

Talk to Me!

Ten Tips for being understood at work

By Sue Johnston

Ask a large group of people about their communication skills and at least 80% of them will claim theirs are better than average. Do the math. Some of them have to be wrong.

Even if it were mathematically possible, our experience would tell us that some of these people are deluding themselves. Poor communication in the workplace is widespread. In employee opinion surveys and exit interviews, poor communication frequently surfaces as a reason for workplace unhappiness. Perhaps that's because it receives so little attention in organizational life.

Millions of wo/man-hours are dedicated to developing and packaging corporate information, marketing messages, and communications technology. But little time is devoted to the communication that happens in person.

Survey after survey reveals that face-to-face is the way we prefer to communicate at work. Still, deciding what typeface to use in the annual report often receives more organizational attention than the way people talk to each other. Not studied, not measured, and not well-understood, face-to-face conversation is almost an unconscious act in most workplaces.

If organizations don't give thoughtful consideration to face-to-face communication, then individuals can. We can make the shift to conscious communication – and celebrate the fact that the way we choose to communicate is something completely within our control.

Here are ten conscious communicator tips that will help you create understanding at work.

1. Know that everything communicates.

Everything you do (or don't do) sends a message. You've made an impression within four seconds of meeting someone. You transmit information about yourself even before people see you. Are you on time for the meeting? Is your workspace orderly? Do you have a sign on your desk that says something like, "Are you confusing me with someone who cares?"

Body language, voice tone, eye contact, posture, and facial expressions speak volumes about you. Experts suggest body language conveys half your message and, when the message involves emotions, 93%. If you're aware of this, you can make sure that when you say something, you look as if you mean it.

2. Know what you're trying to achieve.

Few people talk simply to hear the sound of their own voices. We usually have a purpose, what advertisers term "a call to action." What do you want people to do, think, feel, know, or believe as a result of the communication? The desired outcome needs to be clear in your mind. Then think of facts that support your point. If people know what you need, and why, they're more likely to accommodate you.

3. Know your audience.

You cannot lose when you wrap your communication in the self-interest of the people you're communicating with. Think about what they need and focus on where your interests overlap. Ask yourself these questions – or, better yet, ask *them*. Making a habit of talking to people regularly, outside of your formal project meetings, helps you know what their issues are and where they stand on each one.

4. **Know the context.**

Context is the framework for your conversation and the better all parties understand it, the more productive the communication. Being sensitive to what they're going through and what they're trying to achieve will help you build rapport, respond appropriately, uncover hidden agendas, and spot areas where what you propose will benefit them..

5. **Communicate in two directions.**

Listening, hearing, and understanding messages – and observing nonverbal cues – are as much a part of communication as sending messages. Good listening isn't easy. Research suggests business people spend 40% of their time listening – but they're only effective as listeners 25% of that time. Clearly, we're missing a lot. Learning to really "tune in" to someone's message encourages others to tune in to yours.

6. **Use clear language.**

There is no need to use big words, fancy language, and industry jargon in conversation. Someone with four PhDs can understand plain language as well as someone who never finished high school. Like everyone else in the world, s/he would prefer to hear plain, simple words than waste brainpower translating bafflegab. The more we use clear, clean language, the more likely we are to be understood and, perhaps paradoxically, to be thought intelligent.

7. **Use your audience's language style**

Each of us uses a preferred sense in receiving and processing information about our environment and what goes on in it. Most people fall into one of three categories. Visual people, about 60% of the population like to see things. Auditory people, 30%, like to hear things. Kinesthetic people, 10%, need to experience, do, or feel something. Their language will give you clues as to their type. "That looks doable." "That sounds fine." "That feels right." You can use the same sort of language when talking with them. If you're in doubt, use all three styles.

8. **Infect people with your energy**

Moods are contagious. People around you can "catch" your mood, just as they would a virus. This is especially true if you are a leader. Be aware of the emotions you may be transmitting as you communicate. When your energy reflects the appropriate content and context, it reinforces what you say. When they catch your energy, they understand your message more instinctively.

9. **Get feedback.**

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. If you have access to video equipment, record yourself in action.

10. **Communicate from the HEART.**

The overwhelming sign of a great communicator is authenticity. S/he really seems to care about the message and the audience. People who can communicate from their own unique spirit touch the spirits of those they are addressing. Make your communication

Human, Emotive, Actionable, Real, and Timely.

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