Can We Talk?
Face-To-Face Communication In The Workplace

The Top Ten Tips To Being Understood

Sue Johnston
Can We Talk?
Face-To-Face Communication
In the Workplace

If you’re a business person who’s ever said, “How can I get these people to understand?” this booklet is for you.

Research consistently ranks communication as one of the most critical factors in successful leadership – and one of the areas of business with the widest gap between “ideal world” and “real world.”

Low-cost and low-tech, face-to-face communication is the forgotten area of business communication, yet it has a profound effect on performance – your employees’, your colleagues’ and your own.

Good interpersonal communication has the power to instil and support the attitudes and enthusiasm that make the difference between “really working” and simply “being at work.”
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About The Author

Sue Johnston is a communication coach and trainer who helps you change your world, one conversation at a time. She works with individuals and organizations to create better workplaces by improving the way they communicate.

Convinced, after 30 years as a professional communicator, that what you say or write is less important than what your audience understands, she founded It's Understood Communication, a consultancy specializing in workplace communication.

A former journalist, Sue has an MBA in Public Relations and Communication Management, a BA in Sociology/Psychology, and professional accreditation by the International Association of Business Communicators and the International Association of Coaching. A lifelong learner, she currently studies, trains, coaches and writes about the related areas of communication and personal effectiveness. She is the author of Talk To Me! Workplace Conversations That Work.

www.itsunderstood.com
The Case For Conscious Communication

When I think about the state of communication in the workplace, I am reminded of bad drivers. Everyone complains about rudeness and recklessness on the roads, but nobody thinks s/he’s the problem.

Do you see lots of poor drivers out there on the road? Do you think you’re a poor driver? Not likely.

Eighty percent of drivers think they’re better than average. You don’t need to be a math whiz to calculate that some of them have to be wrong about that!

80% are above average????

The same thing happens with communication.

Zillions of people say, “Communication where I work is terrible!” Many of them would be right! But do we know any people who admit they are terrible communicators?

No way!
Who admits to communicating poorly? We see some variation of these six words, in black and white, on everyone’s résumé: “Excellent communication skills, written and oral.” That phrase is also scattered across the newspaper’s Careers section. It’s probably embedded in your own job description.

But is that phrase meaningful?

If we’re all such good communicators, why is poor communication in the workplace so widespread?

HR consultants Watson Wyatt Worldwide conducted 20,000 exit interviews and discovered that the top reason people leave their jobs is “poor supervisory behaviour.” In other words, people quit their jobs because of bad bosses. And what was one of the biggest examples of poor supervisory behaviour? You guessed it. Poor communication skills.

Paradoxically, good communication is the workplace skill people seem to need the most and demonstrate the least. How does that happen?

Could we be focussing on the wrong sort of communication?

Publications, memos, marketing material, financial reports and “edicts from on high” all get lots of attention. Billions of dollars are spent printing brochures, catalogues and annual reports.
In some organizations, every department head gets a chance to review the text for the annual report before publication. And I’ve witnessed painful office debates about whether to say “yours truly” or “sincerely” at the bottom of a letter.

Corporate communications departments, advertising agencies, public relations firms and consultants spend lots of time and energy developing plans, programs, strategies, tools and tactics to help companies communicate better with customers, shareholders, employees, regulatory agencies and the public.

Information technology departments, manufacturers, service providers and whole armies of techno-specialists are hooking us up with faster, cleaner, more reliable computing and telephone communication devices.

But when it comes to face-to-face communication – which still makes up most of the communication in day-to-day business – people scarcely give it a thought.

Human beings, by nature, send and receive messages face-to-face. We’re “hard wired” to do this. Survey after survey tells us it is the way we prefer to communicate.

But nobody teaches us how to do this type of communication.
They teach us lots of other useful tricks: to decline verbs, change tenses and make the noun agree with the verb. They teach us not to end a sentence with a preposition, how to write in the active voice and when to use a semicolon.

They teach us to say “please” and “thank you,” not to talk with our mouths full and to use our “indoor voices.” Sometimes, in classes with names like “French Conversation,” they teach us to speak other languages.

But who gives formal lessons in how to conduct meaningful conversation in our own language? Nobody I know. Conversation is something the world just expects us to develop on our own.

Not studied, not measured and not well-understood, face-to-face conversation is something that, if not quite an unconscious act, seldom receives much thought.
Can you imagine what would happen if everyone gave conscious consideration to their face-to-face communications? The results could be surprising – and highly beneficial to us and to our world. Making a shift to conscious communication is something you can do, starting today, that will improve both your work and your life.

Here’s some good news: Personal communication is a learned skill. Good communicators learned it and so can you.

More good news: How you communicate is one thing that you can totally control!

In this booklet, I’ve pulled together information from the literature of communication and emotional intelligence that can help you improve your life by becoming a conscious communicator. *Can We Talk?* offers *The Top Ten Tips To Being Understood*. It gives you things to remember, things to try and things to avoid as you work to build your personal effectiveness through better face-to-face interaction.
1. Know That Everything Communicates

Communicating is about much more than talking and writing. Everything you do – and don’t do – sends a message. It takes humans just four seconds to form an impression of someone we meet, and it can take hours of interaction for that first impression to change.

We give away information about ourselves and our attitudes before people even see us. Are we on time for the meeting? Is our workspace orderly? I once visited an office whose occupant had a little sign on her desk, facing her visitors. It said, “You must be confusing me with someone who cares!” Before I even met her, I had reason to be suspicious of her reliability.

Once people meet us, our posture, the amount of eye contact we make, how we dress, the energy we convey, our facial expressions and dozens of other physical clues tell others what we’re like.

When we start talking, our words aren’t necessarily doing all the communicating. Professor Albert Mehrabian, of UCLA, pioneered the formal study of interpersonal communication in the 1960s. His research showed that if there is any doubt about the meaning of a message, the listener is more likely to use body language and tone to understand the meaning than the words, themselves.
If a significant amount of the meaning someone gets from a message is due to non-verbal cues we send, there’s truth to the old saying, “It’s not what you say that’s important, it’s how you say it.”

What are the implications of this for conscious communication? If most people think about a communication at all, they think about their words. Few people are aware of the message their body language conveys. Fewer still do anything about it.

But it hardly matters what you say at all if you don’t look and sound as if you mean it.

In conversations with colleagues, bosses, employees and others, it’s useful to be aware of your non-verbal communication, that part of communication that delivers 93% of meaning.

Make sure that what you show and what you say are sending the same message. If the audience members have any doubt, they’ll believe what they see.
One element of your nonverbal communication worthy of special note is eye contact. A recent European study showed that babies as young as two days old can detect when someone is looking at them.

In his book, *Eye To Eye – How People Interact*, Dr. Peter Marsh says, “How we look at other people, meet their gaze and look away can make all the difference between an effective encounter and one that leads to embarrassment or even rejection.”

The silent rules of eye contact vary from culture to culture. In western culture, Marsh suggests, the best advice is to make short frequent glances. Making eye contact for too long can be seen as threatening. Failing to look at others causes suspicion as they wonder what we’re concealing; or it can send a message of arrogance and contempt.

The best way to learn about your non-verbal communication is to videotape yourself in a conversation or presentation. The next best way? Ask someone to watch you in action.
2. Know What You’re Trying To Achieve

There may be people who talk simply to hear the sound of their own voices; however, most of us communicate for a reason.

That purpose is often about change. We communicate because we want people to do, think, feel, understand or believe something that’s different or new. We share information, ideas, stories and feelings because we want people to start, stop, or keep doing something. Advertising professionals call this request the “call to action.”

To be understood, it’s a good idea to know what you want before you start the conversation. The clearer you are about your desired outcome, the more likely you are to achieve it.

Clarify your own ideas before trying to communicate them. You need to be clear in your mind before you can put your purpose clearly into words. (Using clear language is Tip 5.)

“Knowing your own mind puts you miles ahead of many people who show up to meetings empty-headed,” writes Matthew McKay, in Messages, The Communication Skills Book.

Good research helps you gain and maintain your listeners’ interest by finding stories, data and facts that support your point.
A well thought out request, supported by facts, is just as important in a face-to-face conversation as it is in a proposal. People need to know what you need from them.

When you’re talking, don’t try to cover everything at once. Instead, go step by step. Cover one idea at a time and focus on being specific. Make sure what you cover in the discussion supports the overall goal.

The clearer you are, in your mind, about what you are trying to achieve, the more clearly you can express it. That means greater understanding on the part of your audience, whether it’s one or 1,000 people.

Knowing what you want to achieve will help you determine what sort of material will support your conversation. It may be survey data, financial information, a relevant anecdote, a “best practice” case history or a journal article on the subject. Having supporting information to talk about – or to leave with people – can strengthen your message.

But don’t be tempted to let the handout do the talking. The value in your communication will be your presence, your delivery, and your concern.

What’s your CALL TO ACTION?
Surveys conducted by countless communication specialists – including me – show that when it comes to information about issues that will affect them, people want to learn it in face-to-face conversations.

Even in our 21st century world of instant messaging, telephones with e-mail and text messaging and "always on" Internet, we need to use face-to-face communication. Humans are genetically programmed to interact in person and to communicate using the spoken word.

Some would argue that we need to do an even better job of face-to-face communication simply because we are bombarded by so much other information from electronic channels.

In our conversations, we can benefit from using some of the habits of good written communication.

- Planning in advance
- Creating an outline of what you want to say
- Researching your subject matter
- Researching your audience
- Logically ordering the information
- Bouncing your ideas with someone else beforehand
- Being conscious of what you’re communicating
- Getting feedback after the fact

Those are the foundation of conscious communication, in any medium.
3. Know Your Audience

Knowing what you want to achieve may be the most important aspect of being understood as a communicator. Running a close second is knowing what your audience wants.

You cannot lose when you wrap your communication in the self-interest of the people you’re communicating with.

There’s a valuable tool used in PR and community relations known as the “stakeholder analysis.” Before introducing change, an organization’s PR team examines the various audiences affected by or interested in the change. The goal is to assess the potential reaction.

The analysis will include questions such as

1. •Who needs to know?
2. •Who cares?
3. •What do they want to know?
4. •What do they need to know?
5. •What do they already know – or suspect?
6. •How do they feel?
7. •How will they react?
If you watched the popular TV drama, *The West Wing*, you saw the White House staff refer to this type of analysis in almost every episode. They check the pulse of every region and voter type so they know the likely reaction to any legislation or policy they introduce.

Borrowing this type of analysis for your personal communication is a great idea. That way, you’ll know where opposition, support and apathy lie before you start. You can plan for this and be ready with information and energy that will help allay concerns, build support and clear up misinformation.

A stakeholder analysis also helps you make sure you’re talking with the right people. Someone who doesn’t care, isn’t affected and can’t help doesn’t need to be involved in the discussion. If, on the other hand, people outside of the usual team really need to be involved, you can include them or meet with them separately.

To do a stakeholder analysis, consider the people you’ll be dealing with and whose support you’ll need to achieve your goal. Then imagine where they stand, what they want and how your ideas will affect or help them. You can use the seven questions above to guide you.
Do they care about this issue?  
Why should they care?  
What do they want to know?  
What do they need to know?  
What do they already know?  
What do they think they know?  
Are they right about that?  
What do they want? Or need?  
What do they gain? Or lose?  
How will they react?

Rather than speculate, ask people. I once worked for a brilliant manager on a project that represented huge change for our organization. When important decisions had to be made, we held one-on-one “pre-meeting meetings” to share information, test our case, determine where people stood and help build awareness and understanding for what we were trying to achieve. In the real meeting there were few surprises – and good support.
By making a habit of talking to people regularly, outside of your formal project meetings, you’ll know what the issues are and where people stand on each one.

You’ll also know what makes them “tick,” which will be important when we come to Tip 7, *Use the Audience’s Language.*
4. Know The Context

The situation in which your communication takes place is critical in being understood. We all know someone who has a knack for inadvertently bringing up a subject at precisely the wrong time. It’s not a winning strategy.

Context is the framework and the backdrop for your conversation, and the better all parties understand it, the more productive the communication will be.

The more you know about the people you’re speaking with, the less likely you are to misread the situation. Being sensitive to what they’re going through and what they’re trying to achieve will help you build rapport, respond to them appropriately, defuse their concerns, uncover any hidden agendas they may have, and spot areas where what you’re proposing will benefit them.
The reverse is also true. The more they know about what you’re trying to achieve (see Tip 1) the better they’ll be at spotting areas where your interests overlap.

Empathy and intuition can play a large role in helping you work effectively in each communication context. In North American society, we’re not generally raised to trust our “sixth sense.” Learning to hear that little voice inside us, to obey the inkling that tells you to tread softly or to ask the unrelated question can pay off in both understanding others and in being understood by them.
5. Use Clear Language

A few minutes ago, I heard a politician on the TV news comment about a taxation report. Using words such as “promulgate” and “exacerbate,” she took three minutes to say something that can be roughly translated as, “People here pay taxes.” This woman is skilled in the art of using many big words to say absolutely nothing. I confess to mentally “tuning out” the instant I see her face. When she appears, meaningless blathering always follows.

There is absolutely no need to use big words, fancy language and industry jargon in a conversation. Not if your goal is to be understood. Not even if you have 30 years of formal education and 100 years of industry experience (or want people to think you do). Opaque language does not impress. It causes confusion.

Someone with four PhDs can understand plain language as well as someone who never finished high school. And, like everyone else in the world, s/he would really prefer to hear simple, clear language, rather than waste brainpower translating your bafflegab.
The more we use plain, clear, simple language, the more likely we are to be understood and, perhaps paradoxically, the more likely we are to be thought intelligent.

If you think of people revered as great speakers, for the most part, they did not use fancy or foggy language. They spoke simply:

• “Ask not what your country can do for you . . .”
• “We shall never surrender!”
• “I came. I saw. I conquered.”
• “I have a dream.”

Have I made myself clear?
6. Communicate In Two Directions

Communication is like a two-way street. You and I are both moving along it. You send. I receive. I send. You receive. It can all be happening at the same time.

Like cars along a freeway, millions of impulses travel up and down the connection between us. All five senses are involved. The ultimate destination for these impulses is your brain, both the thinking brain and the feeling brain.

But many people seem to operate as if communication were a one-way street and they were the only one using it.

Listening, hearing and understanding the message – and observing the other person’s nonverbal messages – are as much a part of communication as sending the message.

Good listening isn’t easy.

Part of the time, we’re more interested in what we’re about to say than what someone else is saying now. We’re formulating our response instead of listening.
Part of the time, we’re just listening to the words, which, as we know, convey only part of the meaning. We’re not tuned into the whole message.

Sometimes the speaker is using language we don’t relate to - big words, convoluted structure or long sentences. We just tune out.

Sometimes we’re just distracted. Our minds are wondering where we put our keys or deciding whether to have a latte or a beer on the way home from work.

In *Listening, the Forgotten Skill*, Madelyn Burley-Allen suggests that business people spend about 40% of their time listening – but they’re only effective as listeners 25% of that time. We’re missing a lot.

She’s identified three levels of listening: 1) empathetic listening, 2) hearing words but not really listening and 3) listening in spurts. In empathetic listening, she says, listeners are “aware and in the present moment, acknowledging and responding, paying attention to the speaker’s total communication, tuning in to the speaker’s feelings and thoughts and suspending their own feelings and thoughts to give total attention to listening.”

In the second level of listening, hearing words, we listen for content, but not feeling, and may miss the true meaning. It’s an invitation to misunderstanding. People who listen in spurts just pay attention to the conversation enough to know when to jump in with their own views.
Burley-Allen suggests that in learning to use empathetic listening to really listen to others, you develop habits that will encourage others to listen to you.

Emotional Intelligence theory (see Tip 10) suggests emotion can impair listening. The "limbic" part of our brain, where we experience emotion, also controls the "fight or flight" mechanism that can keep us alive in a true crisis. Unfortunately it can take over if we feel threatened or even nervous, invoking the pattern below.

It’s hard to listen empathetically when your limbic brain is telling your body to prepare itself for a life and death struggle. Anticipating that a situation may create emotions – yours or someone else’s – and being ready to stay calm can reduce the chance of being too emotional to communicate. So, too, can understanding your goal, your audience and your context – not to mention your mother’s advice about breathing deeply and counting to 10.
7. Use Your Audience’s Language Style

One of the gifts you can give the people you speak with is to use their lingo. I don’t mean speaking Italian, Hindi or Swahili. I mean use the type of language structure and personal communication preferences they use. That’s what they’re most likely to understand.

People have different ways of experiencing the world. It seems each of us has a preferred sense that we use in receiving and processing our environment and what goes on in it.

Most of you will have heard of learning styles – it’s more or less the same. Most people fall into one of three categories.

• Visual people, 60% of the population, like to see things
• Auditory people, 30%, prefer to learn by hearing things
• Kinesthetic people, 10%, need to experience, do or feel something

Here are some clues:

• If they can’t talk without drawing a picture – they’re visual.
• If they talk better than they write – they’re auditory.
• If they must dive in and just do it – they’re kinesthetic.

Knowing their preferred sense gives you information about the sort of phrases to use when you’re talking to people.
• Visual – “Do you see a way to make that work?”
• Auditory – “This sounds like a good plan.”
• Kinesthetic – “I get a sense that we could move on this.”

The language they use, themselves, will give you clues to their communication preference. (See the chart, below) It can be fun to listen for these clues, like a detective, and to think of ways to use their language style and metaphors that will appeal to them.

If you’re in doubt, use all three types of language.

This technique of using their style is a variation of language matching. This concept suggests adopting the communication style of the other person. This would include both verbal and nonverbal communication.

For example, someone who uses short sentences will relate better to short sentences. Copy that style, and you’ll get through to them more easily. People who use metaphors, or very expressive language will relate better to you if you adopt those devices.

Body language also comes into play. You may naturally and unconsciously adopt the posture of those around you – crossed arms, hand on chin or other gestures. It creates what those who study the brain call a “limbic connection” as it stems from the emotional part of the brain.
If you consciously match another person’s style, it can build an emotional connection that will improve communication. We relate better to people who are like us.

- **Visual**
  - “How does that look to you?”
- **Auditory**
  - “How does that sound to you?”
- **Kinesthetic**
  - “How does that feel to you?”

Make a conscious effort to observe the language patterns of the people you interact with. See if you can spot the communication preferences. See if you can spot your own.

After I learned about matching from a coaching colleague, I made a major breakthrough in my communication with a musician friend. I replaced kinesthetic images (my own preference) with auditory language. Now I ask if things “ring a bell” for him, instead of wondering if he can “grasp” something.
8. Infect People With Your Energy

Did you know moods are contagious? In Primal Leadership, authors Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee introduce the concept of “contagion” in organizations, suggesting that people catch feelings from each other.

It’s easy to see examples. If the boss has mood swings, feelings in the corner office can infect a whole building in a matter of hours. Good or bad mood, we all can catch it.

I once had a corporate job in which I worked in a different location from the rest of my peers. A cloud of gloominess hung over their entire floor, largely due to our demanding executive, whose grumpiness was infectious. I wondered why, at team meetings, people seemed so glad to see me. A colleague said, “Don’t you get it? You’re not tainted. You’re cheerful. You’re optimistic. You’re the antidote in this viper pit. We’re hoping some of it will rub off on us!”

Such is the power of emotional contagion that these people were infected by the boss’s foul moods. And they could also find relief in my good (or at least different) mood.
Goleman, whose earlier works popularized the research on emotional intelligence, urges us to recognize our emotions and their potential effect on other people. An outstanding leader, he says, learns to manifest the right emotion for the situation. We can develop our ability to recognize and express emotion, he says, just as we can develop any skill.

This isn’t about manipulation, or even acting. It’s about recognizing that there are lots of emotions in your repertoire and developing and using them all, rather than a tired few.

Knowing that people around you can “catch” your mood or attitude, you can be aware of the emotions you are transmitting as you communicate. When your energy reflects the content and context – hopeful, concerned, excited, etc. – it reinforces your message.

Whether your audience is 100 people or just one, the principle of contagion applies. Your energy will affect their response.

If you think back to Albert Mehrabian and his discovery that most of the meaning of a message is understood through nonverbal cues, you can see the value in being conscious of the mood and emotion you transmit.
A friend of mine leads a training course based on Stephen Lundin’s book, *Fish! A Remarkable Way To Boost Morale And Improve Results*. It uses the story of how workers in a Seattle fish market use personal energy, spirit and humour to improve service and quality of life at work. One of the principles of the *Fish!* philosophy is that you choose your attitude every day.

Choosing your attitude, choosing your mood, choosing the emotions to exhibit – all these are related. Choosing well improves the chances that the people around you will understand what you’re trying to achieve.
9. Get Feedback

I know a man who says failure is just feedback. You can’t fail if you don’t try; however, you won’t learn anything and you certainly won’t succeed.

Fortunately, you don’t have to fail to collect feedback on your performance. You can ask for it.

One of the best ways to learn how you’re doing as a communicator is to ask people. You’ll never know what it’s like to communicate with you, but they will.

You might create an assessment tool – perhaps a list of the communication areas you’re working to improve, with a place to check “did well” or “do better.”

Start with someone whose judgment you respect who knows you well, but not too well to be candid. (This probably eliminates your mother or spouse.) Say that you’re trying to become more aware of the way you communicate and would like to learn from their feedback. You can ask this person to observe and evaluate your performance in specific situations (staff meetings or talking with a certain colleague) or using an individual skill (listening or expressing yourself clearly).

Pay particular attention to gaps between how you think you’re doing and how the observer sees your performance. Listen carefully to his or her feedback.
When you’re ready to deal with other colleagues, you can create a small survey, such as the one below, as measurement and learning tool.

If you have access to video equipment, videotape yourself in action. Nothing tells you more about your performance than watching it, after the fact, when the urgency and emotion is gone.

Feeling brave? Approach someone with whom you have a difficult time communicating. Share that you’re working on your communication skills, and ask him or her for feedback. You both learn. And the communication improves almost immediately, simply because you talked about it!
Communication Questionnaire - HOW AM I DOING?

I’m working to improve my communication at work. You can help me understand how well I’m doing by responding to this short, anonymous questionnaire. Please be as honest as you can, since your candid feedback will help me learn to be a better communicator.

On a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the highest score, please circle the number that best reflects my performance.

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<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>When I talk to you about a project, how clear are my instructions?</td>
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<td>Do I provide you with feedback about how you’re doing on a regular basis?</td>
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<td>Do you feel comfortable coming to me with concerns and questions?</td>
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<td>When you do, is my input useful?</td>
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<td>Do I provide you with timely information so that you feel fully aware of the challenges, threats, and opportunities you and your group must address?</td>
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<th>When I speak to you about what’s going on in the organization as a whole, is the information presented in a way that is relevant to you?</th>
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<td>Do I listen to what you’re telling me and confirm that I’ve understood correctly?</td>
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<td>Do I act on what you tell me?</td>
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<td>What communication practices should I start, stop, and continue doing?</td>
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10. Communicate From The HEART

There’s a strong link between communication and the skills that have come to be known as “emotional intelligence.” In the late 1990s, writer Daniel Goleman popularized some psychological and business research suggesting that only 20% of success in life is due to intellect. Attributes such as resilience, intuition, optimism, self-awareness, and empathy contribute far more. Goleman called that other 80% “emotional intelligence,” in Emotional Intelligence, Why It Can Matter More Than IQ.

The research suggests that, unlike IQ, which is fixed at birth, Emotional Intelligence (sometimes known as EQ) can be developed and improved. Many of the habits we develop as would-be Conscious Communicators also help develop our emotional intelligence.

One is the practice of observing how you and others feel during your communication. Because they’re sensitive to their own and others’ feelings, strengths and limitations, high-EQ people consider the way their messages will be perceived and, consciously or intuitively, choose the time, the place, the format, and the words to communicate for understanding.

Emotionally intelligent communicators use their hearts, and their “gut instincts” in the process of communication. They also use their brains – both the creative brain and the analytical brain.
If there’s a secret to communication, it’s giving it some brainwork. It takes thought, will and, sometimes, courage. More than anything, it takes awareness. Once we’re aware of the ways we communicate, we can notice and practise and, in doing so, create high-EQ conscious communicator habits.

The overwhelming sign of a great communicator is authenticity. He or she really seems to care about the message and the audience. People who communicate from their unique spirit touch something in the spirits of those they are addressing.

Great communicators speak (and write) from the heart.

What does it mean to speak from the heart? This little memory jogger can be a reminder of some fundamental principles of any communication.
**H - Human** - You’re dealing with people – keep the focus on them. And remember that nobody’s perfect – don’t even expect it from yourself!

**E - Emotive** - Appeal to people’s emotions so your message will penetrate their perceptive and intellectual filters and move into their understanding.

**A - Actionable** - Show people something they can do. Involve them – most people naturally want to be helpful.

**R - Real** – Be clear, be truthful, be yourself - avoid jargon and biz-babble. And run a mile from any “spin” or hidden agendas.

**T - Timely** - Talk about issues when they’re happening, when people need information – not when it’s old news or when people have already made up their minds.
Remember – It’s Not About You

Regardless of how well you understand your audience, its language, its needs and the communication context, and no matter how well you prepare and package your message, you can only influence how it – and you – will be understood.

Someone receiving a message has ultimate control of how it’s understood. You don’t know how they understand it until you see what they do in response. In other words, you know what you really said when you see the results.

No matter what you intend to communicate, your audience creates the meaning. That meaning may be something quite unintended.

Say I want to send a message out to inspire you. I carefully choose words that make my clever and important point and send it out into the world. You notice that I’m trying to get your attention and generously give me a second or two.
What I’m saying passes through your eyes and ears and may touch other senses. I think you get my message, that you will understand it completely, and that you will respond as I expect.

Then it hits your filters. These opaque and distorting lenses are determined by your view of the world. They adjust the meaning of my words, based on your experience. When my message works its way through your filters, you may understand something very different from what I intended.

As communicators, we need to be aware that our audience will create its own meaning for our messages. That doesn’t mean we should just give up and assume we’ll never be understood. It does mean that we need to remember that communication is not about you. It’s about the audience.
Cross Gender Communication

No discussion of communication that includes analyzing your audience and using its language would be complete without a look at the differences in how women and men communicate.

Deborah Tannen, author of *You Just Don’t Understand*, makes the point that men and women come from different cultures. John Gray, suggests they might as well be from different planets, in *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*.

Their work suggests men and women see things differently and have different impulses, different approaches to getting things done and different ideas about what’s important.

**Women** seek connection, relate symmetrically as equals, prefer interdependence and cooperation, decide by consensus, yearn for intimacy, want approval, speak up in private, share problems, focus on details of feelings, mix personal and business talk, ask for help, advice, and directions; give empathy and sympathy, and want to understand problems.
Men seek status, relate asymmetrically as rivals, prefer independence and autonomy, decide by force, persuasion or majority rule, yearn for space, want respect, speak up in public, keep problems to themselves, focus on details of fact, stick to business, don’t ask for help, advice or directions, give advice and analysis, and want to solve problems.

Women are more likely to make suggestions or ask questions, rather than issue orders. When a woman asks, “Would you mind getting the Tucker file if you have a minute?” it may be the equivalent of a man ordering, “Bring me the Tucker file ASAP.”

Men talk to transmit information. Women talk to build and maintain relationships. Women talk about troubles as a way to build rapport. Men may view this as whining, and often feel the need to fix the problem. Women may interpret that reaction as an inability to listen and care.

To combat these differences, men can train themselves to be more sensitive, to express feelings and to curb their competitive nature. Women can practise being more assertive, more straightforward and more solution oriented, and not to ask when they want to direct.
Reading List

If you want to learn more about the ideas in this booklet, here are some books that give you detailed information on the concepts.

*Crucial Conversations, Tools for Talking when Stakes are High*, Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, McGraw Hill, 2002


*Emotional Intelligence, Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Daniel Goleman, Bantam, 1995


Sue Johnston – It’s Understood Communication

*NLP At Work*, Sue Knight, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1995


*Secrets of Face-to-Face Communication*, Peter Urs Bender, Robert A. Tracz, Stoddart, 2001

To Learn More

If you have found this e-booklet useful and would like to order printed copies to share with employees or clients, please contact

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Sue offers keynotes and workshops along with individual and group coaching on subjects relating to effective workplace communication. Her topics include:

- Can We Talk? Face-To-Face Communication in the Workplace
- Write To Me! – Effective Writing for Professionals
- Real Conversation – Your Most Powerful Business Tool
- Soft Skills Hard Results – Emotional Intelligence at Work
- Making an Impact with Presentations – The Basics
- It Takes All Types – Using the MBTI with Your Team
- Polish Your Professional Image With Conscious Communication

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