

FACTIVA

Effective Communications for Knowledge Professionals

Is there any limit to the number of channels available today for communicating with colleagues, friends and business partners? From cryptic 140-character tweets to an in-depth report analyzing market conditions, from a phone conversation with a team member on another continent to a Web conference involving dozens of persons whom we have never met, we interact and communicate with others on an expansive scale. The effectiveness of these interactions is largely determined by our ability to communicate in a way that resonates with our recipients and, more importantly, captures their attention.

Communications patterns and behaviors develop in early childhood and are intuitively modified and improved over time. The body of science devoted to communications is immense due to its complexity, so our intent with this resource is to frame some important aspects of effective business communication for you to think about and offer practical tips from a 30,000-foot perspective.

Your role as a knowledge professional is important to your organization because the meaningful information that you disseminate has the power to influence business decisions and increase learning. Ideally, your oral and written communication will reflect your engagement in the business of the organization in which you work. As James C. Humes, author and speech writer for several U.S. presidents, notes, "The art of communication is the language of leadership."

First impressions

- Your overall communications style encompasses more than what you say and how you say it. Your attitude, your presence and your personality all influence how others perceive you and what you say. In face-to-face interactions, an impression or opinion is formed within seconds based on your appearance, body language, demeanor, mannerisms and dress.
- A pleasant, can-do attitude contributes to a positive first impression. Your body language projects confidence and self-assurance when you stand tall, smile, make eye contact and greet others with a firm handshake.



Nonverbal communication

- Controlled research studies in specific areas of communication, particularly feelings and emotions, conclude that more than 90% of communication effectiveness is based on nonverbal cues. While this percentage does not hold true for all general communication (even assuming that each facet of communication could be scientifically isolated and measured accurately on a broad scale), it is a serious indicator that words are often secondary to impressions created through nonverbal signals.
- Nonverbal (non-word) components of your communication that contribute to first impressions include:
 - Facial expressions
 - Eye contact
 - Gestures
 - Posture and body language
 - Verbal sounds
 - Physical distance or closeness
- Gestures, sounds, eye contact and personal space norms differ by culture and it is important to be mindful of such differences as business communication is increasingly global.
- Shaking hands, standing to meet someone, embracing, waving, exchanging business cards, and dining etiquette are situations in which nonverbal signals can vary from one culture to another and can cause misunderstanding and confusion. Interacting with persons from a culture other than our native culture requires sensitivity and awareness. There are helpful guides for educating yourself about the nuances of etiquette and body language by culture in print and online.

Written communication

The written word carries much weight and is not diminishing in popularity or use, as evidenced by the current volume of texting, tweeting and emailing. Writing is frequently an important part of the knowledge professional's work—informing, analyzing, summarizing and detailed reporting. With time being an increasingly precious commodity, succinct writing with a clear message is most likely to capture the attention of the recipient and achieve the desired response.

- The basic questioning and prioritizing sequence taught to journalists is helpful in organizing written communication: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? So What?
- While much business communication is formal, requiring good grammar, spelling and proper etiquette, informal written communication is on the rise as organizations use social media to encourage interaction with others in the organization and to facilitate networking and knowledge sharing. Whether formal or informal, clarity of thought and a respectful tone are important.
- The tone of your written communication reflects your attitude toward the reader as well as the topic of your message; here, impressions are formed without the benefit of visual cues. In written communication, tone is conveyed primarily by your choice of words, but sentence structure (or lack thereof), use of punctuation (e.g., lots of exclamation points), emoticons, abbreviations, highlighting and bold-face type also contribute to how the reader perceives the message.
- It is not possible to control who eventually may see your emails or other cyber posts. Before clicking the send button, it is a good idea to ask yourself how your communication will be perceived if it is viewed out of context, should all or part of it be forwarded, reposted or re-tweeted to unintended recipients such as your manager or an executive in your organization.



Oral communication

Speaking styles are very personal and a wide range of oral or verbal communication styles can be highly effective, depending on the individual and the situation. The good news is that ingrained patterns and habits can be changed and improved with coaching or by simply observing and emulating polished speakers. Whatever the role you are assuming at any given time—manager, researcher, trainer, consultant, analyst or negotiator—aim to be authentic, articulate and confident. Speak the language of the business in which you work and minimize library, information management and knowledge management jargon.

- Oral or spoken business communication is typically one of the following:
- One-to-one conversations (in person or on the phone)
- Participation in business meetings or team activities
- Presentations (in person, on the phone, or recordings or podcasts)
- As with written communication, the secret to successful spoken communication is understanding the audience, in addition to having a compelling message and effective delivery. Be sensitive to the mix of persons in the audience, organizational politics and cultural differences when preparing your presentation.
- With any formal presentation, you want to 1) introduce the topic, 2) describe your objective, i.e., what you want the audience to learn or do or take away, 3) ensure that there is understanding, and 4) outline “next steps”—the action or outcome you hope to achieve. Repeating major themes and using verbal cues to indicate key messages (e.g., “the following point is essential to understanding this situation” or “in summary, these are the points we need to consider”) are techniques that assist the listener.
- Your delivery can be enhanced with props or visual aids such as charts and slides. A bit of humor or a relevant story are often helpful in building a bond with the audience and making you, the speaker, feel at ease.
- The elevator speech is a particularly valuable tool for oral communication. It is prepared for chance encounters or events where you have only a brief amount of time to strike up a meaningful conversation and you want to make sure that you use that time to market yourself and your work. It should take approximately 30-60 seconds, describe in a distinctive way what you do, and be easy for the listener to understand how what you are saying might be relevant to him or her. It may emphasize how your work benefits your clients or the organization in which you work and how you might help the person to whom you are speaking. The elevator speech is so carefully crafted and rehearsed (and refreshed when necessary) that it is delivered in a very natural way—with no fumbling for words at those crucial opportunities.



Active listening

"The art of effective listening is essential to clear communication, and clear communication is necessary to management success." (James Cash, aka J.C., Penney)

- Active listening means giving the speaker your undivided attention, without preconceived notions about what might be said and without interrupting or simultaneously planning how you will answer. The objective of active listening is improved understanding. It is enough of a challenge to retain what we hear under any circumstances but more so when we are not giving our full attention to what is being said. You can practice active listening by focusing your attention on the speaker, maintaining eye contact and shutting out other "noise"—including your own thoughts. Occasional nodding, asking questions to clarify and repeating what you think you are hearing help demonstrate genuine interest and allow you to confirm understanding. After confirming that you heard what the speaker was intending to communicate, the conversation can move forward on a strong basis of understanding—whether or not there is agreement with the situation being discussed.
- Active listening skills have surprising parallels with consultative selling skills. The salesperson (who typically enjoys talking) actively listens and probes for customer needs, confirms needs, matches benefits of the product or service being sold to the client's needs, overcomes objections, negotiates with the client to reach the optimum solution, and closes the sale. As a knowledge professional, you may not think of yourself as a salesperson but you are selling expertise, knowledge and information.

Audience

As you evaluate the effectiveness of various channels for communicating, you want to be conscious of your audience and their preferred "intake" mode(s). Analyzing the intended audience—whether one person or many—and considering their interests are cardinal rules followed by successful communicators. Some questions that help you focus on your audience and craft your message in order to connect with them effectively include:

- To whom are you directing your communication—an individual, a specific group (e.g., a team of colleagues, or a LinkedIn group in which you participate), or more loosely connected groups and followers (e.g., Facebook friends or Twitter followers)?
- What is the background of audience members and what is their level of familiarity with the subject or topic about which you are communicating?
- What is relevant to the audience or listener? Why should they take time from their schedules to pay attention to what you wish to communicate?
- What is the status of the audience—a senior person in the organization or peers?
- Is the purpose of the communication to inform, educate, persuade or entertain?
- Are there specific outcomes or action steps desired of the audience?



Content of your message

Everyone is deluged with information every day and it is not uncommon to delete or ignore a significant percentage of what we receive. In order to win the attention of others, the message must be relevant, clear and concise—no matter the channel through which it is sent. Substance matters in all communication, even in social media messaging, so that your message is not lost in the overwhelming volume of cyber postings. The content of your message, whether written or spoken, is an essential aspect of effective communication.

Helpful resources

Workshops or coaches, mentors, friends or co-workers who provide honest feedback about your communications style can help you build skills and address traits that might diminish your business communications effectiveness. Web searches on various aspects of communication will yield thousands of hits, many of which may be unreliable or the result of marketing efforts. We recommend reviewing the following recent books and websites:

- Books
 - Everyone Communicates, Few Connect: What the Most Effective People Do Differently by John C. Maxwell (Thomas Nelson 2010)
 - Tell to Win: Connect, Persuade, Triumph with the Hidden Power of Story by Peter Gruber (Crown Business, 2011)
- Websites
 - Collection of articles and e-courses for a range of business competencies, including improving communications skills: **www.mindtools.com**
 - Toastmasters International, a nonprofit organization focused on communications and leadership development: **<http://www.toastmasters.org/>**
 - Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center: Countries in Perspective, a resource for cross-cultural information: **<http://fieldsupport.dliflc.edu/cip.aspx>**



Checklist for Assessing Your Communication Style

While many styles of communication are effective, certain behaviors can enhance or detract from your ability to really connect with others. Successful knowledge professionals have mastered effective communications skills through experience and training. For persons at an earlier career stage, it is as important to be attuned to and use techniques that enhance your ability to communicate well in the workplace as it is to develop technical skills. This checklist is offered to help you think about your personal style. It may be helpful to have a trusted colleague go through the checklist with you after you have done the self-assessment to see if you are in agreement.

YES	NO	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do people generally have a positive first impression of me?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I go out of my way to meet and speak to people?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Am I good at networking?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is my elevator speech current and smooth?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is it clear that I have a sense of humor?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I have a positive, can-do attitude?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Am I an active listener?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I invite alternative points of view and feedback?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Can I speak and write in the language of our business?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I proactively contact people and offer assistance for special projects or high-profile initiatives?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I assess the interests and background of the audience before a presentation?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I organize my thoughts carefully before making a presentation?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are nonverbal signals that I use appropriate?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Am I aware of cultural and language differences when speaking to a diverse or global audience?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I have a tendency to talk down to others or use jargon that creates barriers in conversation?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I give instructions clearly?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I give constructive feedback in a timely way?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Am I consistent about thanking people and giving credit to others when it is due?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Am I careful about the tone of my communication, particularly when frustrated or angry or hurried?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I share information readily?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Can I keep information confidential when it is necessary to do so?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I explore new modes for communicating with others, including social media?
		Do I embrace technology to help me connect more effectively?