



Interpersonal Skills

Introduction

There is a lot to know in the field of horticulture – about plants, trees, shrubs, flowers, soil, design, plant maintenance, and the list goes on! There are some skills though that are harder to identify but still very important for the workplace. We call these skills interpersonal skills. And these skills are getting more and more important to employers.

Employers today are not just looking for employees who know about plants, how to take care of plants, etc. They are looking for employees who know how to work as part of a team and who have good communication skills. They value employees who know how to manage their time and how to motivate themselves and others at work.

This module has several resources to help you identify and build these interpersonal skills.

Check Your Skills

First, let's see how you feel about your interpersonal skills. We'll then come back and see how you feel at the end of the module. Read each of the statements below and select the response that best describes you today.

Statements	I can do this	I would like to do this better	I can't do this
I know what verbal communication is and why it is important in the workplace			
I know what non-verbal communication is and why it is important in the workplace			
I know how to demonstrate confidence in my work			
I know how to work well with others in the workplace			
I know what language and behaviour is appropriate for the workplace			
I know tips to speak successfully in public			

Communication

You may speak to many different people at work. What you say and how you say it depends on **who** you are speaking to and why you are speaking to them. The main things that affect the way you speak to people are:

- Your working **relationship** with them



- Your **attitude** towards them
- Your **reason** for speaking to them
- Your **appreciation** of any problems they might have in understanding you

As a labourer, you will have to speak to your supervisor, your co-workers, other workers in the industry, customers and sometimes other members of the public. Speaking is used to:

- Ask for information
- Pass on information
- Seek advice
- Give an opinion
- Give instructions or directions



Learning Activity - Speaking Well

Read the following examples of an employee talking to different people. Who do you think they are talking to? Choose one of the following workers:

- Manager
- Team leader
- Co-worker
- Member of the public
- Trainee

1. "The play area is on the left, on the far side of the park. If you stay on this path, you'll see it."

2. "I reckon we did a great job today. The Super's going to be pleased."

3. "I've completed my training and I was wondering – are there any vacancies for a team leader's job at the moment?"

4. "I've finished potting; what should I do now?"

5. "This is a dibber. It's used for making small holes in the compost to plant seedlings in."

Like other skills, including reading, writing, and speaking, your listening skills can be improved with study and practice.

Listening is the MOST IMPORTANT communication skill used in any job environment.

We spend about four hours each workday in listening activities.

The way you listen at work may be different from the way you listen in school or in your personal life. Outside of work hours, people often listen to "get the gist" or the general idea of what is being said. At work, you must listen for more details. Having a "general idea" of a job task is not good enough.



Learning Activity – Communication Skills

1. Read the chart below to find the missing information and fill in the blanks in the following sentences.

- Listening is the skill we use the _____.
- Writing is the skill we use the _____.
- We are taught how to write the _____ and how to _____ the least.
- We use our reading skills about _____% of the time.

Skill	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Used	<i>Most</i> <i>(45%)</i>	<i>Next Most</i> <i>(30%)</i>	<i>Next Least</i> <i>(16%)</i>	<i>Least</i> <i>(9%)</i>
Taught	<i>Least</i>	<i>Next Least</i>	<i>Next Most</i>	<i>Most</i>

2. Do you feel the data in the chart reflects what you were taught in school? Why or why not?

3. How would you teach someone listening skills?



Are You a Good Listener?

- Have you ever pretended to be listening when you are not?
- Do you know how to look interested when your mind wanders far away?
- Do you ever “tune out” people when their ideas are boring or difficult?
- Do you find it difficult to concentrate on ideas when a speaker’s appearance or mannerisms are strange?

Most people would answer “yes” to one or more of these questions because we have developed poor listening habits. Basically, we are not paying attention to the speaker. Poor listening habits can be costly in business.

Barriers and Distractions

- **External Distractions:** It is difficult to listen well if you are distracted by background noises such as other people talking, noisy machinery, traffic, etc.
- **Internal Distractions:** How you feel determines how well you listen. If you’re tired, hungry, sick or worried about something, you may have problems focusing on what is being said.
- **Overload:** When people give too much information at one time or use words that are unfamiliar, you may feel overwhelmed and just stop listening.

Good Listening Habits

- **Focus your Attention:** Look at the speaker. Tune out external distractions. If possible, turn off noisy machinery or move to a quieter place. Don’t think about how they are saying something; focus on what they are saying and not on what you are thinking. Listen to listen. Don’t listen and also plan what you are going to say next.
- **Show You’re Listening:** Be responsive. Maintain eye contact with the speaker. Look interested in what she or she is saying. An occasional “yes” or “I see”, or a head nod lets the speaker know you are listening.
- **Ask Questions:** Asking relevant questions is one of the best ways to show a speaker that you have been listening. In a work situation, many people are shy about asking questions; they think it makes them look bad to the employer. The only thing that will make you look bad in an employer’s eyes is not doing the job correctly. Employers want you to ask questions.

Know How to Ask Questions

“I know what I want to ask...I just don’t know how to ask it.”

One of the most important things to think about when phrasing your question is . . . how to get to the point. Make your questions as direct as possible. You don’t want the speaker to begin his answer to you with “I’m not really sure what you are asking.” Be clear and concise; don’t add details that don’t matter to your question or the answer.



Think about the question you want answered. Begin your sentence with phrases like:

- "Can you re-phrase . . .?"
- "I don't understand what you meant by . . .?"
- "I've never . . . before. Can you show me how to . . .?"
- "Can you repeat that?"
- "How do I . . .?"



Paraphrasing and Clarifying

This means mirroring the information back to the speaker in order to make sure you understand exactly what they want you to do. Clarifying means asking for more information to make something clearer. Some phrases you could use are:

- "So, what you're asking me is . . .?"
- "So, what you're saying is . . .?"
- "So, what I need to do is . . .?"

When you paraphrase the information in your own words, the employer will know that you understand what it is you are supposed to do. It will also help you to remember if you are an auditory learner.

Take Notes

When given verbal instructions, you may only get one or two chances to hear the information. You have to process, understand and remember all of it quickly. Carrying a small notebook with you is a good idea. Make short notes for yourself or draw simple sketches to help you remember the details. There is nothing wrong with making notes. It shows your boss that you want to do the job right.



Learning Activity – Paraphrasing

Paraphrase the following instructions.

Plant the bulbs in staggered rows and then back-fill the holes and fertilize. Only plant 200, even though there are more to go in. Use the landscape fabric because we've had trouble with weeds in this bed. Make sure to cut the X spots on the fabric in the right spots.

The material in the above section was created by Community Literacy of Ontario and the Tri-County Literacy Council (based on Curriculum originally produced by Literacy Link Eastern Ontario). These organizations have given their permission for Landscape Ontario to use this material.

Non-Verbal Communication Skills

Words are important, but they are only part of the communication puzzle. We communicate a lot – intentionally and unintentionally – with facial expressions, eye contact and body language. An important part of non-verbal communication is recognizing that these things often tell people just as much – or more – than the words we are actually saying.

Recognizing key non-verbal cues in ourselves and others is a great first step to making sure that we communicate effectively with others both in and outside the workplace.

Soft Skills

Attitude

Attitude is a feeling or emotion toward a fact, a state or a person. It is a way of thinking that is reflected in your actions. Those actions can be conveyed through your voice, facial expression and body language. In a work environment, it is important that you keep a positive attitude about yourself, others and your job.

Attitude affects the way you approach any situation. It's important that you show people that you can work well with your supervisor and other members of your crew. If you respect and cooperate with others, they will be the same way with you.



Appearance

Employers in this industry know that working outside can be dirty work. Moving sod, cutting brick and kneeling in soil all day can be hard on your appearance. Working in the hot sun can also leave you feeling a little less than fresh. Having said that, it's important that you start your day off right. Show up for work in clean clothes, showered and ready to go. Remember, your job is outdoors, and you will be seen by members of the public and company customers. If you look untidy and sloppy, people may think your work will be untidy and sloppy too. Unfair as it is, you are often judged on your appearance, so make a good impression.

Show Up on Time

One of the biggest complaints employers have is workers not showing up on time, or not showing up at all. The best thing you can do for yourself as an employee is to show up on time. Even better, showing up 15 minutes early is a good practice to develop. Arriving on time or a few minutes early shows your boss that you are responsible, considerate and that you value your job. Lateness sends a negative message to your employer. Lateness tells your employer that you don't really care about your job. It might not be true, but it will cross your employer's mind. Remember, there are a lot of people standing in line behind you, waiting for their chance to show your employer how dedicated they are.

Be Willing to Learn

In an entry-level position, employers don't expect you to come with all the skills you need, but they do expect you to come with a willingness to learn.



How do you show willingness to learn?

Ask questions

- "How do you know when to...?"
- "Why does the ...?"
- "How much do I ...?"

Asking questions isn't a bad thing. A lot of people don't ask questions when they need to or when they should. Asking questions is an excellent way to learn!

Read more about it

There are many books, magazines, websites and television shows about landscaping and gardening. Sometimes learning more about a subject makes the subject more interesting.

Take courses or training

Keep upgrading your skills. If there is something you'd like to learn about, ask someone to show you, or ask where you could find the information. Your coworkers are a valuable resource in helping you learn more. Don't be afraid to ask them for help, advice or information.



Work Hard

Employers pay you to work. That's the bottom line. They don't pay you to stand around looking for something to do. Dig in and do whatever it takes to get the job done. There is a difference between hard work and working hard. Working in the landscaping and grounds maintenance field is hard work. In the summer, it's dirty, hot, sweaty work. In the winter, it's cold, uncomfortable work. Your muscles hurt. You push, pull, carry, drag, dig, pound and bend all day. Your body is a tool to get the job done.

Working hard means that you take your job seriously and you give 100% all the time. You arrive on time and start work immediately. You work until you are given a break. You don't extend your breaks longer than they are supposed to be. You get back to work and give it your all. You work hard right up until your shift is over.

Anticipate What Needs to be Done Next

Employers want you to anticipate what needs to be done. If you finish the task you are given, look around for something else to do. If you are unsure as to whether your boss wants you to do it, just quickly ask: "I see the shipment of annuals has come in, do you want me to water them?" Offering suggestions like this will make your employer's job easier. They don't have to stop and think about what task to assign you next.





Learning Activity – Soft Skills

1. Why is a positive attitude important in a job situation?

2. Sam, a landscape labourer says, *"I'm going to get dirty and sweaty anyway, what does it matter if I show up to work unwashed and in dirty clothes?"* As the owner of a small landscaping company, what would you say to Sam to explain to him why this is a problem?

3. What message does arriving late for work send to your employer about you?

4. How can you plan to show an employer that you have good soft skills?

5. Other than those mentioned, can you list some more soft skills that employers might look for?

The material in the above sections was created by Community Literacy of Ontario and the Tri-County Literacy Council (based on Curriculum originally produced by Literacy Link Eastern Ontario) for the use of Landscape Ontario. We are grateful for their permission to use this material.



Working with Others

When you are on the job you will be working with other people. Having the skills to be a good team member is important.

Traits of a Strong Team

In a strong team people **trust** one another enough to share their thoughts, feelings and ideas. That doesn't mean someone letting loose with a string of swear words to share that they're frustrated ...it's about being honest while being work-appropriate and respectful. Trust is knowing that you can ask for help without being judged, suggest a new way of doing things without it being dismissed out-of-hand, and that you can admit you've made a mistake without being ridiculed or seen as weak. It also means that when other members of the team share ideas or feelings, you respond supportively too.

Much of what we just mentioned is rooted in good communication skills, but there's a behavioural element at play here too. Members of a strong team are **dependable** – everyone on the team can rely on everyone else to do the job or complete the task that they've agreed on. As a team, they know that each member can be counted on, takes their work seriously, and won't abandon it to do something they think is more interesting at the time.

Knowing team members can be counted on is also demonstrated in the way they **support** one another. Most teams can accomplish far more together than the members would individually – and not everyone is an expert at everything. We all need a little help sometimes, and strong teams do a lot of that helping... supporting each other as they work towards both individual and shared goals.

There's a really big difference between the way an individual sport is played compared to how a team sport is played. Take tennis or squash for example. In either of those sports you're playing one-on-one – just you against another player. While you need to observe your opponent and strategize about the best way to beat them, you're doing it on your own – you win or lose based only on how well you're matched, combined with your own strength and decision-making.

Finally, strong teams **respect** and value their members – not just because of what they can do for the team, but because they're human beings too, and everyone has value. It's important to point out that this is especially true when team members are very different from one another. Strong teams not only recognize the differences between the backgrounds, values, lifestyles, experiences and beliefs of their members, but see the value in the new perspective that those differences bring. Interestingly, different opinions within a team can be one of its greatest strengths.



Building Respect

You may have heard the phrase that respect isn't given, it's earned... but we would challenge that it's carefully and deliberately built. You want to be respected and valued, and so does everyone else. So how do you build a culture of respect?

First, learn a bit about your teammates – find out how they are different from and similar to you. Don't necessarily grill them but be observant and friendly – learn a bit about their backgrounds, what they like and don't like, and what's important to them. This knowledge is incredibly powerful, not only because it shows your teammates that you're interested in who they are, but because it helps you understand why they might see things differently than you do. It also gives you information you can use in casual conversation, and an understanding of what sort of topics you might want to avoid. For example, if a teammate shares that they're a vegetarian you can probably skip talking to them about the best way to cook a steak. In the process of demonstrating that you respect their dietary choices, you're also building trust – another key element of a successful team.

Second, remember that seeing things differently isn't the same as a disagreement. Everyone sees the world a little bit differently, according to their past experiences, their values and beliefs, and their perspectives. Too often when we don't see things the same way someone else does, it seems like an opportunity for debate or a contest to prove who's right. That sounds nothing like the supportive environment we just described. There's nothing wrong with different perspectives, and in fact hearing about them can help us grow and see the world around us differently.

When those differences of opinion are big, things get more complicated. As we just discussed, we all have different ways of seeing things, but when those differences are about ideas or topics that we value deeply, they can be harder to accept. This kind of difference of opinion is often interpreted as disrespect – and we're working hard to build respect with our teammates. With that in mind, let's look at a third way to build respect – it's in the way we deal with differences.

The first thing to consider is our own emotional reaction. When someone sees things differently than we do, it can upset us, make us angry, hurt our feelings, or make us feel threatened – depending on the topic. And when we get emotional, we can lose our ability to communicate effectively by lashing out or getting defensive. So the first trick to handling conflicting opinions is to pay attention to how you feel about them, and try to separate those emotions from the issue. Remember, the other person's emotions may be involved too, so those feelings of anger, threat, or hurt could be part of the conversation even if they're not coming from you. Take a couple of deep breaths and refocus your attention on the facts. Controlling our emotional reactions can be hard but recognizing that they can get in the way of communication is a good first step.

Recognizing our emotional response is closely followed by making choices about how we talk to the person we have a difference of opinion with. If someone's perspective seems really off-base, our gut instinct might be to tell them so – bluntly. But team conflicts don't get resolved by telling the other person their point of view is stupid. It actually works against us when we attack someone personally instead of talking about the issue. When we work against each other we're not working toward a solution. The language we use when faced with differing opinions should focus on the actual topic rather than on the other person.

These issues can sometimes arise from miscommunication, or not understanding the other person's experiences or perspective. Remember what we said about diverse teams being the strongest? That means there's a very good chance that you won't have the same experiences to draw from. So start the conversation by asking questions about your teammate's opinion so you can understand why they have it in the first place.

This is a good place to practice the idea of choosing your words wisely too. Consider ways to ask where the other person is coming from that are non-confrontational, like "can you help me understand that?" instead of "how could you think that?"

An important part of asking questions is listening to, and considering, the answers. Be open to the idea that in fact, you may not come to a place where you agree with your teammates completely – but you can arrive at a place where you understand and respect people's opinions or beliefs even when they're different than your own.



Another way words are powerful when you don't see eye-to-eye with a teammate is that they can emphasize the separation between the people involved (for example, "you always do this" and "I can't work with you") or they can reference teamwork instead (for example, "we're handling this really differently" and "we need to figure out how to get past this.").

Focusing on the impact these differences have on other people in the team, or on the overall goals you're trying to accomplish together, is another technique to focus the conversation. Is how you're handling this difference of opinion disrupting your team's ability to focus, damaging their reputation, or hurting their business? Often the impact of an internal disagreement is bigger than just the people immediately involved, and that can be an important shift in perspective.

You have the right to your opinion and so do others. And the goal here isn't necessarily to change someone's mind or debate until you reach an agreement, but to recognize that everyone has the right to different opinions. In strong, effective teams, people know how to express those opinions respectfully without trying to impose their opinions on others.

The material in the above section was created by Literacy Link South Central (LLSC). We are grateful that LLSC gives its permission for this material to be used by Landscape Ontario.



Public Speaking

When working outside there will be times when you will have to speak to members of the public. You need to be aware of the impression you make. Your aim is to give a positive impression of yourself and the organization you work for. This means having good knowledge of your subject and knowing how to speak properly.

When you speak to a customer or a member of the public:



Do's

- Offer help
- Speak politely
- Use words people know
- Use positive body language
- Use polite expressions
- Use appropriate language and tone



Don'ts

- Don't use slang/swear
- Don't use informal language
- Don't mumble
- Don't give unclear answers
- Don't be too technical



Learning Activity – Answering Questions

Read the following examples of an employee answering questions from the public. Mark an x beside the responses that are **NOT** acceptable.

___ “Can I help you?”

___ “What do you want?”

___ “The lilac path is to your left.”

___ “You can’t walk here!”

___ “Careful, you’ll fall on your bottom.”

___ “Meh, I don’t know.”

___ “I’m not sure, but I’ll find out for you.”

___ “There is an accessible washroom near the park. I’ll get you the key.”

___ “Do ya know where to go?”

The material in the above section was created by Community Literacy of Ontario and the Tri-County Literacy Council (based on Curriculum originally produced by Literacy Link Eastern Ontario) for the use of Landscape Ontario. We are grateful for their permission to use this material.



Recheck Your Skills

Now that you've completed the module, let's see how you feel about your interpersonal skills. Read each of the statements below and select the response that best describes you.

Statements	I can do this	I would like to do this better	I can't do this
I know what verbal communication is and why it is important in the workplace			
I know what non-verbal communication is and why it is important in the workplace			
I know how to demonstrate confidence in my work			
I know how to work well with others in the workplace			
I know what language and behaviour is appropriate for the workplace			
I know tips to speak successfully in public			

Now you can go back to the assessment that you completed prior to starting the module and see where you feel your study habits have improved and areas that you can continue to focus on.

Additional Resources

Below you will find a list of other resources you can look at to help you with your study habits.

Verbal Communication Playbook - Literacy Link South Central

<https://irp.cdn-website.com/1a9192fe/files/uploaded/Verbal%20Communication%20Playbook.pdf>



Answer Key

Activity – Speaking Well

1. Member of the public.
2. Co-worker
3. Manager
4. Team leader
5. Trainee

Activity – Communication Skills

1. Most / least / most / listen / 16
2. Answers will vary.
3. Answers will vary.

Activity – Paraphrasing

- Answers will vary.

Activity – Soft Skills

1. Answers will vary.
2. Answers will vary.
3. It sends the message that you are not punctual, don't care about the job, don't take the job seriously, etc.
4. Answers will vary.
5. Answers will vary.

Activity – Answering Questions

The following answers are not acceptable:

- *What do you want*
- *Meh, I don't know*
- *Do ya know where to go*