

# EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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### Tips on Being Understood

Are you having trouble being understood? Sometimes it seems that the harder you try to explain what's on your mind, the less others understand. For example, some people get so focused on telling their own stories that they ignore what others have to say. Or one person rambles on while the other tunes it all out. Or worse, both people talk to each other at the same time without hearing each other. Because none of us are born with a natural ability to get the point across, it helps to *learn* some effective interpersonal communication skills.

The following paradox is the most important thing to remember when interacting with others: *If you want to be heard, you must first stop talking and listen.* By doing that you begin to set aside your own thoughts and focus your attention on what others have to say. It is a way of setting yourself up to be understood by understanding others first. Let's look at some specific ways to do this.

1. Be physically attentive to others. Make eye contact. Nod your head in understanding. Make listening sounds: "uh huh...hmm." Relax. Keep an open posture (e.g. don't fold your arms across your chest or cross your legs). Lean forward a little. By posturing in this manner, you appear interested in what others are saying. This increases rapport with others, puts others at ease, and helps them get to the point instead of constantly rambling to get your attention.
2. Try to understand others from their viewpoint. Ask yourself the following: "If I looked, sounded, and spoke like that; what would I be thinking, how would I feel, and

what would I be able to do?" Answering those three questions focuses your attention on others' worldview and helps temporarily suspend your own frame of reference. This sets you up to accurately guess what others are feeling, thinking, and doing.

3. Paraphrase the gist of their story; for example, "It sounds like you've been having some trouble at school; you're not getting along with your folks; or the people at work are really getting to you." Doing this lets others know that you are interested in and precisely hearing their story. In addition, it helps you actually understand their circumstances.
4. Acknowledge their emotions with words that accurately label feelings; for example, "You're *worried* about school; you're *exasperated* with your parents; or you're *fed up* with your fellow employees." This lets others know that you understand what they feel as well as what they are thinking and doing.
5. Normalize their feelings; for example, "It makes sense to be worried about school when your grades are dropping." Or you can say, "No wonder you feel exasperated when they put you in a bind like that." This helps others feel valued as well as understood.

Using a combination of these techniques lets others know that you are hearing and understanding their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Others will appreciate being

understood, and this improved rapport will probably open them to hear your story. If that doesn't happen, it probably won't matter. The satisfaction that comes with thoroughly understanding others usually diminishes the importance being understood.

The application of effective communication techniques is only part of good interpersonal interaction. A mental set that predisposes us to understanding others and being understood by others is also required. Let's look at a set of beliefs characteristic of such an orientation.

1. The ability to communicate effectively requires us to **see the world as others see it.**
2. Understanding and being understood rest on **accepting others as they are.**
3. Healthy contact with others requires an **honest presentation of self.**
4. Good communication is facilitated by a **focus on the specific concerns of others.**

These four attitudes are the foundation of good interpersonal relations, while the aforementioned five techniques provide the superstructure. The integration of these beliefs and techniques provide a potent framework to guide your approach to others, to improve your understanding of them, and to increase the probability of being understood yourself. If you have questions or need additional guidance about communicating effectively with others, call the EAP at 1-800-562-9753, extension 3145.

## Some Quotes to Help You Along

If you contribute to other people's happiness, you will find the true good, the true meaning of life.

*The Dalai Lama*

He who does good comes to the temple gate.  
He who loves reaches the shrine.

*Rabindranath Tagore*

Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.

*Helen Keller*

A matter that becomes clear ceases to concern us.

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

The real alchemist is one who learns the secret of turning everyday situations into gold, who learns how to make every situation serve him.

*John Kehoe*

Love begins at home and can spread like a burning fire from house to house.

*Mother Teresa*

I hear, I forget  
I see, I remember  
I do, I understand

*Chinese Proverb*

Something we were withholding made us weak until we found it was ourselves.

*Robert Frost*

Don't walk ahead of me, I may not follow.  
Don't walk behind me, I may not lead.  
Just walk beside me, And be my friend.

*Anon*

## 2003 EAP Conference: Happiness Is A Choice Monday, March 10, 2003

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