

6 tips for better communication while wearing masks

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It's hard enough to communicate effectively at work under normal circumstances. Today, wearing masks for public safety is a fact of life, but at work it can lead to a steady stream of puzzled looks and "Sorry, what was that?" responses as people struggle to hear and be heard.

One employee who is hard of hearing told us: "The rest of the world is getting a glimpse into some of the challenges I deal with every day." And for those who have hearing loss (approximately 12% of the U.S. workforce) or face language barriers, masks can make a challenging situation even tougher.



Thankfully, there's plenty that you and your team can do to minimize mask-related communication frustrations — for yourselves, your colleagues, and your customers.

1. If possible, avoid using masks that heavily muffle or distort your voice.

Not all masks are equal when it comes to interfering with your speech. For example, surgical masks, which are less likely to absorb sound or restrict your jaw and lip movement, have been found to have a minimal effect on others' ability to understand you when you speak. Whereas masks made of thicker material or multi-ply fabric may absorb more sound, and tighter masks can smash your nose, lips, and jaw, hampering your articulation. There are also see-through masks that allow people to read lips and see more facial expressions.

Of course, your top priority should be wearing the type of mask prescribed by your organization and health officials. But if you have discretion, consider holding a team discussion about what type of mask would work best in your situation for both safety and communication. Encourage people to wear that type and, if possible, keep a few spares at your workplace.

Note: This article does not cover wearing masks for safety. See [World Health Organization guidelines](#) for when and how to use masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

2. Know your speaking tendencies — and adjust as needed so that you can be better understood in a mask.

Do you tend to talk to people while you're looking away — maybe at your phone or screen? Or while you're seated and they are standing? Do you mumble? Does your voice trail off in order to open the floor to feedback or questions? Without a mask, common habits like these may not cause comprehension issues, but they likely will when you're wearing one.

If you can't easily identify your habits, ask your colleagues about times when they've had trouble hearing or understanding you. Based on what you learn, consider:

- Speaking while facing the other person and making eye contact
- Speaking on the same physical plane as others — with everyone either sitting or standing
- Speaking slowly and clearly articulating words (without overdoing it — you don't want to sound like you're talking to an infant)
- Projecting your voice as if you're giving a presentation
- Maintaining your voice volume through the end of your sentences

And if some of your direct reports have speaking habits that make them hard to understand, consider giving feedback on what you notice, explaining the impact it's having on team communication.

3. Develop strategies to address your team's most common communication difficulties.

What specific issues have emerged since your team started wearing masks? It's easy for people to get annoyed and say, "We just can't communicate in masks!" But if you and your team take the time to identify everyone's new challenges, you'll be better able to come up with creative solutions. For example:

- **Challenge:** Your team is mishearing customer orders.
- **Possible solution:** Establish a standard practice of repeating back orders to be sure they are correct.
- **Challenge:** Customers are mishearing your team's instructions.
- **Possible solution:** Create a sign or printout with key instruction points, so customers have both verbal and visual explanations.
- **Challenge:** People are frequently not understanding or mishearing certain words that your group uses often — for example, unfamiliar words, such as business jargon, or word sounds that are hard to distinguish ("sh" and "th" can sound the same)
- **Possible solution:** Agree to use common words and substitutes with more distinct sounds (e.g., "hope" instead of "wish," which can sound like "with").

- **Challenge:** In crowded, noisy workplace environments, team members struggle to understand one another while wearing masks.
- **Possible solutions:** Use basic sign language signs or develop a few hand signals to communicate common questions or responses. Or, if you have the space, designate a quiet zone in a side room or outside area where people can talk more easily.

Check in with your team periodically about how well your solutions are working and adjust as needed. Also, keep in mind that challenges may evolve as your work environment changes, so you may need to devise new tactics if, say, your company adds or removes plexiglass barriers or changes the flow of foot traffic in your office.

4. Have back-up tactics you can try when masked communication isn't working.

Even with proactive strategies in place for clear communication while wearing masks, you'll still have some miscues, especially if your situation includes compounding factors like a loud environment, unfamiliar accents, or people with hearing loss.

To avoid frustrations, try tactics like these — either using them yourself or asking the person you're struggling to hear to try them:

- **Instead of repeating a point, rephrase it.** When there's a misunderstanding, repeating the exact same words can cause the exact same issues again. Try instead, *"I'm sorry, I didn't hear that. Could you please try saying it another way?"* or *"Let me try saying that another way"* — the new sounds and new context might be enough to make the message click.
- **Try again using shorter, simpler sentences.** When people speak lots of words in a stream of consciousness or use very complex sentences, it's easy for listeners to lose the point partway through. If someone confuses you with a complicated message, try asking, *"Could you please explain that again, one step at a time?"* And to repackage your messages, share a small piece, pause to allow your listener to confirm understanding or to ask for clarification, then share the next piece. For example: *"The primary issue is X. [brief pause] It's causing Y to happen. [brief pause] I recommend Z."*
- **Keep a notepad nearby or use a cell phone to write out messages.** If verbal communication isn't working, why not try written? Expressing your message may take a minute or two longer, but you'll hopefully do it only once.

5. Verbally check in about how people are doing, rather than relying on reading their faces, voices, and/or body language.

Most people don't realize how much they rely on nonverbal signals to read others' emotions. When someone approaches you with a smile, you read them as happy and expect a positive interaction. But when you have access to only part of a person's face and their speech is muffled, it can mess with your ability to read signals. For example, some research suggests that without the visual cues of the mouth, people may confuse happiness for disgust. Or you may think that someone is angry because they're speaking loudly, when they're just trying to make sure you hear them.

Rather than using partial information to make possibly wrong assumptions, verbally ask the person a question about how they're doing in order to fill in the blanks. This could be as simple as greeting a customer with *"Were you able to find everything today?"* Or you might offer your read of a direct report's state of mind so that they can either confirm or clarify (e.g., *"That sounds frustrating ..."* to which the person might respond yes or *"Oh, it hasn't been too bad"*). Then you can calibrate your response accordingly.

6. Find alternate ways to send positive signals (which masks can mute).

Of course, when you wear a mask, your smiles go unseen, too. So, it may be no surprise that research on patient perceptions of healthcare professionals suggests that they view mask-wearing doctors as less warm and empathetic than those not wearing masks.

To compensate for this mask effect and ensure that your team expresses the positivity they actually feel, you could suggest that people:

- **Wear positive messages on their masks or name tags.** For customers, you might write "I'm here to help" or add a big smiley face. Or, if your team interacts mostly with one another, consider allowing them to personalize their look with a favorite image or graphic (as long as the masks still meet safety guidelines and the image is appropriate for your workplace).
- **Be intentional about using positive body language.** This could mean giving friendly waves to greet people or thumbs-up signals to show agreement. Or, if you're a free-spirited team, you could urge people to do a little dance (or a big goofy one) when things are going well.