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*The Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution Newsletter  
State of Hawaii, Judiciary*



Center for Alternative  
Dispute Resolution  
State of Hawaii  
Judiciary  
417 South King Street  
Room 207  
Honolulu, Hawaii, 96813

Phone:  
808-539-4ADR (4237)

Fax:  
808-539-4416

E-mail:  
CADR@courts.hawaii.gov

[www.courts.state.hi.us/cadr](http://www.courts.state.hi.us/cadr)



## *Reminders for Effective Communication*

If we know the basics of effective communication — keeping to the subject, no interruptions, respecting personal space, awareness of non-verbal communication — why are there still so many misunderstandings? Here are four reminders that can keep misunderstandings from turning into arguments:

**It's not just what you say; it's how you say it.** Tone of voice matters. When the words and the tone contradict each other, adults tend to believe the tone. Make sure that your non-verbal cues reinforce your intended meaning.

**Assume good intent.** Instead of assuming the argument or insult in the way that something is said, try to look past the awkward wording or negative tone of voice and consider the relationship. Could the person have come off that way because she was delivering a difficult message? Because he didn't feel well? It's okay to say that you're not sure you understood what you heard or to ask if your interpretation is right. Your question gives the other person a chance to think about the message and convey it in a different way. Just be sure to ask without accusing.

**Listen actively.** Instead of thinking about what you are going to say while someone else is speaking, try to concentrate all your attention on what is being said, and wait to respond. Paraphrase the message and ask if your understanding is correct. If you are wrong, welcome the chance to get it right. This can keep potentially volatile matters from escalating.

**Not about me (NAM mantra).** In the movie *Casablanca*, Peter Lorrie says to Humphrey Bogart, "You despise me, don't you Rick?" Bogart replies, "If I gave you any thought, I probably would." Often, we take things personally when they are not meant that way, or we make the conversation about ourselves when the focus should be on the person speaking. Consider whether the center of attention should be the other person and whether you should insert yourself into the situation. Express genuine interest in the other person, hear the story (see **Listen Actively**), and ask about the other person's perspective. You may learn something.

These tips are good reminders but putting them into practice is the challenge. Ease comes with repetition. Practice a skill a week and you may see a difference.