

"Tone of Voice" in Manager-to-Employee Communications

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Body language and tone of voice are both forms of nonverbal communication.

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Employees might be afraid of a supervisor who raises his voice or uses a sarcastic or degrading tone when communicating with subordinates, but they also will lose any respect they might have had for him. To communicate effectively with employees, make sure your tone of voice contributes to the message you want to send.

Avoid Ambiguity

When communicating with an employee about a problem or concern, "Forbes" contributor Lisa Quast suggests using a firm but even tone of voice with a hint of toughness. The idea is to communicate your authority without sending a message of disrespect and without losing your temper. According to the Conflict Research Consortium at the University of Colorado, you should avoid any ambiguity in tense situations because the person you're speaking with will tend to interpret an ambiguous tone of voice as being negative or hostile.

Language and Paralanguage

The phrase "thanks for joining us" can communicate completely different things depending on the tone of voice. If you say these words with an upbeat but serious tone at the start of a meeting, they convey a welcoming but businesslike message. If you say the same words sarcastically to an employee who shows up 10 minutes late for a meeting, they communicate displeasure and criticism. The words themselves are language and the tone of voice is paralanguage. Whenever you say anything, you use both language and paralanguage.

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Using Paralanguage Effectively

Paralanguage includes not only tone of voice, but other aspects of communication, such as the rhythm and speed with which you speak and how often you pause. For instance, if you say, "That was very interesting" in a cheerful tone immediately after an employee completes a presentation, it sends a different message than if you pause for several seconds and then say, "That was very... interesting" in a dry tone. A quiet tone of voice can communicate a lack of confidence, while an angry tone of voice can communicate a lack of self-control. According to Chuck Williams, author of "Effective Management," the key to using paralanguage effectively is to use it deliberately. Decide on the message you want to communicate and then use the right tone of voice for the message.

Calm and Confident

When you want to communicate praise, use a warm and sincere tone of voice. When you need to communicate criticism, raise a concern or give an order, use an impersonal and firm tone of voice to convey authority. Effective use of body language can contribute to the right tone of voice. Leaning toward the person you're talking to communicates engagement and focus, while leaning away from them or folding your arms communicates that you are not open to whatever they are saying.

