

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



College of Education
& Behavioral Sciences
Office of the Dean

Principles of Effective Communication

A couple of times in the movie *Cool Hand Luke* someone says, “What we got here is a failure to communicate.” And sometimes we do. Over time I’ve noticed that Deans and Directors across the College and Campus devote a not insignificant amount of time to the resolution of issues that are the result of faulty communication. Sometimes I find myself in the role of mediator between two or more individuals on an issue that, given the clarity of hindsight, handled differently early on might not have risen to my level. Sometimes the issue is an amicable disagreement among colleagues, where my advice or resolution is sought. Other times, however, the issue has escalated from an academic disagreement to an interpersonal conflict. The social psychologist in me knows full well the power of the communication process: how we say and don’t say things; in whom we confide; the effects of the off-hand remark; face-to-face communication instead of electronic communications; establishing and maintaining boundaries; or an unwillingness to deal directly with a difficult situation.

Below you’ll find a set of suggestions regarding effective communication. Some of these suggestions came from an e-mail sent by our former President Hank Brown to the faculty at CU. Brian Johnson elaborated on the original set of principles. Leadership Council reviewed the principles and had the opportunity to comment.

I forward these principles to all across the College as a reminder of our need to work continually to maintain and enhance collaborative relationships with our colleagues and students. Our conceptual framework emphasizes caring as a disposition we strive to foster in our students and candidates. I believe when you read the principles of effective communication you will see that they are in line with that disposition.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

- If you have questions or concerns about policies, decisions or behaviors displayed by another person, I encourage you to discuss the issues directly and in an up-front manner with that person. Present your concerns to the individual involved before discussing your concerns with others. A direct discussion of issues can often enlighten both parties.
- When an issue is important, or you have a concern about something, I encourage you to

use the telephone or discuss it in a face-to-face manner. E-mail messages can often lead to further miscommunication and is no substitute for direct interaction. Sending an email when one is upset often leads to ineffective communication. If you write an email while upset I encourage you not to send until you have calmed down.

- When alerting others that problems may exist, I encourage you to be prepared to offer a solution or a pledge to help develop a solution. Simply pointing out problems that you want others to “fix” can lead to dissatisfaction because the problem may be fixed in a way contrary to how you had hoped.

- If a disagreement continues between you and another individual, you always have the option of taking your concerns to a higher level. I ask, however, that you exercise professional courtesy and inform the other person(s) of your intent to discuss this with someone higher up in the administration.

- This professional courtesy also relates to the forwarding of emails. If you are going to forward an email from one individual to another, it is important that the original author is informed of this by being cc'd on the forwarded message or notified by a separate message.

- If a student expresses a concern to you about another faculty/staff member, I encourage you to ask the student why he/she is not communicating the concerns directly to that individual. This will model appropriate professional behavior. While students may express a “fear of retaliation” as the reason for not directly communicating their concerns to a faculty/staff member, students should be reminded of all the protections they have to prevent retaliation from happening to them (refer students to program and university student handbooks). If a student is still reluctant to discuss the concerns directly, and you believe the student’s concerns are legitimate, you should help the student take his/her concerns to a higher level. You should avoid being put in the position of personally forwarding the student’s concerns as this can lead to further miscommunication. It is often difficult to deal with anonymous concerns because the context of those concerns cannot be clarified (e.g., is the concern based on misinformation). If a student is unwilling to take his/her concerns to a higher level, then perhaps it is not a big enough of a concern for us to get involved with either.

- It is not appropriate for any faculty/staff member to become a “depository of secrets.” Keeping secrets for students/colleagues may reinforce an inaccurate assumption that a unit is an unsafe environment. While one may “feel unsafe” that does not mean the environment is unsafe. If someone asks you to keep a secret, try to find out why they feel it is necessary for you to keep the secret and what they are going to do to improve their situation so secrets are not necessary. Also keep in mind that by agreeing to keep a secret, you are becoming a coauthor of the secret. My favorite quote from Freud is “a secret exposed has no power.”

- It is not appropriate to ask students to keep secrets for you or rely on them for support. If you are going through a difficult time, recognize that in yourself and seek support

from colleagues, family members or other professionals. Seeking support from students places the students in a dysfunctional position of needing to care for/protect someone who has more power than they. It can also lead other students to resent the “special relationship” that the student has formed with you.

- It is usually best practice to keep clear boundaries with our communication. Just as it is not appropriate to discuss concerns you have about a student with the student’s peers, it is not appropriate to discuss concerns you have about a colleague with students. Concerns about colleagues should be kept at the faculty/staff level. If a student asks you about a colleague that you have conflicts with, the old saying “if you cannot say anything nice, don’t say anything at all” can be applied.

Many of you may already be regularly practicing some or all of these principles. Hopefully they will become the norm for our College and all of our professional interactions.

E-mail

On a more lighthearted note, are all your e-mails frustrating you? Do you find the volume distracts you from other important aspects of your job (grading those papers, writing that paper or grant)? I was at a conference last weekend and am still tunneling out from the all the e-mails I received. I read an article by Henry Roediger in the January 2006 Observer (published by the Association for Psychological Science). The article gave several sound suggestions on how to manage e-mail, including not keeping e-mail on all day; not responding unless absolutely; don’t copy everyone; and only forward the jokes that made you laugh out loud. You can find the article on line at [*E-mail Onslaught: What Can We Do?*](#) I think if we followed some of them we might save ourselves some valuable time. And yes I realize the irony in sending you this communication via e-mail.

