Communicating with colleagues

Introduction

If you work in an organisation, you need to communicate effectively with your colleagues. This includes accepting and understanding your role(s) and responsibilities, and respecting the position of others.

All workplaces have staff with a variety of personality types, and a range of talents, attitudes and behaviours. Everyone is not like you - wouldn’t it be a dull world if they were? But some differences are easier than others to accept and respect, and working together requires all of us to make allowances, to communicate our ideas and feelings honestly and with empathy, and to acknowledge and work to resolve conflicts when they arise.

Colleagues communicate using many spoken and written forms. It is important to use the appropriate format to communicate a particular message; some formats are widely used, others may be specific to an organisation.

When you have completed this section, you should be able to:

• work effectively in a group or team
• participate in group discussions
• communicate clearly and appropriately in writing
• identify and resolve conflict.

The main topics in this section are:
1. Working in groups or teams
2. Meetings
3. Forms of communication
4. Forms of behaviour
5. Conflict and negotiation

Working in groups or teams

The successful organisation is one in which individuals work harmoniously in groups to achieve set objectives.

Groups can combine the talents of the members, and enable each person’s strengths and interests to be used. Groups often provide innovative solutions to unfamiliar problems; and through belonging to a group, each person can participate in achievements well beyond his or her individual potential.
In addition, if everyone in the workplace is trained, through participation in group decision-making, in an understanding of the organisation’s objectives and work practices, each will be better able to solve work-related problems.

The subtopics in this section are:

1a. Groups
1b. Why people join, leave, stay in groups
1c. Personality types
1d. Group decision-making

Groups • 1a

However much we like to be individuals, most of us are members of many groups.

They include our family - perhaps it is a traditional nuclear family, although these days it is much more likely to be blended, with the richness of step-parents, half-siblings and so on.

We may be members of political groups, interest groups, a sports team, friendship, work, and study groups. Some are formal, and some are informal. Some are temporary (e.g., for a season); some have lasted decades, or even all our lives.

Click on each name to see what they think about groups.

- John Donne (No man is an island, entire of itself…)
- Michael Leunig (Every man is an island.)
- Sigmund Freud (It is always possible to bind together considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness.)
- Jean-Paul Sartre (Hell is other people.)
- Debra Boggan (Plant Manager, Northern Telecom North Carolina) (Successful team building was as simple as realising that employees are adults who have responsibilities outside the workplace. We stopped telling people to check their brains in at the front door in the morning and pick them up at five. We started treating people with respect.)
- Fran Lebowitz (That I am totally devoid of sympathy for, or interested in, the world of groups is directly attributed to the fact that my two greatest needs - smoking and plotting revenge – are basically solitary pursuits.)
Why people join, leave, stay in groups

There are many reasons why people participate in groups. They include:

- security
- social interaction
- completing a task
- proximity
- exchange

Click on any reason for a summary.

**Security**

This probably stems back to our earliest origins when, in order to survive, it was safer to be in a group. Psychologists place security very high in our list of emotional needs. Most of us - whether or not we acknowledge it - experience a sense of safety in a group.

**Social interaction**

We are social beings. Being part of a group gives us a sense of purpose, of belonging, of identity, a chance to talk, laugh, comment, listen, criticise or debate. Solitary confinement is regarded as the worst punishment in the prison system. We talk of ‘sending them to Coventry’ when we want to punish people socially by excluding them.

**Completing a task**

Most complex tasks need a range of people with different skills and knowledge to complete. A netball team, for example, consists of members whose primary skill may be to attack, defend, keep, or shoot.

**Proximity**

You are much more likely to get to know people who sit near you at school or work, or who live close by. For convenience you might join a local book club, sporting team, or political group.

**Exchange**

Most members of a group weigh up - consciously or unconsciously - what they get from the group, including friendship, support, and personal satisfaction. If these outweigh the costs - such as time, money, mental and or physical exertion - they remain in the group. Work groups don’t always allow their members to drop out when they are
not receiving ‘a fair exchange’. This often causes disruptive or unhelpful behaviour.

**Personality types**

A useful tool for working in groups is personality testing. If you have a clear sense of your basic personality type, you will be more aware of your strengths and weaknesses.

Equally, if you can assess others in this way you may be able to compose a team of people with the attributes you need for a particular task. Or it may help you to understand each member of an established team, and use their strengths more effectively.

However, be careful not to rely too heavily either on a formal personality assessment, or on your judgement of a person’s attributes. They are not always reliable, and can lead you to make wrong assumptions about people’s attitudes and behaviour.

There is also a risk of stereotyping people, and this can lead to discrimination.

**Group decision-making**

Groups can make decisions and resolve problems in a number of ways. The methods include one person (usually a leader or manager) making decisions, the group taking a vote (whether public or private), working to achieve consensus, or a variety of creative ways of eliciting ideas and solutions from the whole group.

The subtopics in this section are:

- Decision by one person
- Voting
- Consensus
- Brainstorming
- Mind mapping
- Nominal group technique
- Group decision-making
- Teams

**Decision by one person**

This is probably the most traditional approach to group decision-making. Here the majority of the group defer to the
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leader. This works well when fairly routine procedures are being carried out. It has the advantage of being quick. However it may demotivate group members. The leader may miss vital perceptions and information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The leader can act quickly.</td>
<td>The leader may be wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The leader may produce good solutions.</td>
<td>The leader may miss vital details, information and opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workers may lose motivation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Voting

Voting is used throughout the community in many different circumstances. These range from a family vote on food or an activity, to a show of hands in the local Parents and Citizens meeting, voting for the ‘people’s choice’ in the Archibald portrait competition, or formal voting for national, state and local government leaders.

Voting can be either
- public
- private

Each method has advantages and disadvantages.

**Public voting**

Public voting is done by a show of hands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is quick and convenient.</td>
<td>People may feel the need to conform to a faction or an influential person’s point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It forces people to make a decision publicly, so everyone knows where they stand.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Private voting**

Private voting is done by secret ballot.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People can vote exactly for what they want.</td>
<td>It is slower and more laborious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It may disguise conflict and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Consensus**

This method of decision-making does not involve voting. It relies on everyone having a say. The pros and cons are worked through in detail, as the group aims to find common ground.

The leader periodically tests for consensus by asking if the team can support the decision.

This is usually a slow process, unless all the team are very like-minded or easy-going. The most familiar examples are the jury process, and the way Aboriginal communities reach decisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone gets a say.</td>
<td>It can be very time-consuming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It builds on the positive common ground.</td>
<td>One person can delay the whole group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It can build a stronger commitment to the decision because everyone contributes.</td>
<td>It may work more effectively in groups where people have similar approaches.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Brainstorming**

This approach to decision-making uses lateral thinking. The problem is stated, and members of the group are encouraged to think creatively of as many options as possible.

Soft lighting, music, and visualisation can all create a relaxed mood.

This method relies on not judging, but accepting ideas and trying to build on others’ suggestions. It works well to get lots of ideas; but people still have to decide on the solution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This method employs people’s creative side.</td>
<td>It does not suit personalities who like a clear logical progression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It avoids criticism before all options are explored. It can favour outgoing or dominant personalities.

It works well if people are in a bit of a rut. It can become a bit chaotic.

It usually produces a wide variety of options. It doesn’t include a way of narrowing the possible solutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Mind mapping</strong></th>
<th>•1d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is similar to brainstorming, but instead of writing a list of all the options, the problem is written in the middle of the page, and arrows are drawn away from this, with a range of options. Then more arrows drawn from each of these. Continue until the group feel they have exhausted all possibilities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This method has very similar advantages and disadvantages to brainstorming.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Nominal group technique</strong></th>
<th>•1d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This technique uses a combination of methods.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It begins with each person brainstorming individually, and listing ideas to solve the problem. Each person in turn calls out one of their options for someone to write up. The chairperson keeps going around the circle until all the ideas are listed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ideas are grouped and numbered. Then each potential solution is discussed. Voting takes place by each individual selecting a number of solutions (say five) which they see as better than the rest, and ranking them by a weighting system - e.g., 1 excellent to 5 passable. Votes are collected, shuffled and recorded.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlike brainstorming, this method facilitates participation by all members.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Advantages</strong></th>
<th><strong>Disadvantages</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It caters for a wide variety of personality styles.</td>
<td>It is quite a long process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Ideas’ people are good at brainstorming.</td>
<td>The voting is complex, but it can still feel like a win/lose situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Logical’ people are comfortable making</td>
<td>It is not truly anonymous.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Meetings

A meeting is a gathering of a group of people for a set purpose. It is here that information is disseminated, opinions are gathered, issues are debated, decisions are made, and tasks are set to be achieved in between meetings. Much of the material on working with groups is relevant here. There is lots of information about meetings on the Web. For a good introduction, look at the Basic guide to conducting effective meetings [http://www.managementhelp.org/misc/mtgmgmnt.htm].

The subtopics in this section are:
2c. The agenda
2d. The chairperson
2e. Minutes

The agenda

If you want a meeting to be effective, it is important to write an agenda to give to participants beforehand. Here is an agenda outline you might use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>A brief description of the major objectives for the meeting</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of items to be discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What work needs to be done about each.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a formal meeting the agenda would include the following items.
Minutes of previous meeting

To be accepted or amended

Business arising from the minutes

Any follow-up from the previous meeting

Agenda items for this meeting

These should be notified in advance

Other business

These items may become items on the next agenda or, if they are urgent, a decision may be made. (It is not helpful to allowing important and complex issues to be dealt with here. It is better to delay their discussion until the next meeting to allow for adequate preparation of all participants.)

Close of meeting

Time the meeting is expected to finish

Time and place of next meeting

Enclosures

Copies of any relevant material to be read before the meeting.

The chairperson

It is essential to have a chairperson (sometimes called a facilitator) to conduct a meeting. This person is responsible for controlling the meeting, including:

- establishing and keeping to an agenda
- controlling the discussion and encouraging everyone to participate
- guiding the meeting towards decisions
- remaining impartial
- ensuring that time is allocated appropriately, and that the meeting finishes at the advertised time.

A chairperson needs a balance of task-orientated and socio-emotional skills. If the meeting is running smoothly, they can focus on the tasks to be accomplished. If there are conflicting views or difficult personalities, they may have to pay more attention to participants’ personal needs and/or relationships.

Minutes

For most meetings someone records the minutes.

This is very important:
• to inform anyone who has missed the meeting about what was discussed
• to act as a record of the meeting
• to let people know what action they need to take before the next meeting.

Everyone should get some experience in taking minutes. The disadvantage of taking minutes is that you may not be able to participate as fully in the meeting. However the advantage is that you can often write the minutes to emphasise what you think is important.

Here is an outline of how to take minutes.

Meeting title

Place

Time

Opening
Time the chairperson or facilitator signalled the start of the meeting.

Present
People who were at the meeting.

Apologies
Note the people not attending, especially if they have sent an apology.

Agenda items
The table below is one way to record what happened during the meeting and what action needs to follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Action Required</th>
<th>By whom</th>
<th>When</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Other business
Record items raised that were not on the agenda.

Date, time and place of next meeting

Close of meeting
Time the meeting finished.
Forms of communication

Written communication needs to be clear and simple, in order to convey the message its sender intends. Different forms of communication suit particular purposes, and the language should be appropriate to the receiver(s).

For an excellent source of guidance on all kinds of writing, go to the Roane State Community College Online Writing Lab. [http://www2.rscc.cc.tn.us/~jordan_jj/OWL/owl.html]

The subtopics in this section are:

3a. Writing clearly
3b. Writing for the receiver
3c. Written formats

Writing clearly

If you have not been in contact with formal education for some time, the thought of writing may make you anxious.

The good news is that writing does not have to be complex to be effective.

In fact:
- a simple clear layout
- which is specific, concise and economical with
- short sentences (8-12 words)
- brief bulleted points
- logically sequenced
- which keeps the reader(s) in mind,

is much more likely to catch the reader’s attention and get your message across.

Writing for the receiver

When we write for a particular person to receive a message, we need to consider:

- tone
- formality/informality.

The tone of the writing

Writing has none of the nonverbal cues, such as facial expression, eye contact, voice expression, which aid verbal
communication. You therefore need to be very careful in choosing the words you use.

Be careful not to use:

- Condescending statements (e.g., ‘of course’ may be interpreted as ‘any idiot knows’)
- Language showing prejudice or excluding one gender (e.g., use ‘women’ instead of ‘girls’ (unless you mean girls); don’t refer to ‘wogs’, even as a joke)

Formality /informality in writing

If we are writing to a friend we may be chattier, more emotive, use slang shortcuts, not worry about spelling mistakes and punctuation. Writing to a colleague would be less formal than to a manager, or a client outside the organisation.

If we do not use the formality appropriate to the receiver, our message may be lost.

### Written formats

#### Email

Email is the least formal type of written communication in the workplace. Often it is used instead of a quick verbal comment or exchange. Emails ask questions, remind about meetings and morning teas, inform of an upgrade to the computer system, notify agendas and minutes.

Yet an email can be an important piece of workplace communication, and copies of significant emails are often kept on file. They are even used in court proceedings as evidence of company policy (e.g., in Microsoft vs U.S. Department of Justice). Work email should not generally be used for personal communication; some organisations expressly ban this, and some are more tolerant.

#### Letter

Letters are sent to outside individuals and other organisations. For example, an acceptance of an application or notification of the intention to enter a contract would be sent by letter. This is regarded as a more polite and formal communication than an email on the same subject.

#### Minute

A minute is usually sent to a more senior person within the organisation, to convince them to do something - e.g., buy a new piece of equipment, change the library’s opening hours. It provides the background, enough detailed information to enable the person to make a decision, and a recommendation.
for action. Although templates are electronic in many organisations, since a minute requires a signature, it is normally sent on paper.

Here is a template for a minute.

```
SUBJECT:

Addressee

Second Addressee

Purpose

Text

Background

Text

Issues

Text

Recommendation

Text

Name
Position, Area

Date
```
Here is a sample minute.

MINUTE

Valentina Matkovich
Librarian-in-charge Heidelberg Municipal Libraries, Melbourne
Simon Wong, Head Librarian, Rosanna Branch
10/12/01

A preschool reading /craft program

Purpose
I would like to suggest that we employ a children’s worker for two hours a week to trial a preschool reading /craft programme for six months in one of our branches. The worker would read several picture books on a theme followed by a craft activity related to the books.

Background
• Our municipality has the highest percentage of families with children under five years of age in the Melbourne Metropolitan area.

• 40% of families have preschool children, yet picture book borrowing is the lowest percentage of all our borrowing age groups.

• Other municipalities have run similar programs in the last two years. They have had an average of 20-30 care givers and their children at each session. Their picture book borrowing has increased 20% over the time they have been running the program.

• We have had over 50 requests for such a program in the last twelve months.

• With the extensions to the library, we have ample room for a program in our children’s section.

• As well as increased borrowing of picture books, we could expect a flow-on increase in borrowing as care givers and their families become more familiar with our services.

• This program would link in with holiday and book week programs we already run for children in our municipality.

Recommendation
I recommend holding a meeting to discuss this issue with you as head of library services, the children’s librarian, the manager of community services, and myself.
Shirley Jones, the children’s worker in Eltham library, would be happy to attend at your request. She could explain how this program operates in their library and answer any questions we might have.

Brief
A brief is provided by a member of staff, usually to a more senior person, to provide background information on a topic. For example, when the library manager is asked to speak to a local community group about the library’s policy on Internet use, a brief will be written by another staff member if the manager is not familiar with the detail of the situation.

Here is a template for a brief.

| SUBJECT: |
| Purpose |
| Text |

| Background |
| Text |

| Issues |
| Text |

| Name |
| Position, Area |

Date

Forms of behaviour

In our relations with others, we need to be aware of our behaviour, and how it may affect them.

This is particularly pertinent when we negotiate with others. However it applies to all our relationships, personal and professional.
In general, assertive behaviour is most effective. Other forms include passive and aggressive behaviour.

The subtopics in this section are:

4a. Passive behaviour
4b. Aggressive behaviour
4c. Assertive behaviour
4d. ‘I’ statements

### Passive behaviour •4a

When people give a passive response, they don’t express their feelings, needs or ideas. We could say this person is ignoring his or her ‘I’.

Sometimes we give a passive response because

- we don’t feel strongly about an issue
- we haven’t the emotional energy to deal with the conflict that might ensue
- we don’t have time to sort things out with the person.

Passive behaviour as a usual response to situations gives a message that:

- I don’t count - you can decide for me.
- What I feel isn’t important - what you feel is more important.
- I’m wrong - you’re right.
- You are more important than me.

### Aggressive behaviour •4b

Aggressive behaviour gives the message that:

- I am the most important - I will decide for you.
- My feelings are the most important – what you feel isn’t important.
- This is what I think – you’re stupid if you don’t agree with me.
- I’m right - you’re wrong.

When people communicate aggressively, they often get what they want in the short term. But as they have hurt, humiliated, embarrassed or angered the other person, they have harmed
the relationship. They may find that they don’t ‘win’ in the long term, as people don’t feel like cooperating with them.

**Assertive behaviour**

People who behave assertively express their feelings, needs, and ideas. They stand up for their legitimate rights, thoughts, and actions in ways that do not violate the rights of others.

The basic message of assertive behaviour is:

- **This is what I think.**
- **I’m interested in knowing what you think.**

This is the most productive way of communicating, as it encourages a situation where both people feel that they have been ‘heard’. Even if they don’t agree, they are more likely to work out a solution which is satisfactory to both of them.

When people use assertive behaviour, they are investing in a long-term cooperative relationship.

**‘I’ statements**

It is important not to blame, attack, or hurt a person when expressing a concern assertively.

This creates the atmosphere for getting a positive response without defensiveness.

It is important to:

- **Own** your response - e.g., ‘I feel …’ not ‘You make me feel…’
- **Deal with the situation early.** This way you can keep the **intensity** of the feeling low to avoid antagonism. Statements like ‘I feel furious!’ or ‘I could scream!’ are bound to cause a defensive reaction.
- **Make a request** so that there can be change.

You might find it helpful to offer a **benefit** to them - e.g.,

- If you are on time, I will have the full half-hour to spend with you.
- If you are on time, I will be relaxed and more able to concentrate.

Here is an example.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When ...</th>
<th>When you run late for our appointments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel ....</td>
<td>I feel put out because I’m very busy and I’ve put aside</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the time especially.  
I feel anxious because I know we are going to run out of time.  
I feel rushed because I have only limited time.

Request  
And what I’d like is that you try to be on time next week.

Conflict and negotiation •5

We all experience conflict in our personal and working lives. It is essential to deal with conflict and resolve it in a positive way in order to maintain and improve relationships.

As individuals, we all have different values, attitudes and opinions, desires and needs, feelings, and habits. These can cause conflict, and it is important to recognise when conflict is likely to arise, and what triggers it.

We all negotiate in our personal and professional lives, sometimes more happily than others. There are tactics and techniques we can learn, to help us to resolve conflicts more successfully.

Select a Subtopic. For each subtopic you can start with its content (Topic info) or its exercises (Topic exercise). A tick indicates a completed section.

5b. Individual style

5d. Negotiation

Individual style •5b

One cause of conflict is difference in individual style.

- You may like your office neat and tidy. Your co-worker might have piles of papers all over the floor.
- You may be a details person. Your partner might be more interested in the big picture.
- You might take a long time making up your mind about a problem, and might want as many facts as possible. Your friend may have half decided before he even approaches the problem.
- You might be most interested in harmony in the workplace. Your colleague may enjoy arguments and debates.

It is helpful to be conscious of your own style, as well as recognising colleagues’ approaches.
There are many tactics in negotiation that you might try in conjunction with assertive requests. Go to this website to read more about negotiation skills [www.crnhq.org/freeskill10.html].

**The ‘broken record’ approach**

Just as children find that persistent requesting often pays off (especially at the checkout in a busy supermarket), this tactic often pays off.

People oblige because they want to be relieved of your persistence. You can still apply an assertive, not aggressive, approach. Remember to use assertive body language, including confident tone of voice, eye contact and a smile.

**Reflective listening**

Reflective listening can help to avoid conflict if both parties are standing their ground.

Take the situation where you ordered grilled fish at a restaurant and the waiter brings fried.

You: Excuse me - I ordered grilled fish.

Waiter: Well, it’s not written on the bill.

You: I understand it’s not written on the bill, but I did order grilled fish...

**Good guy / bad guy routine**

This form of negotiation is often used by police to elicit information from suspects. One person is aggressive, even threatening. The other person is sympathetic, and conveys the impression that they really care about the welfare of everyone involved.

**Ultimatum**

Sometimes near the end of a negotiation, an ultimatum tactic will work. A ‘give me what I want or else’ statement, or ‘take it or leave it’ strategy will often finalise matters. Anyone who has bargained in Asian countries will be aware of the effectiveness of this strategy.

You need to avoid being aggressive as this may make a short-term gain, but it doesn’t help to build a long-term relationship.

**Hypothetical testing ground**

You can test an option without either party having to agree to the solution. As with all negotiation, if you can lace it with humour, this method works even better. This can be a good tactic to combine with a subdued ‘broken record’ approach.
Emotional approach

This can either:

• take the positive approach of a plea for help, begging the other negotiators to satisfy your need,

or

• make the other party feel guilty if they don’t reach agreement, by appealing to goodwill, friendliness, loyalty, patriotism.

The danger of using this rather than a more assertive approach is that it may make the recipient feel manipulated, and encourage them to use manipulative behaviour as well.