Communicating with Tact and Professionalism
Upon completion of this module, attendees will be able to:

• Define ‘tact’ and its importance when communicating with others
• Identify key elements of successful communication
• Identify common misconceptions about communication
• Identify strategies for maintaining professionalism when communicating with others
What is ‘tact’?

Tact is commonly defined as:

“...the ability to tell the truth in a way that considers other people’s feeling and reactions.” ~Mindtools.com

Tact allows us to...

• Give feedback effectively
• Communicate sensitive information
• Say the right thing to preserve relationships (personal and professional)

Why is tact important?

In both personal and professional situations, tact allows us to:

• Deliver bad news or provide critical feedback appropriately
• Demonstrate our reputation and build credibility
• Preserve existing relationships and build new ones
• Show character, maturity, professionalism and integrity
• Avoid potential conflict and find common ground

Tact and Cultural Awareness

Given the diverse populations we serve within the National Guard community, it is important for us to have an awareness as to the customs and traditions in various cultures.

When focusing on communication, cultural awareness is important as it can prevent misunderstandings as well as interpretation and perception challenges.

What might be considered fair feedback in one culture may be viewed as profoundly rude in other cultures. An assertive, yet understanding, approach is the best way to remain tactful when communicating with individuals with various backgrounds.
Developing Tact

The following strategies can help you communicate effective and tactfully:

Create the Right Environment and Think Before You Speak:

- Practice active listening while others speak
- Use empathy to build a connection with others
- Work to see things from the other person’s perspective
- Build trust so that others know your intentions are honest and compassionate
- Practice what you plan to say ahead of time
- If necessary, ask the other person for a moment to process and gather your thoughts before speaking

Developing Tact  (cont)

Determine the Appropriate Time:
- Consider your situation and the other person’s situation before engaging in conversation, especially if addressing concerns
- Always remain conscious of who you are with and where you are before speaking
- If necessary, ask the other person when would be a good time for you to speak

Choose Words Carefully:
- Learn to use “I” statements during conflict or giving constructive criticism
- Use ‘cushion’ or connecting statements when you have a disagreement (Example: “I appreciate your opinion...”)
- During times of tense conversation, be concise, honest and assertive

Developing Tact (cont)

Watch Your Body Language:
• Your body language should match your message
• Make eye contact, avoid crossing your arms, avoid pointing and sit with a good posture
• Open body language, combined with a courteous vocal tone, convey truthfulness and a willingness to work together

Never React Emotionally:
• Give yourself time to calm down before responding
• In stressful situations, take a break, briefly walk around or practice deep breathing to regain your composure
• Know what your emotional triggers are and learn how to control them
• Be cognizant of other people, words, issues and situations - avoid feeding an ‘emotional fire’

Tact in Real-life

The following are common situations where tact can mean the difference between a positive or negative experience:

**Letting Team Members/Volunteers Go:**
- Start by explaining clearly what is happening
- Remain calm and stick to the facts - be honest
- Avoid emotional reactions or trying to ‘sugar coat’ the message
- Explain why the decision was made and offer follow-up emotional support when possible
- Be direct but also kind and supportive

Giving Feedback:

• Get into the habit of providing feedback regularly, not sporadically

• Utilize the ‘sandwich’ approach:
  • Start with a positive comment about the individual
  • Follow-up with constructive feedback
  • Conclude with a positive comment about the individual

• Avoid ‘sandwiching’ constructive feedback between too many positive comments, as your message can become diluted and lost to the other person

• Avoid using this technique all the time, as people may begin mistrusting positive feedback when you provide it

Declining an Invitation:

• Remember an outright ‘no’ may be viewed as crass or insensitive
• Structure your response as follows:
  • Start with a positive comment ("Thanks for thinking of me...")
  • Next, tactfully decline the invitation ("I’m sorry that I can’t attend...")
  • Finally, end on a positive note ("Hopefully my schedule will be less hectic next time...")
• Always consider the other person’s feelings when declining an invitation
• Utilize emotional awareness regarding the other person and situation... there may be times when an invitation is an attempt by the other person to either build a relationship or seeking out a ‘shoulder to cry on’

Deflecting Gossip:

- Say something positive about the person being discussed ("Jill might struggle with her sales figures, but she’s a hard worker.")
- Ask them to stop gossiping ("I don’t want to talk about this, especially since we don’t know all the facts.")
- Suggest a better time and place for the conversation ("Let’s wait until Jill returns and discuss your concerns when she is here.")
- In certain situations, a more direct approach may be necessary ("I am not going to engage in gossip behind their backs.")

Handling Disagreements:

- Always attempt to view the situation from the other person’s perspective
- Agree to remain professional throughout the conversation
- Avoid becoming defensive, emotional or lashing out at the other person
- Stick to the facts and what has been observed, not other people’s interpretations
- Engage a neutral third party to help work on a resolution and better clarify each person’s point of view
- In some situations, you may have to agree to disagree...BUT, you must also remember to not allow personal opinions to negatively impact the C&Y Program

Tact in Real-life (cont)

Giving Presentations:

- Avoid using jargon, acronyms or long words that may confuse the audience
- Explain complex ideas clearly and solicit questions to better ensure comprehension
- When appropriate, utilize the skill of self-deprecation to help put others at ease (especially those who may be new to the C&Y Program)
- Always leave plenty of time for questions; actively solicit questions throughout your presentation if time allows
- Maintain open and positive body language (make eye contact, avoid crossing your arms, maintain good posture, avoid fidgeting with objects and pacing or swaying from side-to-side)
- Conclude your presentation by highlighting key concepts

Communication is also About Perception

When we communicate (especially telephonically) things like tone, inflection and emphasis can greatly impact how other people perceive our message. Read the following, emphasizing the underlined word in each passage:

I never said you stole the money.
I never said you stole the money.
I never said you stole the money.
I never said you stole the money.
I never said you stole the money.

Little things, like how we emphasize words can change the intent and meaning of what we are saying.

Emphasis, compounded with body language, can cause others to perceive something other than what we had intended.
Tactful communication requires an awareness on our part. Along with what we say in our message, the receiver is also paying attention to appearance, tone/emotion and inflection...

To remain tactful, always remain cognizant of your tone and appearance. While your message may be tactfully spoken, your body language and tone may convey the opposite.
Common Misconceptions about Communication

1. Saying something = communicating something:
   Just because something was spoken/written does not ensure it was clearly received by the other person/group. Always follow-up, restate your message and solicit questions to ensure your message was accurately received. If emailing, follow-up with a phone call to review the information and answer any questions.

2. Communication doesn’t require much effort:
   To truly communicate, one must make a conscious investment in time, energy, attention and follow-through. Communication should be viewed as something you do with someone to reach a mutually beneficial resolution. As our 7 Habits training notes: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

3. **Good speakers are good communicators:** Successful communication requires a great amount of active listening. Communication is more than speaking, it is a two-way exchange between individuals. When we truly listen to others, we not only convey respect for them, we also better avoid potential miscommunications.

4. **Saying something over and over ensures understanding:** While studies have shown it requires multiple episodes of hearing information to be retained, that does not mean the same message repeated. Comprehension (or understanding) employs all aspects: listening, doing, sensing, feeling... Learn to paraphrase messages and restate them, making real-life connections for the listener.

5. When someone says ‘I know...’ that may not be the case: Often times in communication people may say things like, “I know...” or “Got it” when that might not be the case. With busy schedules and many demands, people often give quick acknowledgements of information being received without having taken the time to thoroughly process the information. This requires follow-up on the behalf of the speaker/communicator.

6. Failure at a task = failure of the receiver/listener: When something does not result in a desired outcome, it is easy to blame the listener for not doing things correctly. When something fails, ownership falls back to the speaker, as he/she may not have been clear with their message, failed to provide follow-up or may have used a tone that ‘shut down’ the listener. A message given is not always a message received AND comprehended!

How can you tell when someone is not listening?

When you need to ensure comprehension of information you are delivering, it can be helpful to spot common traits people employ when they are not listening. Being aware of these traits can let you know the degree to which additional follow-up or paraphrasing might be required:

• They do not maintain eye contact
• They nod and respond but never engage in the conversation
• They respond inappropriately (or out of context) to what you were saying
• They maintain a blank facial expression; no reactions to message
• Their body language is closed (crossed arms, lack of eye contact, etc.)
• They are easily distracted by movement around you
• They listen to the first part of the message and then start responding before you have finished

Source: How to Communicate with Confidence. Bechtle, Mike. 2008.
Strategies for Improving Your Listening and Comprehension

As stated earlier, communication is a two-way exchange. One aspect of tactful communication is actively listening to the speaker, which conveys your respect for who he/she is and what he/she is saying...

- Ask questions based on what they talk about
- Learn to consciously tune out everything else around youth
- Maintain good eye contact (avoid staring or looking off constantly)
- Listen with your senses (eyes, ears, mind and heart)
- Nod occasionally to acknowledge you are listening
- Avoid interrupting
- Do not fear silence...use it to process what was said
- When adding your own comment, relate it to what was said
- Restate what you have heard him/her say

Source: How to Communicate with Confidence. Bechtle, Mike. 2008.
Success Lies in Monitoring Yourself

Each time we engage with someone else is a new opportunity to reflect upon how we say things (verbally and non-verbally), our attitude, tone and expressions. While each situation will be unique in its own right, we should make continual efforts to professionally grow with each interaction.

The attitude by which we approach situations is (typically) an accurate representation of what is happening inside. We must always remember...

...our thoughts lead to our attitude, which leads to our actions.

Source: How to Communicate with Confidence. Bechtle, Mike. 2008.
Reflective Lens Approach

Bechtle identifies ‘lenses’ through which we should always view our interactions with others. He claims that by keeping these lenses in perspective, we can better convey our message clearly, articulately, professionally and arrive at more positive outcomes.

These lenses can be a tool for reflective growth and professional development.

Source: How to Communicate with Confidence. Bechtle, Mike. 2008.
Reflective Lens Approach (cont)

If we see ourselves through a realistic, positive lens, others will be more likely to see us that way as well.

The Lens of Acceptance:
We must recognize that not all conversations will go perfectly; however, our long-term professional success lies in accepting this and growing from the experience.

The Lens of Perspective:
It can be uncomfortable when someone does not connect well with us, but it is critical to keep that in perspective. One person’s negative opinion does not become the yardstick for measuring our success; we must learn to maintain perspective in the most challenging situations.

Source: How to Communicate with Confidence. Bechtle, Mike. 2008.
Reflective Lens Approach (cont)

The Lens of Positivity:
The goal of conversation is to build a connection with someone else. We should avoid comparing ourselves with others and recognize the uniqueness we possess and ‘run with it’ when we can. This paves the way for building positive connections in the future.

The Lens of Gratefulness:
Time is a valuable commodity, and we must always remember anytime someone takes an opportunity to speak with us, they are providing us with a gift. Adopting this point of view can then help us better establish and maintain successful connections with others - connections that are genuine and respectful.

The Lens of Contentment:
This lens is about finding a peaceful recognition that communicating is not a competitive game, but rather a sharing of ourselves, our thoughts and ideas and our skills. The key to establishing integrity comes from aligning who we are on the inside with who we are on the outside. Demonstrating integrity builds positive connections.

Source: How to Communicate with Confidence. Bechtle, Mike. 2008.
Additional Strategies to Build and Maintain Professional Communication

• Make emails concise - avoid adding information that is not relevant to the topic of the email
• Follow the ‘Golden Rule’ - you must give respect to gain respect
• Check and edit emails/messages before sending; use proper grammatical mechanics in exchanges
• Utilize the Subject Line of emails - make it relevant to the topic of the message
• Review messages through the various lenses to avoid sending emotional responses
• Use abbreviations/acronyms carefully as other may not understand them or they could mean something in a different organization
• Utilize ‘Reply All’ cautiously - not everyone needs to hear what you have to say

Source: How to Communicate with Confidence. Bechtle, Mike. 2008.
Additional Strategies to Build and Maintain Professional Communication (cont)

• Reply promptly to messages sent specifically to you - this signifies you are the SME and the one who can correctly answer the question
• Avoid forwarding jokes and stories, as they can unintentionally offend someone
• Always keep professional exchanges separate from personal exchanges
• Do not always let electronic exchanges take the place of in-person exchanges
• When sending mass/group emails, utilize the ‘Bcc’ feature to protect other people’s email addresses
• Beware of typing humorous or sarcastic comments in electronic/written communication because it could offend someone - the other person is not present to pick up on things like tone, timing or facial expressions

Source: How to Communicate with Confidence. Bechtle, Mike. 2008.
As evidence of completion of this course, you will need to complete the short assessment tool provided. To access the assessment, please click on the link below:

CLICK HERE TO BEGIN YOUR ASSESSMENT:

https://www.classmarker.com/online-test/start/?quiz=9qq55cc9bd1dfe7c

Please Note: Following completion of the assessment, please save the results certificate and then email the results to your RAPM. This will serve as your documentation of completion.
You have now completed the Communicating with Tact and Professionalism module. Congratulations!