

Effective Communication Skills

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Preface

So what does it take to become a master communicator?

Have you either “got it” or you haven’t? Are you born with outstanding communication skills or can they be learned?

Either way, you’ll need to be a master communicator to get on in your studies and to progress throughout your career and life in general.

This textbook covers the essentials and also hidden secrets of what being able to communicate with ease is all about.



Sean McPheat, the Founder and Managing Director of management development specialists, MTD Training is the author of this publication. Sean has been featured on CNN, BBC, ITV, on numerous radio stations and has contributed to many newspapers. He’s been featured in over 250 different publications as a thought leader within the management development and training industry.

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1 Introduction – Effective Communication Skills

1.1 The Importance of Communication

In a survey conducted by the Katz Business School at the University of Pittsburgh, organizations rated communication skills as the most important factor used in selecting their management staff. The study found that oral and written communication skills were important in predicting job success, as was the ability to communicate well with others in the workplace.

A University of Pittsburgh study found that the most important factor in selecting managers is communication skills.

This makes sense when you think about it. If you can communicate well, you can get your message across to others in an effective way and they then have accurate instructions to complete their assigned tasks. If you are not able to communicate well, the messages you send get lost in translation. Communication breakdowns result in barriers against your ability to develop both professionally and personally.

Even though communications skills are so important to success in the workplace, there are many individuals who find these skills to be a stumbling block to their progress. They struggle to convey their thoughts and ideas in an accurate manner, making it difficult to progress and nearly impossible to lead well.

However, there is hope for anyone who finds communicating to be difficult. These skills can be practiced and learned. It takes learning about how communication works, how to communicate exactly what it is you want to say, what mode of communication is best, and what factors are influencing the ability for you to send and receive messages with acumen.

1.2 What Is Communication?

When asked to define communication, how would you respond? Most people will relate to the forms of communication – talking or listening. But communication goes beyond that. Communication involves getting information from one person to the other person. Yet even this is not a complete definition because communicating effectively involves having that information relayed while retaining the same in content and context. If I tell you one thing and you hear another, have I communicated?

Communication is the art and process of creating and sharing ideas. Effective communication depends on the richness of those ideas.

So if we look at communication from another angle, it involves the perception of the information as much as the delivery of that information. In other words, we can define communication as the art and process of creating and sharing ideas. Effective communication depends on the richness of those ideas. In order to be effective at communicating, there are a number of skills that you can rely. Which skill you choose will depend upon your situation, the recipient of your communication, and the information that you need to convey.

1.3 What Are Communication Skills?

Imagine you are on one side of a wall and the person you want to communicate with is on the other side of the wall. But there's more than the wall in the way. The wall is surrounded by a moat that is filled with crocodiles and edged by quicksand. These barriers could be things like different cultures, different expectations, different experiences, different perspectives, or different communication styles, to name just a few.

Communication skills are the tools that we use to remove the barriers to effective communication.

You might experience only one of these barriers at a time, or you might find yourself facing them all. Getting your message to the other person requires that you recognize these barriers exist between you, and that you then apply the proper tools, or communication skills, to remove those barriers preventing your message from getting through.

Of course, communication is a two-way street. The person on the other side of those barriers will also try to send messages back to you. Your ability to understand them clearly could be left to a dependence on their ability to use communication skills. But that's leaving the success of the communication to chance. Instead, you can also use your own communication skills to ensure that you receive messages clearly as well.

Finally, there isn't only one point in your communication with another person at which you have to watch out for barriers. To be successful at communicating, it's important to recognize that these barriers to communication can occur at multiple points in the communication process.

1.4 The Communication Process

The communication process involves multiple parts and stages. These are:

The communication process is composed of several stages, each of which offers potential barriers to successful communication.

- Source
- Message
- Encoding
- Channel
- Decoding
- Receiver
- Feedback
- Context

At each of these stages, there is the potential for barriers to be formed or problems to arise. As we look at ways to limit the barriers to communicating effectively, remember that you may have to apply them at more than one occasion during your communications process. The steps in the process are represented in Figure 1 and explained further in the following information.

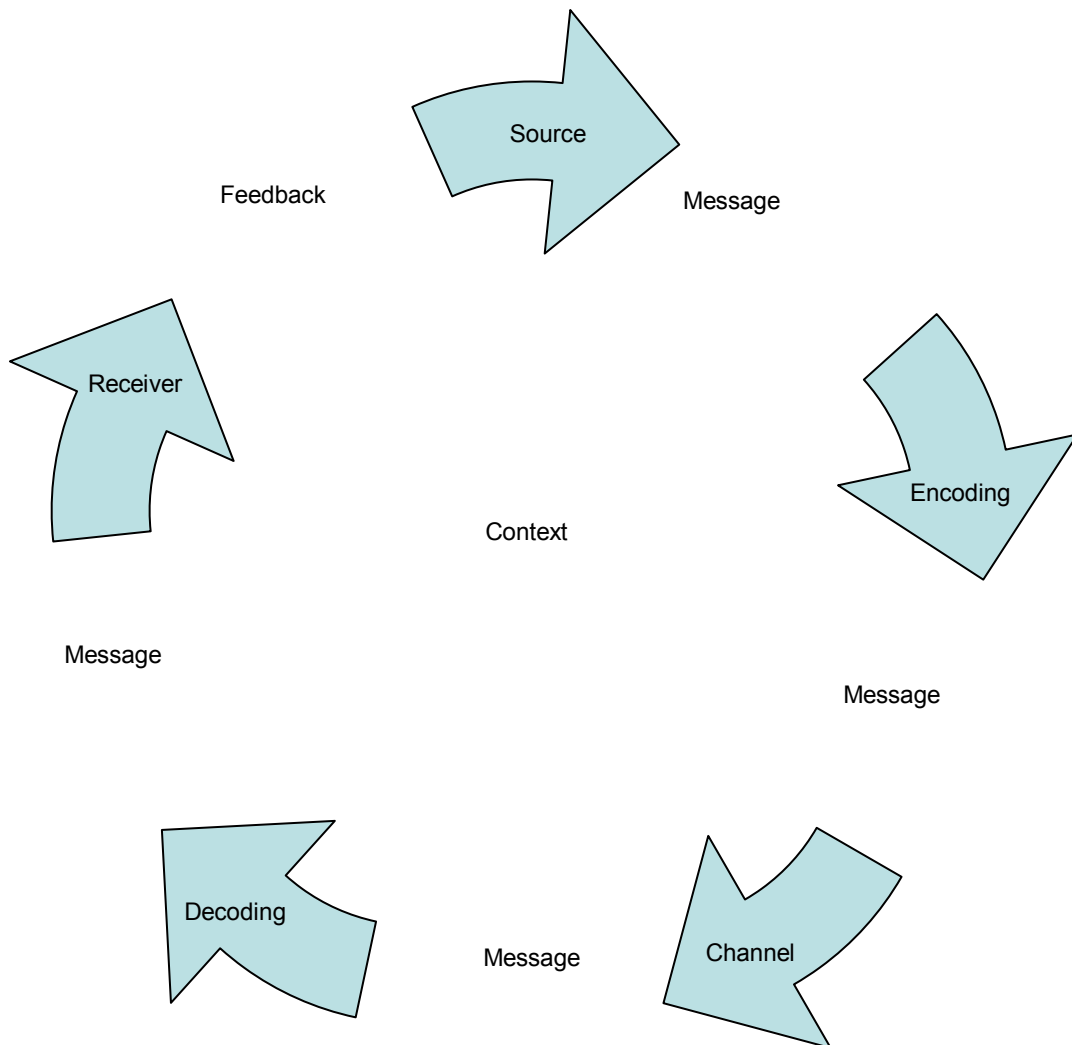


Figure 1: The Communication Process

1.4.1 Source

The source of the communication is the sender, or for our purposes, you. In order to be a good source, you need to be clear about the message that you are sending. Do you know exactly what it is that you want to communicate? You’ll also want to be sure you know why it is that you are communicating. What result is it that you expect? If you cannot answer these questions, you will be starting the communication process with a high chance of failure.

The source of the message is the sender. The sender must know why the communication is necessary and what result is needed.

1.4.2 Message

The message is simply the information that you want to communicate. Without a message, there is no cause for communicating. If you cannot summarize the information that you need to share, you aren’t ready to begin the process of communication.

The source of the message is the sender. The sender must know why the communication is necessary and what result is needed.

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1.4.3 Encoding

Encoding is the process of taking your message and transferring it into a format that can be shared with another party. It's sort of like how messages are sent via a fax. The information on the paper has to be encoded, or prepared, before it can be sent to the other party. It has to be sent in a format that the other party has the ability to decode or the message will not be delivered.

In order to encode a message properly, you have to think about what the other person will need in order to understand, or decode, the message. Are you sharing all the information that is necessary to get the full picture? Have you made assumptions that may not be correct? Are you using the best form of sending it in order to ensure the best chance of the message being properly received? Are there cultural, environmental, or language differences between you and the other party that could cause miscommunication?

Encoding is the process of taking your message and transferring it into the proper format for sharing it with your audience. It requires knowing your audience and ensuring that your message provides all of the information that they need.

Of course, to encode a message properly, you have to know who your audience is. You need to have an understanding of what they know and what they need to know in order to send a complete message. You need to use language they will understand and a context that is familiar. One simple example of how you can do this is being sure to spell out acronyms. We sometimes forget that not everyone is familiar with the acronyms that we may use on a regular basis.

1.4.4 Channel

The channel is the method or methods that you use to convey your message. The type of message you have will help to determine the channel that you should use. Channels include face-to-face conversations, telephone calls or videoconferences, and written communication like emails and memos.

The Channel is the method of communication that you choose such as face-to-face, by telephone, or via email.

Each channel has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, you will find it difficult to give complex, technical information or instructions by using just the telephone. Or you may get bad results if you try to give criticism via email.

1.4.5 Decoding

Decoding happens when you receive the message that has been sent. The communication skills required to decode a message successfully include the ability to read and comprehend, listen actively, or ask clarifying questions when needed.

Decoding is the process of receiving the message accurately and requires that your audience has the means to understand the information you are sharing.

If the person you are attempting to communicate with seems to be lacking the skills to decode your message, you will need to either resend it in a different way or assist them in understanding it by supplying clarifying information.

1.4.6 Receiver

Since you have thought out your message, you've certainly also thought about what you want the desired result to be on the part of your listener. But it's important to realize that each person that receives your message will be listening to it through their own individual expectations, opinions, and perspectives. Their individual experiences will influence how your message is received.

You have expectations for a response from the receiver when you send a message. You can increase the chances of getting this result by addressing your audience's concerns or addressing specific benefits as part of your communication.

While you can't always address each person's individual concerns in a message, part of planning for your communication is to think ahead of time about what some of their thoughts or experiences might be. For example, if you are releasing a new product and want to convince customers to try it, you would want to be certain to address the specific benefits to the customer, or what improvements have been made since the last version was released.

1.4.7 Feedback

No matter what channel you have used to convey your message, you can use feedback to help determine how successful your communication was. If you are face-to-face with your audience, you can read body language and ask questions to ensure understanding. If you have communicated via writing, you can gauge the success of your communication by the response that you get or by seeing if the result you wanted is delivered.

Feedback lets you gauge how successful you were at communicating. It also offers a chance to adjust your communication process for the future.

In any case, feedback is invaluable for helping you to improve your communication skills. You can learn what worked well and what didn't so that you can be even more efficient the next time you communicate with that person or the next time you need to communicate a similar message.

1.4.8 Context

The context is the situation in which you are communicating. It involves the environment that you are in and that in which your audience is in, the culture of your organization(s), and elements such as the relationship between you and your audience. Your communication process will not look the same when you are communicating with your boss as it will when you are communicating with a friend. The context helps determine the tone and style of your communication.

Context involves things such as your relationship with your audience, the culture of your organization and your general environment.

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2 Perspectives in Communication

2.1 Introduction

We all come to each communication exchange with our own 'filter' through which we see the world, the person we are communicating with, and the situation or topic we are communicating about. These filters mean that we don't always start with the same perspective as the person we are communicating with.

Our individual perceptions are the 'filter' through which we communicate with others.

2.2 Visual Perception

These filters can be visual, as in the famous example in Figure 2. What do you see when you look at the picture? A young woman or an old crone? Both perspectives are possible, and both are valid.



Figure 2: Young Woman & Crone

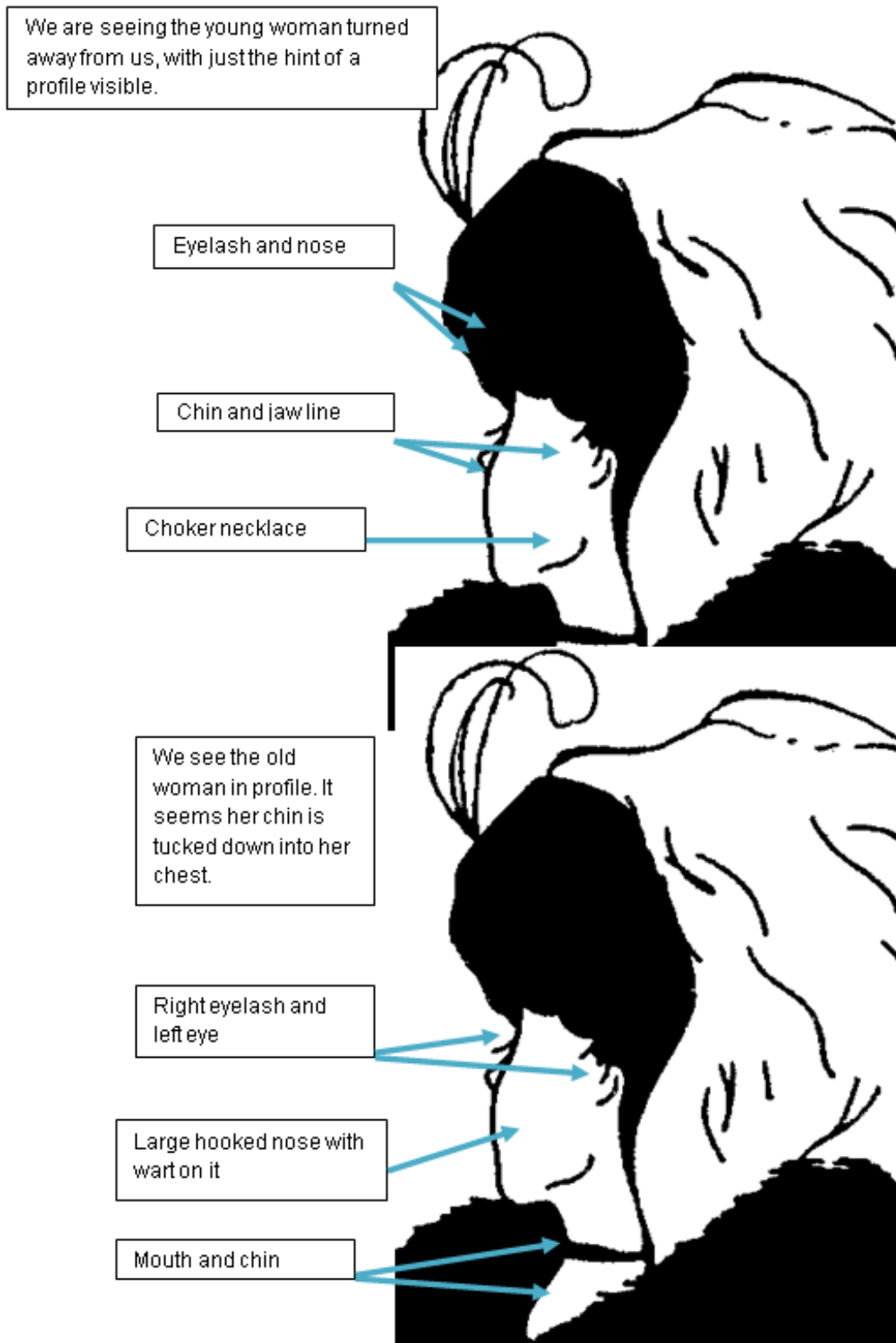


Figure 3: The Two Perspectives

Figure 3 reveals the two perspectives. Both of the perspectives represented in the young and old woman are valid – they are simply two different ways of seeing the same thing. We cannot decide that one does not exist just because we don't see it. We have to recognize that there is more than one way to perceive the picture, just like there is usually more than one way to see any situation we encounter.

2.3 Language

The different perspectives we experience can be with language as well. How many times have you received an email that seemed to have a certain 'tone to it,' and that perception of tone colored the way that you might have responded?

The same words can have very different meanings depending on how we interpret them.

Here's another example. What is the meaning of the following phrase?

A woman without her man is nothing

Sounds pretty bad at first glance, doesn't it? Look again. If you add punctuation or change the word emphasis, how does the meaning change?

A woman. Without her, man is nothing.

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The words were the same in both cases. But the meaning has now changed completely. So although we think our meaning may be clear when we use specific words in a certain order, we can't always be certain that the other person will read or hear them in that way.

"Effective listeners remember that "words have no meaning - people have meaning."
The assignment of meaning to a term is an internal process; meaning comes from inside us. And although our experiences, knowledge and attitudes differ, we often misinterpret each other's messages while under the illusion that a common understanding has been achieved."

- *Larry Barker*

2.4 Other Factors Affecting Our Perspective

There are a multitude of other factors that can affect our perspective, thereby affecting how we communicate with another person. Some of these factors come from our past experiences, our prejudices, our feelings, and our environment. Some of these will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

2.4.1 Past Experiences

Imagine that you are in a meeting where you will be discussing changes in your personnel policies at work. What will you be bringing to that conversation? You might have examples of other company's personnel policies. You might have examples from your own time in the company that demonstrate why you feel that certain changes might need to be made. Or you might come to the table empty-handed, with just a pad of paper and a pen in order to take notes.

What influences you to do any of these things? Your past experience. You would bring outside information because you have learned in the past that comparing situations can be helpful in decision making. You bring examples of your own experience because you have learned in the past that examples can be powerful ways to make your case. Or you come to the table empty-handed because in the past you have felt that your input wasn't valued or you have no past experience in this topic and so you are a 'clean slate' information wise.

In every one of these situations, your communication is being affected by your past experience. You enter a situation, a meeting, or a conversation, with certain expectations of what will happen in that scenario, and you behave accordingly.

Of course, sometimes you want your past experience to influence your future communications. For example, when your team responded positively to the sales tactics you put in place, those same or similar tactics can certainly be successful again.

It's when our negative past experiences stifle our communication or alter our full potential for communicating that we need to be aware. Further examples of how your past experience could influence your communication are given in Figure 4. Note that not all of them are negative – our past experiences can reaffirm our communication as well.

2.4.2 Prejudices

We all have prejudices. They occur when we take our past experiences with a person and assume that the same type of experience will happen with all people who are similar to the first. Prejudices are partly due to culture and partly due to personal preference or experience. Not all prejudices involve a negative characteristic either; for example, you could consider all of one group to be smart.

| Past Experience | Resulting Effect on Communication |
|---|--|
| Your boss has reacted negatively when you have discussed this topic in the past | You hesitate to discuss the topic even when it is necessary for your work |
| Your co-worker has forgotten important information multiple times in the past | You assume he or she will forget the information this time and so you overload him or her with reminders |
| Your boss ignored your idea in the last meeting | You don't bring up another idea that could have made an impact |
| You got nervous the last time you gave a presentation | You start out even more nervous on your next presentation |
| The group reacted well to your last sales pitch | You use a similar style for your next sales pitch |
| The last twenty customers rejected your new product | You fail to offer that product to the 21st customer and beyond, some of whom may have wanted the product |
| The last email you received from a colleague was rude (you perceived it as rude!) | You send a rude email in return |
| Your subordinate was disagreeable the last time you asked him to work overtime | You don't ask him this time, even though he would have agreed |

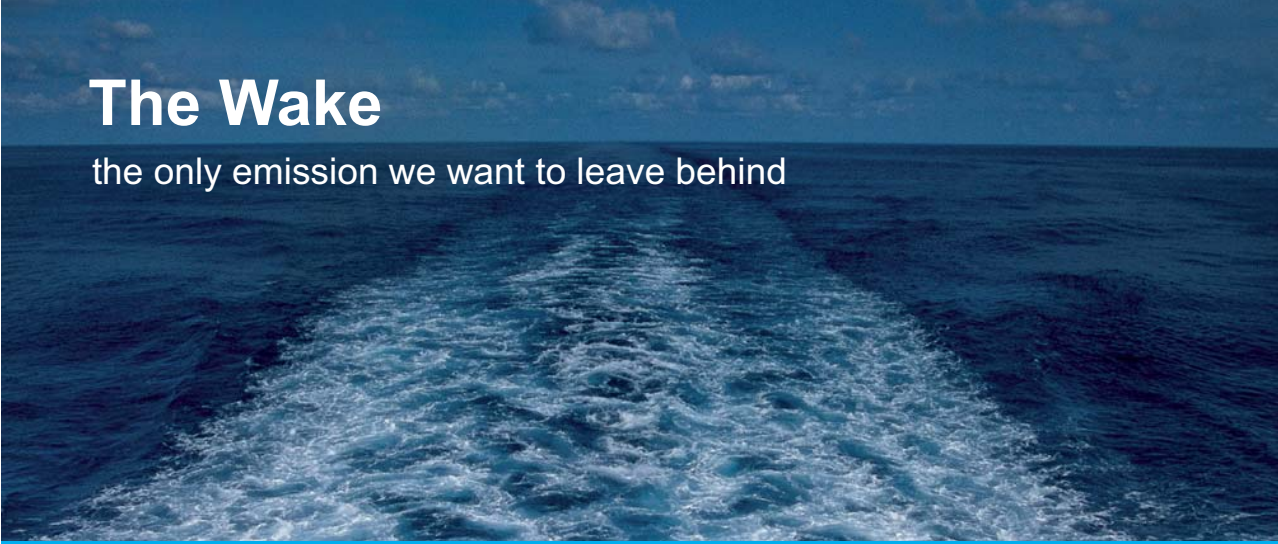
Figure 4: Past Experiences Influencing Communication

The problem with prejudices is when they start to influence how or to whom we communicate. To get an idea of how this could be happening in your workplace, consider how you might complete the phrases below. If you can't think of a way to complete it from your own experience, complete each phrase with a stereotype that you might have heard in the past:

- Women in the workplace are....
- Young people in the workplace are...
- Seniors in the workplace are...
- Working mothers in the workplace are...
- Supervisors at work are...
- The lowest job level workers are...
- Blacks, whites, or (fill in a race) in the workplace are...
- Homosexuals in the workplace are....
- Christians, Muslims, or (fill in a religion) in the workplace are...
- Disabled people in the workplace are...

Prejudices occur when we take an isolated experience with one 'type' of person and then act as if all encounters in the future with people of the same 'type' or with the same characteristics will result in the same experience.

When we categorize people like this, we eliminate their individuality. If you are communicating to a person through a perceived prejudice or stereotype, at the very least you are greatly limiting the chances of your communication being successful or producing the desired result. At the most, you are alienating or insulting someone with whom you are trying to build a working relationship.



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Your goal should be to see each person as an individual that is separate from any preconceived notions you might have about them. It takes practice, but wouldn't you like to be seen and communicated with as an individual and not as a sum of different labels that can be placed on you?

2.4.3 Feelings

For this area of influence, there are actually two ways in which your feelings can influence your communication with another person. The first simply refers to the way that you feel on a given day; if you feel well, you'll communicate in one way and if you feel ill you'll communicate in another. Since your well being fluctuates, it makes sense that the way you communicate will change somewhat with how well you are feeling. If you find yourself experiencing difficulty in communicating due to an illness or other physical stressor, recognizing and acknowledging it, when appropriate, can be very helpful when others might interpret the change in your communication as having something to do with them.

The second aspect related to feelings refers to how you feel about a specific person. When you genuinely like someone, the way you communicate is going to show it. Unfortunately, the same can be said for when you don't like someone. However, as you continue learning about effective communication skills in the following chapters, you will find some tools to help you be as effective as possible in communicating, even when it's with someone that you dislike.

2.4.4 Environment

The last area of influence on your communication is your environment. All of us communicate differently in different environments. This is simple enough to observe in everyday life. Do you speak to your colleagues the same way that you do to your friends? Do you talk to strangers with more or less formality than people you know well? Do you talk to your subordinates the same way when your own boss is there as you do when she is not there? As you go through your workday, notice how where you are, what is going on and who else is present may be impacting the way that you communicate.

Recognizing how the environment might be affecting others you communicate with is a skill that can come in handy for you, particularly when you perceive that the environment is having a negative impact on your ability to communicate effectively with someone. This skill will help you to perceive why someone might be communicating in the way that they are. It will also give you a factor that you can alter in order to make the person more comfortable or to establish a level of formality that you feel is important in a particular situation.

"Precision of communication is important, more important than ever, in our era of hair trigger balances, when a false or misunderstood word may create as much disaster as a sudden thoughtless act."

— James Thurber

3 Elements of Communication

3.1 Introduction

What does it take to communicate with another person? How are we communicating even when we aren't using words? When you begin studying communication, you'll find that we communicate with much more than our words. In face-to-face communication, our words are only part of the message.

The balance of the message, and in fact, the largest part of the message that we are sending to others is made up of non-verbal information. It is composed of our body language and our tone of voice. Figure 5 below demonstrates this fact.



Figure 5: Face to Face Communication

3.2 Face to Face Communication

Albert Mehrabian's work on verbal and non-verbal communication in the 1960s and early 1970s is still considered a valid model today. He posed that the non-verbal aspects of communication such as tone of voice and non-verbal gestures communicate a great deal more than the words that are spoken. He also found that people are more likely to believe your non-verbal communication than your verbal communication if the two are contradictory. In other words, you are most believable and most effectively communicating when all three elements of face-to-face communication are aligned with each other.

Over half of the information we send to others is through non-verbal methods.

3.2.1 Tone of Voice

According to Mehrabian, the tone of voice we use is responsible for about 35-40 percent of the message we are sending. Tone involves the volume you use, the level and type of emotion that you communicate and the emphasis that you place on the words that you choose. To see how this works, try saying the sentences in Figure 6 with the emphasis each time on the word in bold.

- I didn't say he borrowed my book.
- I **didn't** say he borrowed my book.
- I didn't **say** he borrowed my book.
- I didn't say **he** borrowed my book.
- I didn't say he **borrowed** my book.
- I didn't say he borrowed **my** book.
- I didn't say he borrowed my **book**.

Figure 6: Impact of Tone of Voice

The same sentence can have multiple meaning depending on which word is emphasized. The emphasis on a particular word implies additional information than what the words say.

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Notice that the meaning of the sentence changes each time, even though the words are the same. The emphasis you place on the word draws the listener's attention, indicating that the word is important somehow. In this case, the emphasis indicates that the word is an error. So in the first example, I didn't say he borrowed my book, the phrase includes the message that someone else said it. The implied information continues to change in each sentence, despite the words remaining the same each time.

3.2.2 Body Language

Over half of the message that we are sending to others is non-verbal, according to Mehrabian. This means that we receive more than half of what a person is communicating through the subconscious messages they are sending with body language.

Examples of body language include:

- Facial expressions
- The way they are standing or sitting
- Any swaying or other movement
- Gestures with their arms or hands
- Eye contact (or lack thereof)
- Breathing rate
- Swallowing or coughing
- Blushing
- Fidgeting

Basically, body language includes anything they are doing with their body besides speaking. We recognize this communication instinctively, without having to be told what it means. Read the following examples and you'll have a good idea of what the person's body language is telling you.

We instinctively recognize what body language is telling us.

- Mike is sitting with his arms crossed over his chest. His head is tilted down and away from you. His finger is tapping his arm in a fast, erratic manner.
- Jane is sitting back in her chair with her arms crossed behind her head. She is smiling at you and nodding her head from time to time as you speak.
- Dave is standing close to you at an angle. He is speaking just above a whisper and in a strained voice. He makes quick, sharp movements with his hands.
- Marci is presenting to the marketing team. She is swaying back and forth, her hands keep changing positions, and she seems to keep absent-mindedly touching her hair.
- Regina is sitting at the conference table in a meeting. Her legs are crossed and the leg that is on the floor is bouncing up and down at a rapid pace. She is sitting forward in her chair with her pen tapping on the table.

It's not what you say, it's how you say it that matters the most in relaying your message.

We can picture these people and their behaviors from the short description here and without hearing a word from them, we have a pretty good idea of how they are feeling about the situation or about what we are saying to them.

There is another reason to understand body language besides being able to read what another is saying to you subconsciously. You can use it to communicate intentionally that you are on the same wavelength as another person. Next time you are in a conversation that you are enjoying or with whom it is important to you to make a good impression, notice their body language. Now notice yours. Chances are, you have subconsciously mimicked their body language. If they lean forward, you lean forward. If they cross one foot over their knee, you do the same. This is our automatic response to someone that we want to establish a positive connection with – and it's one you can use to your advantage.

Body language is a useful tool that you can learn to use.

You can mimic another's body language when you want to express support for them.

You can use a person's body language to realize that your message is incomplete – there is more to say or there are questions to be answered.

When you are in a situation where you want to convey your support of another person, you can intentionally mimic their body language. If you are standing in the hallway and they lean to one side, mirror their action. If they sit back and relax, do the same. You are sending subconscious signals that you are on their side, even if the topic that you are discussing is one where there may be disagreement. It reaffirms that you are part of the same team, no matter what else might be going on.

You can also use this tool to gauge whether or not others are buying in on what you are saying. Are they using words that express agreement, but sitting all wound up with crossed arms and legs? Unless they just happen to be cold, chances are that there is some matter still unresolved in their mind. You can use this signal as information to you that you still need to do some explaining or ask some additional questions.

3.2.3 Verbal Communication

The third communication element is verbal communication. Believe it or not, it is actually the least impactful element in face-to-face communication. The old adage is true – it's not what you say, it's how you say it that counts.

Of course, this is a bit simplified. We do want to use verbal communications, the words we choose, to our best advantage. You would definitely make a different impression if you curse during your presentation than if you don't. Choosing our words carefully is a way to enhance our message, but we should remember that it is not the most important part of the message. We should not neglect to pay attention to the other non-verbal elements.


But what about when we are limited to using only verbal communication? Given that we know that face-to-face communication delivers the most complete message, we know that verbal communication alone can be challenging in creating effective communication.

You might think that talking on the telephone or sending off a quick email is an excellent time saver. There are times when this is true. For example, when confirming specific facts or asking simple questions. But for many communication needs, verbal communication only is rarely going to suffice.

As an example, imagine trying to give someone verbal instructions on how to draw the string of shapes shown in Figure 7.

How could you give someone directions on drawing the string of shapes in Figure 7 by only using verbal communication? What would be challenging about doing so?

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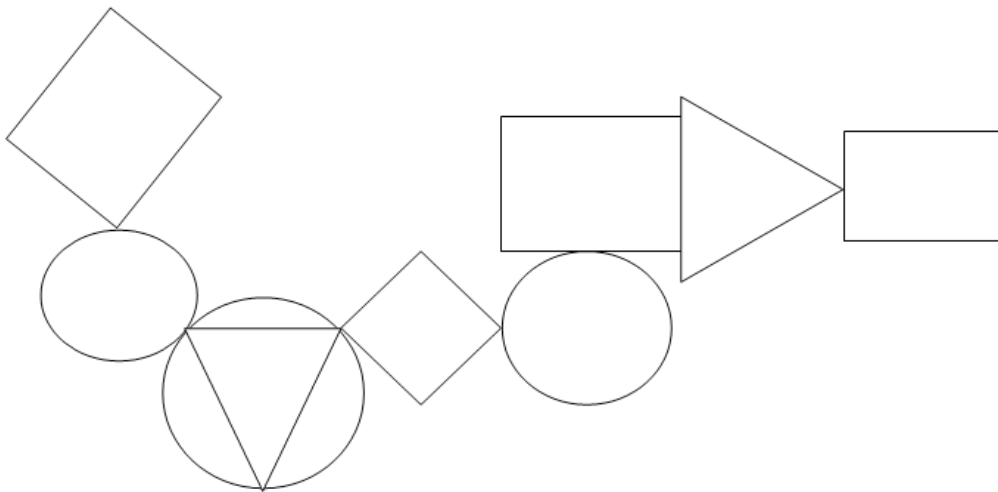


Figure 7: Describing a String of Shapes

How would you start? Would you give a general description of the string of shapes first? Would you tell them to be prepared to use rectangles, circles, triangles, and squares? Would you attempt to use measurements to give the other person the general idea of the size of each shape? Or would you just give directions as to the general area to start and say ‘draw a rectangle’?

If you do try this with another person, chances are you will feel the strong desire to show them the picture or to use your hands to indicate the shapes and their position to one another. That’s because in this case, you instinctually know that there are better ways to deliver this type of communication.

Notice that each of these ways of communicating the information is valid. They may end up with slightly different results with the same person, but your challenge is in the fact that you are very limited in how you communicate the information. Using only words, you are likely to end up with as many different versions of the drawing as there are people drawing it. We’ll spend more time on improving your verbal communication in later chapters.

3.3 Physical Communication

Although it is less used in a business scenario, there is one last element of communication that all of us use on a regular basis – physical communication. At work you might use it some – to pat someone on the back or to give them a slight tap on the shoulder to get their attention. When it is used, it is more effective than verbal communication.

To clarify this point, imagine doing the exercise on the shapes in the last section, but this time, instead of words, you are able to put your hand over the hand of the person doing the drawing and direct the motion of their pen physically. You will end up with something much closer to the actual picture than by verbal instruction alone.

4 Communication Styles

4.1 Introduction

Each one of us has a style of communicating that is unique. Some of us are talkative and extroverted while others are quiet and reserved. Some of us are outspoken while others are less likely to share their opinions in public. Still others of us are formal and direct while others are informal and like to take our time getting to the main point. So how do these different styles of communication impact us in the workplace?

Communication style refers to the choices we tend to make when communicating to others. It involves two basic dimensions: the assertiveness level of our communication and the emotiveness level of our communication. We also use different styles depending on with whom we are communicating.

Differences in communication style can lead to barriers in communication success.

When you work with someone who has a decidedly different communication style from your own, that difference can act as one of the barriers to effective communication. You may feel that someone is being aloof and cold while they feel that they are being quick and business-like. Or you might feel that someone is being too analytical and detailed, while they feel that you aren't recognizing the importance of the small things that can make a big difference.

There is a way to overcome these differences, however. It involves learning the basic characteristics of the different communication styles and how they influence the context in which your communication is happening. If you can learn to understand the other person's communication style and how it is manifesting itself in the way they communicate, you are learning your audience and what they need in order to understand your message. You can then encode your message in a way that they will be more likely to be able to decode it, thereby increasing the chance that your message will be delivered successfully.

To put it another way, imagine that you are in a foreign country. You can stumble about, using your own words for things and trying to communicate, with the result being that one or both parties may become frustrated – and with very little chance that you will get the result that you want.

But if you can speak the language of the person you want to speak with, suddenly you can communicate. You can ask for what you need, give them the information they need, and hopefully achieve the result that is the original aim of your message. When you employ this communication tool, you simply make the choice to communicate to your audience in their 'native tongue.'

So how do you start? You begin by studying the four basic communication styles and how they relate to each other. You identify your own personal communication style and what particular barriers you might face when communicating with the other styles. Then you learn some simple tools you can use to enhance your communication with others, no matter what communication style they are.

4.2 The Communication Styles Matrix

There are many different models that describe the ways in which we communicate. But one very useful model is based on the work of Dr. Eileen Russo. Her matrix is displayed in Figure 8 below. It shows that there are two different dimensions in communication styles: the level of expressiveness and the level of assertiveness.

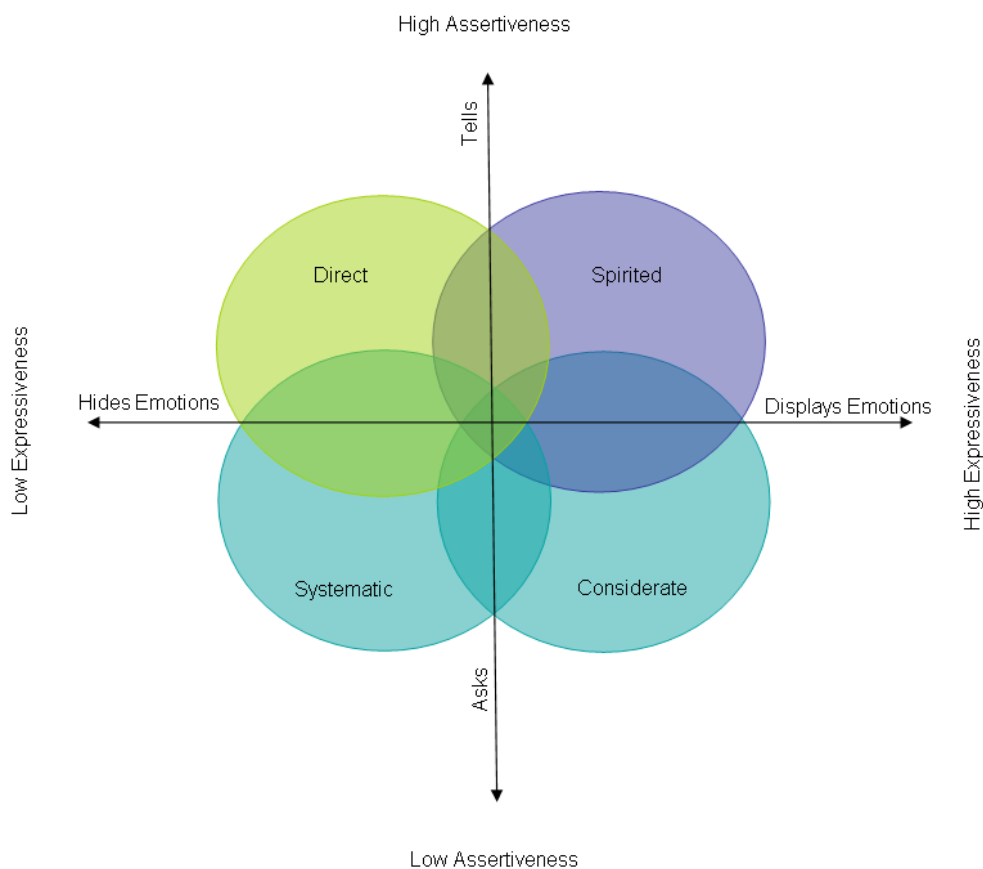


Figure 8: The Communication Styles Matrix

Each quadrant in Figure 8 represents a different communication style. People can fall anywhere within each quadrant, becoming more uniformly one style over the others as they move further from the center.

The assertive communication styles tell others what to do while the less assertive styles ask others what should be done.

The more expressive styles show emotion while the less expressive styles refrain from showing it.

Notice that the more assertive communication styles tend to ‘tell’ others what to do. The less assertive communication styles tend to ‘ask’ others what should be done. The more expressive communication styles tend to show their emotions in their face, speech, and tone. The less expressive styles will either not express their emotions or will work to hide them. The resulting four basic communication styles are shown in Figure 9. In the following sections, we’ll look at the basic characteristics of each communication styles and some things you can do to help you communication well with each type.

- Low Expressiveness + Low Assertiveness = Systematic
- Low Expressiveness + High Assertiveness = Direct
- High Expressiveness + High Assertiveness = Spirited
- High Expressiveness + Low Assertiveness = Considerate

Figure 9: The Four Basic Communication Styles



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4.2.1 Direct Communication Style

As indicated in the communication style matrix, people with the direct communication style are highly assertive and not expressive. They tend to tell others what to do instead of asking others what they think should be done, and they will not easily show emotions in their communications with others. Their communication style is meant to be expedient, though others may not always see it that way. They may appear terse and cold to others, who might take their style of communicating personally.

People with direct communication styles are the 'go-getters' in the group. They will work hard and fast and will brook few questions or distractions.

These people need to use caution to avoid appearing dictatorial or cold.

If you are a direct style, you could probably use some practice with listening skills.

Direct communicators will try to tell you as little as possible before moving on to the next topic – not because they are trying to be evasive, but because they are trying to save time. They won't always stop to listen to others, even if the others have something valuable to contribute. They may seem impatient and overbearing at times, but it's not meant to be personal. They are attempting to focus on results rather than emotions. They will speak their minds, even if it could be off-putting to others. Don't expect them to talk about their personal lives – they like to keep business and personal issues separate. They don't back down from conflict, and at times could be seen as being aggressive rather than assertive in the way that they express their opinions. Figure 10 gives tips for you if you are a direct style, while Figure 11 gives you tips for working with others who are the direct style.

Tips for Communicating if You Have a Direct Communication Style

- Make an effort to listen fully to others and avoid interrupting
- Allow time for 'chatting' at the beginning of a meeting
- Recognize that others may feel the need to express their emotions about topics
- Recognize that brainstorming can be helpful and not just a 'time waster'
- Try to communicate your expectations for how a meeting will go – the length of time, the topics to be covered, and the expected results – before a meeting occurs
- Take the time to show your appreciation for others' contributions
- Don't use email for sensitive or complicated topics
- Allow time in your schedule for questions and feedback

Figure 10: Tips for Communicating if You Have a Direct Communication Style

Tips for Communicating with People with a Direct Communication Style

- Ask if they have time to talk before jumping in
- Get to the point quickly – don't bore them with lots of background information
- Limit 'chatting' or conversation that is off-topic
- Use short, direct sentences
- Ask for a specific call to action or make a specific request
- Do not speak in the abstract
- Only promise what you are certain you can deliver
- Don't give or ask for information about personal issues unless they initiate it
- Don't sugar coat things – speak plainly

Figure 11: Tips for Communicating with People Who Have a Direct Communication Style

4.2.2 Spirited Communication Style

People with the spirited communication style are very interested in the 'big picture'. They are the dreamers, the inventors, and the innovators in the group. Their communication may be full of grand ideas and hyperboles that tend to be very persuasive to others at first.

People with the spirited communication style love to flesh out ideas, brainstorm, and talk about the big picture – as long as they get to do a lot of the talking!

Spirited people can have a hard time nailing down the details in their wonderful ideas. They may also have a hard time sticking to an agenda or to one topic.

However, they are not always very good at discussing the details or the exact steps in the process. They will tend to go off on tangents in their conversations, and like to interject anecdotes into their dialogues in order to demonstrate or drive home a point.

Keeping to an agenda is sometimes a challenge for those with the spirited communication style since both time management and remaining focused are challenges for this group. Their written or verbal communication may tend towards the dramatic. While they can be very entertaining, getting them to communicate clearly on specific topics may take the assistance of someone else to guide them through a conversation and keep them on track by bringing them back to the subject at hand. See Figures 12 and 13 for tips on communicating as or with a person with a spirited communication style.

Tips for Communicating if You Have a Spirited Communication Style

- When considering new ideas to share, also consider whether or not you have suggestions on how to put those ideas into action
- Respect agreed-upon agendas and time limits when in meetings
- Try to limit your sharing of personal anecdotes that take the group off-topic
- Make sure you are allowing others to contribute their ideas and suggestions – and that you are listening
- Be certain any requests you make are clear and that you convey the reason for asking
- Communicate your appreciation for others' work and input

Figure 12: Tips for Communicating if You Have a Spirited Communication Style

Tips for Communicating with People Who Have a Spirited Communication Style

- Use an agenda with time limits listed for each topic
- Praise them in front of other people
- Learn to gently redirect the conversation back to the topic at hand
- Understand that they may exaggerate
- Challenge them to break down their 'big ideas' into specific outcomes and steps
- Reaffirm with them what they have agreed to do
- Use check-lists or other written reminders as a way to help communicate what needs to be done

Figure 13: Tips for Communicating With People Who Have a Spirited Personality Style

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4.2.3 Systematic Communication Style

Those with a systematic communication style like to focus on facts and details rather than opinions and possibilities. Expect to use and appreciate logic when you communicate with a systematic. They will appreciate facts and analysis rather than the ‘big picture’ ideas that have not yet been proved useful.

People with a systematic communication style will focus on facts over opinions. Communication with tangible evidence is best for systematic. They will likely be uncomfortable expressing feelings and will tend to avoid confrontation.

They may be slower to respond to your communication, as they are probably analyzing the situation and constructing a logical, well thought-out response. Charts, graphs and trends are all useful tools for communicating with systematic as well.

Those with a systematic communication style are uncomfortable with expressing their feelings about things and do not like conflict. They may tend to shut down communication rather than dealing with emotional or confrontational situations. If you give them directions, you will need to be very thorough and precise in relaying them.

The more information you can give them, the happier they will be – as long as the information is relevant to the current discussion or is relevant background information. Figures 14 and 15 give you tips for communicating if you have a systematic communication style or if you are speaking with someone with a systematic communication style.

Tips for Communicating if You Have a Systematic Communication Style

- Recognize that not everyone follows linear thought processes and decision-making
- Realize that for good working relationships, consideration for others’ feelings is important
- Learn to ask qualifying questions that will help you get the information you need
- Ask others questions about themselves if you want to build rapport
- Make sure you understand the scope of a project so that you don’t waste time collecting information that is not going to be needed
- If you need to ask for more time for analysis, be able to explain the benefit of the information you are working on

Figure 14: Tips for Communicating if You Have a Systematic Communication Style

Tips for Communicating with People with a Systematic Communication Style

- Focus on the facts of the situation rather than individuals' opinions
- Speak with precision and accuracy rather than generalizations
- Be organized, on time, and on topic when you communicate with them
- Give logical reasons for your actions and for what you ask of them
- Allow them time for research and analysis before decision-making
- Avoid personal topics unless they open the conversation

Figure 15: Tips for Communicating with People Who Have a Systematic Communication Style

4.2.4 Considerate Communication Style

Those with the considerate communication style are very concerned about the feelings of others. They want to please other people and to be included in their peer group. They like to work with others, help others, and connect to others on a personal level. If there is conflict in your group, they will be the ones to attempt to mediate it. They want everyone to have the chance to speak their minds, have their turns, and receive recognition for their contribution. They are natural trainers and counselors, and enjoy helping others to succeed. They will encourage group collaboration and communication, though they are not always inclined to speak their own minds.

People with a considerate communication style will be very interested in listening and in finding out how you and others are doing. They will want everyone to have a chance to speak, but might refrain from expressing their own opinions if they think it will displease others.

This is the major communication challenge for those with the considerate personality style – they may be reluctant to share an opposing opinion, even if it's important information, because they are concerned about keeping the peace and being liked.

They are also inclined to take direct communication as a personal matter. It's difficult for them to separate other peoples' opinions about a topic from their opinions about them, and so may feel that an opposing opinion is due to not liking them. There is also the possibility that they will be talked into something in order to preserve the peace rather than standing their ground. Figure 16 offers tips for communicating if you have a considerate communication style, and Figure 17 does the same for communicating with a person who has a considerate communication style.

Tips for Communicating if You Have a Considerate Communication Style

- Recognize that other people's opinions about a topic are separate from their opinions about you
- Realize that not everyone is comfortable discussing personal topics with work colleagues; allow others to open personal topics before asking questions
- Respect your own opinion as you respect others' opinions
- Recognize that you don't have to be friends with everyone, but you should treat others and be treated professionally


Figure 16: Tips for Communicating if You Have a Considerate Communication Style

Tips for Communicating with People Who Have a Considerate Communication Style

- When possible, reassure them that your opinions are not personal
- Express a sincere interest in their feelings, thoughts, and personal life
- Encourage them to ask questions and share their opinions
- Let them know that you appreciate their help
- Resolve any conflicts quickly

Figure 17: Tips for Communicating with People with a Considerate Communication Style

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* Figures taken from London Business School's Masters in Management 2010 employment report



4.3 Examples of Communication for Each Style

It will take some time and practice to learn exactly what will work in communicating with the people in your work group. Hopefully you recognized the people in your office in the descriptions of the different communication styles in the last section. If not, you can pay more attention to how they communicate with you as a sign of their main communication style. Remember too that not everyone fits neatly into a category; some people will bridge more than one style, depending on with whom they are communicating. You may need to do some experimenting to determine which communication style works best with them.

It will also take practice for you to become comfortable in altering your own communication style or methods in order to best communicate with others. You will still be inclined to your natural communication style, which is to be expected. It will also be easier to do at first when you have the time to think about your communication ahead of time, such as when writing an email. However, over time, you will find that you can adjust faster and employ the tools that you need without thinking it out ahead of time.

4.3.1 Direct Style

When communicating with someone who has the direct communication style, the key is to get to the main point of your communication as soon as possible, and to do so in as efficient a manner as possible. The first example below shows the type of communication that will not work with someone who has a direct communication style. In this example, Jane is the one with the direct communication style.

Hi Jane,

I heard from Alex that you landed a new large business account yesterday. He said that you did an excellent job in explaining the company's benefits to the customer and that you were very professional.

Alex also said that the customer asked for a quote on a new phone system for his existing offices. Have you thought about how you will proceed? Let me know if I can help you get the quote together or if you need any ideas on the configuration. I'd like to get the quote to them later this week if you think you can manage it. That way we would have a good chance of getting the order in for this month's numbers.

Thanks again, and hope you are having a good Tuesday so far!

Anne

What is the main point of the communication? What is the requested action? How much of the communication is superfluous information?

A person with a direct communication style will not necessarily glean what you want them to do or by when. They will appreciate the accolade, but they won't appreciate the personal references or information.

Jane,

Great job on the new account. I'd like to meet for 10–15 minutes tomorrow to discuss strategy and timing. Please let me know if you'd prefer to meet at 1:00, 1:30, or 2:00 p.m.

Thank you,

Anne

See the difference? The first one does eventually get around to the point, but it is too personal-sounding and doesn't give a clear request for the direct person to respond to. The second one still communicates approval and makes a request, but it does so in a much clearer way. If it seems curt to you, don't worry – the direct style person will appreciate it. It's a perfectly professional communication and there is much less chance for misunderstanding.

4.3.2 Spirited Style

When communicating with someone who is spirited, it might be hard to even pin them down for communication in the first place. And once you have their attention, keeping it is another matter entirely. You will find that consistency is important in communicating with people who are spirited. If you can get them used to a particular format or method of communication, it will be easier to keep them communicating. This doesn't mean always choosing email or always choosing telephone. But it does mean always using follow-up questions or checking in on a regular basis to see if you are both still on the same page.

Also remember that a person with a spirited style may need more time to brainstorm and discuss ideas than the other communication styles. If you want them to come to the table with decisions already made, be sure to get their buy-in beforehand. Otherwise they may still find the need to discuss something that you already felt was decided.

Finally, you can go a long way towards relationship-building with a spirited style person if you give them the opportunity to shine. Does your team need to make a presentation? Let the spirited person know that you think they would be a good choice to lead. Complimenting them in a public arena is a good choice as well. Here's an example of a good written communication to a spirited person.

Hi Sally!

I thought your presentation yesterday was fantastic! I enjoyed the way that you had the audience participate in the session.

I think you would be a great choice for the educational component at our next board meeting. The Board of Directors needs some information about local economic trends, but in a way that is not too boring or complicated.

Would you like to have lunch to discuss it? I'm free on Thursday or Friday this week. Let me know if either of those days will work for you.

Thanks so much!

George

Why would this communication work for a spirited person? It is enthusiastic, complimentary, and would be flattering to Sally. She will be pleased that you noticed her first presentation and more pleased that you would like her to repeat it.

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Or course, you're sure to have a very excited person on your hands at lunch. So be prepared. You could bring an outline of the topics you want to cover at the presentation. Ask for her input and make sure you've planned enough time to let her give it. Then help her narrow the ideas down and note them down for her. Sending a follow-up email or note will help ensure that you are both on the same page as well. Remember, the spirited person is very valuable for all their talents and enthusiasm – so with a little structure around your communications you can be successful in communicating without stifling the very qualities they bring to the table.

4.3.3 Systematic Style

When you need to communicate with a person who has the systematic communication style, remember that facts are what to emphasize. Opinions are not going to be very effective. Use logical, linear thinking and communicate in the same way. Step them through your thinking – don't jump ahead of any steps. It will save you time in the long run if you take the time to explain your argument or thoughts through the first time.

If you need a systematic to make a decision, let data do the talking for you as much as possible. Have charts? Know some trends? Have examples to show how something works? All of these can be useful in communicating with a systematic person. If you are attempting to encourage a systematic to support an idea that is not supported by the data, you will be in for a bit of a challenge. However, you can still get their help if you can logically explain your position.

Remember too that systematic types are not prone to sharing personal information with work colleagues. You shouldn't take this personally – it's simply what they prefer. Yet if they do broach a personal subject with you, you can usually take it as a sign that they feel more comfortable with you than others.

The example of how not to communicate with a direct communication style person is a good example of how not to communicate with someone of a systematic style as well. You could also avoid phrases like:

- It's my opinion that...
- I believe that...
- I feel that...

Instead, try using phrases like:

- The data shows that...
- The trends show that...
- The results of the test show...

The chart below gives more suggestions for language that will work better with systematics:

| Instead of... | Use... |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Some, many, the majority of | 20%, three out of five, an average of 2.7 |
| Next week | Thursday at 3:00 p.m. |
| ASAP | By tomorrow at noon |
| In a timely manner | Within two weeks |
| They | Gail, Amy, and Wes |
| An upward trend | An increase of 12% over five years |
| Eventually | When the following conditions have been met: |

Figure 18: Suggestions for Language to Use with Systematics

4.3.4 Considerate Style

To best communicate with someone who is a considerate communication style, remember that the person’s feelings are going to be important. They will listen best when you make them feel as if their feelings are important to you, their opinion is important to you, and that you value them as a team member and a contributor. This doesn’t mean that you have to become very emotionally expressive yourself, but showing in interest in them as an individual will go a long way. Why not start your communication with an inquiry into how their child is doing, or how their last vacation was? The small investment of your time can have a great return.

If you have something to communicate that will perhaps be perceived as a critical, you will need to tread cautiously in order to be effective. Let the person know that you appreciate their work, and name the aspects that you find valuable and good. Then note the changes that need to be made, explaining the reason for the changes as much as you can. Smile, and use open body language to let them know that there is nothing personal in what is being said. Whenever possible, use requests instead of imperatives in discussing the needed changes.

For considerate style people, the example of used as how not to speak to a direct style person is actually a good one to use for a considerate style. It builds to the point easily, it shows care for the other person, and it makes a request in a friendly, personal manner.

5 Basic Listening Skills

"The basic building block of good communications is the feeling that every human being is unique and of value."

- Author Unknown

5.1 Introduction

Good listeners are rare these days. Studies have shown that most listeners retain less than 50% of what they hear. Imagine what that means when it comes to a conversation that you might have with your boss, a colleague, or a customer. If you speak for ten minutes, chances are that you have only heard about half of that conversation – and so have they. No wonder miscommunications happen so frequently!

Yet listening is one of the most vital skills that you need if you want to communicate effectively. Listening allows you to 'decode' the messages that you are receiving, but it also allows you to help others communicate better. When you aren't certain of the message that you have heard the first time, listening well allows you to ask the questions that will clarify the message.

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Of course, listening is important in more arenas than in the work place. We listen for multiple reasons:

- To build relationships
- To understand others
- To be entertained
- To learn
- To show empathy
- To gather information

With as much as listening can do for us, it's obvious that we can all benefit from improving our listening skills. We can become more productive at work, more connected in our relationships, and more efficient in everything that we do. But listening also helps us to persuade and negotiate with others. It can help us avoid misunderstandings and can just make life more conflict-free in general. All of these are very good reasons for learning more about how to be a better listener.

5.2 Self-Awareness

An important tool for becoming a good listener is becoming aware of your own behavior, feelings, and habits when listening. Do you know whether or not you are a good listener? Are you only a good listener in certain situations, like when listening to a friend who is upset? Or can you also listen in a tense situation when you have to communicate with someone who is angry, stressed, or expressing an opposing opinion to your own?

Take time to become aware of your own listening behavior in different scenarios. At work, at home, with friends, with strangers, or with other groups that you communicate with, notice the following:

- Your body language – how are you standing or sitting? Are you tense or relaxed? In an open position or a closed one?
- Do you make eye contact? Do you keep it? Or do you look away, look down, or turn your eyes to other people or things in your environment?
- Are you following every word? Could you repeat what was just said verbatim? Or is your mind wandering off to lunch, that email you need to write, or that phone call you just had?
- Are you planning what you will say in return?

All of these behaviors make it difficult to be a good listener. You may be sending the message to the speaker that their message is unimportant – or worse, that they are unimportant. As you practice better listening skills, you'll need to be able to recognize when you're straying back to these old behaviors. Being self-aware will let you self-correct and get better and better at listening to others.

5.3 Active Listening

"You cannot truly listen to anyone and do anything else at the same time."

— M. Scott Peck

Becoming a better listener requires improving your active listening skills. What is meant by active listening skills? Most of us spend at least part of the time that we are listening waiting for the person to stop so that we can have our next turn. This is particularly true when a conversation is heated or when the information we are trying to convey is very important.

Active listening means being as attentive and involved in the conversation during the times that you are listening as when you are speaking. You must learn to be consciously attentive to the words that are being said, but in addition, to the whole message that the other person is attempting to relay to you. In order to do this you must pay close attention to the speaker.

This requires concentration and practice. It means being certain that you either eliminate or ignore the distractions surrounding you, and that you don't spend the whole time coming up with your response to what they are saying. This may sound difficult, but there are some simple tools you can use to make active listening a regular habit.

5.3 Becoming an Active Listener

There are five key aspects of becoming an active listener. You will probably already be employing some of them, but may need to practice others. However, once you are using these tools over time, you will find that they get easier and easier. Plus, you'll learn so much about others and have such better conversations that you will be positively reinforced each time you practice.

1. Pay close attention.

With this step, you learn to give the speaker your undivided attention. But you also let the speaker know that you are listening by using acknowledgements – types of verbal and non-verbal tools that help add proof that you are truly listening.

- Look the speaker in the eyes
- Stop any mental chatter
- Don't start preparing your response or rebuttal while the other person is talking

- Make sure your environment doesn't distract you
- Notice the speaker's body language and tone of voice – what are the non-verbal messages telling you?
- If you are in a group, avoid side conversations

2. **Demonstrate physically that you are listening.**

Use non-verbal and verbal signals that you are listening to the speaker attentively.

- Nod from time to time, when appropriate
- Use appropriate facial expressions
- Monitor your own body language. Be sure you remain open and relaxed rather than closed and tense.
- Use small comments like uh-huh, yes, right.

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3. Check for understanding.

As we learned in the last chapters, our personal experiences, our perceptions, and our feelings can all influence the way that we hear. It is possible for the message to get mistranslated or misinterpreted, so that we hear a message that was not intended. Before responding, it's important to check for understanding using these tools.

- Use reflecting and paraphrasing. Check that you heard the message correctly by saying things like “what I hear you saying is....” or “If I’m hearing you correctly, you’re saying....” or “I think you’re talking about...”.
- Ask questions that will help clarify the speaker’s meaning. Suggestions include things like, “Can you tell me more about...?” or “What did you mean when you said...?” or “I think you’re saying...is that right?”
- Summarize what you’ve heard occasionally – don’t wait until the end or you might not remember exactly what was said.

4. Don’t interrupt!

There is nothing good that comes from interrupting the speaker. You will only be limiting your chance of understanding the message because you won’t hear it all – and because the speaker will get frustrated!

5. Respond Appropriately.

When you are actively listening, you are showing your respect for the speaker, as well as gaining the information that you need to form your response. Once you have that information and have clarified it, it’s time to form your reply. When expressing your thoughts:

- Be honest and open
- Be respectful
- Be thorough

Remember too that you are modeling excellent behavior for others when you use active listening. Don’t be surprised to hear others start to use clarifying questions or reflecting phrases as well – which would be a good thing for everyone concerned!

5.4 Listening in Difficult Situations

Listening is particularly difficult when you are in a heated or emotionally charged situation. In order for your communication to be successful and productive, you may need to employ some additional tools in order to listen to others and to allow for the exchange of information despite your feelings.

Some tips include:

- If possible, suggest that you move the discussion to a private location with no distractions.
- If tension is high, start by agreeing on what your goal of the discussion will be. Are you resolving a problem? Learning about what happened in a difficult situation? Deciding roles in an important project? Determining how to proceed in order to reach a deadline? Come up with a common goal that you can both agree to work towards and that you can both refer back to should the conversation go off-topic.
- If you need to, set ground rules. These could include agreeing that you won't bring up old events again, that you will keep personal comments out of the discussion, or that you will both keep your voices down.
- While listening, remind yourself of the active listening guidelines. Breathe slowly in and out in order to remain calm.
- If you can't seem to pay attention, try repeating to yourself in your mind every word that the other person says. Then you are 'hearing' the message twice and it has a better chance of getting through.



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6 Effective Written Communication

"Regardless of the changes in technology, the market for well-crafted messages will always have an audience."
— Steve Burnett

6.1 Introduction

In today's world of rapid-fast communication via texts and emails, most of us would rather shoot off a written message than make a phone call. It's fast, efficient when used properly, and it provides a nice document trail for our work records. Written communication is more important than ever, yet very few people know when writing is the right – or wrong – form of communication, and fewer still can write well. Of course, like all other communication skills, good writing skills can be learned.

6.2 When and When Not to Use Written Communication

Sure, sending an email is easy. How many of us haven't written one while on hold with another call or in those few moments between one meeting and the next? Texts are even easier – and let you send information from virtually anywhere.

Yet when is written communication most effective, and when is it not? There are a number of factors that can help you make that choice.

6.2.1 Complexity of the Topic

Using written communication is an excellent choice for sharing information that is easily organized and easily understood by the independent reader. This means that the reader can read the communication and get the message clearly without additional information from you or other sources. Meeting notices, answers to quick questions, or quick clarifications are all easy to complete with written communication.

Highly complex topics or lengthy explanations are not good choices for normal written communication. Written communication should 'stand alone' for the reader.

However, there is a point at which written communication becomes inefficient for one of several reasons. The information may be too complex to organize in a manner that will be intelligible to your reader without further assistance.

The amount of explanation required to make the information intelligible might be cumbersome, leading to misinterpretation or lack of understanding. In the long run, you'll end up answering so many follow-up emails or phone calls that in these cases you would have been better off having a face-to-face meeting or in a formal training session.

6.2.2 Amount of 'Discussion' Required

If the topic is complex or involved enough that there will need to be a long exchange of discussion-type emails, the longer you allow the exchange to continue in writing, the more you are risking that someone will misunderstand. Furthermore, you can't be assured that everyone who received the email has actually had the chance to participate in the discussion unless you are able to track the receipt of others' emails or require everyone to respond one way or the other. Therefore, decision making, long, involved explanations or conversations, or controversial subjects are not usually good topics for written communication.

Lengthy discussions by written communication (email) are not efficient, and each exchange risks meaning getting lost.

6.2.3 Shades of Meaning

We've learned from previous information in this ebook that non-verbal communication is the most important form of communication in getting your message delivered. When you are writing, you are left to the small portion of communication that is possible through words alone in getting your message through to your reader. So the more intense the emotions around a topic or the more important the message is, the less likely writing will be a successful form of communicating.

Written communication alone does not allow for non-verbal communication – the most important aspect of getting your meaning across.

For example, it can be difficult to convey tone of voice, humor, sarcasm, or other shades of meaning in writing alone. Don't risk offending someone or causing confusion by someone not understanding your true meaning by trusting written communication with the task of conveying highly emotional or important information.

6.2.4 Formal Communication


Although there are exceptions, written communication is still the common choice when the level of formality between two parties is high. For example, think about your customers or clients. Chances are that formal communication such as contract terms, sales agreements, account information, or other legal or administrative information will be transmitted in written form. This gives you both the information in a format that you can pass on as needed, and gives you both reference material to help you in continuing your communication. As the level of formality decreases in the relationship, you are more likely to move from paper documentation to email communication as well.

The higher the level of formality of communication, the more likely you will use written communication. Plus, you will usually employ email more as the level of formality decreases.

6.3 Writing Effectively

Although some of the following information relates to either email or paper communication, it is mainly geared towards email since so much of our work involves email. However, you can apply most of the advice to paper communication as well.

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6.3.1 Subject Lines

When you are writing a letter or an email, the subject line of the communication is like the headline in a newspaper. It calls your attention to the communication and should also let you know what it is about. The best subject lines will also tell you what needs to be done – and will let the recipient prioritize which emails to open first and which ones to ignore for later (or altogether!)

What do these subject lines tell you about the information that will follow?

- Response to Your Email
- Question
- Hello
- Meeting
- Information for you

By these subject lines, can you tell any information about what will follow? Sure, the first one could be clear if the receiver has only written one email that day. But most of us handle dozens, if not hundreds, of emails every week. It's unlikely the receiver will remember exactly what you are responding to.

The other subject lines are too general. They don't specify what information will be contained or what action the recipient needs to take. If there is important or urgent information included, it might go unread – or opened, scanned, and dismissed.

Instead, try subject lines such as:

- Information on Open House Tuesday, June 22, 2010 – Please RSVP!
- Question Regarding the Change in Health Benefits – Response Needed
- Meeting Requested on New Website Design – Please Confirm Availability
- URGENT! Change in On-Call Schedule for Memorial Day Weekend
- Response to Your Question on the Marketing Plan for 3rd Quarter

Each of these tells the reader what information they will find when they open the email, and also tells them whether or not they need to take action. The reader can decide which of these is most important and process the incoming emails in the best order.

6.3.2 Put the Main Point First

When you write your communication, you need to know exactly what, why, and to whom you are writing. Are you simply giving information, asking for information, or requesting the other person to take an action? If you can't narrow down the point, you either aren't ready to write or writing isn't the right choice of communication formats to use.

Once you know what the main point of your email is, you should put that first in the communication. We all tend to scan written communication to save time, focusing more at the top of the information than the bottom. Putting your main information at the top of the communication pulls the reader's attention to the main topic, request or instruction. You can follow with background information after you've stated the reason for writing – but if you start with the background information, you risk your reader missing the point of the communication.

Here's a bad example:

Dear Tom,

I spent some time with Joan this morning reviewing the numbers from last quarter's sales results. I was concerned to see that there seems to be a downward trend in sales of the Widget Deluxe, which is significantly different from what we forecasted. I am concerned that this might have an impact on our launch of the Widget Super Deluxe planned for next quarter. I think we should meet with the marketing team and the sales team to see if we can identify any possible issues with the sales and fulfillment process that we could influence. Would you let me know when you are available this week?

Thanks,

Julie

Notice the subject line? Again, it's not precise. Then the writer doesn't get to the point of the communication until the last line. If the reader is scanning for information, he might not even get to the last line before moving on to the next email. If that happens, you'll have to write another communication or follow-up with a phone call – which is a waste of your time.

Now read this version:

Subject: Request to Meet with You Regarding Sales Process – Please Respond

Dear Tom,

I'd like to meet with you, the sales team, and the marketing team this week to discuss the impact of the latest sales trends on the launch of Widget Super Deluxe. Would you be available on Monday at 3 p.m. for about an hour?

I spent some time with Joan this morning reviewing the numbers from last quarter's sales results. I was concerned to see that there seems to be a downward trend in sales of the Widget Deluxe, which is significantly different from what we forecasted. I think we should attempt to identify any possible issues with the sales and fulfillment process.

Thanks,

Julie

See the difference? The second email has a clear subject line that asks for a response. It gets to the point in the first paragraph. Even if the reader is scanning the information, he will have a better chance of getting the message.

6.3.3 Know Your Audience

When you are writing a communication, you need to be able to identify to whom you are writing. Sure, you could be writing to the 'world' of your organization or the 'world' of all of your customers, but you need to know what it is that they will gain from your communication. Is it just information for everyone, or are there particular unidentified members of the audience who need to receive your communication, recognize the information that is important to them, and then take a specific action?

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For example, say you are changing the HMO healthcare plan at the office so that domestic partners are now eligible for coverage. You might be sending the communication to everyone in your organization, but your true audience is employees that have domestic partners. In thinking about those people, what information do they need? What choices do they need to make? What concerns might they have in acting on the information? How can you handle those concerns in your communication? Identifying your audience helps you target and fine tune the communication in order to make it as effective as possible.

Another aspect of knowing your audience is being aware of what they don't know. Most of us have a 'lingo' that we use in the day to day operations of our work. They might be technical terms, references to internal structures or teams, or acronyms that are shared among peers. However, you need to be certain that every member of your audience would understand that lingo or acronym before using it – and that every person they might forward your communication to would also understand it. When in doubt, add a brief explanation or spell it out.

6.3.4 Organization of the Message

Perhaps your communication has more than one request or call to action. If the actions are unrelated to each other, the best choice is to send a separate email for each one. That requires your reader to see each topic in the subject line and then to respond accordingly.

However, you might have situations where you have several requests or several important facts for the reader. In that case, you need to organize the information in a way that increases the chance that the reader will give you all of the information or take all of the actions that you request. You can do this by using topic headings that still put the main topic of the communication at the top such as: Response Needed, Background, Concerns. Or RSVP Requested, Instructions, Directions, FAQs. You could also use bullets or numbers for each subtopic. Or consider using bold or colored font to highlight requested actions. One word of caution – avoid using all capital letters, which can be interpreted as 'yelling'.

Your job is to make it easy and fool-proof for your reader to get your message. Use whatever tools you can employ to ensure that the message is delivered fully, as long as they are still professional and appropriate for your audience.

7 Resources

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