

Workplace communication

Words matter

Small shifts for a safer, stronger team

Why words matter

Every day, the words you choose act like seeds in a garden. Choose a “flower”—a respectful, clear word—and you build trust. Choose a “weed”—a judgment or a label—and you create a space where it is hard for a healthy team to grow. Communication is a skill that everyone can practice and improve.

Four tools for better conversations

1. Use strength-based language

Focus on what is going well and the effort being made, rather than only pointing out what is missing.

- **Instead of:** “Why is Mrs. Smith still in her room? She should be ready for breakfast.”
- **Try saying:** “You’ve done a wonderful job getting so many residents ready. I really appreciate how organized you are on such a busy morning.”

2. Be objective and descriptive

Describe exactly what you see without labelling a person or assuming their motives.

- **Instead of:** “He’s so lazy and never does his work.”
- **Try saying:** “I notice that when phones are out during team meetings, some people’s attention seems to be elsewhere.”

3. Practice “I” statements

Focus on your own experience to take the blame out of the conversation. This helps others listen without becoming defensive. The Structure: “I feel...

when... because...”

- **Instead of:** “You can never be on time. You’re being inconsiderate.”
- **Try saying:** “I feel frustrated when we can’t start on time. It makes it harder for me to stay organized and support the team.”

4. Validate their experience

Acknowledge that someone else’s feelings are real to them, even if you see the situation differently.

- **Instead of:** “You’re overreacting. It’s not a big deal.”
- **Try saying:** “I can understand why that feels frustrating, especially with everything else on your plate.”



Talking ABOUT people

How we talk about colleagues when they are not in the room shapes our team culture.

- Choose curiosity over judgment: If a colleague leaves exactly at the end of their shift, don't assume they don't care.
- Ask "What else might be true?": They might have a second job, a child to pick up, or an elderly parent to care for.
- Generous language: When we talk about people generously, we create a space for generosity to come back to us.

Quick daily checklist

- Did I catch one judgment today and replace it with a question?
- Did I notice something a teammate did well and tell them?
- If I felt frustrated, did I use an "I" statement instead of a "You" statement?
- Am I speaking to people's strengths?



Remember: None of this requires perfection. It just takes a bit more intention in each conversation.

For more resources on how words matter, visit [SafeCare BC](https://www.safecarebc.ca).