HUMAN RESOURCES
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

Honest Communication: Skill Overview

Skill Introduction (Step 1)

<u>**Communication**</u>, at its core, is the exchange of information or meaning between two or more individuals. It happens through words and gestures, tone and silence, in person and across digital platforms. While we often focus on spoken or written language, communication is also non-verbal: body language, eye contact, response time, and even formatting can shape how a message is interpreted. Effective communication is not simply about ***what*** is said, but how it is <u>conveyed</u> and <u>received</u>, across various contexts and modalities.

<u>**Honesty**</u> is the quality of being truthful, transparent, and aligned with reality. In the context of communication, honesty becomes more than a value, it is a practice that supports authenticity and fosters psychological safety. Honesty builds trust when it is consistent and observable. It deepens relationships when it is grounded in humility and compassion. And it invites vulnerability, not for the sake of openness alone, but because vulnerability signals that we are willing to show up as both human and imperfect, even when we are leading others.

Managers frequently identify communication as the source of team challenges, friction, or disengagement. It is one of the most cited areas of conflict and my most commonly requested training topic. But in practice, many of these so-called "communication issues" are not about *how* something was said, but rather *why* something was not shared, *what* was withheld, or *who* does not feel heard or understood. A lack of transparency, unclear expectations, an absence of respect, or unspoken assumptions often emerge *through* communication, not because of a communication skill gap. That's why it is important to distinguish between challenges that reflect a breakdown in communication skills and those that stem from deeper relational or organizational dynamics.

So how does someone tell if they are facing a communication skill issue, or some different problem that is showing up through communication? <u>Here are a few signs I look for as a training professional:</u>

➔ You struggle to explain ideas clearly or consistently, especially across different formats like phone calls, instant messaging, and meetings.

➔ You often receive follow-up questions seeking clarification on things you thought were clear.

➔ You avoid giving feedback because you're unsure how to phrase it or worry it will be misinterpreted.

➔ You frequently feel misunderstood despite feeling confident in your message.

➔ People have reported feeling confused, not because of what you said, but because they did not know why something mattered or how it connected to a larger purpose or problem.

Core communication skills can and *should* be developed by all employees that supervise others, not because they solve every issue, but because they create the conditions for clearer, more effective relationships. Skills like **active listening** help managers hear what is actually being said, not what they expect to hear. **Clarity and structure** make information more digestible and prevent misinterpretation. **Feedback delivery** supports development, not correction alone. **Emotional attunement** allows a manager to read the room, recognize unspoken cues, and respond appropriately. **Asking thoughtful questions** keeps conversations interesting and draws out insights from others.

Together, these skills reinforce trust, drive progress, and support a manager's ability to lead with both precision and presence.

Skill Development (Step 2)

It can be challenging to assess where we might fall in any given skill, and the types of practice or behaviors we should seek in order to improve our ability to practice each skill. I have provided a rubric that assigns descriptions and common behaviors or outcomes for each skill level below.

Skill Level	Description	Behaviors and Indicators

Inexperienced	Values honesty but struggles to express it in a way that is clear, appropriate, or productive	- Avoids sharing difficult truths or gives overly softened feedback - Hesitates to speak up in challenging moments - Messages may be indirect, confusing, or overly cautious
Competent	Speaks honestly in most situations with thoughtful preparation and effort	- Shares candid input while maintaining respect - Begins addressing issues directly rather than deflecting - Explains reasoning or context behind decisions to build trust
Proficient	Communicates with consistency, clarity, and care across varied situations	- Engages in open dialogue, even when the message is difficult - Fosters a climate where others feel safe being honest - Uses honesty to prevent misunderstandings and support growth
Expert	Creates and sustains a culture of honest communication through intentional practice, influence, and leadership	- Leads with transparency, even in complex or high-stakes situations - Proactively addresses difficult truths in a way that builds understanding and accountability - Coaches others to communicate honestly and constructively

- Establishes norms, systems, or practices that encourage open dialogue and psychological safety

LinkedIn Learning Course & Prompts (Step 3)

The course we will be discussing for the honest communication skill is called, *"Compassionate Candor: A Radical Approach to Management by Kim Scott"* (90 minutes).

You can access the course via your TWU Linkedin Learning account through this link and can view instructions for first-time sign-in using this TWU Knowledge Base article. As you watch this video, I recommend considering the following questions:

1. What is one strategy or concept from the course that stood out to you, and why do you think it resonated?

2. How might you apply what you learned to your current role, team management, or interactions with others?

3. Did anything challenge an existing perspective or approach to communicating with employees effectively? If so, how?

4. What opportunities do you see for us as an institution to use these concepts to improve our work and meet our goals?

Exercises and Supplemental Resources (Step 4)

These exercises are optional, but recommended, as low-stakes opportunities to synthesize the material and provide an avenue for reflection and practice. The exercises should be done after reviewing the skill introduction section, skill development section, and answering the prompts for the course above.

Reflection Exercise:

Think of a time where you wish your own supervisor would have asked **you** for feedback.

● What question would you have wanted them to ask you?

● How would you have wanted them to initiate the conversation?

● What would have made you feel comfortable to speak up and be truthful?

● How would you have provided praise, criticism, or a mix of the two?

Practice Exercise:

Kim Scott states that one of the best ways to avoid being a micromanager or an absentee boss is to strive for being a "thought partner". One recommendation she highlights is asking two simple questions to every direct report in your next one-on-one meeting. Try asking both of these questions and reflect on the experience:

- Was there a time in this past week when I was over involved in your work?

- Was there a time in the past week when I was under involved in your work?

Once you get this information from your reports, identify how you might move closer to the middle "thought partner" option. What is something you could do to show up more purposefully for your employees? What is something you could stop doing to empower your employees?

Supplemental Resources:

If this topic is interesting to you, and you wish to learn more, consider one of these resources for furthering learning:

- ➔ The book that inspired the LinkedIn Course *Radical Candor* by Kim Scott.

- ➔ This HBR article on communicating and leading with compassion.

- ➔ This article from Penn State with strategies for workplace communication.

- ➔ This succinct LinkedIn Learning course, which has an AI-roleplay feature for practice.