess the situation

- Has the person acted differently in at least three similar situations?
- Are you reacting out of proportion to the situation?
- Was there a particular incident that triggered the troublesome behavior?
- Will direct, open discussion relieve the situation?

If your answer to at least one of these questions is yes, you are probably dealing with a problem you can solve, not a difficult person that you cannot change.

Step 2 Stop wishing they were different

- Stop blaming them—it won't change anything.
- Give up wishful thinking; unrealistic hopes lead to even more resentment.

Step 3 Get some distance between you and the difficult behavior

- Label with prototypes (see the next page for prototypes such as Complainer and Negativist), but do not stereotype.

Stereotyping assumes all Complainers are the same, and they are not.

- Seek to understand the person from the inside out.

Step 4 Formulate a plan for interrupting the interaction

- Negative interactions become even more negative.
- You can't change the other person, but you can change your response.

Step 5 Implement the strategy

- Timing—Select a time when you are not under great stress and have the energy to experiment.
- Preparation—Use mental rehearsal and role-play.

Step 6 Monitor and modify

- Expect that you will have to plan, experiment, and persist.
- Know when to give up; if necessary, create physical or organizational distance.

How to Cope with Difficult People

CONTINUED 2 OF 3

Coping with Difficult People— A Quick Reference Guide

TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS	COPING TECHNIQUES
Hostile, Aggressive	<p>Behavior: intimidating, abrupt, abusive, loud, indignant, sniping, explosive</p> <p>Underlying issues: strong need to be “right;” fear of weakness in themselves and others; need to be in control; suspicious of and quick to blame others</p>	<p>If the attack is overt: Let them run down. Stand up to them. Don’t argue. Don’t return fire.</p> <p>If the attack is covert: Bring it to the surface. Don’t snipe in return.</p>
Complainer	<p>Behavior: whining, blaming, accusing; may complain to you about you, or may complain to you about others</p> <p>Underlying issues: feel powerless; need attention; want to view themselves as perfect and blameless</p>	<p>If the complainer blames you: Listen attentively. Acknowledge their complaint. Don’t agree. Move into problem solving.</p> <p>If the complainer complains to you about someone else: Don’t listen. Tell them to stop! Offer to pass on their complaint or to set up a meeting.</p>
Silent, Unresponsive	<p>Behavior: in response to your direct questions or statements, only silence, a nod, or a grunt; only a “Yes” or “No” when more information is called for</p> <p>Underlying issues: hard to generalize, but could be silent sniping, fear of your reaction to what they would say if they talked, or fear of their own feelings</p>	<p>Ask open-ended questions. Use a friendly, silent stare. Don’t fill up the silence. Make a direct observation: “I’m waiting for your answer, and you’re not saying anything.” Help them overcome their fear: “Can you say anything about this?” or “How about starting in the middle?”</p>

How to Cope with Difficult People

CONTINUED 3 OF 3

TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS	COPING TECHNIQUES
Super Agreeable	<p>Behavior: outgoing, sociable, friendly, quick to agree or give support; doesn't follow through with action</p> <p>Underlying issues: strong need to be accepted or liked; fear of conflict or of making you unhappy</p>	<p>Help them feel accepted and appreciated.</p> <p>Make honesty nonthreatening. Don't let them make unrealistic promises.</p> <p>In conflict situations, propose win/win solutions.</p>
Wet Blanket, Negativist	<p>Behavior: regularly shoots down others' ideas or solutions, no matter what they are</p> <p>Underlying issues: often genuinely believes it is futile to try to change things; feels powerless; doesn't trust people in power</p>	<p>Avoid getting drawn in. Don't take their comments seriously. Don't argue.</p> <p>Express your realistic optimism. Use negative comments constructively: "How might we overcome that obstacle?"</p>
Indecisive Staller	<p>Behavior: appears helpful and agreeable; postpones decisions, particularly ones that others may not like; beats around the bush</p> <p>Underlying issues: doesn't want to hurt anyone and therefore postpones difficult choices; genuinely concerned with quality over expediency; when confronted with practical problems, stalls until the issue "goes away" or it is too late to do anything</p>	<p>Make it easy for them to be direct with you.</p> <p>Express their doubts for them: "You might be concerned that I won't like your answer...?"</p> <p>Help them problem solve. Work with them to prioritize solutions.</p> <p>Give lots of support when they make a decision.</p> <p>Follow up to make sure they implement the decision.</p>

[Adapted from: *Coping With Difficult People*, by Robert M. Bramson, Dell Publishing, 1981.]

8-Step Conflict Resolution Process



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Step 1: Deal Effectively with Anger

You can't negotiate a good agreement if you and/or the other person are too angry to think straight, or if you don't acknowledge your feelings.

Step 4: Use Ground Rules (stated or unstated)

One person talks at a time.
Work to improve the situation.
Stay calm.

Step 2: Do Your Homework (think before you act)

How does this conflict affect each of us?
What interests or values are at stake here for each of us?
What prejudices or assumptions do we each have about the other?
What approach or style would be best here (avoid, compete, collaborate, etc.)?
If I want to collaborate, what would be the right time and place to initiate that?

Step 5: Discuss and Define the Problem

One at a time, each person shares issues and feelings.
Use effective listening and speaking techniques.
Identify interests and needs.
If necessary, discuss assumptions, suspicions, and values.
Summarize new understandings.

Step 3: Set a Positive Tone

Invite the other person to negotiate. ("Could we talk?")
State positive intentions. ("I'd like to make things better between us.")
Acknowledge and validate the other person. ("I can see this is difficult for you, too.")
Thank you for working with me on this.")

Step 6: Brainstorm Possible Solutions

Each person contributes ideas to satisfy interests and needs.
Don't criticize or evaluate ideas yet.
Be creative.
Use "I can..." or "We could..." rather than "You should..." or "You'd better..."

8-Step Conflict Resolution Process

CONTINUED 2 OF 2

Step 7: Evaluate and Choose Solutions

Solutions should be:

- a) mutually agreeable,
- b) realistic,
- c) specific, and
- d) balanced.

Solutions should also address the main interests of both parties.

Step 8: Follow Up

Check back with each other at an agreed-upon time and date.

If the agreement isn't working, use the same process to revise it.

[From: Face to Face: Resolving Conflict Without Giving In or Giving Up, A Conflict Resolution Curriculum for AmeriCorps, Draft, by Jan Bellard and Hilda Baldoquin, The National Association for Community Mediation, 1994.]

The Nature of Positive Thinking



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Acknowledge that the other person's position is legitimate for that person.

Differentiate the other person's position from yours.

- Check to see that you have heard the other person correctly and develop an environment that allows him or her to check what he or she hears you saying as well.
- Accept angry and hostile feelings in yourself and in the other person as real.
- Be responsible for your own feelings.
- Accept that the other person may feel differently than you do.
- Don't problem solve until your differences are clear to both of you. (You know the differences are clear when you feel heard and understood and can clearly state what the differences are.)
- Ask the other person for her or his preferred solutions.
- Be prepared to state and differentiate your preferred solutions.

Thomas-Kilmann Model of Conflict Management Styles



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In any conflict situation, you may respond in one of several ways: by competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, or compromising. Which of these conflict management styles you choose should depend on the nature of the situation, rather than your particular personality traits. Read the descriptions below to learn more about the five styles and their applications.

Competing is assertive and uncooperative—an individual pursues their own concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode, in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one's own position—one's ability to argue, one's rank, economic sanctions. Competing might mean “standing up for your rights,” defending a position which you believe is correct, or simply trying to win.

Uses:

1. When quick, decisive action is vital—e.g., emergencies.
2. On important issues where unpopular courses of action need implementing—e.g., cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline.
3. On issues vital to the organization's welfare when you know you're right.

4. To protect yourself against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior.

Accommodating is unassertive and cooperative—the opposite of competing. When accommodating, an individual neglects their own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this style. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

Uses:

1. When you realize that you are wrong—to allow a better position to be heard, to learn from others, and to show that you are reasonable.
2. When the issue is much more important to the other person than to yourself—to satisfy the needs of others, and as a goodwill gesture to help maintain a cooperative relationship.
3. To build up social credits for later issues which are important to you.
4. When continued competition would only damage your cause—when you are outmatched and losing.

Thomas-Kilmann Model of Conflict Management Styles

CONTINUED 2 OF 3

5. When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important.
6. To aid in the managerial development of subordinates by allowing them to experiment and learn from their own mistakes.

Avoiding is unassertive and uncooperative—the individual does not immediately pursue their own concerns or those of the other person. They do not address the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Uses:

1. When an issue is trivial, of only passing importance, or when other more important issues are pressing.
2. When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns—e.g., when you have low power or you are frustrated by something which would be very difficult to change (national policies, someone's personality, etc.)
3. When the potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution.
4. To let people cool down to reduce tensions to a productive level and to regain perspective and composure.

5. When gathering more information outweighs the advantages of an immediate decision.
6. When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.
7. When the issue seems tangential or symptomatic of another more basic issue.

Collaborating is both assertive and cooperative—the opposite of avoiding. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both persons. It means digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find an alternative which meets both sets of concerns. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, concluding to resolve some condition which would otherwise have them competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

Uses:

1. To find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised.
2. When your objective is to learn—e.g., testing your own assumptions, understanding the views of others.

Thomas-Kilmann Model of Conflict Management Styles

CONTINUED 3 OF 3

3. To merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem.
4. To gain commitment by incorporating other's concerns into a consensual decision.
5. To work through hard feelings which have been interfering with an interpersonal relationship.

Compromising is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties. It falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating. Compromising gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but doesn't explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

Uses:

1. When goals are moderately important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes.
2. When two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals.
3. To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues.
4. To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.
5. As a backup when collaboration or competition don't succeed.

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