

Building Better Communication

The examples below are provided by the IIT Diversity Committee and are intended as illustrations to give greater context to and to be used as guidelines for furthering conversations. These examples are not policy. They are provided to encourage reflection and, hopefully, facilitate greater civility and understanding among IIT community members. Please use your own best judgment when presented with actual scenarios given the particulars of the situation. **Think the best before you assume the worst.**

#1 – ASK RATHER THAN ASSUME

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone makes an assumption that another person is not a member of the “IIT community” because of “non-traditional” attire; and/or A person makes an assumption that people are not members of the “IIT community” because they appear lost or unsure of their location. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid approaching individuals in an “authoritarian manner.” (“You are not supposed to be on this campus unless you go to IIT; I will call Public Safety to escort you to your location and to help you find where you are going.”) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unless verbally or physically antagonistic or threatening, speak to the individual (typical greeting, “good morning”, “hello”, etc.) and be cordial and continue to your destination; and/or Approach in a cordial, smiling way, and ask if you can assist them in finding their location.

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone addresses an individual by an incorrect name in verbal, electronic, or written communications; and/or An individual assumes someone is not a U.S. citizen upon hearing a “heavy accent” or a lack of command of the English language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don’t use a variation of their name that is easiest for you (“Hello Tim” rather than “Hello Timothy”); and/or “Americanize” the name for ease of pronunciation (“Hello Ray” rather than “Hello Rayapralu”); and/or Avoid asking things like, “What country are you from?” simply because someone speaks English with some difficulty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Before using “shortened versions” of an individual’s name or nicknames, or even before calling someone by their first name, (particularly among “peers” as well as students), ask if it is ok to call them by a shortened version/ nickname or first name; and/or Wait for an individual to volunteer information about their place/country of origin.

#2—DON'T FORGET THE PLEASE

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An employee, student, or faculty member tells a peer or colleague to complete a task without utilizing polite words to frame their request— or offering a personal greeting to someone looking for assistance; and/ or• A person is not acknowledged by an employee, student, or faculty member as they pass each other in the hallway or ride on the same elevator together; and/or• Someone accuses a colleague of not returning an item and does not apologize to the wrongfully accused person after realizing the item was indeed returned.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't show indifference when a member of the IIT community is seeking your professional assistance or slight a member of the IIT community; and/or• Apologize for a miscommunication to which you are a party	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When working with colleagues to complete a task, treat them the way you would like to be treated or the way they desire to be treated; and/or• Start and finish every new conversation with a sincere greeting and close; and/or• Acknowledge others as you meet them throughout your workday; and/or• When a miscommunication takes place, ensure that you do your part to extinguish any negative or hurt feelings—including apologizing.

#3—GIVE PEOPLE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An assignment/project is not completed in the manner you expected; and/or • Someone does or says something that feels offensive, expresses a unique position, or asks questions about topics you find sensitive/private; and/or • A person behaves in an unexpected manner or in a way that is different than you would have (avoids eye contact, speaks softly or loudly, declines a particular invitation to socialize, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid telling the employee/student the assignment/project is incorrect without first allowing him/her the opportunity to explain the approach; and/or • Don't immediately discount a person's position just because it is "different", or "non-traditional;" and/or • Don't assume ill-will or malicious intent; and/or • You shouldn't expect everyone to behave or respond in the same manner; and/or • Try not to take every action personally and assume the worst. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow students and employees the opportunity to explain their work, ideas, processes, and outcomes, and listen with an open mind. Also realize that people are juggling multiple priorities, both personal and professional; and/or • Understand that people generally act without ill will and malice. Ask questions to clarify their intent and provide further information when feasible; and/or • Accept that people are different and that different is not just ok, but sometimes is even better; and/or • Anticipate different responses and reactions (especially to sensitive or controversial topics) and tailor your communication and behavior accordingly.

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are in a meeting and a colleague is quiet. Not only is he or she not contributing to the conversation, but he or she appears to be looking at his or her tablet/phone often throughout the meeting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't assume they are bored, apathetic, or angry about an earlier issue, have no business being included if they have nothing to contribute, or call attention to him or her during the meeting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following the meeting, find a moment to talk with your colleague privately and gently inquire about the behavior. For example, "I noticed you were really distracted during the meeting. Is everything ok?" Wait patiently for a complete response before continuing. You may learn that there is a sick family member or another personal issue. You may also discover that the person is, in fact, bored. This private conversation gives you the opportunity to support your colleague's personal challenges and/or help him or her understand how he or she can contribute and how his or her ideas are valuable to the group.

#4—THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEARING AND LISTENING IS UNDERSTANDING

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person says “yes” but means “I hear you, but I don’t necessarily agree” or says “I don’t know/I’ll think about it”, but means “no”; and/or • Someone doesn’t respond. It could mean “I don’t know the answer, I don’t like the question, or I didn’t hear or understand the question or parts of the question;” and/or • A peer agrees to complete an assignment, but doesn’t specify a date of completion; you don’t give a deadline date, but you assume it will be done as soon as possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You shouldn’t assume anything; and/or • Don’t evaluate everyone’s reactions using the same standard; and/or • You can’t expect everyone to interpret words in the same manner, or understand your context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify that you and others have the same understanding (“it is my understanding that you want me to _____, is that correct?”). Set clear expectations and follow up verbal conversations with written summaries of the conversation; and/or • Acknowledge that vocabulary is built, at least in part, by one’s environment. Some words, phrases, analogies, etc. are more familiar to some than others; and/or • Pay attention to body language and tone when evaluating the meaning of words and actions by others; and/or • Create a safe environment for people to ask questions and see clarification of unclear tasks by encouraging and rewarding such behavior.

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your colleague says that a decision you made is a terrible idea and will negatively impact the organization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try not to get defensive about your authority (“Well, that’s too bad! I discussed it with my boss and that’s the way it has to be.”). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pause for a moment and acknowledge your colleague’s concern (“In what way do you think it will impact the organization?”) Listen closely to the response and don’t interrupt while she is sharing concerns with you. Take mental note of each concern (or write it down if you are in a position to do so). Then, address each concern with understanding and compassion. You may discover that her concerns are valid and she has ideas on how to mitigate the impact. If you are truly unable to change the decision, regardless of this new information, you can be clear about that. Be careful to do it in a compassionate way.

#5–FACE IT. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN YOU NEED TO PICK UP THE PHONE OR DELIVER THE MESSAGE IN PERSON

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are working with your department/team/unit/colleague to implement a new policy/system/process. Emailing becomes frustrating because everyone has a different interpretation for how things should work and no one is on the same page. Communications are becoming strained because not all thoughts can be expressed in the way they were intended via electronic communications. Now defensive behavior is engaged. Someone is ready to attack (verbally or via email). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't engage in a flurry of heated email exchanges that become more rude and less cohesive with every keystroke. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walk over to or call the person or request a time (either right then or later) to discuss the issue and not how you perceive it; and/or Mention that email doesn't seem to be the best solution to complete the task and determine a time to work together to get the job done; and/or Share the responsibility of not being more clear in your communication. Remind yourself and the other person that you are working together toward the same goal; and/or If things have gone too far and communication is broken, be mature enough to apologize and admit you misspoke/overreacted. If you were on the receiving end of the offense, be mature enough to acknowledge what happened and move past it. Once the air has been cleared, move forward with the business at hand.

#6–ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR OWN PERSONAL STEREOTYPES (I.E. YOUR BAGGAGE)

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An item goes missing from your office or classroom. Someone infers that a particular person must have taken it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't make assumptions based on a person's race, gender, financial situation, etc.; and/or Don't focus on the person, focus on the problem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize that we have all developed biases and dealt with stereotypes. This is natural, but it is inappropriate to act upon it; and/or Become aware of your personal biases (through assessments or self-reflection); and/or Pause and reflect before acting/responding in situations where your personal biases are likely to surface.

#7—KNOW WHEN IT’S A GOOD THING FOR YOU (AS A THIRD PARTY) TO ACT AND WHEN IT’S BETTER FOR YOU TO WATCH FROM THE SIDELINES (I.E. TO LOOK THE OTHER WAY)

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone makes an inference about another person’s culture, race, age, gender, etc. in front of the person. The person making the inference seemingly has no idea that they have made an inappropriate comment; and/or A person is offended by a label, name, attitude projected by someone. They address the fact that they are offended, but are belittled for feeling that way; and/or Someone posts a remark on social media that many perceive to be insensitive and hurtful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Try not to take things personally and assume the worst or attack a person who may be unaware that their comment was rude or hurtful; and/or Avoid jumping into the conversation without allowing the affected person to respond first (unless necessary due to safety); and/or Sometimes it's not appropriate to confront the situation immediately (depending on the hostility). But if the affected person is not in harm’s way and chooses to walk away, follow up with one or both people as appropriate at another time; and/or Never pretend that you did not witness the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give the affected person the ability to respond and listen with an open mind, while helping to ensure the safety of both parties; and/or Assume that people generally act without ill will and malice; and/or Ask questions to understand their intent; and/or Provide education and clarity when feasible. You may be the voice of reason, as an objective bystander, who can share information that will help both parties calm down/understand each other; and/or Allow other peers to comment (especially via social media); many times, groups of people are self-regulating; and/or Address the situation personally and follow up with the appropriate supervisor if that supervisor is not you.

#8—SOME PEOPLE ARE UNAWARE, NOT INSENSITIVE - SO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TALKING MOMENTS

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You overhear or witness an exchange that can be perceived as insensitive. You are either familiar enough with one of the parties to know the true intent behind the statement, or you don’t know either of the parties well enough to understand the intent; and/or You learn of a situation through a complaint and/or general conversation with student or co-worker. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Try not to assume that you know the whole story or that you understand the intent behind the exchange; and/or Don't expect everyone to interpret the situation the same way; and/or Avoid assuming that both parties understand what just happened; sometimes a person does not realize that what was said was offensive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify your understanding of the situation either immediately or at a more appropriate time (after the situation calms down, etc.); and/or Pay attention to body language and tone when evaluating the meaning of words and actions by others; and Create a safe environment for others to ask questions and seek clarification of unclear tasks by encouraging and rewarding such behavior.

#9—PERCEPTION IS REALITY...THOUGH NOT ALWAYS

THE SITUATION	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A colleague or fellow student sends an email with particular words called out in bold or all caps. The sender believes they are doing it for emphasis. However, the recipient understands it as being offensive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't assume that the sender meant the worst; and/or• You shouldn't continue communication or retort via email.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clarify the situation immediately; and/or• Talk in person or via phone for a better understanding.

#10—PUT DIVERSITY INTO YOUR DAILY ROUTINE

- Add a new colleague to your committee.
- Seek out someone with a different point of view.
- Get to know someone in another office.
- If someone tells you where he or she is from, express interest and ask him or her about the place.
- It all starts with you!