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Business Communication

How to Be Direct Without Being Rude

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Summary. Telling it like it is” can be a big asset, especially for people leading

teams. It's best not to camouflage critical feedback, provide people with vague guidance, or set unclear expectations. Clearly communicating what you want and need from your people, and... [more](#)

You're pressed for time and have a zillion emails sitting in your inbox. You also need to send your boss the weekly sales report ASAP. You quickly shoot a message to your team:

Hi,

Please send me your individual sales numbers for this week. I need them pronto, no later than 10 am.

Thanks

Your work BFF later says she saw the message, and thought it was a tad rude.

You don't agree with her assessment, but the feedback is not entirely new. Last week, during a brainstorm meeting, someone pitched an idea you thought would never work. You said: "Your idea isn't going to work because of X, Y, and Z. You haven't considered those roadblocks. I highly recommend we go in another direction." Afterward, your manager said that you came across a little too strong.

Even your intern once said that your communication style is frustrating. That confused you because you value clarity and try to be direct.

Do any of these scenarios resonate with you?

Many people are great at “telling it like it is” and may even find pride in doing so. If you’re one of them, this communication style has likely worked well throughout your education and career. You’ve probably found it’s an efficient way to get things done sans all the fluff and small talk. When you have a problem to solve, why beat around the bush?

You’re not wrong. “Telling it like it is” can be a big asset, especially for people leading teams. It’s best not to camouflage critical feedback, provide people with vague guidance, or set unclear expectations. Clearly communicating what you want and need from your people, and why, makes everything more efficient. The issue arises when leaders toe the line between being direct and being abrasive. This can be incredibly difficult for new managers, who are trying to show authority while also forming a trusting relationship with their team.

Here’s the thing: If you come across too harshly, you can end up doing more harm than good, and irrevocably damage your relationships and the opportunity for positive collaboration. When you move from honesty to inconsideration, people end up feeling frustrated and hurt, leading to a disengaged and demotivated team who doesn’t respect, like, or trust you.

So, how do you find a healthy balance? How do you be honest, direct, compassionate, kind, and clear — all at the same time?

Here are some simple strategies you can use to make your point without being disrespectful.

When giving feedback, talk facts — not emotions.

Facts are objective, while emotions are subjective. When you refer to facts, you remove your personal emotions from the conversation, and instead, give people hard evidence around what they can improve upon. In doing so, you're actually being more considerate by seeking to help the other person grow as opposed to expressing a negative, emotion-driven opinion.

Say, for example, a team member asks you for feedback on their presentation. You might think that their presentation was terrible and lacked the data needed to back up their point. As a direct person, you might want to say, "You had too much text on most slides, and too little data. In the end, it was tiring to read and boring to listen to."

Instead, you can be just as direct, but more kind, by providing them with points of improvement, and entering the conversation with the positive intention of helping them learn. It can also help to start with one thing that did work, objectively: "The first half of your presentation had a good balance of data and visuals to back up your point. Between slides five and 10, the information became harder to digest because there was a lot of text to read at once, and less data to support your points. Around then, I noticed that some people in the audience were finding it too hard to follow or were confused. Here is what I'd recommend for next time..."

Notice here, that while you're still direct, you've backed up your feedback with evidence which will also make it easier for your colleague to accept the feedback, and more importantly, grow.

When expressing an opinion, use “I” statements — not “you” statements.

Nobody likes to be accused or told they’re wrong. When you speak in accusatory language or start every sentence with “you did this” or “you did that,” the conversation either shuts down or escalates because the receiver gets defensive. You want to avoid both situations. Instead of pointing fingers, use “I” statements when discussing your subjective opinions, or if you want to remain objective, refer to the work you’re discussing (as opposed to the person doing the work).

For example, let’s say you’re in a brainstorm meeting and disagree with someone else’s idea. Don’t say: “Your idea won’t work. You’re not considering X, Y, and Z, which would be big roadblocks and potentially set us up for failure.” Instead, show that you hear what the other person is saying by first acknowledging their efforts, and then proceed to express your opinion or perspective using “I” statements: “I can see that you put a lot of thought into this idea — thank you for your hard work on it. I want to bring up that, based on my experience, I feel we need to consider the potential roadblocks of X, Y, Z.” To be extra thoughtful, you can end with something like, “I would love to help you think through how we might address those challenges.”

Here, instead of criticizing your colleague, you’ve criticized her idea while also acknowledging the work she put in, pointing out potential problems, and offering to help solve them.

When turning someone down, turn a “no” into a soft “yes.”

In the rush of your busy day, you might find yourself prioritizing and reprioritizing tasks. Even when it feels impossible to add another item to your to-do list, your peer wants to share a new idea, your manager asks you to attend an urgent meeting, and your direct report wants feedback on their work. As a direct person, your instinct may be to clearly say “no” to the least important of these requests. But, if you’re too blunt, you will likely be perceived as someone who refuses to collaborate or provide others with much-needed guidance.

A better approach is to turn your hard “no” into a soft “yes.” This doesn’t mean you suddenly become a “yes” person and prioritize work over your own wellbeing. It means that you find the compassion to thoughtfully offer the requester an alternative that works better for you and your schedule.

Imagine, for instance, that you’re already behind on several projects when a colleague reaches and asks you to help them write an agenda for the meeting he is leading next week. Your instinct might be to say: “I have no time today, sorry. Too many other priorities at the moment.”

A soft “yes” looks more like this: “My schedule is super packed over the next few weeks, but I could help asynchronously as I find the time. Does that work for you? Alternatively, [name of colleague or direct report] usually has great ideas. Feel free to reach out to them and we’ll support you the best we can.”

While the fact remains that you don’t have time, you haven’t said a “no” flat out. You’ve let them know you are pressed for time and offered an alternate solution, which they will likely appreciate. In the case that you need to say “no” without offering an alternative,

thoughtfully explain your reasoning and express goodwill by saying something kind, like: “I really wish I had more time to help. I know you’ll do a great job, though. You always do!”

When making a request, be considerate — not commanding.

Many people plan out their day ahead of time, and know exactly how they’re going to tick each item off of their to-do list. So, when you come in with a request, someone is going to have to make time for it. It’s okay to tell them exactly what you want, but be considerate.

Let’s say, for example, that you’re working on a presentation for a client, and you suddenly realize you haven’t pulled together the impact numbers you had intended to add at the end. You still have to fine tune the presentation and if you spend time number crunching, you’ll be terribly delayed. Instead of saying, “Hey Jo. I’m going to need you to help me with the impact analysis of the XY project. I need numbers from January–June 2023. I need this, like yesterday, as I’m already behind on putting it all together in the presentation. Thanks,” try, “Hi Jo. I need your help with pulling together the impact analysis for the XY project from January–June 2023. I know it’s a last-minute request, but I’m really hoping I can rely on you to send it to me by 3 pm. I appreciate you making the time for it.”

While in the former statement, you come across authoritative and bossy, in the latter statement, you’ve still told your employee that you need their immediate help, but you’ve been mindful that they will need to readjust their schedule to complete an additional task.

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While there is nothing wrong with being direct and honest, you can do so without hurting other people's feeling and maintaining a culture of kindness. These strategies can help you be honest and direct in a clear and respectful way by providing facts, not pointing fingers, and finding ways to support your colleagues.

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