

# TEN STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN AFTERSCHOOL

*By Jamie Garcia and Matthew Rushing*  
Working in an afterschool program involves taking on many roles and interacting with a variety of people, including staff, parents, and children. Effective communication techniques can help maintain a clear vision of the program's goals, clarify expectations of staff and students, and assure parents that their children are in good hands.

**KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.** We are educators, caregivers, and mentors, among other roles. Make sure we're saving the educational jargon for the office and using our classroom voices when working with young children. Be a leader in each setting in which you work by adapting and choosing your language carefully.

**PREPARE.** Before addressing parents, principals, or employees, take a moment to map out your conversation. Keep your main points in mind, so you can control the direction of the conversation.

**ESTABLISH CREDIBILITY.** You are the expert when it comes to your program and the needs of your children. When confronted with a difficult conversation, start with assets, not deficits. Instead of saying, "I've never seen this situation before ..." try, "Because I've worked with children for four years, I can offer some insight ..." This will give others confidence in your decision-making ability.

**LAFF.** When confronted by a disgruntled

customer, remember LAFF - Listen, Apologize, Fix, Follow Up (Through the Customer's Eyes by National Seminars Group). By listening and apologizing, we can validate concerns and ease tension. Offer solutions, and follow up to ensure your solutions resolved the situation.

**MAKE FIRST CONTACT.** If you know someone will be calling to express a concern, call them first. Being caught off guard by an upset parent puts us at a disadvantage. Prepare your thoughts and call your customer first, to maintain control of the situation and be proactive in your response.

**MITIGATED SPEECH.** Understand the level of urgency with which you need to communicate your message. Subtle differences in the words you choose can change the meaning of your message. The six degrees of mitigated speech are: Command, Obligation, Suggestion, Query, Preference, and Hint (Fischer and Orasanu). With employee performance, a first offense may warrant a preference or query, but if their actions are compromising supervision and safety, a command may be necessary. The difference between a query and a command may look like, "What time did you clock in?" versus, "Be here on time tomorrow or don't come in at all."

**USE TACTFUL PHRASES.** When dealing with conflict, use language that is direct, but tactful. Phrases such as, "Help me understand by explaining why you feel that way" and "I'm

glad we have a difference of opinion so we can find the best solution" can do a lot to defuse a situation and help you avoid an argument.

**RECIPROCITY.** Studies show that if a favor is done for someone, they are likely to repay that favor. Don't pass up the opportunity to invest in people you work with by doing small favors. This will develop a relationship based on mutual trust where there may not have been any common ground before.

**GIVE SPECIFICS.** Have you ever described a child's behavior as a "tantrum" or "meltdown"? Oversimplifying the behavior does not describe what actually happened. When giving behavior reports, be specific about the child's actions and describe the situation without including summative language or implying how someone felt. Specific language creates a more honest, direct conversation and does not mislead the listener.

**THE TRIANGLE APPROACH.** According to "The Visionary Director," a director needs to act as a Manager, a Mentor, and a Community Supporter (Carter and Curtis). This means embracing a broader perspective and not favoring one style of management over another. Support your employees by offering resources for improvement, spending time understanding their struggles, and being the one to make the tough decisions. All three approaches are necessary to communicate effectively through the challenges afterschool leaders face daily.

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**SEE MORE AT:** <http://naaweb.org/tip-of-the-week/item/146-ten-strategies-for-effective-communication-in-afterschool#sthash.wi0ts1LS.dpuf>

## **OPENING DISCUSSION**

Which of these communication strategies have you used or heard others use successfully?

What was the outcome?

What stands out to you as you look at the strategies?

What questions or other thoughts do you have about the strategies?

## **APPLICATION ACTIVITY**

Maurice has adopted a negative tone and defensive position to several suggestions you have made to him recently regarding his interactions with families. You need to have a follow-up discussion with him. Which of the communication strategies might be most effective in this situation? What would you say?

On short notice, you inform an employee that he/she will be required to work overtime again tonight. This is the third night in a row that the staff has been asked to cover short staffing. No other member of the staff has been asked and neither have any of the more senior employees been asked. The employee gets irate and states, "This is the third time in a row. It's not fair!" Using the communication strategies from the article, how would you respond?

## **CLOSING REFLECTION**

Which one or two of these communication strategies do you think you'd like to learn how to use successfully? Why?

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If applicable, provide participants with the corresponding certificate of participation and if required ask them to complete the questions included on the certificate.

# **CERTIFICATE** of PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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## TEN STRATEGIES FOR **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION** IN **AFTERSCHOOL**

\_\_\_\_\_ **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT HOURS, EARNED BY:**

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### **CONTENT INCLUDED:**

Know Your Audience • Prepare • Establish Credibility • LAFF • Make First Contact • Mitigated Speech  
Use Tactful Phrases • Reciprocity • Give Specifics • The Triangle Approach

**FACILITATOR:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

| List three Tactful Phrases:

- a.
- b.
- c.

| What does LAFF stand for? Why is this technique helpful?

| Which techniques would you use to approach an employee or colleague about his negative tone? Why?

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*Supports Content Areas 7, 8, and 9, Levels 1-4 of the NAA Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals*