

Communication Skills Information Sheet

Clear communication is key to a successful farm or ranch transfer. It helps landowners express their needs and motivations, helps incoming producers understand them, and vice versa. It also helps build respect and trust between stakeholders.

The Basics

Communication is how we share information, ideas, and feelings. Both verbal and non-verbal, it involves listening and expressing messages. **Verbal communication** includes speaking and writing. **Non-verbal** includes body language and tone. **The message** is the information and ideas being shared. **Expressing** is the act of sharing messages. **Listening** is the act of receiving them. This may sound simple, but clear communication takes practice. Personality, feelings, needs, expectations, bias, culture, power, all play roles.

Context is important. The audience and formality of the situation affect how messages are shared and the choice of **delivery channels**—all the various platforms people use to share ideas and information—from kitchen table conversations to formal presentations, legal documents, letters, phone calls, emails, texts, social media, and so on. Use formal communication with a lawyer or a lender, and informal with family and friends.

Listening is just as important as expressing. Listen for meaning—not just to words but to the full intent and emotion behind them. The goal is to really understand the message and to reflect that understanding back to foster trust and strengthen relationships.

Know Your Audience

Tailor your message: Knowing your audience is crucial for effective communication because it helps you to tailor your message to their needs, personality, and preferences. This makes it easier for them to understand and receive your ideas and information and avoids misunderstandings or negative responses.

Choose the right channel: Farm transfers typically include people of different generations and personality traits who communicate in different ways. Take time to think about the type of information you want to share and which delivery channels will work best with them. What do you know about their personality, culture, style, and preferences? Consider, for example, that in 1920, ~35% of American households had telephones. By 2020, over 80% had Smartphones. While you may prefer in-person meetings and phone calls, the incoming producer may rely on texting. See the Communicating Across Generations Information Sheet.

Explore Personality Assessment Tools: A variety of personality style tools can help you assess your communication styles and preferences and those of other people. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a quantitative assessment that has been widely used for over 70 years. It identifies 16 personality types which result from different preferences to help people understand their natural way of interacting with the world and foster deeper appreciation of one another. You can take a free test at [16personalities.com](https://www.16personalities.com). True Colors™ is another option. It classifies four personality types with colors and is often used by Extension educators.

Express yourself clearly

Choose clear, concise language: Avoid jargon. Use simple, specific words and active language that puts the subject in front of the action. For example: “I signed the papers” instead of “The papers were signed by me.”

Be Prepared: Think before you speak—or write, even with something as simple as a text. To check that you are clear about your message, jot down bullet points, draft a script, proposal, or email. For formal writing and presentations, start with an outline which includes topic sentences for the main points you want to make.

Proofread or Practice: If you write something, edit your work for clarity, consistency, grammar, and style. Proofread and don’t rely on spell check. If you are making a pitch, negotiating terms, or making a presentation, practice your talking points. It helps to practice in front of a mirror, time yourself, and/or ask someone to listen to you and give you feedback.

Pay attention to your body language and tone: When speaking, be aware of your pitch, tempo, and tone, as these shape how well your message is received and understood. Also pay attention to your body language. Leaning forward and direct eye contact express interest and connection while leaning back and looking down or away can suggest boredom, discomfort, or distrust.

Use “I messages”: When speaking, “I messages” or “I statements” focus attention on the person expressing the message instead of on the person receiving it. Saying “I want/need/feel/believe” vs. “you do or don’t this or that, or you make me feel...” helps build stronger relationships, avoid conflicts, and de-escalate tense situations.

Show appreciation: Acknowledging others and expressing appreciation and gratitude are signs of respect. Combined with keeping small agreements, these help build empathy and trust, reducing conflict and stress and leading to more positive outcomes.

Listen for meaning

Apply active listening: Active listening is a communication technique where you give the speaker your undivided attention to understand their complete message, both verbally and nonverbally. When someone else is talking, focus on their meaning, not on preparing your response. This deepens connection, builds trust, and avoids conflict. Show interest, ask clarifying questions, and reflect back what you hear. You can summarize what think you’ve heard by saying, “Sounds like what you’re saying is...” or “What I hear you say is...”

Read body language: Observe facial expressions, posture, gestures, eye contact, and movements. Pay attention to inconsistencies between their words and what their bodies’ convey, especially if they suggest anxiety, discomfort, or defensiveness like clenched fists, crossed arms, fidgeting, or broken eye contact.



This resource is part of American Farmland Trust’s [Farm Transfer Toolkit](#) which is available on AFT’s [Farmland Information Center website](#). The toolkit walks agricultural landowners through key steps in a farm transfer process. It contains information, worksheets and other tools to help users set goals, assess their finances, communicate with stakeholders, and work with professionals to finalize decisions and implement a transfer plan.