



Communication Skills for Tough Situations

Working for America

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT



Message from the President

*“Yet some things endure –
courage and compassion,
reverence and integrity,
respect for differences of
faith and race.”*

- George W. Bush



Message from the Director



“If the military service is our muscle and might, then the civil service is America’s heart. And it is a healthy heart that our country depends on.”

- Kay Coles James

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Basic Communication Skills

Part 1

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Listen actively

- Find a private setting – no interruptions
- Address courteously – Mr., Mrs., Sergeant
- Use nonverbal cues to show you are listening
- Use summary statements to check for accuracy
- Have a box of tissues handy

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Listen actively

- Don't criticize the person
 - “You shouldn't take it so hard”
- Don't minimize their pain
 - “You still have your children”
- Don't try to make it OK
 - “You may find a job you like even better”

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Provide emotional support

- Show compassion with verbal behavior
 - “Umhmm” “Yes” “Really” “I’m so sorry”
- Show compassion with nonverbal behavior
 - Tone of voice
 - Facial expression
 - Posture

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Provide emotional support

- Don't maintain a wooden, "businesslike" demeanor
- Don't discuss your own beliefs or experiences
- Don't tell the person you "know just how they feel"

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Give the person choices

- Let them help structure the setting
“Where would you like to sit?”
- Let them help structure the interview
“Would you like to work with health insurance today?”
- Explain what you are doing
“I need to ask you about...so I can...”

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Give the person choices

- Don't suggest they are less important than other people or duties
- “I can't see you Tuesday morning because I have an important meeting with my supervisor”



Case study: Betty

- Age 55, 15 years of Federal service
- Must retire early
- Came into Federal workforce after husband left her and her daughter
- Worked her way up from a clerical job to a graphic design job
- Main concern is putting her daughter through medical school

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Fit the person's current ability to cope

- Remember the person is most likely to be having difficulty with paying attention and remembering
- Other mental functions are likely to be working normally

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Fit the person's current ability to cope

- Select your material carefully
- Break it into small chunks
- Use summary statements
- Invite questions
- Offer information in multiple modes
 - Discuss, mark a pamphlet, send it home
- Be easy to reach for follow-up questions

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Fit the person's current ability to cope

- Don't talk very slowly
- Don't talk as you would talk to a child
- Don't use only very simple words if you would usually use more complex ones

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Refer to other resources

- Think ahead about possible resources
- Have cards or phone number on hand
- Present resources as a helpful tool

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Consult with other resources

- Get to know your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) staff before you need them
- Ask for confidential advice whenever you need it
- Turn to other HR specialists for advice before your meeting and later if needed
- Don't try to handle everything all by yourself

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Case study: Walter

- 46 year old SES attorney, 12 years Federal service
- Injured in a traffic accident, in constant pain
- Needs 6 months rehab out of state
- Worried about the agency's needs
- Worried about recuperating at home, where his wife runs a business and his son's rock band practices

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Working with the bereaved

Part 2

Talk about the deceased in a natural, personal way

- Say “Your husband,” or “Mr. Jones”
- Talk about the loved one’s life
“Mr. Jones was the first head of that office.”
- Use a soft, compassionate tone of voice
- Express your own sorrow
“I didn’t know him well, but I loved the way he could get everybody laughing on the elevator”

Talk about the deceased in a personal, natural way

- Don't speak of
 - “the remains,”
 - “the deceased,”
 - “the employee”
- Don't try to hide your own grief if that's what you are feeling

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Be prepared for a wide range of emotions

- Listen with empathy if the bereaved person expresses strong feelings
- Keep your demeanor appropriate to the person's emotions
- Have tissues available and offer them if the person begins to cry
- Wait quietly until they are ready to talk

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Be prepared for a wide range of emotions

- Don't rush a person who is crying, speaking slowly, or remaining silent
- Don't try to talk people out of their feelings in an effort to "cheer them up"
- Don't maintain a wooden, "businesslike" demeanor

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Be prepared for an apparent lack of emotion

- People respond differently to grief
- Still in shock
- Can't let go and grieve until practical issues are resolved
- Afraid of breaking down if emotions come to the surface

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Be prepared for an apparent lack of emotion

- Don't assume that a person who seems calm doesn't need your concern and support
- Don't underestimate the difficulty of this situation – many HR specialists find it easier to work with someone who is actively grieving

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Case study: Isabel

- 38 year old surgical nurse, widow of a Federal employee who died in a plane crash
- Terrorism is suspected
- She is grieving deeply
- She is worried about caring for her three children, elderly mother-in-law, and family pets

Realize that this is difficult for anyone

- Talk it over with the EAP, trusted colleagues
- Allow yourself time to regroup
- Enjoy family, friends, hobbies, pets, nature – whatever sustains you

Realize that this is difficult for anyone

- Don't hide from your own emotions
- Don't assign all the death cases to one person
- Don't expect a new employee to handle these cases without guidance and support
- Don't try to handle everything yourself without support

Contact Information

For more information,
visit us on the web at

www.OPM.gov

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