Conversations That Build Trust: A Leader's Communication Guide

Why This Guide Matters

Communication skills are what turn a 1:1 meeting from a checklist into a powerful leadership tool. The way you listen, ask questions, respond, and hold space directly impacts trust, performance, and team culture. Strong communication creates psychological safety — which means your team brings issues to you early instead of letting them grow, hides less, solves more, and feels supported rather than judged. 🌱

These skills help you slow down enough to understand the real issue, coach more effectively, and build the kind of relationships where people feel safe to grow, learn, and be honest. This guide gives you the tools to have conversations that not only get things done, but also strengthen your leadership and your team. 🤝

Introduction

Great 1:1 meetings rely just as much on how you communicate as they do on the structure of the meeting itself. A meaningful 1:1 isn't about telling people what to do — it's about creating a space where employees can think, reflect, and grow. That's where the coaching approach comes in.

A tell–direct approach is when you immediately give answers or instructions. It's fast, and sometimes necessary, but it prevents employees from developing their own judgment or confidence. A coaching approach slows the conversation down and centers curiosity, open-ended questions, reflective listening, and partnership. 💬

This guide breaks down the core communication tools that make 1:1 meetings more meaningful: signposting, open-ended questions, pausing, reflective listening, summarizing, empathy statements, asking permission, and checking for understanding.

⏱️ Signposting the Meeting

Signposting means clearly telling the other person what to expect at the beginning of the conversation. It reduces anxiety, builds psychological safety, and creates structure — especially when the employee isn't sure why the meeting was scheduled. 🧭

Signposting helps because it:

- sets the tone
- clarifies the purpose
- outlines the flow
- helps the person relax
- ensures shared understanding of time

Examples:

- "We have about 30 minutes today. I'd like to start with how things are going for you, then I'll share a couple of updates, and we can wrap with next steps. How does that sound?"

- "My goal today is to check in on how your week has been and see what support you need. We'll end with action items."

💬 Using Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions invite thoughtful responses and create space for deeper conversation. They help you understand the full story before jumping into solutions.

Why they're effective:

- pull out context and nuance
- help employees think for themselves
- reveal patterns or root causes
- reduce defensiveness
- shift the conversation from surface-level to meaningful insight

Start broad, then funnel down:

- "How have things been going?"
- "What's going well?"
- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "What would be a good example?"
- "What part feels most challenging?"

Closed-ended questions to avoid:

- "Are you doing okay?"
- "Did you finish that?"
- "Do you understand?"
- "Was it a busy shift?"

⏸️ The Power of Pausing

Pausing means intentionally allowing silence after you ask a question or after the other person speaks. It gives people time to think, process, and respond honestly. ⏸️

Pausing helps because it:

- communicates you're not in a rush
- reduces pressure
- supports emotional regulation
- allows deeper thinking
- encourages thoughtful responses

When to use pausing:

- after asking an open-ended question

- when someone is thinking
- when emotions are high
- when someone is hesitant
- when you want deeper reflection

Example:

- You: "What would support look like for you right now?" (Pause 5 seconds.)

🔄 Reflective Listening

Reflective listening means restating the core idea, emotion, or meaning behind what the employee said. It helps reduce defensiveness and ensures true understanding. 🔄

Reflecting facts:

- "So what I'm hearing is…"
- "It sounds like the main issue is…"

Reflecting feelings:

- "It seems like this has been frustrating for you."
- "It sounds like that caught you off guard."

Reflecting meaning:

- "It sounds like you want more clarity."
- "It seems like this isn't just about the task — it's about feeling supported."

When to use reflective listening:

- when someone expresses emotion
- when confirming understanding
- when the person feels unheard
- when conversations get stuck
- before shifting into solutions

📝 Summarizing

Summarizing gathers key points into a clear, concise statement. It prevents misunderstandings and creates alignment before moving forward. 📝

How to summarize:

- "Let me make sure I've got this right…"
- "Here's what I'm hearing so far…"
- "To recap…"

When to use summarizing:

- after detailed explanations
- before shifting into solutions
- during emotional topics
- when misunderstandings are likely
- at the end when setting next steps

💛 Using Empathy Statements

Empathy acknowledges the person's feelings, effort, or experience. It creates emotional safety — especially during difficult conversations. 💛

Examples:

- "That sounds really frustrating."
- "I can tell you've put so much energy into this."
- "Anyone in that situation would feel the same way."
- "Thank you for being open with me."

Normalizing as empathy:

- "Most people struggle with this at first."
- "It makes sense you'd feel overwhelmed."
- "You're not the only one who's experienced this."

When to use empathy:

- when emotions are present
- before giving feedback
- when someone is vulnerable
- after hearing something difficult
- when someone feels unsupported

🙋 Asking Permission

Asking permission gently prepares the employee before you share feedback, an observation, or guidance. It keeps the conversation collaborative rather than directive. 🙋

When to use it:

- before giving feedback
- when offering an observation
- when shifting from listening to coaching
- when exploring a new angle
- when someone is guarded

Examples:

- "Would it be okay if I shared an observation?"
- "Can I offer a thought that might help?"
- "Are you open to some feedback?"

☑️ Checking for Understanding

Checking for understanding ensures you both heard the same message. It eliminates assumptions and keeps expectations clear. ✔️

When to use it:

- after feedback
- after giving direction
- after summarizing
- during complex or emotional topics
- before action items

Examples:

- "How does that land for you?"
- "What are you hearing me say?"
- "What feels clear, and what still feels fuzzy?"
- "What do you think your next steps are?"

Conclusion

You don't need to be a perfect communicator to be an effective leader — you just need to be intentional. These skills take practice, and each 1:1 gives you a chance to strengthen them. 🌟

What matters most is showing up with curiosity, empathy, and a genuine desire to support your people. Over time, these small communication habits build deeper trust, better alignment, and a more connected, resilient team. Keep practicing, keep listening, and trust that every conversation is an opportunity to grow together.

Conversations That Build Trust — Quick Reference Cheat Sheet

🧭 Signposting the Meeting

- “We have about 30 minutes today. Here’s how I’d like to use it…”
- “My goal today is to check in, share a couple of updates, and end with next steps.”

💬 Open-Ended Questions

- “How have things been going?”
- “What’s going well?”
- “Tell me more about that.”
- “What would be an example?”
- “What part feels most challenging?”
- “What else?”

Closed-ended (yes/no) questions to avoid:

- “Are you doing okay?”
- “Did you finish that?”
- “Do you understand?”
- “Was it busy?”

⏸️ Pausing

- Ask your question… then pause 5–10 seconds.
- “What would support look like for you right now?” (pause)

🙋‍♂️ Asking Permission

- “Would it be okay if I shared an observation?”
- “Are you open to some feedback?”
- “Can I offer a thought that might help?”

🔄 Reflective Listening

Facts:

- “So, what I’m hearing is…”
- “It sounds like the main issue is…”

Feelings:

- “It seems like this has been frustrating for you.”
- “It sounds like that caught you off guard.”

Meaning:

- “It sounds like you’re wanting more clarity.”
- “It seems like this is about feeling supported.”

💛 Empathy & Normalizing

- “That sounds really frustrating.”
- “I can tell you’ve put a lot of energy into this.”
- “Thank you for being honest with me.”
- “Most people struggle with this at first.”
- “It makes sense you’d feel overwhelmed.”

📝 Summarizing

- “Let me make sure I’ve got this right…”
- “Here’s what I’m hearing so far…”
- “To recap…”

✔️ Check for Understanding

- “How does that land for you?”
- “What are you hearing me say?”
- “What feels clear and what still feels fuzzy?”
- “What do you think your next steps are?”

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