Work Talk

Effective workplace communication with employees with an intellectual disability

Contact details

Branch	National Disability Operations
Department	Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
Postal address	GPO Box 9820 SYDNEY NSW 2001
Phone	1300 653 227 Toll Free
Website	www.facsia.gov.au

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Introduction

Welcome to *Work Talk*.

The team who put the manual together and the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs who funded its production, hope you find it useful in your work supporting employees with disabilities.

Aim of this manual

The aim of the manual is to bring together information about and strategies for effective workplace communication in Disability Employment Services. It focuses on the communication between the employee with a disability (we've called them 'supported employees' here, but your service may use a different term) and staff who work with them directly (again, we've used the term 'support staff' but your service may use terms like supervisor, team leader or job coach). If you have a different role, you may find the examples and case studies less familiar or directly relevant but we hope you will still be able to make use of the strategies we suggest for your workplace communication with supported employees, specifically those with an intellectual disability.

Worktalk introduces a fictional business service, *Merrinvale Enterprises*. Throughout the manual you will meet a number of people connected with Merrinvale, including some of its supported employees and support staff (who Merrinvale call 'supervisors'). Merrinvale provides the 'stage' for case studies and scenarios that illustrate the communication situations support staff may encounter in their everyday work with people with intellectual disabilities.

Merrinvale Enterprises is used as the organisation for the case studies presented throughout the workbook. The Implementation Guide includes information and background about Merrinvale and its staff.

Relationship to the Disability Service Standards

Using *Work Talk* will assist services to meet the requirements of a number of standards. For example, it will be useful in relation to Standard 11, provision of appropriate and relevant training and skills for each staff member.

Structure

This manual has four sections:

- this introduction
- an implementation guide
- an introduction to intellectual disabilities
- the series of ten communication and learning topics that make up the bulk of the manual.

The learning topics are based around communication situations you are likely to encounter in the workplace.

On each of the learning topic pages you will find four sections:

- some background information or theory about effective workplace communication strategies
- a case study or example. The case studies and examples are set in a fictional service called Merrinvale and describe some of the interactions that members of the support staff have with supported employees and/or their reflections on those interactions
- strategies for achieving effective communication and learning
- a page for you to add your own notes or thoughts.

Using the manual

You may be asked to use this manual in a number of ways:

- as a self-paced learning resource which you work through on your own
- as a basis for discussion and learning about a particular topic or topics at a staff meeting or in a short training session
- to help you develop your strategies in particular situations or with particular supported employees
- as the basis for a training session for other support staff.

Implementation guide

This section is designed to assist people delivering or co-ordinating staff training to use *Work Talk* most effectively, either in group training sessions or as an aid to individual, self-paced learning by individual staff members.

Purpose and focus

The main aim of *Work Talk* is to bring together information about and strategies for, effective workplace communication between support staff and supported employees in Disability Employment Services. Effective communication is critical in any workplace, particularly between people who have supervisory or supporting roles and the people they are supporting or directing.

The focus is on communication – skills in it, what makes communication effective, how to know when to use particular strategies, and practising those strategies.

Work Talk is designed to be used in a number of ways:

- **As a self-paced, independent learning resource.**

  You may want staff to work through the workbook on their own, and at their own pace. If you are encouraging people to do this, suggest to them that they use the notes section of each topic to record either additional strategies that they use or as a reminder of work situations or interactions with particular people where they are going to use one of the suggested strategies.

- **As a resource for assisting to resolve a particular communication difficulty.**

  Because *Work Talk* is organised around a range of typical workplace communication situations, it can be a useful tool for tackling communication difficulties. For example if there is a problem with getting the message about safety across to a supported employee, the strategies suggested in *Talking about safety* might be helpful.

- **As a discussion starter at a staff meeting.**

  Communication issues can often be at the bottom of other workplace problems. A section of *Work Talk* – perhaps just one of the case studies or a set of strategies – can provide a 'neutral' way of beginning a discussion rather than launching straight into the actual workplace problem.

- **As the basis for short training sessions.**

  The topics in *Work Talk* are deliberately brief. They can be covered in 30 to 45 minute training sessions. Hints and tips for structuring a training session using a *Work Talk* topic are included below.

- **As part of the resources used to run a longer/more comprehensive training program incorporating communications skills development.**

  Case studies, diary extracts, strategies or whole topics from *Work Talk* can be used as resources for communication skills development in other training programs.

In addition to the printed copy of the workbook, your service will have received an accompanying CD which contains a set of .pdf files. They are:

- a file that contains the text of the whole book
- a series of ten files that cover each of the *Work Talk* topics
- a file that contains this implementation guide.

This gives you the opportunity to print multiple copies of all or parts of the workbook for use by staff. We suggest that if you are planning to use the entire workbook over a period of time you provide each staff member with a folder and add to the materials as you are preparing to use them.

Hints for running facilitated sessions

Here are a few hints for conducting a discussion or a training session using *Work Talk*.

Remember that *Work Talk* is not formal, accredited training – it's a learning tool and a practical guide to effective communication between support staff and supported employees with an intellectual disability. So it is unlikely that you'll be running formal training. In fact it is a good idea to keep the atmosphere informal.

Your role

We've described you as a 'facilitator' quite deliberately. You are helping (assisting, facilitating) people to broaden the range of communication strategies they have at their disposal. This involves giving them access to information (from the materials in the work book and from other sources), assisting them to share their knowledge and experience with others, encouraging them to be open to ideas and suggestions and strategies from others in the group, and developing their awareness of their own skills and learning needs.

It isn't as hard as it sounds, but there are things to remember about what NOT to do as a facilitator. Try not to:

- **Dominate.** You will have information, knowledge and experience to share, but your primary role is to draw the information and knowledge from other people and relate it to the topic in hand. If you talk for more than 10 minutes in a 30 minute session you've probably said too much.
- **Play favourites.** You will probably find some peoples' ideas or views are closer to your own than others. Make sure that all opinions get a fair hearing. Remember you and others with knowledge can only help people who have a limited understanding of the topic to understand more, if you know what they are thinking and know already.
- **Get side tracked into talking about particular people, workplace issues or problems.** Remember in all sessions where you are using *Work Talk,* the emphasis is on communication skills.

Preparation

- Make sure you have enough copies of the section or sections of *Work Talk* that you are using. If you are expecting people to bring their own copy of the workbook, have a few spares – that way there are no problems for the people who forget or have lost their copy or claim they never received one.
- Be clear about what it is about effective communication that you are trying to achieve – information, improved awareness, behaviour change, a resolution to a problem. This lets you evaluate how successful the session has been and will help you to manage the expectations of other people.
- Ensure you are thoroughly familiar with the content of the topic or topics you are covering. Read everything through – preferably more than once. Look at the case studies and diary sections in particular. Think about what messages they contain about effective (or ineffective) communication and how you will help people understand those messages.
- Think about how you want to approach the session. Do you want to ask the questions and for people to provide answers through you? Do you want to let discussion range freely with your role being to bring people back on track if the discussion gets too far away from the topic? In many cases a session will be a combination of the two. When you are thinking about your approach, think about:
  - the purpose of the session (information, problem solving, etc)
  - the people in the session (are there people who may dominate a free flowing discussion? Are there people who have a lot of information to share but will need to be encouraged to do so?)
  - how much time is available (short sessions often benefit from a more formal structure).
- Have a time plan worked out. For example in a 30 minute session you may spend five minutes introducing the topic, 10 minutes talking about the case study, another 10 looking at the strategies and five minutes drawing the threads together and rounding off the session.

Using the materials

Aside from the introduction, each topic follows a standard format.

Presentation

Each topic is presented over four pages. The first page is a heading and 'preview' of the topic. The second and third contain the background information, case studies, diary notes and strategies. The fourth page is a notes page.

Background

This is theoretical or background information relevant to the topic. For example in topic 1 *'Talking about talking and listening'*, the background information is about effective communication and barriers.

You could use this material by:

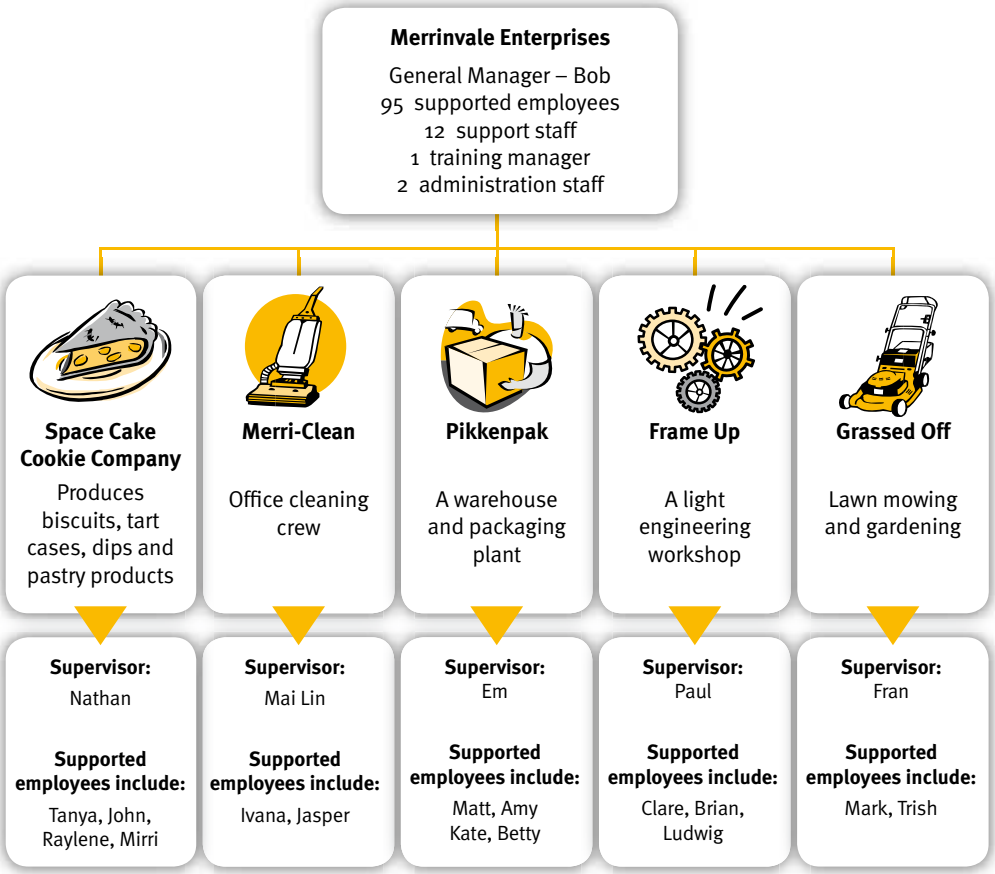
- asking people to describe something they have experienced that illustrates the content
- asking people for their reaction to what is said – do they agree, how applicable is it to their situation, etc.

Case studies

People in the case studies are supported employees and support staff from Merrinvale enterprises.

Merrinvale Enterprises opened in 1972 to provide 'sheltered' employment to people with disabilities. It has undergone many changes in the past 30 years and has been certified under the Disability Service Standards since 2003. In the last financial year, Merrinvale's grant from the government was $980,000, and the business activities generated $2.3 million.

The diagram below describes Merrinvale's structure and business.



A number of the supervisors keep diaries or notes which allow us to see how they deal with some of the challenges in their daily work.

The case studies are put together in a range of ways. In some cases a behaviour or incident is simply described; in others you will also be given insights into the approach to communication with supported employees of Merrinvale's support staff.

The case studies can be used as a basis for discussion. You could explore:

- where they demonstrate effective communication practice
- what may be causing the problems the supervisors are having
- how well the supervisor's experiences match those of people in the group.

Be aware that people might 'recognise' themselves or their own behaviour in the case studies and, in some cases, may not like what they see. This may lead to them defending what was said or done and create conflict in the group. A way to handle that is to deflect the discussion with a question like 'What could Em have done instead?' or 'If you were advising Nathan on this issue, what would you suggest he did?' rather than asking 'What did Em do here that was wrong?'.

Strategies

These are suggestions for practical ways to improve workplace communication between support staff and supported employees with an intellectual disability. They are just that – *suggestions* – and will not fit every situation or solve every problem.

As well as reading them through with the group and talking about the ideas they present try:

- brainstorming situations where these strategies would be useful (Remember the rules of brainstorming – all ideas are accepted and recorded. They are only debated or rejected after the brainstorm is finished)
- coming up with additional strategies
- 'acting out' the strategies.

Notes

Obviously this last page is designed for people to make their own notes on the topic covered. You might suggest they:

- identify people/situations/tasks where they could use a particular strategy to improve communication
- note down any additional strategies suggested by the group
- keep adding to the notes after the session as they use the strategies – notes could indicate how well (or not well) they worked.

Intellectual disabilities, communication and learning

An introduction to intellectual disabilities

Intellectual disabilities

Intellectual disabilities affect a large number of people in disability employment services. The causes of intellectual disabilities are complex and varied, and the impacts are equally complex and cannot be summed up merely as 'slow learning'. The way employment services tailor themselves to meet the individual needs of people with intellectual disabilities is a key issue for support staff. Awareness of the ways an intellectual impairment affects an individual, their thought processes, communication, emotional responses, and their learning, enables planning and implementation of specific strategies to assist the person with the intellectual disability develop his or her employment potential.

What is intelligence?

Your average caveman ancestor spent his days hunting and gathering food but still had a brain capable of puzzling over quantum physics (if he'd wanted to). Human intelligence has evolved to ensure the survival of a species which lives in groups within complex social structures. Each person's brain has a similar neurological structure, but also allows for strong individual differences.

Intelligence is often taken to be a global quality that allows us to 'act rationally, purposefully and effectively'. Cognition, or thinking, consists of three main functions:

1. Concept attainment – the use of language or other symbols to mentally represent information and allow us to organise our thinking about people, objects and ideas.
2. Problem – solving-using learned procedures and 'lateral thinking' skills to recognise and solve problems.
3. Reasoning – the use of inductive and deductive reasoning to arrive at logical conclusions.

Inherent biological processes prompt intelligence to develop through changes in a person's quality of thinking as they grow to adulthood. In infancy, thinking is largely undifferentiated with an all-or-none quality to it at first. By the time we are in adolescence, however, most of us will have acquired the ability to think in the abstract, and are no longer confined to actual concrete experience as an anchor for thought.

What is an 'intellectual disability'?

An intellectual disability results from difficulties a person may have in fulfilling tasks, or adapting to an environment or circumstances as a result of some impairment in their intellectual functioning.

We all have impairments in our intellectual functioning in some form, some of the time, even quite a lot of the time, according to different situations. Think about needing to estimate the cost of all the items in your supermarket basket when you've always had great difficulty with mental calculation. Or you're in a meeting where you need to attend to 2 or 3 widely differing viewpoints and it's hard for you to process information aurally. Most of us cope with such challenges because we've got to know what we can and can't do and adapt our behaviour accordingly. We can do this because, overall, our intellectual functioning allows us to make the necessary adjustments.

When intellectual functioning is impaired more severely, a person may experience significant difficulties, not just in tasks like adding up their grocery bill, but, more importantly, in the way they learn and in their transactions with other people.

The degree to which a person is disabled by intellectual impairment will be significantly influenced not only by the level of impairment experienced, but also by the degree to which specific deficits in intellectual functioning are identified and remedied. It is only by getting to know some of these specific impacts that effective ways can be found to assist the person with an intellectual disability learn and achieve.

Owing to the vast combination of causes, impairments and disabling effects, the label 'intellectual disability' is, by necessity, very broad and imprecise. Intellectual disabilities result from a wide variety of cognitive impairments which may themselves be products of a range of genetic, medical and social conditions. Whatever the cause, intellectual impairments will show up in the behaviour of individuals – frequently as deficits in learning, communication, independence and self-direction.

Fundamentally, intellectual impairments affect learning and, in turn, the social and psychological functioning of the person. These lead, in turn, to the person experiencing a disability.

What is the real issue for employment services?

Any service that aims to assist people with intellectual disabilities build work skills is involved in assisting them to learn. The more support staff know about how their workers learn, and how *they* can set things up so that every learning opportunity is optimised, the better will be the outcomes for the worker. Good learning does not 'just happen' most of the time. It cannot be left to chance. It requires structure and planning to work out how things are best presented for someone to learn them effectively. Above all, it requires good communication.

Let's look at some of the crucial things that have to be communicated in any workplace and consider how we can make our communication as effective as possible to assist our workers with intellectual disabilities develop their skills and potential through active and meaningful learning.

Any worker anywhere needs to learn:

- what is required of them to do their job properly
- what will be provided for them to do their job properly
- essential safety skills
- how they will know whether or not they are doing their job as required
- what is expected of them to 'fit in' to the team or work environment
- what to do if they need help or something goes wrong
- what to do if things change
- how to make their needs known.

Workers with intellectual disabilities need to know exactly the same things: *we* just need to ensure we communicate this information so workers can engage in the individual learning process that enables them to act purposefully and deal effectively with it.

The communication process

How often have you made the mistake of thinking that just because you said something to someone, they took on board what you said – and really understood what you meant by it? If only! Communication is much more than just talking. In any communication there is always a concrete, visible and/or audible level to the experience as well as an unseen, unheard and very abstract level. You can affect people, and they can affect you, without a single word being exchanged.

It helps to understand the basic process involved when we communicate.

Communication is the **PROCESS** of transmitting information between people and there are always three elements involved:

1. **A sender** who wants to communicate something – an idea, opinion, fact or something they want to occur.
2. **A message or transmission.** The sender works out what they want to say, why, and to whom. For the message to be clearly communicated, the sender must understand their purpose in sending it. Once they are clear on this, the sender needs to work out how to form the message (the words, diagrams or symbols that will best convey the message as it is intended).
3. **A receiver** who gets the message, tries to work out its meaning, and then takes action on it.

Communication is only effective when the people with whom you're communicating:

- receive your message
- understand it
- respond in the manner you intended.

Understanding is only possible in a communication when the receiver has the materials they need to interpret the message correctly. Whenever we communicate (that is, be **the sender**), we must find out if our message has been understood and acted on in the way we intended. The next step in the communication process is, therefore, to seek feedback regarding our communicated message. We check both verbal and non-verbal behaviours and actions to determine whether the message has got there.

This step restarts the communication process: the receiver makes a response to the first message.

It pays to remember that the communication process is complex. There are many potential barriers to effective communication at each stage of the process. These include:

- individual characteristics of both sender and receiver of the message
- problems in the transmission of the message
- inattention to the message – for whatever reason
- a different interpretation of the message from the one intended.

Whatever the reason, if the message is not received and acted upon in something close to the way the sender intended, then communication has not taken place.

Effects of intellectual disabilities on communication

Some people with intellectual disabilities find it difficult to communicate. Some common communication problems for people with intellectual disabilities include:

- problems in ordering thoughts and language in a 'logical' fashion – words and sentences can come out, but it's hard to see where the statement is going
- difficulties learning to listen and take turns in conversation
- problems using communication in an interactive sense
- difficulties relating objects and actions to spoken or written words.

People with intellectual disabilities need to be shown that communication is both expected and worthwhile. No-one ever finishes learning to communicate; we constantly learn new skills and strategies in expressing ourselves. Support staff have a crucial role to play in supporting employees build their communication skills.

The learning process

Just as communication consists of much more than 'just talking', *learning* consists of much more than 'just being told'.

Learning can be defined as the processing of information we encounter, which leads to changes, or an increase in knowledge and abilities.

Learning is an *active process*. Unless the learner is engaged in the process, there can be no learning.

We all learn in a number of ways:

1 We learn through the responses we get to our actions. This is called ***instrumental learning***. We come to associate particular ways of behaving with particular responses we get to the behaviour. We learn to smile and say 'thank you' when someone gives us something we like, because we learn that we're more likely to be offered it again if we do so. In other words, our polite response is *reinforced*. People learn just as many faulty responses as they do correct ones, however, because often the faulty ones are reinforced.

2 We also learn a great deal simply by observing and imitating what others do. This type of learning can be called ***modelling***. People imitate, or model their behaviour on what others do because they see *their* behaviour reinforced.

3 As our thinking develops, we learn to build concepts. The advertising slogan 'this goes with that' sums up what ***concept learning*** is about. Concepts make our learning more efficient. They help us order and classify things – things on which people can sit, things on which people can't sit, birds that fly, colours, blue colours, red colours, friendly faces, angry faces, and so on, infinitely. Concepts are the organisers of our incoming information.

4 As our ability to learn concepts develops, we can start to engage in ***rule learning***. A rule is the relation between two or more concepts. When you understand that 2 + 3 = 5, that dogs bark and that planes fly, you have learned rules. In each case the rule depends on the prior learning of the other concepts '2', '3', 'dog', 'bark' and so on. We use rules all the time in our thinking. They make it easier for us to respond to a wide range of situations and problems.

Effects of intellectual disabilities on learning

Intellectual disabilities affect both the capacity for learning and the way in which learning occurs. The learning process is very complex and individual, but it appears that the same processes apply to everyone, regardless of their intellectual level. People with severely impaired intelligence learn in the same way as people with above average intelligence. What differs is the level of learning performance:

- how much is learned
- how quickly it is learned
- how long the learning is retained
- what needs must be met during the learning process, and so on.

People with intellectual disabilities can certainly learn but they will usually have more difficulty than people without intellectual disabilities. We can assist workers with intellectual disabilities learn by finding out their learning needs, and developing the best strategies to assist them learn.

There are some key things that can make learning difficult for people with intellectual disabilities.

Memory

Memory is the ability to encode, process and retrieve the information that we are exposed to through our sensory systems. As the information comes in our *sensory memory* tells us there's a sight or sound or touch that registers with us, we start to process what it is, and whether it's important for us to attend to it.

Many people with intellectual disabilities experience problems in their memory performance that will make learning difficult. For example, there can be problems selecting what is relevant and what's not (*selective attention*) of what comes in. Our short-term and working memories usually help us make the right choice, because we link incoming information to stored information in our long-term memory, updating the new information in terms of what we remember from before. Obviously, this is much harder if you have intellectual problems that prevent quick and adaptive memory recall.

Language and communication

We not only need to know what words stand for in order to use language, we also need to know the rules that link words, and the way we use words in different situations. To have communication competence, we must also know how to make the language work for us in a social interaction.

Many forms of intellectual impairment can result in language and communication problems. For instance, consider these sentences:

1 *Miriam was upset when Margaret hurt herself.*

2 *Miriam was upset when Margaret hurt her.*

Some people with an intellectual disability would find it hard to tell you what is different between the two sentences (that is, who is hurt in sentence 1, and who in sentence 2), because they do not understand the grammatical rules that give them their actual meaning.

Reading and writing abilities

Many people with intellectual disabilities have difficulties with reading and writing. This leads to more difficulties than just those that come from not being able to read an instruction, or write their name on a form. The abilities to read and write are thought to actually assist all learning because of the connection between these abilities and our other language abilities.

Reading and writing abilities are thought to be key elements of our main functional language systems:

- language by ear (*listening*)
- language by mouth (*speaking*)
- language by eye (*reading*)
- language by hand (*writing*).

It appears that these functional language systems *work together* and help each other make the links between the systems. Thus, people who can read and write may make better sense of the information coming in (say, a spoken message – *language by ear*), and thus learn it more efficiently and effectively just because they've got these other systems (*language by hand* and *language by eye*) working for them to assist their understanding. Studies have shown that people who can't read or write very well may have more difficulty processing information than people who can.

Concrete thinking

It is very common for people with intellectual disabilities to be reliant on concrete supports for their thinking. They need to have objects and events on hand in order to think about them, or to be able to imagine a concrete example of them while solving a problem. Thus, thinking is confined to what has been, or is being, experienced.

Concrete thinkers cannot work with abstract ideas, especially those problems that require thinking about what things would be like *if* something were different from the way it is now. Mostly, we solve problems by a planned approach in which we think about a range of solutions or ideas, and test out which is likely to be best.

People who can think abstractly can speculate on any number of possibilities, but a concrete thinker cannot.

Social and psychological effects

The biggest barrier faced by anyone with any form of intellectual impairment is having their potential recognised and realised. The social and psychological impacts of an intellectual disability will be determined by the responses made to the individual's needs. Two common social and psychological impacts on the person with an intellectual disability are:

- *Low expectations* of the person with an intellectual disability held by families, teachers and trainers, and support workers (the '*they couldn't learn that*' syndrome). This will generally have negative consequences for his or her self-esteem and can set up a 'self-fulfilling prophesy'.
- *Learned helplessness*. If people doubt their competence and worth as a person, they will come to believe they have no influence over the things that happen to them and around them. When this happens, they feel helpless. Helpless to take on the challenge of learning. Our perception of our ability to influence or change things keeps us motivated and energised. Someone who feels powerless in the face of events often seems to others to be unwilling, uncooperative or unmotivated *('She doesn't want to learn')*.

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about talking and listening

Whether it is verbal, non-verbal, spoken, written or visual communication, it is all about sending and receiving messages.

One of your key roles is to assist supported employees to communicate as effectively as possible. This is critical for their development as workers.

Three elements are involved in the **process** of transmitting information between people.

- **A sender** who wants to communicate something such as an idea, opinion, fact, etc.
- **A message or transmission** is what the sender wants to say, why, and to whom. The sender needs to be clear on the purpose of the message and then work out how to form the message (the words, diagrams or symbols that will best convey the message as it is intended).
- **A receiver** who gets the message, works out its meaning, and then takes action on it.

Communication is only effective when the people with whom you're communicating:

- receive your message
- understand it
- respond in the manner you intended.

At each stage of the process there are many potential barriers to effective communication. These include:

- individual characteristics of both sender and receiver of the message
- problems in the transmission of the message
- inattention to the message – for whatever reason
- a different interpretation of the message from the one intended.

Whatever the reason, if the receiver does not receive the message *in something very close to the way* it was meant then communication has not taken place.

Intellectual disability can make it hard for an employee to talk and listen. Some common issues are problems in the abilities to conceptualise thoughts and express them, focus attention on what is being said and make the sounds and use the speech rhythms that make language understandable to others.

No one can go to work and do their job properly without communicating with others. Supported employees should know their communication responsibilities:

- making their needs and choices known including their personal goals, problems, grievances
- taking on information communicated to them, for example, the name of their supervisor, which days they work, etc
- assisting their organisation meet its objectives by knowing the targets for their work area, making suggestions about improvements, etc.

Fulfilling these responsibilities requires both support staff and supported employees to use talking and listening skills.

From Em's notebook

I've just read in this new communication book that you get a lot further with people with communication difficulties if you listen and observe for 80% of the time and talk for only 20% of it.

I've been doing far too much of the talking. I even often answer my own questions! Like today when I was helping Amy do the washing:

We're going to put the washing powder in now aren't we, because this is when we put it in, isn't it? You always do it before you start the machine because it's better that way, isn't it? It stops the soap powder getting all glued together which it does sometimes, doesn't it?

Arrrrghh!! It's a wonder Amy didn't shove the soap powder down my throat. I must learn to follow the 80/20 rule. Not easy for someone born with verbal diarrhoea ...

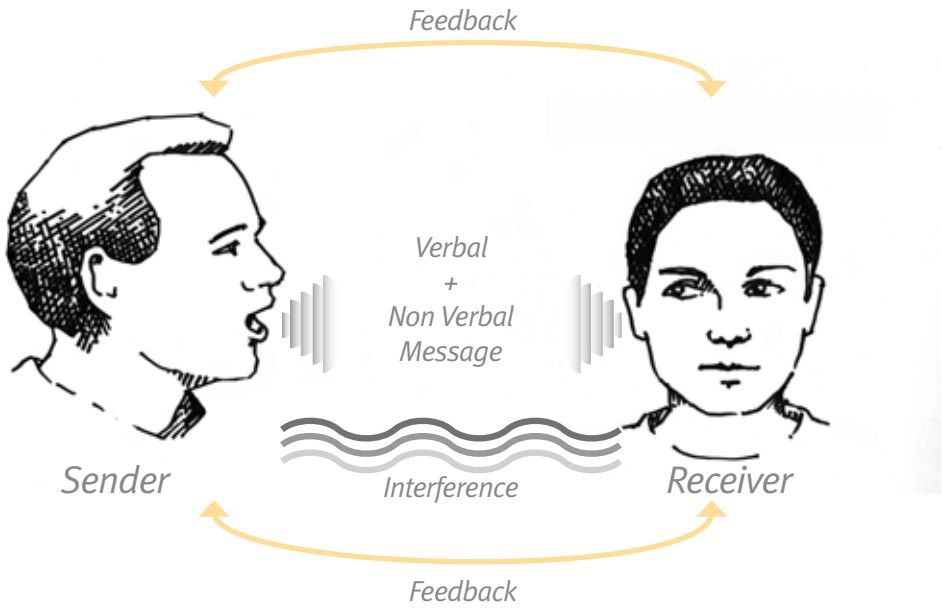
Matt's story

Matt is 28. He has only about 12 spoken words and rarely interacts with others. He will sit next to people, but turns his head away from facing them.

Matt is 'captured' by spinning things, the wheel on the labelling machine, the pallet wrapper in action. He will stare fixedly at these for as long as they go around.

To engage attention or respond to someone saying something to him, Matt holds up his index finger and says loudly, 'one'. For the first three years he was at Merrinvale, support workers would reply to this greeting by holding up two fingers and saying 'two', and sometimes going on with 'three' and 'four'. This was Matt's only social interaction in the workplace, and while it probably helped Matt feel comfortable and welcome, the strategy was not extending his communication. It was discovered that Matt understands more words than he actually speaks and that he can convey the meaning and purpose of language through other means. He points to things when asked; he will copy actions and sound patterns, and can, in subtle and individual ways, communicate some feelings.

He will say 'hello' in response to a greeting, and has started making eye contact when people say his name.



Strategies

1 Get to know the employee. By observation, personal interaction, and speaking with others who know the employee well, find out what their level of understanding and expression are, so you can 'match' your communication styles. For example, if a supported employee says to you, *'I don't have any problems with punctuality. I'm here at 8 each morning'*, you don't need to talk about the big hand being on 8 and the little hand on 12 when she gets to her work bench.

2 Use simple language and clear gestures. Speak slowly and distinctly using the same word or words to name or describe objects each time. For example say the 'pallet wrapper' each time, not the 'wrapping machine', or the 'plastic wrapper'.

3 Encourage the employee to repeat names, terms and instructions as they are doing the task.

I'm putting the packet on the line with its open side facing up.

4 Don't talk too much. A lot of people make the mistake of over-talking when they work with someone with an intellectual disability. The longer the stream of talk, the harder it is for the listener to process. Provide information in clear, well-spaced, short and simple sentences.

Put the syrup in now ... Use the cup to measure it ... Shut the lid ... Push the button.

5 Be a good listener. Listening is an active process requiring:

- **attending skills** – an 'involved' posture, eye contact, a non-distracting environment
- **following skills** – non-verbal (nods, gestures) and paraverbal responses (*aha, mmm*) that recognise points and encourage people to go on talking
- **reflecting skills** – paraphrasing, reflecting feelings (*you felt good when you worked it out yourself*), summarising.

6 Don't ask too many questions and never ask a question just for the sake of saying something: always have a purpose for your question.

7 Keep them on track. Help employees keep communication purposeful by guiding them back to key points.

That's interesting but I want to know what you do with the flour mixture now.

We talked about that before. Now we're talking about ...

8 Promote reality. Sometimes a person with an intellectual disability will persist with what appear to be fantasies or highly unrealistic expectations. Often this is simply a public airing of the sort of wishful thinking everyone does but most people keep private. You can assist employees by encouraging them to have dreams and goals but, at the same time, reminding them of the fact that these are, as yet, just that.

No, you're not playing footy for Collingwood on Friday. On Friday afternoon we're having the staff versus employee football match and you're on the employee team ... I bet you'll kick some goals.

9 Always explain the purpose of your communication.

Matt, I'm going to talk to you now about how we put the labels on the can.

10 Communicate one-to-one with the employee as much as possible. Use the individual's name to make sure they understand you are talking to them. And make sure you get their attention.

Tanya – I'd like to talk with you... I am going to show you the correct way to stack the forms.

11 Minimise distractions to get the person's best attention and concentration. Use a separate work bench, or whatever is appropriate, so that you can be free from interruptions.

12 Always check for understanding – all along the communication flow. You can do this by asking the employee for an explanation in their own words, or to show you. Try not to ask 'Do you understand?', because 'understanding' is an abstract concept! Instead, check by saying something like:

Will you please show me what we're going to put on the cans, Matt?

13 Remember that poor expression does not necessarily mean poor understanding. Most people understand more than they express. Matt may not be able to say the word 'label' but can point out a label to show his understanding.

14 Use language even with people who don't express themselves verbally. Understanding comes before the spoken word. Putting things into words helps order thinking and attend to things. Language helps people with intellectual disabilities concentrate on what they are doing.

15 Use visual methods to substitute for or add to your verbal message. Pictures, photos, symbols and facial expressions are all very useful aids to making communication more specific and meaningful to someone who has limited language.

16 Don't be scared to tell someone if you don't understand them.

Could you point to the label Matt?

17 Ask questions in several different ways to clarify your understanding.

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about learning

Assisting people with intellectual disabilities to learn new skills, new routines or new behaviours requires particular communication skills.

All employees, including those with intellectual disabilities, need to know that they are continuously learning the skills of being a worker. Everyone has to learn these skills and go on learning to develop new skills and learn new tasks. You need to assist supported employees to understand their role as learners and why it is important to learn and keep on learning work skills.

1. Work shows other people we are independent adults.
2. Going to work shows other people that we are productive members of the community.
3. Work is a chance to learn and develop skills.
4. Through our work, we set ourselves goals for getting better at things.
5. When we see ourselves getting better at things, we feel better about ourselves.
6. When we work well, we contribute to our organisation and that means everyone gains.

People learn best when they take an active part in the learning process. To assist a person with an intellectual disability to learn you must get them engaged right from the start. Like any learners they need to know:

- What they will be learning
  Today you're going to learn how to put the labels on the jars of dip.
- Its link with previous learning
  Yesterday you checked the labels before the dips were packed didn't you? And you noticed that some jars had the label on the wrong way up. Well, they should have been fixed up here in the section. That's part of our job.
- The outcomes of the learning
  Today we'll concentrate on two things. First, we'll make sure the jars come off the line the right way up. Second, we'll put the label on so that it's straight and fixed firmly to the jar.
- The structure of the learning process
  Stay with me and watch everything I do. Then I'll go over anything you want me to slowly and you can ask questions. After that, you can have a go.
- How they will know how things are going.
  I'll watch you and tell you how you're going. Does that sound OK to you?

A person with an intellectual disability faces some particular challenges as a learner. One that you may encounter quite frequently is the person having trouble *generalising* learning from one situation to another.

Generalisation is learning to give similar responses to similar events – or to *transfer* learning from one situation to another similar but not identical situation. It involves delving into our memory of how we behaved in response to some event that seems like this one, and using that response in the new situation. Not being able to generalise or transfer learning easily means that every new event requires learning from the beginning.

Other supported employees may find it hard to do tasks with more than one dimension – for example classifying objects by shape *and* colour – because their intellectual disability prevents them paying attention to more than one aspect of the task at the same time.

Kate

Kate has worked in Pikkenpak for over two years. Even though many of the jobs that come into the warehouse are very similar, she always takes a long time to learn anything new. It's a real problem because the warehouse section relies on quick turnaround for its contracts. There are other employees like Kate who learn a task more quickly and are able to do it, but make a complete mess of something new that comes in that is almost exactly the same.

Em's notebook

I've learned there's no point saying *This is the same as we did last week*, to Kate, and then expecting her to just do the job. I have to take things slowly with her.

This week, sorting the order forms should have been easy for her because it's virtually the same task as the Lotto forms we did last week. Not to Kate, though. For her, it's entirely new. I wonder if it's because the order forms are blue and A4 size rather than yellow and A5?

I think I might try a photo book showing her doing similar tasks and then pointing out what's the same and what's different for the new tasks. I'm hoping this might help her learn new things quicker.

Amy's story

Amy is learning the tasks in Pikkenpak. She is having a lot of difficulty completing a current task where she has to pack kitten toys in display boxes. The task has to be done according to size, colour and shape (mouse and turtle). She can discriminate between the two colours, the two sizes, and identify the mice and turtles. Each display box she packs has a section which holds one small and one large mouse , and one small and one large turtle, each of alternate colours.

Amy is unable to work with all three dimensions of the task at once, to pack them correctly in the display boxes. She has a sample to match her packing against but still usually packs all purple turtles and mice, or all blue. They are often incorrectly sized, too, so that one pack may have only small toys, while others will have only large.

Although Amy has the concepts for each of the single characteristics of the toys (that is, size, shape and colour concepts), she cannot work with all three at the same time to order and classify them.

Strategies

1 Make sure you have the learner's full attention and that you explain what is going to happen.

I'm going to show you how to fold the forms, Kate. I want you to watch carefully while I go through it step by step. Then you can have a go.

2 Always try to relate any new learning to something you know the person already knows well, can think about, and act upon.

This is like the blue forms we folded last week. Do you remember? You folded them in three folds. We fold these new ones three times, too.

3 Show the person how the new task is similar to the previously learned one, and how it is different.

We fold these three times like the ones last week, but these have to be folded up this way.

4 Present material in small steps each with clear objectives as to what is to be learned or accomplished.

We fold the forms three times. We have to make sure each fold is straight so that the form fits the envelope and opens out correctly. You're going to learn how to do it. I'll show you how to do each fold and then put it in the envelope in the correct way.

5 Provide clear feedback immediately when the employee completes a step.

That's right – you folded it straight along the first line.

6 Ask 'fact-oriented' questions that you can link to concrete objects or situations, and keep them simple and short.

Will you wear gloves to do this job?

Which stack do you go to to get the yellow forms?

7 Encourage the employee to talk about the task and tell you how well they understand the task by using open ended questions.

What do you think you should do when you see that the form isn't fitting smoothly in the envelope?

How do you feel about doing it by yourself?

8 Avoid leading questions that the employee may not want to answer accurately.

Do you understand?

You see that don't you?

9 Let supported employees learn through their own mental activity. You can't just shovel learning into someone's head. They have to do for themselves. Learning is a set of internal processes and needs the mental participation of the learner. Always make sure the employee is actively involved, demonstrating what is being learned as they learn it, and asking and answering questions.

OK Kate, while I'm explaining how to sort the forms, you can show me how to do it.
(In response to a question) Yes Amy, you can put a small blue turtle in that space.

10 Allow time for new knowledge to sink in

Learning needs time to be turned over in our minds while we make associations and link the new learning to something we already know. Always make sure employees have time to think about, practice and remember the new learning so that knowledge is consolidated.
Well done Kate. You've learnt to sort the forms. You'll be doing this job till lunchtime. I bet you'll be working really quickly when I come back then.

11 Make sure the physical conditions are suited to learning

Try to ensure the environment in which new learning is occurring is as free from distractions as possible, as well as physically comfortable.
Matt, let's go over to this table where its quiet while you're learning to fold these forms.

12 Make learning as concrete as possible

It is very easy to forget the problems some employees have with abstract thinking and learning, and to go on using expressions (for example, 'inappropriate'), and concepts (like 'quantity') that are like a foreign language to them. Link new tasks, and the terms you use to explain them, to what is clearly available to the employee within their range of experience (and try NOT to ask, 'Do you understand?').
Mark, can you tell me how many scoops of soil you put in each pot? When you have filled up 6 pots put them on the bench so Trish can plant the bulbs.

13 Encourage questioning

Ask learners to question whether something is correct or not, and help them apply appropriate tests.
Let's look at some of the pastry cases in this box John. Does this one look like the picture? ... That's right, it does. Can you see any that don't look like the picture? ... Well done, what's wrong with that one?

14 Help them focus on different aspects of the task

Some employees may find it hard to think about more than one aspect or dimension of a task or problems at the same time. Help them keep focused on all the features they need to consider. Wherever possible, use real objects, diagrams, photos etc to aid verbal explanations of the different aspects of something.
Amy you need to put 6 turtles in each box – 3 big ones and 3 small ones. They all need to be different colours. See? Like in this picture? You try now while I'm here to watch you ... Well done. I'll come back in about 10 minutes to see how you are going. Don't forget to keep looking at the picture.

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about the job

Giving clear instructions is a critical skill to have when you are supporting employees with an intellectual disability.

Supported employees (like all workers) need to know what they are required to do. They need to know and understand:

- what their task is
- how it has to be done
- why they need to do it that way
- how much or how many they need to aim to do in a time period
- how much or how many their team needs to aim to do
- what standards are expected – and why.

Employees with intellectual disabilities may need to be given this information more than once. Depending on the level of disability you may need to repeat the information daily, even when the same work is being done each day.

Your focus when you are talking about the job is giving instructions that ensure that the job is done to the standards (quality, quantity, safety, etc) that have been set. For this reason you need to consider the communication needs and abilities of the particular supported employee. These may include needing to be shown as well as told what to do, needing very concrete information (*bend your knees when you pick up the box*) not abstract statements (*remember the manual handling rules*) or being left with ongoing reminders like a sample to copy (*this box has the toys in it in the order you have to put them in*).

To check that your message about the work has been received you need to ask the supported employee to feed back what they have heard. This can be verbal or, particularly for people with limited verbal skills, a demonstration of the task.

Betty

Betty often appears to get instructions muddled. For example, if she has been asked to lay out the markers for collating the tax packs, she might well be found sorting envelopes in the mailhouse.

Em now tests her communication with Betty in the following way:

EM Betty, can you lay out the markers for the tax packs please.

BETTY OK

EM Can you tell me what I just asked you to do?

BETTY Lay out markers

EM Lay out markers where?

BETTY The tax pack line ...over there.

EM That's right. I'll come and see how you're doing in ten minutes.

From Nathan's diary

I am having a lot of trouble getting Raylene to remember all the hygiene requirements of her job.

Today I had to talk to her for a long time again:

I said to you yesterday, do you remember, I hope you do because we talked about it for a long time, but of course I know you have a bit of trouble remembering things, so don't worry if you have forgotten because we'll go through it again. Anyway, as I was saying, it is very important that this area is kept totally clean so you must ensure you always follow the correct food handling procedures ...

I turned away for a few minutes and next time I looked back she's there without her gloves. I think it's just laziness really because she knows – she's been told often enough.

Strategies

1 Clarify the whole task at the start.

We're making pastry cases today Tanya. The pastry comes along the line. You have a box of foil containers beside you. You and John cut the pastry sheets into circles with the round cutter. I'll show you how and then you can have a go. Then you put each circle of pastry in a foil container. I'll show you how. Then you put them on the conveyer and they go through the oven to get cooked.

2 Clarify the purpose of the task. It increases job satisfaction when people know the 'end' result of their work.

We make the pastry cases and then they're sold in supermarkets. People buy pastry cases to put apple or custard in to eat.

3 Tell the employee how this contributes to the business.

We make over 7,000 pastry cases every week. The money we get from selling them helps pay your wages.

4 Ensure the employee knows the timeline of the task.

We need to make at least 1,000 every day. You and John together need to make around 100 every hour. That's 50 each.

5 Use concrete examples to make sure the employee understands the production rate and timelines.

Each big box holds 100 pastry cases. You'll know you've done 100 when a box is full and stacked on the pallet. You can see it's 5 to 8 now, so around 9 o'clock the first box should be ready and you'll know you've done 100. We'll check the time when the first box comes off and see how we're going.

6 Give the employee a cue to remind him/her about rate and time.

Look at the clock and when it's getting close to 9 o'clock, check if the box is nearly full.

7 Tell the employee other key points about the job.

You and John take turns cutting and filling. Today John will start cutting and you'll fill the containers. You and John will change over after 8.30, and you will cut.

8 Clearly describe the required standards.

Each pastry circle must go into the container without any cracks or breaks. You must check each filled container against the photo to make sure it is the same. If it doesn't look exactly the same, it's a reject. Rejects are put into the plastic bin beside your bench. If you're not sure you must come and tell me.

9 Clearly describe what to do if there is a problem.

If the conveyor makes a noise press the 'stop' button straight away and call me over.

10 Tell the employee what to do when the work is finished.

When the pastry stops coming along the conveyor, that lot is finished. Come and get me to check over what you have done.

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about tools

Almost every task a supported employee does involves the use of tools or equipment. Communicating clearly which tools to use, how to use them safely, and how to store or maintain them involves you in a mix of explaining, demonstrating and observing.

Employees need to know about the tools and equipment they use to do their job. This means knowing not just the name of a tool or piece of equipment but also that it is their responsibility to use it correctly, and ensure it is maintained properly. They need to know:

- what equipment and tools they will use on a task
- the name of each tool or piece of equipment
- its purpose
- safety procedures that must be followed when using the tool or equipment
- where it is kept and how it is stored
- how it is used
- how to recognise problems in tools or equipment
- what to do if there are problems with tools or equipment.

As tools and equipment are concrete objects, most employees with intellectual disabilities will have little difficulty learning their names and functions.

Don't assume, however, that they will always

- remember to use them correctly
- recognise problems or malfunctions when they occur
- be able to correct any problems or malfunctions.

Ensure employees have structured training and practice in the use of tools and equipment. Note too, that if an employee has a break from using the particular tools and equipment (because of a change in task, or absence, for example), retraining may be required. Always check to make sure.

Tanya

Tanya has worked in the SpaceCake kitchen for nearly two years. For most of this time her former supervisor, Fran, had done all of the tasks that required the use of machines or equipment while Tanya and her fellow employees looked on. So, although Tanya and other employees have fetched ingredients and cleaned up, they have not learned to complete tasks independently.

Fran believed it was dangerous to allow people with disabilities to use things like electric mixers, hot plates etc. If asked, however, Tanya will say that she can use all the kitchen equipment.

From Nathan's diary

Tanya has left the small oven switched on twice this week. I don't know why she is doing this. She is certainly capable and I remind her most days. I have told her how important it is not to waste power and that there is always the potential of fire. She just doesn't seem to care.

Strategies

1. Clearly describe, and if possible demonstrate, the purpose of each tool or piece of equipment the employee will use.

   You wear a hat and gloves so the pastry stays clean.

   The conveyer belt is set to match the speed you and John can work at.

   The pastry cutter must be held this way to cut properly.

2. Use a mixture of information giving and questioning to make sure the employee can name the tool correctly.

   This is a pastry cutter.

   Show me the pastry cutter.

   What is this tool called?

3. Combine information giving with questioning and practice to confirm that the employee can demonstrate the function and use of each tool.

   Please show me what you use to cut the pastry.

   What do we call this tool?

   Please show me how you hold it when you cut the pastry.

4. Tell the employee what to do if the equipment or tool does not function correctly.

   If the cutter is not cutting clean, call me over.

   If the belt starts making a noise, use this button to turn it off.

5. Ask questions that will let you check that the employee can demonstrate what to do if the tool or equipment is not functioning correctly.

   What do you do if the pastry cutter is not cutting properly?

   Show me the button that shuts off the conveyer.

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about safety

Workplace safety is everyone's responsibility. Communicating the messages about how to work safely is probably an everyday task for you. So doing it effectively is really important.

Employees need to follow health and safety rules in the workplace and know what to do if there is a health or safety problem. Many support staff in disability employment services worry over how to get employees with intellectual disabilities to work within the OH&S laws and principles. But explanations of OH&S rights and responsibilities for supported employees can be simplified, and people with intellectual disabilities can be assisted to understand and work within the safety regulations of the workplace.

One of the keys to getting employees to work safely is communicating the abstract notion 'safety', in concrete terms. An effective way to do this is by linking the actual things that are done in the name of 'safety' – walking in designated walkways, wearing PPE, and so on – with the concrete experience of 'being hurt'. In other words, we do all these 'safe' things to stop ourselves getting hurt. In this way, safety 'rules' (which are themselves an abstract concept), can become personalised and linked to the actual experience of the individual. Therefore it is made concrete – we follow the 'rules' so we won't get hurt (or hurt other people).

It is also effective to talk about safety by linking 'getting hurt' with something you know the employee has actually experienced at some time:

> *Do you remember when you got a rose thorn in your thumb? What did it feel like? What did you have to do? What do you need to do to stop getting hurt like this when you are pruning roses?*

For many people with an intellectual disability it is very difficult to understand conditional relationships. For example, 'If I wear a high visibility vest in the warehouse, I'll be a lot less likely to be run down by the forklift', is a conditional statement. We learn this and then apply this conditional statement to our own specific case as well as to general cases (all workers who wear high visibility vests in the warehouse). We use conditional statements all the time as short cuts to aid our thinking and reasoning, but this ability can be very limited in someone with impaired cognitive functioning.

Amy

The work instruction for the can stripping line includes a requirement that all employees wear gloves. Amy rarely remembers to put hers on.

There are two prominent signs at the work station. One says: 'GLOVES MUST BE WORN', the other has a graphic of a glove in white on a clear blue background. When asked, Amy can explain what the signs mean. Still, she does not put a glove on unless specifically told to do so by Em.

From Em's notebook

I hit on an idea last week and it seems to be working. Amy never remembers to put on her glove when she strips the cans. She just doesn't seem to think the rule applies to her. So, I took a photo of her holding up her hand wearing a glove. I made two copies. I pasted one next to the sign 'Wear Gloves' nearest where Amy sits, and another is taped on her workbench where she can see it all the time she's working. Now, when Amy sits down, she sees the photo and says, 'Amy wears a glove', and puts the glove on before she starts work. I'm chuffed!

Strategies

1. When you want to clarify the key reason for safety at work, make sure you relate it back to the individual.

   We do everything we can to work safely so that nobody gets hurt. Do you remember when you ...

2. Don't rely on an employee's ability to 'state the rule' as evidence that you have communicated it effectively. It is better to have her/him demonstrate they can work with the rule.

   Please show me the areas where I need to wear a safety vest.

   This sign says 'hearing protection must be worn'. What does that mean you have to do?

   Put on the protective equipment you need to wear when you are mowing.

3. Ask questions that require the employee to describe how they will act if there is a fire or emergency.

   (While the fire/evacuation alarm is sounding in a drill) What do you have to do if you hear this sound? (Don't ask 'what does this sound mean')

4. Don't supply all the safety information yourself (*Tell Nathan if someone gets hurt*). Ask the employee to point out the person or people they go to if there is a safety problem.

   Who do you tell if someone gets hurt at work?

5. Make sure the employee can perform basic safety checks of a tool or piece of equipment.

   Show me how you check if the rake is okay to use today.

   Show me the button you use to turn off the conveyor if there's a problem.

6. Ask questions that will allow you to check that the employee can relate the rule to him or herself, not assume responsibility lies with another person.

   John, can you tell me what YOU have to do if the conveyor starts making a noise?

   Mirri, what do you have to do if you spill water on the floor?

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about quality and quantity

Quality and quantity are abstract concepts. If you need to talk about either with people with an intellectual disability you'll need to put them into more 'concrete' terms.

Disability employment services must operate as viable businesses, competing with other businesses to make revenues to enable them to employ and pay their workers. To do this, they must set and achieve productivity targets and ensure the quality of the goods and services they provide meets their customers' expectations.

All employees need to know:

- they have a responsibility to make things to the standard that is set
- they have a responsibility to produce as close as possible to the number that is set for them to achieve.

Quality

Quality means that the product, service, process, or outcome meets the standard set or expected by the user or consumer.

When you are communicating with employees with intellectual disabilities about the abstract concept 'quality' you need to:

- focus on the particular task or product they are working on at the time
- explain in concrete terms why the standard is important
- check with the employee that they have gained an understanding of what is required.

Quantity

Similarly, you can assist employees to understand productivity requirements by bringing the abstract 'quantity' down to the simpler and more concrete 'how much' or 'how many'. It is very important for people with an intellectual disability to be clear about what they will be doing over a set period of time. Some people with an intellectual disability also have difficulties with numeracy, or find it hard to keep track of the numbers going through.

Again your communication should:

- focus on the particular task
- relate quantity to other variables such as time available to do the job, how many people are working on it, etc
- give the employee cues to monitor their own productivity
- include checking with the employee that they have understood what is required.

Raylene

Six months ago, Raylene moved from Pikkenpak to SpaceCake where she quickly learned the tasks on the pastry making line. Her productivity shot up (from 20% to 35%) and she is very consistent in her quality control.

However, there is a problem. If the work stops for any reason, or there is any problem with the flow of goods on the conveyor, Raylene won't do anything about it. She simply stops, cradles her face in her hand, and stares ahead. She has even fallen asleep on some occasions. Nathan has tried putting Raylene to work with several other, more active and assertive employees, but nothing seems to work: when the task stops, so does Raylene. Naturally, this impacts on productivity – both at the individual and team level.

From Nathan's diary

I'm a bit disappointed in Mai Lin and Ivana. I have spent a lot of time talking to Ivana about the importance of quality. I have told her over and over again that she has a responsibility to make sure the quality of her work is of the highest standard. Today, she was supposed to mop the cool rooms and I found her using the wrong mop. She'd also forgotten to put the liquid cleaner in the water. I said, 'What did Mai Lin instruct you to do, Ivana?' She just looked at me. 'Is this a quality job, you've done?', I asked her. No response. I said, 'Why is quality so important?' She looked at me and said nothing.

Mai Lin will have to put someone else on cleaning. Ivana's just not motivated to do a quality job.

Strategies

1. When you are clarifying the tasks for the employee, use diagrams, written lists, photographs, as appropriate.

   Today, you'll be working with Tanya, making sure the pastries get labelled as they come through on the line ... Here's the list of what you have to do (go through the list) ... And this photograph shows how the label should look.

2. Ask questions that will confirm that employees understand the set tasks for the day.

   What are the main tasks you will be doing today in this section?

3. Refer to samples or photos when you are clarifying the standard that is expected of the task.

   This is a sample jar that shows the correct way to put the labels on. See, the label is fixed so the sign for 'Fish n Dips' is at the top? And the label is sitting straight? Now look at the back of the jar. See how the two black lines meet where the label is joined? Your labelled jar must match this one exactly.

4. Involve the employee in the discussion about why the product standard must be met.

   We must make sure the jars are correctly labelled because our dips are sold in supermarkets. You wouldn't buy them if they looked untidy would you?

5. Ask the employee to demonstrate they understand the quality standard.

   Show me how you know if you have folded the forms correctly.

6. Ask 'why' questions. Listening to the answers lets you check if employees understand the reasons for the standard.

   Why is it important that you sweep up all the grass clippings on the path?

7. Make sure the employee knows the amount of work that is expected or the quantity that he/she is expected to produce, and within what time frame.

   Mark, this morning we have to mow and edge this lawn and weed the two garden beds near the front door. We'll do the weeding before morning tea and the mowing and edging after morning tea and before lunch ... When are we going to be finished the weeding?

8. Explain the aids and cues that employees can use to assist them monitor their production.

   Your jars will go into this pack when you have labelled them. At the end of each session, I will come and help you count how many you've done. We'll write down the number in your diary and that way we can check next week to see if you're getting faster.

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about teams and workmates

Being part of a team and understanding what teamwork means are important in all workplaces. Helping people to develop the behaviours and attitudes that contribute to a team approach is an ongoing task.

Working involves getting on with others. We expect people to work cooperatively and contribute as team members. These skills involve quite complex abilities and are often difficult for people with intellectual disabilities. Some of these difficulties can be caused by:

- not understanding the things that are expected of you when you work with others – for example, respect for individual differences, respect for the rights of others, cooperative efforts, shared goals, etc
- a person only being able to understand things from their own viewpoint. Trying to imagine or empathise with the way another person thinks or feels may be far too abstract for them
- confusion of emotional expression. Interacting with people involves our emotions. People with intellectual disabilities often have problems interpreting their own emotional states, as well as correctly identifying emotions in other people
- limited understanding of 'teams' or teamwork because they are such abstract concepts. People with intellectual disabilities need to have these abstract concepts linked with things that are familiar to them and help them learn the attributes and behaviours that make up 'team work'
- difficulties in following the 'rules' of communication with others. People with intellectual disabilities sometimes have difficulties taking part in conversations with others. Assist them by providing training and practice in conversational skills.

Jasper

Jasper is 39 years old, has worked in all the areas at Merrinvale and is generally held to be one of the 'best' workers. He is very articulate and independent and few people would recognise he has any sort of intellectual disability. In fact, Jasper has quite pronounced problems remembering things, ordering information and problem solving. He needs frequent cues to remind him, and a highly structured work schedule to keep him on track.

Jasper's main problem is accepting he has limitations. When faced with something he can't do, he tends to just back away and leave it, without telling his supervisor. He also dislikes working with people he perceives to be 'disabled', saying, 'There's no point working with "those people", they can't do it'. It is getting harder to accommodate Jasper as a solo worker and to know how to deal with the attitudes he expresses about his fellow employees.

From Nathan's diary

I had a call from Mirri's mother. She said Mirri was very upset last night because Matt had pushed her out of her seat on the bus and made very rude gestures to her all the way home.

When I asked him why he had been so nasty to Mirri. He just let out that high-pitched laugh he has. He held his finger up and said, 'one', and smiled. I told him his behaviour was inappropriate.

Strategies

1. Don't talk 'teams'. It's too abstract. Talk about specific behaviours that make up good teamwork. 'Hey guys, we're a team' doesn't mean much if the only thing the word 'team' means to you is your favourite footy team. Start with something that is related to the workplace.

   Tanya and Raylene like you to say 'hello' to them when you sit down at the workbench each morning.

   Remember to ask Matt if it's okay to borrow his tape dispenser if you need it.

   If you have to leave the line, always let Matt know where you're going and when you'll be back.

   It's good to ask the others if they need any help doing their work. That's part of being a team.

2. Clarify the behaviours that make a good team member. Provide opportunities for discussion, training and practice in:

   - being reliable – being on time, being at work on the days you are supposed to, getting back from breaks on time, staying at your workplace
   - effort – putting in your best at all times
   - listening well to others and what they say
   - working with people – trying to get on well with them, helping them and letting them help you.

3. Explain with an example and give employees chances to practice the 'rules' of conversation.

   Mirri, face Raylene when you start to talk with her.

   Make sure Mark is ready to listen to you Trish.

   John, you need to let everyone have their say. Don't interrupt or talk when another person is talking.

   Kate, listen to what others have to say.

   Introduce yourself Amy, and introduce the others.

   Matt, you need to speak at the same volume as others in the group.

   Ask questions to show you are interested, Jasper.

   Say goodbye as you go Betty, to close off the conversation.

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about problems

Developing problem solving skills will assist supported employees to participate effectively in the workplace. You will need to use a range of communication techniques to help them to do so.

Much of your communication with employees with intellectual disabilities will be about solving problems and making decisions. These skills are often very difficult for workers with intellectual disabilities to attain.

The starting point of any problem solving or decision making process is recognising there is a problem or issue. This capacity may be very limited for some employees, particularly where there is a behavioural problem. What you may define as a problem behaviour in an employee may be just his or her usual way of responding, something they've done for years and have never seen as causing any difficulty.

All too often, support workers tend to solve problems for employees, rather than letting them have a go at doing it themselves. You are in a good position to assist employees with intellectual disabilities improve their problem solving skills, especially those that occur within the workplace because you have some scope to:

- anchor the problem or issue to concrete experience
- make some adjustments to the environment in which the problem is occurring.

It will be helpful to train employees to:

- recognise when a problem exists
- take some responsibility or ownership for solving that problem
- use a set of strategies for problem-solving.

Kate

It doesn't take long to get Kate talking about her plan to join the police force and become a detective like her brother, Kim. This has been going on for as long as she has been at Merrinvale. All you have to do is say 'how are you, Kate', and she is off. 'Did you know that I am going to join the police force ... I'm going this week to do the exam to get in ...' If you try to reason with her, or 'steer' her away from the topic, she can become quite sullen and bad tempered.

From Mai Lin's Notes

I was amazed today to find Jasper hadn't done any vacuuming for the last three days. He's our best worker yet he often makes this sort of mistake. He's responsible for the cleaning, so it's a problem.

I asked him why he'd forgotten and he just got angry and walked off, as he so often does when he's challenged over something. Now he's gone to Fran's area – says he'll only work where he's appreciated.

I was even more amazed though by Ivana's response. She heard it all because she had just finished her cleaning round. After Jasper stormed off, Ivana said, '*He always forgets things, Mai Lin. I reckon he'd be better if you gave him a set of pictures of all his jobs so he can follow it ... he can't read, you know.*' I thought Jasper could read. He's always had a written list of his duties.

From Em's notebook

Kate is a good worker. She's naturally sociable, but drives everyone mad with her one topic of conversation – how she's joining the police force. I've noticed people avoiding her, including at lunchtime and breaks. She often looks lonely and spends a lot of time just sitting by herself in the locker room.

Bob had a chat with Kate's mum and she has recommended something that works for them at home. She calls it their 'don't open the gates strategy'. We're going to try it here.

Instead of starting a conversation the way most people do – 'Hi Kate. How are you?' and her saying 'Did you know I'm going to join the police ...' Kate's mum suggests we open conversations with Kate on a specific topic (NOT the police). So we get in first by saying something like, 'Did you hear Australia won the cricket on Saturday, Kate' and she can't 'open the gates' on the police force. That way we can maybe increase the range of things she'll talk about.

Strategies

1 Use questions to encourage employees to learn to define the problem or problems.

What makes you think there is a problem?

Where/how/when/why is it happening?

With whom is it happening?

How important is it?

What does it have to do with you?

2 Help employees use their verbal and reasoning skills to look at potential causes of the problem.

What do you know about this problem?

What do you and others think about it?

Let's describe the cause of the problem in terms of what's happening, where, when, how, with whom, and why. (Don't ask for all of this at once).

3 Use a diversity of communication methods and settings to help the employee consider different ways to solve the problem.

Let's get together and discuss ideas for how we might fix this problem.

We'll let everyone involved have a say and listen to all the ideas.

4 Present the possible solutions to the employee then encourage them to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the one they choose.

Which way will be most likely to fix the problem?

Can we do this now?

Is there any problem involved in taking this step to fix it?

Do we need any extra help to do this?

5 Assist the employee put the solution into action.

What steps do we need to take to fix the problem this way?

How will we know if the steps are being followed?

Who will check if the steps are being followed?

6 Help the employee monitor the implementation of the action.

Are we seeing the changes we'd hoped to see?

Is the plan going to work?

Is the problem getting better?

7 Help the employee evaluate the problem-solving.

Are things better than they were?

Is the problem definitely gone now?

What can we do to avoid this happening in future?

What did we learn from this problem-solving?

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about changes

Change is an inevitable part of any workplace and can be uncomfortable. Talking about the changes before, during and after they happen is a key factor in how well people cope with them.

Change can create difficulties for people with intellectual disabilities because of the problem they often have in learning how to deal with the consequences of the change. Wherever possible, it pays to prepare your employees for change and set things up so that they have the best conditions in which to learn how to cope with the changes. It is also important to acknowledge that every employee will react differently to change; and that the size or extent of the changes is not necessarily going to determine their impact on an individual.

A range of things commonly change in the workplace.

Personnel

Any new person in the work environment brings about a change to the group dynamic. Adding a new team member may mean individuals feel that their status has changed. Changes amongst people with high reference authority (authority through position) such as supervisors/support workers can lead to problems if they are not managed properly. Supported employees can become quite anxious if their supervisor changes – they experience a fear of the unknown. This can occur even if the relationship is not a particularly positive one – better the devil you know.

Status

This sort of change requires learning about how to cope with a different level of authority – either your own or that of someone else. For example, an employee who moves from one task where he was responsible for a whole line, to another task where he is just one of ten people doing the same thing with no one having any greater responsibility may grieve for the old situation.

Task

People with intellectual disabilities find it hard to transfer skills from one situation to another. Hence, task changes may be far more difficult for them to deal with than they are for people without intellectual disabilities.

Environment

People with intellectual disabilities are often very sensitive to changes to time frames, equipment, place, etc, because they rely a lot on routine, structure and familiarity. These structures and routines play a very important role in their ability to go about their own daily routines and tasks.

Raylene

Raylene has recently had a change of work area. Despite being prepared for this, she seems unable to accept that Nathan is now her supervisor. She won't speak to him at all. If she wants something she gets up, leaves her work and goes all the way over to the other section where Em (her former supervisor) now works and asks her what to do.

When Em sends her back, she stomps off to the locker room where she sits sulking and refusing to come out.

If Nathan asks her to do something, she responds with, 'You're not my boss. Em is.'

Em's notebook

Everyone seems to be stressing out over the changes in the kitchen. The employees are all squabbling like mad since Raylene went in there. John and Tanya, who used to work really well together are now taking sides with either Raylene or Mirri (depending on what time of day it is) and are suddenly acting like they're arch enemies.

Yet when we discussed Raylene going in there, John, Tanya and Mirri all said it was a good idea, agreed they needed extra help and said she would be good there. So it's not as if they didn't have some say in the change.

We're being driven mad – Nathan and I – by constantly having to sort things out between them.

Fran, of course, just says it's all 'too much to expect of these people'. If Fran loves babying people so much why doesn't she go and work with some real ankle-biters!

Strategies

1. Prepare employees for change by letting them know in advance what is happening, why, how and when. Talk to them openly and invite them to ask questions and express any concerns.

   Next week, Nathan is going to become your supervisor. This is because Bob likes supervisors to change around every year so that we get to know the whole company. I am going to be the supervisor for Grassed Off. Nathan will start here on Wednesday and he and I will work together with you till the end of the week. This is so I can help Nathan get to know how we do things here, and get to know you all. Now, what do you think about this?

2. Once a change is implemented, monitor how employees are reacting to it.

   Your role has changed a lot here at Pikkenpak. You worked the collator by yourself. Now you're packing hampers with the others. How is it going? Do you know what your targets are? Are you having problems with any part of the job? Are you enjoying it?

3. Don't leave people drowning in the wake of change. Make sure there is a contingency plan for any situation where an employee is clearly unable to cope with a change.

   I can see you have tried to do it the new way but it is obviously not working for you. That's okay. There's another thing we can try ...

4. Foster the notion that changes are part of life and are generally made in order to improve things. Employees are often resistant to change because of bad experiences in the past, or because they may have trouble identifying the feelings they have about the change – or the thought of it.

   We are doing this to make things better. We think this is going to make our inspection lines run faster.

   We've changed the layout of the cleanroom so you have more space along the workbenches.

Notes

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING TOPIC ...

Talking about futures

The employment planning process requires supported employees to think about the future. You may need to work with them to help them make the abstract concept 'future' something concrete that they can understand.

The future is an abstract concept and, therefore, one that people with intellectual disabilities will find quite hard to understand. Take the individual employment planning process, for example.

When a service works with an employee to develop an Employment Plan, it can be hard getting the employee to make a meaningful contribution. The much used tactic of setting 'goals' with employees – '*what would be a goal you'd like to set for the next year?*'– often becomes a rote like process with little real contribution from the person supposedly setting the goals.

To get employees with intellectual disabilities genuinely involved in thinking about and planning for the future, we have to, first, determine what is their understanding of *the future*, and, second, provide concrete 'anchors' from which they can build a meaningful and realistic plan.

To achieve independence in the workplace, and to have a say in planning what they are going to do, people need to have an adequate future orientation. This orientation towards the future underpins people's ability to understand:

- how and why they need to go on developing their skills – *If I can improve my productivity, I will get higher wages*
- what they might be able to achieve in the longer term – *If I earn more, I can save more money and get things I want*
- what they could realistically achieve through thinking about and planning their future – *I could buy my own house one day and not have to pay rent*
- the 'steps' they can start taking to reach their long-term goals – *If I start by getting up earlier to get to work on time, I will start earning more pay. Then if I work really hard, I will get a bigger pay rise and save an extra $50 a month and ...*

Kate

Kate has just had her planning meeting with her supervisor and theTraining Manager. Merrinvale offers its employees an accredited training course – Certificate I in Work Skills, and Kate's participation in this course was discussed at the meeting. Kate chose to do the course over the next year. She is now delightedly telling people she is doing the police entry course at work and will, therefore, be ready to go into the police force at the end of the year. For Kate, her dreams appear to be coming true.

Em's notebook

I was really proud of Amy today. She had her Planning Meeting. Her mother and her support worker from the accommodation service came along. We talked about what Amy wanted to do over the next six months.

At first she had very little to say as Nathan went through all the goals that she set last time. I don't think Amy even remembered those things. Sue (from CosyHome) talked about Amy not putting enough effort into things and that they hoped she'd be 'more motivated' in the future. Her mum amazed me by coming right out and saying, 'Of course although she's 33 she is really much less mature than our seven year old grand-daughter.'

Anyway, after much going on with 'would you like to try out' this, or this, or that (like she was having to pick something from a menu), Amy suddenly lifted her head and looked at everyone and said, 'I want to work on the doors at Frameup. They do measuring there and I'm good at measuring.'

Strategies

1. Remember that the thinking of an employee with intellectual disabilities may be confined to what has been or is being experienced, rather than what might be in the future. Provide real examples, and pin them to actual experience, to assist the employee think about the future event.

   Your pay is now $117 a week. If you get your productivity up you could earn an extra $40 a week. What are some things you could do with an extra $40?

2. Thinking about the future depends a lot on our ability to build realistic time concepts – something that is often limited by intellectual impairments. Assist employees build more effective time concepts.

   We will take two days to do this. That means we will be doing it all of Tuesday and all Wednesday. Can you tell me about some other jobs that have taken two days from start to finish?

   It's going to take about half an hour to do that. That is the same amount of time as you have for your lunch break.

3. Remember that employees with intellectual disabilities may have had little chance to build a concept of their future, and may have been discouraged from doing so. They might feel they have very little influence over what happens to them. Employees need to know they have an active role in shaping their work future, and that they can get assistance doing this from your service. Your communication should focus on the role of the service in supporting people to have a fulfilling future.

   Trish, we are going to sit down and have a Planning Meeting today. Do you remember our last planning meeting when you said you wanted to work outside more? And that you moved over to the mowing team from the greenhouse team after it? Do you want us to think about another new area you could work in so you can learn new things – because we will if you want us to?

   You're 64 now John. Most people who are 64 are thinking about retiring – you know, not coming to work everyday. They're going to teach someone else to do their job so they have time to learn to do other things they want to do. What would you like to learn to do?

Notes