

Positive communication at work



WORKING WELL

 **Mental Health Foundation**
mauri tū, mauri ora OF NEW ZEALAND

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Positive communication at work

An introduction to using this resource

Creating a mentally healthy workplace is about creating a safe, supportive and strong workplace culture.



A mentally healthy workplace is mana-enhancing – supports all people to feel good and function well and enables interactions and relationships based on trust and respect.

Positive communication – communication based on respect and builds trust and collaboration – is the cornerstone of creating a psychologically safe workplace.

Leaders and managers (and their teams) can use the resource to reflect on their current approaches to communication and build a culture of positive communication together.

The resource helps workplaces understand:

- Their workplace communication culture
- Potential barriers/issues to the current communication approach:
- Four practical ways to shift to positive communication. The four ways are:



The Māori concept of mana includes many things. In this resource it refers to dignity, respect, power and prestige. Mana-enhancing is about having a safe environment that enables mutual respect and people's inherent worth and value to be expressed and encouraged.

Fact sheets

Positive communication at work

The business case for positive communication

Avoiding a culture of silence – identifying barriers to positive communication

Reframing failures as opportunities to learn

Communicating so people feel safe to speak up

Mana-enhancing communication – a framework

Positive, open, two-way communication – tips for managers

Bibliography

Worksheets

Skills for positive communication

Refer to bibliography for further reading and key sources of information informing this resource.

Fact sheet

Positive communication at work

Workplaces are more complex than ever in the face of new challenges, technology and increased diversity. More than ever, we need others' knowledge, skills and input to achieve our goals. Being able to clearly, effectively and respectfully communicate is more important now than ever before.

Positive communication – communication that is based on respect and builds trust and collaboration – is the cornerstone of creating a **psychologically safe workplace**.

A psychologically safe workplace is mana-enhancing, supports all people to feel good and function well and enables positive interactions and relationships.

Principles of building psychological safety in communication

- Based on respect
- Value honesty and build trust
- Make it safe to show vulnerability
- Open communication
- Information sharing

We're communicating constantly – not just through words (conversations, emails, texts) but also through our actions or inactions, body language and via procedures and policy. Sometimes the message we're sending is intentional. Other times it is unintentional – we may not be aware of how other people perceive it. Our communications reveal information about how we think and feel, our values, what we will or won't tolerate, and what's important to us.

What does positive communication look like



Positive communication is respectful and builds trust, creating positive relationships that support collaboration.



Expectations, goals and processes are clearly explained and people's understanding checked.



Feedback is encouraged and people feel safe expressing their ideas, concerns and feelings.



Conflict may still occur but it happens safely, recognising that disagreement or things going wrong are an opportunity to learn and improve.

Workplaces that value and are committed to positive communication:

- Build trust to support positive relationships with co-workers and supervisors.
- Clearly explain expectations, goals and processes and check people's understanding.
- Promote respect through courtesy, kindness and politeness.
- Encourage people to express their opinions and ideas.
- Promote civility (kindness) and reject prejudice, discrimination and bullying.
- Value and reward teamwork and collaborative ideas and practices.
- Value diversity, differences and similarities.

In a psychologically safe workplace with positive communication, staff:

- Bring, express and share their whole self because they feel valued and treated with dignity and respect.
- Speak up with relevant ideas, questions and concerns.
- Build relationships that are reciprocal and cooperative.
- Interact with honesty, offering frank and honest feedback without fearing negative responses.
- Share concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution.
- Explore ideas and possibilities, including differing views and cultural perspectives.
- Seek suggestions and opinions and consider all views.
- Learn and improve, even from mistakes or disappointments.
- Participate and bring their views to the table.

Building a positive communication culture

To achieve a culture of positive communication, leaders, managers and staff need to understand how their workplace communication culture works currently (what does communication at my work look like now and what impact does it have?) and where they want it to be.

To understand and create change, you need to:



Have clear intentions



Ask more than tell



Value relationships



Make it safe to speak up

Fact sheet

The business case for positive communication

Psychologically safe workplaces with positive communication have staff with higher engagement and better mental health, plus lower turnover. When there is a culture of positive communication (rather than a **culture of silence**), problems can be raised, issues addressed and accidents minimised or avoided.



Psychological safety

- = higher commitment to the organisation
- = higher performance
- = higher wellbeing



High psychological safety

- = higher worker engagement
- = better mental health
- = lower staff turnover



Low psychological safety

- = disengaged employees (which can lead to more safety risks)
- = high turnover (which leads to less experienced workers and higher costs)



Teams with higher psychological safety

- = higher performance
- = more likely to achieve their goals



Open and honest communication, where people are less worried about what other people think

- = saved time
- = more clarity
- = generate new ideas and innovation



Trusting and respectful relationships

- = ideas expressed and conversations had without fear of embarrassment
- = less conflict

A diverse workforce (including cultural background, age, gender, as well as diversity of experience and expertise) can add to innovation and performance, but only if the workplace is psychologically safe.



Diversity plus psychological safety = high performance



Diversity and low psychological safety = low performance

Many serious workplace accidents and project breakdowns can be minimised or avoided if staff feel able to speak up or, in some cases, listened to by senior management. In one study¹, 85% of respondents reported at least one time when they felt unable to raise an issue with their boss even though they felt it was important.

Research shows teams with low psychological safety rely more on 'work arounds' for problems, compared with those with high psychological safety who identify the problem and improve the system, so it doesn't happen again.

¹ Mayfield, J., & Mayfield, M. (2002). Leader communication strategies critical paths to improving employee commitment. *American Business Review*, 20(2), 89–94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinane.2016.04.021>

Fact sheet

Avoiding a culture of silence – identifying barriers to positive communication

Silence does not always mean things are going well. Psychologically unsafe workplaces encourage a culture of silence. When a workplace hinders speaking up or fails to listen, it creates a dangerous silence where problems cannot be raised. Understanding why people don't speak up is critical to turning the culture around. Fear is one of the biggest barriers to open, honest communication at work.

We all grew up with different lessons on when it was appropriate to speak (and who to), when to stay silent and what would happen if we got it wrong.

Often these unwritten and unspoken rules relate to how we show respect or know we are respected.

To avoid misunderstandings and unintentionally disrespecting someone, it's important to understand how cultural norms may vary. Allowing space to respectfully discuss different perspectives helps us feel comfortable speaking up and not staying silent.

Feeling safe to speak up is important in all workplaces. It's particularly important where tasks are complex and teams rely on each other to get the work done, or where there are risks and safety issues.

Common unhelpful unspoken rules for when to speak up or stay silent

- Don't criticise something the boss has helped create
- Don't speak unless you have proof to back it up
- Don't question those higher up than you or who have been there longer
- Don't say negative things that may make the boss or others look bad
- Speaking up may have career consequences



Workplaces often have their own culture around how safe it is to speak up. The way people are treated when they disagree, make mistakes or suggest changes sends a clear message about what is safe. You'll naturally wonder if it's worth the hassle of speaking up if it feels like you're "sticking your neck out" – even if it is something you feel is important.

Why people don't speak up

One of the biggest barriers to open, honest communication at work is fear. Fear of being:

- Disrespectful or disrespected.
- Embarrassed.
- Punished.
- Humiliated.
- Culturally misunderstood.
- Seen as incompetent.
- Disadvantaged at work.

People don't want to let others down. They worry that their concerns/mistakes may be seen as a sign they don't have the right skills or knowledge.

When people feel stressed, anxious, uncertain or fearful about how their messages will be received, saying nothing can feel like the safest option, but this can lead to miscommunications and problems.

How leaders respond to negative news sends a clear message of what is safe to say and what is better left unsaid.

When conversations and communications don't show humility, reciprocity and equity, e.g. we feel talked down to, ignored or not heard, people can become anxious, feel disrespected or humiliated, leading to a culture of silence where problems cannot be raised.

How psychologically safe is your workplace:

- If you make a mistake is it often held against you?
- Can you bring up problems and tough issues?
- Are people sometimes rejected for being different?
- Is your cultural perspective valued?
- It is safe to take risks?
- It is difficult to ask others for help?
- Do people act deliberately to undermine others?
- Are your unique skills and talents valued and utilised?

Workplaces have a legal responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 to manage risks to mental health and wellbeing just like they do any other health and safety risk.

Fact sheet

Reframing failures as opportunities to learn

A psychologically safe workplace enables people to feel safe to report errors, mistakes, accidents or potential problems affecting work. The sooner these are known, the quicker they can be acted on, fixed or impact minimised. In a psychologically safe workplace, reporting problems, accidents and errors is seen as a good catch, appreciated and can be used to learn and improve.

What we commonly see as simply 'failures' and mistakes offer us opportunities to see where we could:

- Improve processes.
- Put in better training.
- Spot changes in the environment we need to respond to.
- Drop a project that is not working, before we invest too much.

We genuinely want things to succeed, so when things don't go well, we might feel reluctant to highlight this and focus on this. We also don't want to hide 'failures'. Promote being pro-learning. Reward when mistakes are acknowledged, reported and learnings gained. Avoid blaming and shaming. Encourage thinking about how we can move forward with more knowledge.

Keep in mind:

- We are all human and can make mistakes. We can't know everything.
- We can't control everything.
- We can't predict the future.
- Increases in complexity and interdependence in workplaces means more 'moving parts' that can go wrong.

How effective teams view 'failure'

Effective teams see 'failures' as a natural part of the learning and development process. They know that you very rarely get things perfect on the first attempt.

If people are encouraged to share their experiences so everyone can learn, you'll see more open discussion, faster learning, fewer repeated problems and innovative solutions.



Reframing attitudes to getting it wrong

Unhelpful

We need to prevent failure

Failure is unacceptable

If you're effective you don't fail

We can't afford to fail

Helpful

We want to know early and learn from things going wrong

Doing new things means we'll make some wrong turns

To be effective you need to be able to learn from mistakes and share those learnings

We can't afford not to learn and change

Common causes of things going wrong or unexpected results

Shortcomings in behaviour, skill or attention

(e.g. not following processes or procedures)

Unexpected combination of event and actions in a complex or changeable environment

(e.g. systems failure such as travel delays due to engine failure)

Moving into a new area, market or responding to change – trying something new

(e.g. introduction of new product has low sales)

Productive responses

Training
Retraining
Process improvement
System redesign
Sanction if repeated or serious

Analysis of failure/issue from all perspectives

Identify risk factors to address system improvement

Analysis of results to work out implications

Brainstorm new ideas or solutions

Design next steps

Start a new solution from what you learnt

Fact sheet

Communicating so people feel safe to speak up

It can be tricky to not react negatively to bad news, disagreement or criticism. We can automatically want to express our feelings with an angry outburst. We might want to argue our point and tell the other person why they are wrong. You don't have to ignore how you feel, but you don't want your feelings to run the conversation either. The purpose of the communication should be to understand what the issue is, understand the impact and work out what the next steps are. Remind yourself of the potential to learn something new. Maintaining a respectful relationship is paramount.

Listen to what they have to say:

Express appreciation

Thank them for letting you know and acknowledge the effort made to tell you.

"Thanks for letting me know, I appreciate getting this news so quickly..."

Clarify

Check you have understood their main points correctly and allow for the other person to clarify.

"Can I just check I've understood correctly?" Or "I may have missed something, what I heard was..." (repeat the key points from the discussion) "did I get that right?" or "Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?"

Understand what's going on – ask more, tell less

Use open ended questions to explore the impacts of the issues and how to move forward now it has been raised.

By asking more and telling less there is an opportunity for extra learning and more information to come forward.

"How can I help?"

"What's the most urgent issue here?"

"What are your key concerns?" (Listen first, then add any others concerns you have) "I'm also thinking that we should consider..."

"How have you or others dealt with this before?... How did that go?"

"What do you think needs to happen?"

"What do others feel?"

"What do you think went wrong?"

Give your honest feedback

Give honest feedback and information as needed and in an appropriate manner. It's okay to not be perfect and to disagree.

"This really took me by surprise, so I had to take a moment to think clearly"

"I'm going to have to disagree on this one"

"I see your concerns for the project. I believe we can manage them, but let's keep checking in"

"Thanks for letting me know how you feel about this. Sorry it's had such a negative impact, I really didn't know. Now I hope we can work out what to do together"

"After listening to what's happened, I'm going to have to start a formal process to find out what's gone wrong so we can learn from it."



Fact sheet

Mana-enhancing communication – a framework

All communication is across an unknown space – the gap between your understanding of the world and mine. Conflict, lack of clarity, and differing expectations and understandings easily occur when we assume our communication style and needs are the same.

Mana-enhancing communication is a process where we can close the space between different understandings, while building trust and mutual respect.

Workplace (Our shared space)

5. Implementation | Whakaora – Restoring wholeness



4. Decision making | Whakataua

3. Exploring the issue | Whaikōrero

2. Call/Invitation to come together | Karanga

1. Prepare | Whakatakātū

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A. My space (experiences/understandings and space in the world)

What I view as:

- Important
- Appropriate
- Acceptable
- Normal
- My role and others' roles
- How things are done

Shaped and affected by:

- Experiences
- Cultural norms
- Information available
- Expectations
- Understandings
- Interactions with others and systems in the world



B. Your space (experiences/understandings and space in the world)

These affect my whole person:

Relationships (Whānau)

- Communication styles
- Relationship values
- Expectations of reciprocity/mutuality
- Participation

Sense of self (Wairua)

- Cultural identity
- Sense of peace or contentment
- Definition of dignity and respect
- Connection to a bigger meaning or purpose

Physical (Tinana)

- Sense of capabilities
- Ability to improve health
- Access to resources

Thinking & feeling (Hinengaro)

- Motivations
- Behaviours
- How emotions are expressed
- Thinking and understanding processes

1. Prepare | Whakatakatū

Consider your intentions.

Are your intentions to understand and learn?

Do you put value on the relationship as well as your goal?

Does the way you communicate support your intentions?

Are you comfortable not having all the answers?

2. Call/Invitation to come together | Karanga

Clearly communicate the reason for coming together.

This is a back and forth communication establishing the purpose of the communication and the intentions of those involved.

Aim to create a shared and agreed purpose and method to communicate.

Consider when, where and who else should be involved.

Note that others may test you or challenge | wero you to see if your intentions are true. This lets them know how safe it is to communicate back. Be prepared to show your humility and acknowledge what you do not know.

3. Exploring the issue | Whaikōrero

This is about discussing the matter at hand.

This step establishes a relationship, so it should involve introductions and acknowledgement | mihi of those involved. All respectful communication involves personal relationships with mutual and reciprocal obligations. At the very least, basic expectations of politeness and acknowledgement are expected.

Allow time for everyone to speak and share their perspective.

Reveal the known and the unknown so there is a shared knowledge.

Listen, explore and ask questions to learn.

This is the time to seek clarification and reflect understandings – gather all the information to make a judgement and decide the way forward.

If meeting in a group, it is important that each person has the opportunity to share their perspective before a general back and forth begins.

4. Decision making | Whakatau

This is the point in the discussion where there is enough information to make a decision. There can still be disagreement but there is general consensus that it is time to move forward.

Move forward with the shared understanding of what has been decided and why.

Clarify and summarise what actions and decisions have been made.

Confirm understanding of responsibilities, expectations, and purpose of decision.

5. Implementation | Whakaora. Restoring wholeness

This happens once the discussion on next steps is complete and a way forward decided. Now is the time to restore and affirm relationships to support the ongoing work and the shared space you have created.

Reaffirm new learnings and agreements.

Acknowledge the effort made to come together and contribute.

Acknowledge any disagreements and uncertainty that remain.

This framework can be followed in short informal conversations or used to guide engagement in projects over time or run formal meetings or workshops.

ALI: “Hi Zoe, I’ve been reading the report you sent. Thanks for that, I appreciate the work you put in. I’d like to suggest a change to one section and before I do want to hear what you think, could we meet?”

ZOE: “Which section Ali?”

ALI: “The 2nd section, I thought we could highlight the recommendations more strongly.”

ZOE: “Are you looking to change them? They were well discussed. I think Sam would want to be involved.”

ALI: “Not change them, I want to change the order and pull out the ones needed this year – for urgency.”

ZOE: “That might work, I’d still like Sam involved.”

ALI: “That makes sense. You both know this report inside out and I really need your advice.”

ZOE: “Thanks, we’re a bit passionate about this. When do you need it by?”

ALI: “For the meeting next month. Yes, include Sam, I hadn’t thought to, thanks. Would Wednesday work, do you think an hour would be long enough?”

ZOE: “I’ll check in with Sam about timing and confirm, Wednesday works for me.”

ALI: “Thanks Zoe, let’s aim for Wednesday but if Sam can’t make it we’ll find a better time. I appreciate how important the recommendations are to you both so I’m keen to hear your thoughts on this.”

Fact sheet

Positive, open, two-way communication – tips for managers

Every day, managers can spend 70-90% of their time communicating with their team and others at work. With job satisfaction, performance and retention all related to a person's immediate supervisor, a manager's approach to communication can have a big impact. When you communicate with someone, what kind of relationships do you indicate you want? Is the communication based on mutual respect, shared goals and values the other person and the relationship?

Reframe your role

How do you see your role? Does fulfilling this expectation support or hinder positive communication and building good relationships?

| | Traditional frame | Reframe |
|--------|--|---|
| Boss | Has answers Gives orders Assesses others performance | Sets direction Invites input to clarify and improve Creates conditions for continued learning to achieve excellence |
| Others | Subordinates who must do as told | Contributors with crucial insights and knowledge |

Start with good intentions, make them clear and known

Do you genuinely want to know the answer the other person has or are you simply seeking agreement with your own views? You need to approach communication with humility and genuine interest. When outlining work, do others know what you are trying to achieve and for what purpose? Do others know what you need from them? Do others know the importance of the work and how their input helps?

Be humble – acknowledge what you don't know

Being humble is acknowledging and sharing that you don't have all the answers and you need your team's knowledge, skills, advice and effort. Understanding that we are all in this together and that we need each other to achieve (reciprocity) is important. Do others know you need their input? Are you modelling that no one is perfect or has all the information and we can learn and grow together?

Ask good questions and listen actively

Decision-making calls for making judgements and reaching a conclusion. Consider the process you go through.

Do you take time to ask?

- Do I have all the facts?
- Is what I observed/noticed all there is to this situation?
- What might I be missing?
- Who else is involved and what do they think?

Do you pay attention to how you feel?

- What do I feel about this and why?
- Is how I'm feeling clouding how I see things?

Do you check in with others and ask them to share their observations and feelings about the situation before making a judgement and choosing a course of action? How do you make sure you have understood what they have said?

Acknowledge what has been shared

Simply saying thank you, taking time to listen and asking opinions shows you value others and builds respect and trust. How do you acknowledge effort and input? How often do you thank or praise others?

Reframe failure through encouraging sharing – about the good and the not so good

How do you help people to feel safe sharing differences of opinion, bad news or constructive feedback? How do you respond to negative news? This is the most important time to practice the skills above and model positive communication.



Fact sheet

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NB: We have added the dimension taha whenua to Mason Durie’s Te Whare Tapa Whā model, to explicitly acknowledge the inter-relationship of whenua as the foundation for a whare, and the importance of that inter-relationship in Te Ao Māori.