

4 Communication Rules to Maximize Productivity

Whether you're communicating with prospects, clients, vendors or co-workers, quality communication will make your meetings more productive.

By Lawrence M. Kohn and Robert N. Kohn

Rule #1. Communicate your commitment to commitment

We've coached hundreds of professionals and executives across the country and have come to the conclusion that *the single most important business skill* is a commitment to commitment. This means a clear, deeply-rooted philosophy that promises are made to be kept. It is a lifestyle that becomes your reputation and it will dramatically enhance productivity in your practice in at least two fundamental ways.

First, it creates trust. When people trust you to fulfill your commitments, they will go to extremes to maintain the alliance. Your clients will remain loyal. Your vendors will try to give you the best deal. Your co-workers will put in extra hours, and your prospects will see you as the preferred provider of accounting services.

Next, a commitment to commitment ignites your passion. Over the years we have worked with hundreds of CPA's who have felt frustrated with their inability to motivate themselves or their partners to bring in new clients. Creating a reasonable plan is always the first step. However, the next step is to confirm their commitment to execute the plan. Everyone should verbalize their commitment to others in the firm. It's a good idea to shake hands to formalize the promise. Once the commitment is verbalized, the passion kicks in. When you're passionate, you're productive.

There are two elements to communicating your commitment to commitment. The first is communicating that **you** live up to **your** commitments. Most often, this is accomplished in small ways: returning calls; meeting deadlines; arriving promptly. Failure to live up to your promises - even the small ones - invites reciprocity.

The second part is letting people know that you expect **them** to live up to **their** commitments. This requires that you discuss your understanding of the meaning of commitment. Your ability to talk comfortably and directly about the value of commitment will reveal its significance and build the foundation for a productive relationship.

Rule #2. Communicate your quality standards

It's been our experience that a dissatisfaction with the work product of others is usually due to unclear quality standards. Quality standards must be defined at the beginning of **every** project. If there is no discussion, then everyone will make their own assumptions. There is no reason to believe that those assumptions will match. All quality descriptions must be precise. We work with CPA's who regularly ask their subordinates to do something with "style" or ask them to be "more creative" or think "smarter." One CPA we know almost fired a receptionist for failure to keep the reception area looking "professional." We suggested a detailed list: all light bulbs must be working; all magazines should be layered and straight; all cups cleared immediately, etc. While this may sound extreme, the reception area is neat and the receptionist still has her job. When people are clear about quality, there are fewer errors. That enhances productivity.

Rule #3. Communicate respect

When you communicate that you respect others, you will help them feel safe. They will not need to invest their energy in being defensive. And, when people feel safe, they will be more productive.

While the importance of showing respect may seem obvious, we regularly see well-intentioned CPA's demonstrate disrespect in many ways. One of the most prevalent is sarcasm. This is not to say that sarcasm is never appropriate. However, it is true that most people we've surveyed in CPA firms feel sarcasm is most often seen as an attack. It may be cute or clever but it is **not** welcome. If you choose to use sarcasm, make sure it is a communication style that communicates your intent.

Another common communication error is showing your impatience. Impatience is demeaning. It means one person is disappointing another. While it is common to reveal impatience, a more productive approach is to accept the role of the mentor and accept the responsibility of communicating until the results are achieved. Patience is productive.

Another common communication error is distraction. Distraction means you don't care as much about someone as you do about someone or something else. While the lack of attention may be valid, it is still insulting. That kind of behavior creates distance and distance reduces productivity.

One more common communication error is minimization. Minimization is brushing issues aside. Even if the issues are not a priority, minimization is criticism. It is insulting. Instead, acknowledge every issue on the table and then discuss how to address each. Priorities will inevitably get the attention they deserve, but the smaller issues won't be ignored. When you avoid minimization, you motivate people to participate. That produces a feeling of ownership, and that's productive.

Rule #4. Communicate the next step

Too often, productivity gets postponed because the ball gets dropped. Every meeting should end with a clear understanding about who is going to do what. Finally, everyone must be clear about deadlines. The best suggestion we know about making deadlines is to be precise. It is common to ask for things, "ASAP." The problem with ASAP is it has no meaning. All deadlines must be clear and when they are, people respond positively. Clearly communicating the next step keeps the process moving and that increases productivity.

Quality communication may sometimes feel like an extra burden. It takes thought and practice. But, when everyone in an organization follows the 4 Communication Rules, the organization develops a culture that is significantly more productive.

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