



## How To Lead With Clarity Using Implicit And Explicit Communication

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 31 July 2023

Leaders often think they are communicating clearly, however, busy schedules, impending deadlines, and competing pressures can get in the way of this. When instructions are curtailed and explanations rushed, misunderstandings are bound to occur. Although misunderstandings can often be smoothed out, over time, the compound effect of miscommunication results in potential relationship breakdowns and workplace conflict.

I consider myself an explicit communicator, but a recent miscommunication with a colleague challenged this view. It turned out that I'd relied on implicit communication by assuming my colleague and I shared the same understanding, which wasn't the case. And I know I'm not alone in that experience. Conflict management professionals, like myself, often see conflicts that arise when colleagues struggle to communicate clearly.

In leadership, clear communication is vital. By effectively using explicit and implicit communication, leaders can maximize mutual understanding, saving precious time and stress for all involved.

### What is explicit and implicit communication?

Firstly, let's look at the difference between explicit and implicit communication. When a manager clearly states the production targets and what constitutes a quality output, this is explicit communication. Implicit communication, on the other hand, includes the nonverbal elements of language, such as word choice, tone, gestures, and how we construct a message. These all help to signal intent and context.

Explicit communication may seem preferable, as there is less room for misunderstanding. However, in reality, most people don't want or need to have everything spelled out. A worker who puts a cup of tea on the desk of a busy colleague, doesn't need to say, "I made this for you, just the way you like it, because I think you're stressed out". In fact, that may undermine their implicit demonstration of care and support.

### The observant leader - recognizing how your team communicates

Before looking to hone these skills, a useful first step is to become more aware of how you and your team communicates. Greater self-awareness is a good place to start. Observe when you tend to use explicit or implicit communication. Then observe in team meetings what other people's preferences are. A team that's worked together for a long time is likely to communicate more implicitly, based on joint understanding and shared experiences. It may be challenging for a new team member to communicate effectively, when their more-established teammates are equipped with this 'shorthand'.

There can be some cultural differences in communication style as well. In the US or UK, communication tends to be more explicit; a coworker gives a direct instruction to a colleague on what they should do. Other cultures rely more on implicit communication. In Japanese culture, for example, expressing opinions directly can be seen as a sign of superiority, so team members are more likely to communicate with more ambiguity or use unfinished sentences. Understanding these differences in communication preferences is key and will maximize the many benefits of diverse teams.

### **The learning leader - improve your communication skills**

Once a leader is more conscious of their own communication style, and that of their team members, they can develop their skills in a way that encourages greater clarity. A useful technique is the 'check back,' which ensures that communication is understood clearly. Summarizing, recapping and paraphrasing can also be helpful.

Another useful method is to pair up with a trusted colleague, to experience your communication style in action and then feedback together. You can reflect on how you each came across, how much you both relied on implicit communication, and how you experienced each other's messages.

With a natural tendency to see things from our own perspective, the challenge for leaders is to create the conditions that can lead to better mutual understanding. My own misunderstanding with my colleague allowed me to pause and reflect on my own communication style, and indeed, to write this article. Every day brings new opportunities, and every interaction offers a chance to try something a little different.