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Communication Skills - Start Here

Discover 130 Skills That Will Help You to Master Business Communication

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Is your message as clear as it needs to be?

Have you ever struggled to get your message across?

Perhaps you tried pitching a groundbreaking project, you were tasked with running a departmental meeting, or you needed to deliver a compelling presentation. You gave it your best shot, but all you got were blank looks and awkward silences.

Chances are, there wasn't much wrong with *what* you were trying to say; it's just that you needed to work on *how* you said it.
The best communicators inspire and motivate people, help them to take effective action, and remove obstacles to their understanding. Unfortunately, many business people find it hard to communicate effectively — we've all received incomprehensible, jargon-ridden messages, and we've experienced the misunderstanding, frustration and missed opportunities that come with them.

However, with the right skills, anyone can **become an exceptional communicator**. Read on, and you can learn more than 130 powerful communication skills, grouped into the following sections:

- **Understanding the Fundamentals.**
- **Planning Your Communications.**
- **Communicating Powerfully in Writing.**
- **Communicating Impressively Face-to-Face.**
- **Running Productive Meetings.**
- **Giving Great Presentations.**

- **Winning Others Over.**
- **Mastering the Art of Feedback.**
- **Handling Difficult Communication Situations With Grace.**
- **Other Communication Resources.**
- **Opinion and Insights.**

Enjoy learning about them, and enjoy becoming a master communicator!

Understanding the Fundamentals

From initial intent, through composition and delivery, to interpretation and feedback, your message will follow a process called the **Communication Cycle**. Your message needs to succeed at each stage of this cycle, so structure it carefully to address your audience's needs and expectations, and to be appropriate to the channel that you're using.

However, communication is a two-way process, and you'll only know that you've succeeded by paying attention to feedback.

So, before communicating face-to-face, spend some time asking yourself, "**How good are my listening skills?**"

Show the people you're talking to that you really are taking their messages on board by **listening empathically** and **actively**. Learn how to be **tactful**, develop **empathy**, and make the effort to grasp other people's **points of view** so that you come to a **shared understanding**. This, in turn, will allow you to create **high-quality connections** with them.

Taken together, these skills can make your workplace happier and more productive . But to achieve all this, you need to start out with a plan.

Planning Your Communications

The purpose of good **communications planning** is to get the right message to the right people in the right way. It sounds simple, but many business people fail to organize their communications properly, leading to misunderstanding, frustration and missed opportunities.

The first step toward an effective communications plan is to create a **framework** that sets out your understanding of your audience and how to reach it. Don't make assumptions: listen intelligently to understand others' opinions, needs and concerns, and ask the right **questions** in the right way.

Then, use tools like the **Rhetorical Triangle** to structure your message to take account of people's expectations, the context they're in, and what you want your message to achieve. If you want your audience to take action, explore using **Monroe's Motivated Sequence** to enthuse and inspire it. And consider

engaging people's emotions with **storytelling** that both informs them and establishes some common ground.
Whatever the medium or style you choose, remember to keep your message **simple**, and avoid using**jargon** — our article on the **7 Cs of Communication** helps with this. Keep the information tightly organized in self-contained **chunks** that are easy to understand, and let simplicity and clarity be your guide.

Communicating Powerfully in Writing

At work, no one has time to waste decoding badly written emails, rambling reports, or dry, over-complicated messages. This is why effective **writing skills** are a must. Your written communications are competing with so much other information that they need to grab your audience's attention to be successful. This is where it can help to use **inverted pyramid writing**, where the key points take the lead.
"Keeping things tight" is particularly important when you're **writing emails**, where brevity, clarity and use of intelligent subject lines are all **essential strategies**. Avoid rambling, using the wrong tone, and other **common mistakes**. This advice also applies to **instant messaging (IM)**, but you must be even more concise with this.
Longer pieces of writing, particularly **business reports**, need to be organized clearly and logically, so that the reader knows exactly where to look for the information that he or she needs, and isn't put off by a mass of unstructured data.

Communicating Impressively Face-to-Face

To **build good relationships** and **engage** people through your communication, you need to develop sensitivity and the ability to respond **positively and constructively** to what they have to say.
It's just as important to make a good **first impression** in person as it is in writing. Whatever your conversation's context, be on time, be presentable, and make the effort to be open and honest. Put people at their ease with some **small talk**, and be sure to listen carefully to their responses.
It's useful to be able to **think on your feet**, particularly in situations where you have to **speak without warning**. Put together a compelling **elevator pitch**, so that you can take full advantage of any chance encounter.
Remember that not all face-to-face communication is verbal. In fact, when people are talking about their feelings and emotions, the verbal part of their message may amount to as little as **seven percent**of the whole communication. A skilful communicator learns to both read and use **body language**, as well as listening to the words used.

Running Productive Meetings

Many people loathe meetings. Poor communication skills can be a significant cause of this, and badly run meetings can leave you feeling frustrated and confused about what to do next.

You've probably witnessed a team member who dominates, technology that fails at the crucial moment, or a leader who doesn't understand the meeting's purpose. It's maddening, but it doesn't have to be that way - by learning a range of straightforward skills, you can manage any meeting smartly and efficiently.

The basic rules for **running effective meetings** are to establish your objective and stick to it, keep the meeting as short as possible, and make sure that all the participants are happy with the process.
But to be a **top-class facilitator**, you also need to be able to:

- Design and plan a meeting.
- Get people involved from the start with suitable **icebreakers**.
- Guide and control the group during the meeting.
- **Record the key points** effectively.
- Make sure that participants understand what they need to do after the meeting.

Not every meeting will run to plan, however. If your meetings tend to wander, you can learn how to**map dialogue**, to help you to bring order to chaos and to make sure that everyone gets their say in an organized way. Conflict can arise when people have different views, so be sure to **manage that conflict**, so that it has a productive outcome.
Make sure that group decisions are objective and rational, even when a meeting is free of conflict. And don't let **groupthink**, **bias** or other thinking traps derail what you're trying to achieve. These, and other problems with **group dynamics**, are surprisingly common, and they can seriously undermine a meeting's success.

Giving Great Presentations

Presentations are a core part of many well-run meetings, but how do you make sure that your presentations are inspiring and uplifting?

You'll need a variety of **skills** to present well.
Plan your presentation carefully. You'll find **delivering a great presentation** much easier if you've taken the time to craft what you're going to say, and picked the right **structure and style** to make sure that your message has maximum clarity and **visual impact**. Move between concrete facts and abstract ideas as you present, using the **Ladder of Abstraction** - this will help you to speak effectively and authentically to a wide audience.
Prepare the room and check any props or IT hardware.

It's no easy task to bring all these elements together. Keep an eye out for **common presentation mistakes**, and remember that even the slickest presenter experiences **presentation nerves**, so you can overcome them, too. If you **understand your audience**, you'll be able to prepare engaging content and become **confident in public speaking**. After all, skilled presenters are made, not born.

Winning Others Over

Even the most skilfully structured and delivered message won't always get the buy-in that you want. But, with good influencing and negotiation skills, you can prevent or resolve conflicts and get what you need.

There are several ways to approach such a conversation. Where you want to build long-term relationships, **Win-Win Negotiation** helps you to find a solution that's acceptable to everyone. But you should plan what you'll do if the going gets tough by understanding about **Distributive Bargaining**. Use **Lewicki and Hiam's Negotiation Matrix** to choose the best negotiation strategy for your situation.
Take care to avoid common **negotiation mistakes**. Whatever your situation and the type of negotiation, it's important to approach it both assertively and collaboratively, even if you may have to**say "No."** As part of this, establish what everybody involved really needs, so that you can be confident in your position.
Persuasion is the art of getting people to agree with you and so it's closely related to negotiation.**Powerful persuasion** relies on four things: **establishing your credibility**, finding common ground with the person that you're persuading, giving evidence that you're right, and creating an emotional connection.
You can still get your way even if only **a few people** share your view. Apply the **ABCD of Trust** and identify something to bargain with, and you may be surprised by what you can achieve.

Mastering the Art of Feedback

Trust is also at the heart of giving feedback effectively – this is one of the most important skills that you can learn as a manager. Understanding and being understood by your co-workers involves **being open about yourself** and **finding ways to share information** with them, as well as inviting their views.
The feedback that you give your team members may not always be positive, but, if you learn to do it well, you can make a huge difference to their performance. Of course, there are two sides to every coin: learning to receive and act on feedback about your own performance brings benefits, too.

It's a good idea to assess **how well you give feedback** right now, and how you might improve. You should always aim for **a positive outcome**; this applies whether you're **praising a colleague** or dealing with an issue with her performance. In either case, try to structure your feedback: focus your comments on particular **situations, behaviors and impacts**, keeping them specific. Look at the balance between your **positive and negative comments**, and the effect that they have.

If it's you who has received feedback, **use it constructively** by analysing it and thinking about how you can react to it. Make taking **responsibility** for your performance and developing your skills a positive experience, however unsettling the feedback might have first seemed. Accept **positive criticism** as a means of improving your performance – and try not to be defensive.

But if you believe that the criticism is **unfair**, stay firm. Challenge it rationally and politely. Learn to manage **negative feedback** with **self-questioning techniques** that help you to improve what you do. Get your facts together and prepare to present a solution to the issue that's been highlighted.

Handling Difficult Communication Situations With Grace

Experiencing negative feedback isn't the only difficult communication situation that you may come across. Sometimes you may have tense or confrontational conversations during which you will need to be **assertive**. Challenge **unreasonable requests** and look out for **manipulation**. Learn how to show**character**, and to stand your ground when you're sure that you're right.

In many situations, you can avoid a huge amount of frustration by knowing when and how to **speak up**, even if you find it difficult. Be sure not to confuse asserting your rights and opinions with being aggressive, though. Learn how to get what you need by collaborating with others, not simply by browbeating them.

Finding common ground in this way is particularly important if you find yourself **working with someone that you don't like**. In this circumstance, you need to try to establish a connection that will allow you to work together, however difficult that may be.

Looking for connections can also help in other situations. If you want to persuade someone who has already rejected your opinion and **closed his mind** to your argument, for example, you'll need to stay calm, rational and assertive. You can challenge and question assumptions, draw others into the debate, and create the conditions for consensus if you have the facts to hand. But consider using **role play** to prepare for the challenges and emotion that might still arise.

If you ever have to **deliver bad news**, do so clearly and sincerely. To **"let someone go"** is about the toughest thing any manager can do; make sure that you are direct,

honest and, above all, fair. If the news is really bad, and you're charged with handling a **crisis**, keep the lines of communication with your colleagues open. If you don't, rumor and gossip will move in to fill the void, with negative results. So control the situation, demonstrate competence, and reassure your co-workers that you're behaving honestly and openly.

Other Communication Resources

There are many other ways to boost your communication skills.

Plan:

- Construct a**communications strategy framework**.
- Agree a **communications charter** of ground rules with your team.
- Understand the different facets of **Mehrabian's Communication Model**.
- Adopt a **Minority Influence Strategy** as an effective way to get your voice heard.
- Apply the **Influence Model** to gain trust from opponents.
- Use **Yukl and Tracey's Influencers** to help you to identify and use positive, trust-based influencing strategies.
- Use the **Conflict Layer Model** to establish what everybody involved in a negotiation really needs, so that you can be certain in your negotiating position.
- Match your ability to influence and your intuition with the right persuasion strategy using the**Persuasion Tools Model**.
- Get to grips with workplace tension using **Bell and Hart's Eight Causes of Conflict**.
- Learn about the games that people play to get their own way, using **Transactional Analysis**.

Craft:

- Make your writing credible and convincing by addressing the **Five Canons of Rhetoric**.
- Use **charts and graphs** to support your message, and make sure that you check them for consistency and accuracy.
- Develop a **value proposition** for your goods or services.

- Build **trust and goodwill** with customers.
- Increase customer loyalty with **Georges and Guenzi's Customer Trust Model**.
- Construct engaging communications by employing **AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action)**.
- **Handle confidential information** professionally.

Practice:

- Understand how to communicate effectively in **difficult or uncertain times**.
- Learn how to react swiftly to criticism of your organization on **social media**.
- Learn to **listen mindfully**, with full awareness of your situation.
- Consider how **Neuro-Linguistic Programming** can help to build rapport.
- Gain media attention with **winning press releases**.
- Use **Twitter** and **LinkedIn** to best effect.
- Develop **effective customer surveys**.
- Turn **dealing with unhappy customers** from a challenge into an opportunity
- Learn the art of **apologizing gracefully**, allowing you to repair damaged relationships.

Facilitate:

- Create an **organogram**, to show the functions and relationships within your organization as well as the hierarchies.
- Develop **360-degree feedback** in your organization.
- **Run a teleconference**, **webinar** or **virtual meeting** effectively.
- Develop **virtual ice-breakers** for remote teams.
- **Plan an "away day"** or **a workshop** to get a fresh perspective on an issue.
- Create a buzz in a **conference, event** or **town hall meeting**.
- Set up **wikis** as collaborative online workspaces.

- Develop a company **blog** to explore ideas, share your brand, and invite interaction.

Why not use one of our Bite-Sized Training™ workbooks? Each session will take about an hour to complete and will help you to explore one aspect of communication in more depth. Choose from: **Written Communication**, **Giving Feedback**, **Giving Better Presentations**, **Delivering Great Presentations**, **Meeting Skills**, **Negotiation Skills**, **Assertiveness**, **Sell Your Idea**, and **Managing Conflict**.

Opinion and Insights

We also have dozens of detailed Book Insights, reviewing books that can take your communication learning to another level. Listen to the podcasts and read the transcripts here:

- **Win the Customer** by Flavio Martins.
- **Perfecting Your Pitch** by Ronald M. Shapiro.
- **Audience** by Jeffrey K. Rohrs.
- **Humble Inquiry** by Edgar Schein.
- **Masters of Disaster** by Christopher Lehane, Mark Fabiani and Bill Guttentag.
- **The Art of Explanation** by Lee Lefever.
- **The Art of Selling Yourself** by Adam Riccoboni and Daniel Callaghan.
- **Small Message, Big Impact** by Terri Sjodinn.
- **Quiet** by Susan Cain.
- **Organizations Don't Tweet, People Do** by Euan Semple.
- **Smart Trust** by Stephen M.R. Covey and Greg Link.
- **The Triangle of Truth** by Lisa McLeod.
- **Tell to Win** by Peter Guber.
- **Getting to We** by Jeanette Nyden, Kate Vitasek and David Frydinger.
- **The One Minute Negotiator** by Don Hutson and George Lucas.
- **Never Lose Again** by Steven Babitsky and James Mangraviti.
- **Fascinate** by Sally Hogshead.
- **Influencer** by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler.
- **Made to Stick** by Chip and Dan Heath.

- **How to Win Friends and Influence People** by Dale Carnegie.
- **Will There be Donuts?** by David Pearl.
- **No More Pointless Meetings** by Martin Murphy.
- **Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!** by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff.
- **The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs** by Carmine Gallo.
- **Be a Brilliant Business Writer** by Jane Curry and Dianna Young.
- **The Back of the Napkin** by Dan Roam.
- **The Exceptional Presenter** by Timothy J Koegel.
- **What Every BODY Is Saying** by Joe Navarro.
- **The Power of Body Language** by Tonya Reiman.
- **Crucial Conversations** by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler.
- **Show and Tell** by Dan Roam.
- **The Truth Doesn't Have to Hurt** by Deb Bright.
- **Strategic Connections** by Anne Baber, Lynne Waymon, Andre Alphonso, and Jim Wylde.
- **Getting (More of) What You Want** by Margaret A. Neale and Thomas Z. Lys.
- **Get Big Things Done** by Erica Dhawan and Saj-Nicole Joni.

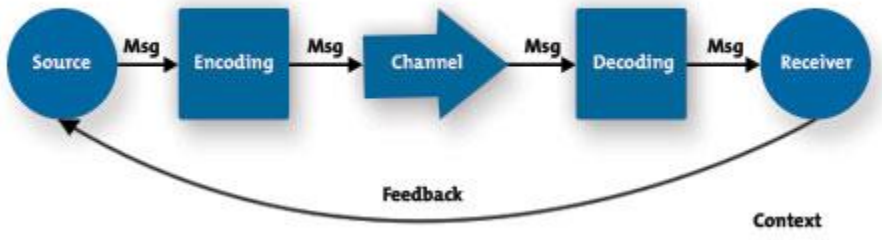
Finally, you can listen to our one-on-one discussions with industry and thought leaders in these communication-themed Expert Interviews:

- **Never Eat Alone** with Keith Ferrazzi.
- **Keeping Things Brief** with Joe McCormack.
- **Projecting Confidence, Conviction and Authority** with John Baldoni.
- **Power Cues** with Nick Morgan.
- **Compelling People** with Matthew Kohut.
- **Lead With a Story** with Paul Smith.
- **Talk Inc.** with Michael Slind.
- **Dealing With People You Can't Stand** with Dr Rick Brinkman.
- **Real Influence** with Mark Goulston.
- **How to Win Friends and Influence People in the Digital Age** with Peter Handal.

- **Winning Body Language** with Mark Bowden.
- **Eight Things We Hate About IT** with Susan Cramm.
- **Just Listen** with Mark Goulston.
- **Better Meetings** with Mike Song.
- **Managing Your Email Before it Manages You**with Mike Song.
- **The Art of Public Speaking** with Stephen Lucas.
- **Persuasion IQ** with Kurt Mortensen.
- **Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands** with Terri Morrison.
- **Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins** with Annette Simmons.
- **The Power of Nice** with Robin Koval.
- **Empowered** with Josh Bernoff.
- **Pitch Perfect** with Bill McGowan.

Detailed Interpretation

Whenever you communicate with someone else, you each follow the steps of the communication process shown below.



Here, the person who is the source of the communication encodes it into a message, and transmits it through a channel. The receiver decodes the message, and, in one way or another, feeds back understanding or a lack of understanding to the source.

By understanding the steps in the process, you can become more aware of your role in it, recognize what you need to do to communicate effectively, anticipate problems before they happen, and improve your overall ability to communicate effectively.

The sections below help you do this, and help you improve the way you communicate at each stage of the process.

The Source – Planning Your Message

(Questions 2, 11)

Before you start communicating, take a moment to figure out what you want to say, and why. Don't waste your time conveying information that isn't necessary – and don't waste the listener or reader's time either. Too often, people just keep talking or keep writing – because they think that by saying more, they'll surely cover all the points. Often, however, all they do is confuse the people they're talking to.

To **plan your communication**:

- Understand your objective. Why are you communicating?
- Understand your audience. With whom are you communicating? What do they need to know?
- Plan what you want to say, and how you'll send the message.
- Seek feedback on how well your message was received.

When you do this, you'll be able to craft a message that will be received positively by your audience.

Good communicators use the **KISS** ("Keep It Simple and Straightforward") principle. They know that less is often more, and that good communication should be efficient as well as effective.

Encoding – Creating a Clear, Well-Crafted Message

(Questions 1, 5, 8, 10, 15)

When you know what you want to say, decide exactly how you'll say it. You're responsible for sending a message that's clear and concise. To achieve this, you need to consider not only what you'll say, but also how you think the recipient will perceive it.

We often focus on the message that we want to send, and the way in which we'll send it. But if our message is delivered without considering the other person's perspective, it's likely that part of that message will be lost. To communicate more effectively:

- Understand what you truly need and want to say.
- Anticipate the other person's reaction to your message.
- Choose words and body language that allow the other person to really hear what you're saying.

With **written communication**, make sure that what you write will be perceived the way you intend. Words on a page generally have no emotion – they don't "smile" or "frown" at you while you're reading them (unless you're a very talented writer, of course!)
When writing, take time to do the following:

- Review your style.
- Avoid **jargon** or slang.
- Check your grammar and punctuation.
- Check also for tone, attitude, nuance, and other subtleties. If you think the message may be misunderstood, it probably will. Take the time to clarify it!
- Familiarize yourself with your company's writing policies.

Another important consideration is to use pictures, charts, and diagrams wherever possible. As the saying goes, "a picture speaks a thousand words." Our article on **charts and graphs**has some great tips that help you to use these to communicate clearly.

Also, whether you speak or write your message, consider the **cultural context**. If there's potential for miscommunication or misunderstanding due to cultural or language barriers, address these issues in advance. Consult with people who are familiar with these, and do your research so that you're aware of problems you may face. See our article on **Effective Cross-Culture Communication** for more help.

Choosing the Right Channel

(Questions 7, 11, 13)

Along with encoding the message, you need to choose the best communication channel to use to send it. You want to be efficient, and yet make the most of your communication opportunity.

Using email to send simple directions is practical. However, if you want to delegate a complex task, an email will probably just lead to more questions, so it may be best to arrange a time to speak in person. And if your communication has any negative emotional content, stay well away from email! Make sure that you communicate face to face or by phone, so that you can judge the impact of your words and adjust these appropriately.

When you determine the best way to send a message, consider the following:

- The sensitivity and emotional content of the subject.
- How easy it is to communicate detail.
- The receiver's preferences.
- Time constraints.
- The need to ask and answer questions.

Decoding – Receiving and Interpreting a Message

(Questions 3, 6, 12, 14)

It can be easy to focus on speaking; we want to get our points out there, because we usually have lots to say. However, to be a great communicator, you also need to step back, let the other person talk, and just listen.

This doesn't mean that you should be passive. Listening is hard work, which is why effective listening is called **active listening**. To listen actively, give your undivided attention to the speaker:

- Look at the person.
- Pay attention to his or her body language.
- Avoid distractions.
- Nod and smile to acknowledge points.
- Occasionally think back about what the person has said.
- Allow the person to speak, without thinking about what you'll say next.
- Don't interrupt.

Empathic listening also helps you decode a message accurately. To understand a message fully, you have to understand the emotions and underlying feelings the speaker is expressing. This is where an understanding of **body language** can be useful.

Feedback

(Questions 4, 9)

You need feedback, because without it, you can't be sure that people have understood your message. Sometimes feedback is verbal, and

sometimes it's not. We've looked at the importance of asking questions and listening carefully. However, feedback through **body language** is perhaps the most important source of clues to the effectiveness of your communication. By watching the facial expressions, gestures, and posture of the person you're communicating with, you can spot:

- Confidence levels.
- Defensiveness.
- Agreement.
- Comprehension (or lack of understanding).
- Level of interest.
- Level of engagement with the message.
- Truthfulness (or lying/dishonesty).

As a speaker, understanding your listener's body language can give you an opportunity to adjust your message and make it more understandable, appealing, or interesting. As a listener, body language can show you more about what the other person is saying. You can then ask questions to ensure that you have, indeed, understood each other. In both situations, you can better avoid miscommunication if it happens.

Feedback can also be formal. If you're communicating something really important, it can often be worth asking questions of the person you're talking to make sure that they've understood fully. And if you're receiving this sort of communication, repeat it in your own words to check your understanding.

Key Points

It can take a lot of effort to communicate effectively. However, you need to be able to communicate well if you're going to make the most of the opportunities that life has to offer.

By learning the skills you need to communicate effectively, you can learn how to communicate your ideas clearly and effectively, and understand much more of the information that's conveyed to you.

As either a speaker or a listener, or as a writer or a reader, you're responsible for making sure that the message is communicated accurately. Pay attention to words and actions, ask questions, and watch body language. These will all help you ensure that you say what you mean, and hear what is intended.