Communication skills activities: six role-play cards for workplace training

Communication skills activities work best when people practise a real move, such as explaining a change or saying no, and get specific notes from someone who watched. This kit gives you six fictional workplace role-play cards, each with a hidden brief for the partner, an observer sheet, a filled example of observer notes and a timed 60-minute session plan for trios.

60 minutes | 6–18 participants | Online and adaptable in person

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The outcome

By the end of 60 minutes each participant has practised three communication moves in three roles, has received written observer notes with exact phrases, and has written one move they will use in a real conversation within the next week.

Before the session

- For trainers, team leads and facilitators who run communication skills training with adults at work, with 6–18 people in trios. It suits a module on everyday communication, a new-manager programme or a team session after a change.
- Choose three of the six cards, one for each round, or let each trio choose. Print the speaker cards and the partner briefs on separate pages so that the partner’s hidden detail stays hidden. Online, send each partner brief in a private chat message.
- Print one observer sheet per person per round, or share a copy that each observer can edit. Plan the trios in advance: groups of three, and one or two groups of four with a second observer when the numbers do not divide by three.
- Tell people before the session that all scenarios are fictional and that nobody acts out a real conflict. Offer the observer role or a written version to anyone who prefers not to speak in a role-play. Turn on captions and allow cameras off.

Included in this kit

A facilitator run of show, participant worksheets with real tables, reference tables, debrief questions, adaptation notes and a follow-up plan. Use the editable Word copy to tailor examples and prompts before delivery.

Original material by Superglue. Timings are suggestions; adjust them to your participants. This resource has not been independently evaluated.

What is inside

- Speaker cards
- Partner briefs
- Observer sheet
- Practice plan
- Filled example: observer notes for card 3
- Facilitator section: run of show, reference tables, debrief and adaptations

Speaker cards

Give this page to the speaker, or cut it into six cards. Do not show the partner briefs to the speaker.

Card	Your situation	What to practise
1. The 60-second change	From next Monday the weekly report goes to a new shared folder and uses a new template. Tell your partner what changes, why, from when, and what they must do.	Explain a change in about one minute, then check that the other person can say back what they must do.
2. The unclear request	Your partner, your manager, asks you to “tidy up the onboarding slides before next week”. Find out what they need before you agree.	Ask open questions about purpose, audience, date and what “done” means. Summarise before you agree.
3. Not by Friday	Your partner asks you to review a 20-page proposal by Friday. You already have two deadlines this week.	Say clearly what you can and cannot do, ask what matters most, and offer a specific alternative.
4. The delay update	The training materials you promised for Thursday will be two days late, because a subject expert has not replied. Tell your partner.	Put the news in the first sentence. Give the cause in one sentence, the new date, and what you need from the other person.
5. The meeting close	A 30-minute planning call is ending. The call covered three topics, and you think two of them were decided. Close the call.	Summarise decisions, owners and dates, invite correction, and record what is still open.
6. “I don’t know yet”	You are running a session. A participant, your partner, asks a question about a new policy that you cannot answer.	Say what you know and what you do not know, do not guess, and promise a specific follow-up with a date.

Partner briefs

Give this page to the partner, or cut it into six cards. Your brief holds a detail the speaker does not know. Reveal it only when the speaker's questions or words make room for it.

Card	What you know that the speaker does not
1. The 60-second change	You missed the email. You send the old template to a client every Friday. Ask what happens to this Friday's report.
2. The unclear request	The slides are for a new-starter group on Wednesday at 10:00. Only four slides have out-of-date contact names. You do not want a redesign. Give each detail only when asked.
3. Not by Friday	What you need before Friday is feedback on the three-page budget section. The rest can wait until Tuesday. Say so only if you are asked what matters most.
4. The delay update	You planned to print the materials on Friday morning. You can move printing to Monday if you know today. Ask what you can tell your own team.
5. The meeting close	You agree with the first decision. You thought the second one was only a proposal. You did not volunteer for any action. Correct the summary politely.
6. "I don't know yet"	Ask: "Will the new leave rules apply to part-time contracts?" You work part-time and you are worried. Ask once more for a best guess.

Observer sheet

One sheet per round. Write exact words where you can. Leave a row empty rather than guess. Give your notes first in the feedback, in two minutes or less.

Card: _____ Speaker: _____ Round: 1 / 2 / 3

What to record	Notes
The opening words	
Questions asked	
Check of understanding	
The main message	
What was agreed	
One thing to keep	
One thing to try	

Practice plan

Fill this in at the end of the session. Keep it private, or share one line with the group.

The move I want to use: explain a change, ask about a request, say no with an alternative, give a delay update, close a meeting, or say I don't know yet

The real situation in the next week where I will use it

The first sentence I will say

How I will check that the other person understood

After the conversation: what happened, and what I will keep or change

Filled example: observer notes for card 3

A fictional round of card 3, “Not by Friday”. The observer wrote exact words and one action to try.

What to record	Notes
The opening words	“Thanks for thinking of me. I can’t review all 20 pages by Friday, but I don’t want to leave you stuck.”
Questions asked	“What happens on Friday?” (O). “Which part matters most for that?” (O). “Would Tuesday work for the rest?” (C).
Check of understanding	The speaker said: “So the budget section by Thursday afternoon, and the rest by Tuesday. Is that right?” The partner confirmed.
The main message	I can do the three-page budget section by Thursday 15:00 and the rest by Tuesday.
What was agreed	Budget section by Thursday 15:00, by the speaker. Rest of the proposal by Tuesday 12:00. The partner will send the latest version today.
One thing to keep	The question “Which part matters most for that?” found the hidden detail in the first minute.
One thing to try	The speaker apologised four times. Try one thank-you at the start and no apology.

Facilitator run of show

1 Open and agree how to practise | 6 minutes

Explain the purpose: “We will practise three everyday moves and give each other notes on what we heard, not on who we are.” Agree three rules: the scenarios are fictional, observers describe words and actions, and anyone can pause a round. Explain the three roles: speaker, partner and observer.

2 Demonstrate one card | 6 minutes

Play the speaker on card 1 with a volunteer as partner for two minutes. Deliberately end with “Does that make sense?” Ask the group what the partner could say back to show they understood. Replay the last 30 seconds with a better check, such as “What will you do differently on Friday?”

3 Round 1 | 10 minutes

Each trio takes a card. Two minutes: the speaker reads the speaker side, the partner reads the hidden brief, and the observer reads the card and the observer sheet. Four minutes: the conversation. Four minutes: the observer gives notes first, then the partner says what it was like to listen, then the speaker says what they would change.

4 Round 2 | 10 minutes

Rotate roles so that the observer becomes the speaker. Use a new card. Keep the same timing: two minutes to prepare, four to talk and four for notes. Give a one-minute warning before each change.

5 Round 3 | 10 minutes

Rotate again so that each person has had each role once. Use a third card. If a group of four has two observers, the second observer notes only the questions and the check of understanding.

6 Group debrief | 10 minutes

Bring the trios back together. Ask for phrases, not people: “Which exact words made a message clear?” and “Which question found the hidden detail?” Write the useful phrases on a shared list. Ask which card was hardest and why, and connect the answers to the situations people face at work.

7 Plan one real conversation and close | 8 minutes

Each person fills in the practice plan: one move, the situation where they will use it in the next week, and the first sentence they will say. Ask each person to share their move in one line in the chat or aloud, or to pass.

Reference tables

Choose a card by the skill you train

For a 60-minute session, pick three cards. A mixed group can take one card from each pair.

If your group needs to…	Use card	Pairs well with
Explain changes and instructions more clearly	1. The 60-second change	4. The delay update
Ask better questions before starting work	2. The unclear request	6. “I don’t know yet”
Say no or renegotiate without damage	3. Not by Friday	2. The unclear request
Share bad news early	4. The delay update	3. Not by Friday
End meetings with clear decisions	5. The meeting close	1. The 60-second change
Answer questions honestly under pressure	6. “I don’t know yet”	5. The meeting close

Debrief and next steps

Questions for reflection

- Which exact words made a message clear in the first sentence?
- Which question found the partner’s hidden detail, and which questions missed it?
- What did the speaker ask to check understanding, and what did the partner say back?
- Which of the six situations do you meet most often at work, and what will you do differently?

Adapt the session

- For 4 or 5 people, work in pairs and one trio, or use two rounds and a whole-group observation of the third card.
- For a 30-minute version, run the demonstration and one round, then a five-minute debrief and the practice plan.
- Online, use breakout rooms of three and send each partner brief by private chat. Paste the round timing in each room. Allow cameras off; the observer can follow by audio or captions.
- For people who prefer not to role-play, offer the observer role in every round, or a written version: the speaker writes the first three sentences, and the partner writes a reply.
- For groups working in a second language, give the cards a day early, allow an extra minute of preparation and accept short sentences. Clear communication does not need long words.

After the session

Ask participants to try their chosen move in a real conversation within a week and to write two lines in the practice plan afterwards: what happened, and what they will keep or change. At the next session, spend five minutes on those notes before new content. Do not ask for recordings or details of real colleagues.

Questions people ask

What are good communication skills activities for adults at work?

Short, realistic role-plays with an observer work well, because people practise one move and hear back exactly what they said. This kit uses six fictional workplace situations: explaining a change, asking about an unclear request, saying no with an alternative, giving a delay update, closing a meeting and admitting that you do not know yet.

How do I run a communication role-play so people take part?

Use fictional scenarios, keep rounds to ten minutes, and give everyone a clear role. Observers describe words, not personality, and anyone can pause a round or choose the observer role. The hidden partner brief gives the conversation a purpose, so it feels like a task and not a performance.

How many people do I need?

Six to eighteen people in trios. With numbers that do not divide by three, make one or two groups of four with a second observer. With four or five people, use pairs and a trio, or observe one round as a whole group.

How is this different from the feedback training exercises?

The feedback kit practises one conversation: describing what happened and agreeing a next step. This kit practises six everyday moves that are not feedback, such as explaining a change, asking about a request and saying no. Use both in a longer programme.

Can I run these activities online?

Yes. Use breakout rooms of three, send each partner brief in a private chat message, and share the observer sheet as an editable document. Keep captions on and cameras optional.

What is included in the free and editable files?

The open PDF has the speaker cards, the partner briefs, the observer sheet, the practice plan, a filled example and the 60-minute facilitator plan. Subscribers also receive the editable Word file, an Excel workbook with the session plan, the cards and a trio planner, and a CSV of the session plan.

Use and sharing

Free to use and adapt in your own training sessions, including paid client work. Do not resell or redistribute the unmodified download as a standalone product. Share the resource page instead.