Keeping records of oral communications

Have you ever had to report any conversations and discussions?

Do you keep records of important conversations and discussions?

It is important to keep records of some oral communications

You’ve probably watched TV programmes where police officers have been giving evidence in court and ask for permission to refer to their notes. It is good practice in the police service to make contemporaneous notes of events they have witnessed or conversations they have had. Contemporaneous comes from the word contemporary which means current or of this time. So contemporaneous notes are made at the time something happens, or very shortly afterwards.

Why do police officers make notes? Because, no matter how significant an event may be, we only remember bits of what happened. You may think that you will remember what someone has said, or something that you have agreed to do, but a few hours or days later, there will have been so many things happening that you can all too easily forget.

Keeping records of oral communications - conversations, discussions, interviews, negotiations and agreements - will help you to recall what was said, what you and others agreed to do, and why certain things were agreed. In this session you will learn to recognise when it's important to keep records, and what it is you should record.
What oral communications should you record?

You have just seen a new employee crossing a building site without a hard hat and stopped him and warned him that he must wear his hard hat at all time. The ‘phone then rang and your manager warned you that a visit by the structural engineers was due next Monday and they needed some material samples prepared. Then a fellow team leader popped his head round the door to remind you that he was on two weeks’ holiday from Monday and that you had agreed to replace him at a meeting about team training. Finally, a member of your team comes in to see you to complain about some comments made by another team member that she thought were racist.

Which of these events should a team leader record? Let’s see what happens in the following days:

- The following day a brick falls from scaffolding and hits the new employee on the head, causing severe injuries as he still isn’t wearing a hard hat.

- The team of structural engineers arrives at 12.30 am to find that the samples they requested aren’t ready.

- You are on the ‘phone talking to head office - they want to know who is coming to the team training meeting later that morning.

- As soon as you finish, your manager calls to say that a member of your team has made a formal complaint about racism.

- In the investigation that follows you can remember warning the injured employee, but can’t say precisely when, and he denies ever having been told anything.

- You hadn’t added details of the visit to your notes for the morning briefing and had forgotten to organise it.

- You had forgotten to put it in your diary and so had forgotten about the clash with the structural engineers’ visit.

- The company has a clear anti-racism policy and all complaints should be reported for investigation straightaway.
You should keep a record of warnings you have given about behaviour that might be a danger to health and safety, or to the environment, or that could lead to disciplinary proceedings or to a grievance complaint. This provides evidence that you have warned someone. It ensures that details of an event are recorded should there be any dispute about them.

But what should you record? Start with a note of the **time**, **date** and **place**, and list the **people** present. (If you note down anyone else who was present you will have the names of any witnesses.) Don’t try to record every detail, just note down the key points of what was said. Don’t record what you felt or thought.

**Case Study**

14/8/07, 3.15 pm      Ted Cannon/GP

I told Ted that I had seen him without his hard hat and warned him he must wear it at all times. He said he knew but had forgotten. I told him that not wearing a hard hat on site was regarded as gross misconduct.

Gary (GP - the team leader) has simply noted down what he and what Ted had said. If he sees Ted again without his hard hat, or there is an accident, he can show that he had warned him. It’s not proof but it is evidence, and backs up anything that Gary says if there has to be an enquiry in the future.

Where is this record kept? It could be in a diary or in a notebook (or a combination of the two, in a personal organiser, such as a Filofax™, which can also have other aids such as work planners, names and addresses, and other information. (An alternative is a PDA - a personal digital assistant - an electronic version of a personal organiser.) Many people keep a notebook with them at work the whole time, to ensure that they can record important information. If you don’t do this already, it’s something you should consider doing.

If you give regular team briefings then it is also useful to have somewhere to make a note of items to include in the next one as you learn about them. A diary is also a valuable tool for any team leader. You should use your diary to record straightaway any appointments, meetings and other significant future events you have agreed or been told about, to remind you later.
Team leaders have to attend meetings from time to time. These may be regular weekly or monthly meetings with your manager, or one-off meetings to discuss improvement projects. They can be one-to-one meetings or large groups. You should keep a record of any meetings you attend, even if there will be formal records made (minutes). You should make a note of the what has been said that is important to you and your team, especially if it involves you in having to take any action.

Don’t try to make a verbatim record. Verbatim means an exact, word-for-word record. What you want to record is the significant details. Overleaf is Phil’s record of a meeting with his line manager, along with three other team leaders.
Phil has numbered each of the items covered, and added a note underneath when he has to do something, marked with an asterisk (*). This way he can see easily what he has to do. The hardest part of taking notes of what is said at meetings is to listen to what is being said, think through what it means for you and your team, and then write this down, without missing what is then being said.

If you find that you are not able to note down the key points and listen to the next topic, there are two simple things you can do:

- Ask people in the meeting to wait until you have noted down something important.
- Summarise back what has been said (called reflecting back) as you intend noting it down - this will confirm that you have got it right, and also people will see you are writing it down and wait for you.

Of course, you can’t always ask people to wait for you or get a chance to reflect back what has been said. If you don’t have time to write everything you want, write some key words to remind you and fill in the details afterwards, while they are still fresh in your mind. Ask others for help if you are struggling to remember.

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Case Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.30</td>
<td>15/08/07</td>
<td>TG’s office</td>
<td>RS/CP/LH-R/PD</td>
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1. End of year - need to keep stocks low (check deliveries due)
   * Tell team - auditors here next week

2. Two temps to cover holidays - compare rotas to decide which teams
   * TLs meet at 2.30 - RS cell

3. Performance data good - above target production (3.2%) and quality (reject rate down below 0.3%), costs 2% below budget.
   * Congratulate team next briefing

4. Possibility of extension to factory starting next month - new product line being introduced next year.
   * Tell team - three new team leaders - details in November
Sometimes you need to do something more than keep a record for your own use of what was said at a meeting or in a conversation. You may be asked to keep minutes of a meeting, or you may want to write a formal confirmation of what was said. There are five main written formats for keeping such records:

- Email
- Memo
- Letter
- Minutes
- Short report

The BS2 session *Writing effective memos and emails* explains how to write emails and memos and the session *Improving your written English* covers writing letters. In this session we’ll just look at when you use these three formats, and then look in a little more detail at minutes and short reports.

Emails and memos are both used for internal communication - that is, for communicating to other employees in the organisation. Emails can also be used for external communications, as are letters (although they are now being replaced by email, in many cases). The main reason for writing an email, memo or letter is to confirm what has been said to someone, face to face or over the phone, to prevent any misunderstanding or forgetfulness, or to let someone else know what was said or agreed.

Here is an example.

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John
I’m just confirming that I’ll come to your office next week, at 11.00 on Tuesday 21st Aug.
Look forward to seeing you
Phil
Writing minutes of a meeting

You may be asked to keep the minutes of a formal meeting. This is a formal record of the meeting that will be circulated to everyone who was there. If you do have to keep the minutes of a meeting, here are some pointers to doing it well.

- Prepare an **outline** beforehand - see what a standard set of minutes usually looks like, below.

- Do not expect to be able to **participate** in the meeting. If there is something you need to say, then do so, but otherwise you need to focus on recording the what others say.

- Record the **key points** of what has been said, but don’t try to write everything down.

- Make sure you record any **actions** that have been agreed, and who is responsible. Meetings which are designed to plan what needs to be done use action plans rather than minutes to record what was said and agreed.

- If you are at all in doubt about something, **ask** what needs to be recorded. It’s better to do that than to miss something important.

What’s included in minutes?

Minutes will normally include:

- Date, time and place

- Who attended (and who sent apologies for their absence)

- The agenda (what was to be discussed)

- Any matters arising from the minutes of the last meeting

- The main points of what was actually discussed

- What was agreed, any actions to be taken, by whom (and by when)

- Date, time (and place) of next meeting, and any points that should be included on the agenda
There may be occasions when you need to write a short report of a meeting. This could be when you visit a customer or supplier, or a customer comes to make a complaint. It could be about a conversation you have had with a member of your team or someone outside the team on a serious matter, such as a breach of organisation’s health and safety or equal opportunities policy.

The purpose of the report is to record what was said and done. It should be factual and concentrate on the details. If your own emotions or the emotions of the other person affected what was said or done, then include that. Don’t try to guess what someone else was thinking unless that affected what you said or did. For example:

“I thought he was going to hit me so I went behind the counter and called security.”

The purpose of a short report is to let other people who weren’t there know what was said and done, and to explain your words and actions. It is most likely to be needed if a problem has occurred and the conversation or discussions you had were relevant. If you think that a report might be needed, write it as soon as possible while you can still recall what was said and one.

What’s included in a short report?

A short report is normally divided into three parts:

- Introduction - brief description of the location, time and context in which the events happened

“My name is Paula Turner, and I’m team leader in Housewares. I was crossing the department on 3rd August 2007 at about 10.15 when I saw the customer looking round…”

- A description of the events themselves and what was said or done

“I approached him and asked if he needed any help. He said he did and opened a plastic bag containing a toaster…”

- Any conclusions - any thoughts you have now about what happened or was aid that may be significant

“I am sure that he intended hitting me with the toaster. It couldn’t have been an accident…”
Most oral communications - conversations, discussions, telephone calls and similar events - are informal and pass on information that is used straightaway. However, because oral communications leave no record, if something was important it can all too easily be lost. That's why you need to keep records of what was said. The challenge is to know what you need to record, and where you should record it.

This session has looked at several different situations when you may need to keep records, and different ways of doing so. You should observe what other people in your organisation do and learn from those who seem best organised. Don’t be afraid to ask people for help and advice. You should think about when you might need to recall what was said and who might need to know. Don’t trust to your memory unless it is something unimportant.

Most importantly of all, if the oral communication was about a topic that might lead to something more serious (like a disciplinary matter), always make a record just in case.
Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

A. List three reasons why you may need to keep records of oral communications.
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 

B. Match these ways of keeping records of oral communications with the descriptions of what they are used for. (Write the letter in the box)
   1. Notebook
   2. Diary
   3. Personal organiser
   4. Personal digital assistant

   a. A way of recording the time and day of events
   b. An electronic tool for recording events, discussions, appointments and other information
   c. A simple way of recording what was said and agreed at meetings, discussions, conversations and other events
   d. A combined diary, notebook, planner and information source

C. List three different ways of recording oral communications for other people's benefit.
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 

Answer the questions following this case.

Rachna is the team leader of a group of trainers and assessors who organise apprenticeships in the hospitality industry - in hotels, restaurants and similar organisations. One of her tasks is to go out with members of her team to observe their work as part of the organisation's quality assurance of its operations. Bill is a new member of the team. He has been working for another organisation and has joined her team in the last two weeks. This will be the first time that Rachna has observed Bill.


During the first visit, Rachna is surprised that Bill doesn’t ask for the apprentice’s supervisor when they arrive, but goes straight through to the kitchen and starts talking to the chef. She also gets concerned that he asks very leading questions of the trainee when checking what he has learnt, and seems to accept answers that are often not completely correct.

Rachna raises these points with Bill after the visit, but he seems uninterested. “That’s what I’ve always done”, he says. Rachna reminds him that these things were discussed during his induction. It was company policy to see the trainee’s supervisor first on each visit. He shrugs, and says nothing. At the next visit, he does ask for the supervisor, but is a bit off hand with him and then jokes with the trainee in a way that Rachna feels uses inappropriate language.

- What would have helped Rachna to prove that she had arranged the observation visit with Bill?

- How would you record the oral conversations that Rachna had with Bill during the visits?
How well do you use the skills in this session?

- Do you use a diary, notebook, personal organiser or PDA? If so, you record everything you should? If not, would it improve your performance if you started to use one or other of these tools?

- Do you currently record any oral communications? Is there anything you should record that you don’t?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>strengths &lt;-&gt; weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I'm good at this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognising the importance of keeping records of some oral communications</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recording oral communications when appropriate</td>
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<tr>
<td>using appropriate tools to keep records of oral communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>keeping other people informed about oral communications, when appropriate</td>
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2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?

3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)