

INFLUENCING & PERSUADING SKILLS



**The essential skills for
getting your own way**

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Influencing and Persuading Skills

No matter what line of business you find yourself in, there's no question as to what is the most important skill that you could ever learn. For those who routinely try and incorporate the principle of synergy into their workplace, this should come as no surprise, because this skill, in addition to being the most important, is also the most synergistic of all skills; mastering it in your business will not only improve your performance in other professional arenas, but in your personal life as well.

The skill we speak of, of course, is communication.

Communication is the means by which we interact with the other people who inhabit our world. Without it, we're left with no means to convey our ideas, to express our emotional states or our needs. To frame it in a more immediate context that should illustrate its importance to the business person, without communication, we...

- can't make new contacts...
- can never negotiate favorable conditions in a contract...
- can never close a deal...
- can never make our good points apparent to others so that we get the recognition we deserve.

This article aims to illustrate the vital importance of communication behind every single aspect of business, to show it as the pillar upon which all of our other strategies and tactics must ultimately rest. As we go along, hopefully you'll not only see this to be true, but realize the importance it has in regards to your own personal situations, both professional and personal. Moreover, we'll learn something about communication that is not often immediately apparent...

Influencing and Persuading

In addition to being a powerful tool for conveying our ideas and forming connections with others, communication can be used for other ends as well. Chief among these are the subtle arts of influencing and persuading.

Much like the proverbial “power behind the throne”, the business person who has a firm grasp on the principles of effective communication will quickly become the true leader of his or her enterprise, and the success or failure of all that enterprises’ endeavors will surely come to rest with him or her.

Before you start getting a picture of the effective communicator as a sinister master manipulator, however, let’s nip that preconception in the bud. When we say “influencing” and “persuading”, are we talking about being deceitful?

Not at all!

In fact, the key to being an effective, influential, and persuasive communicator is simply to learn how to tell the truth most effectively! It’s not about pulling the wool over the eyes of your colleagues and clients, but rather about being able to recognize what is most important to them, and leveraging it in your presentations and sales pitches, effectively making a “custom tailored” approach.

It’s not about misrepresentation, but about representing and emphasizing different aspects of your product or service to fit the person to whom you’re speaking. Although the whole picture of influence and persuasion is vastly more complex than this, this simple principle here is actually the underlying foundation of all effective communication.

As you read through this article, you'll find that we talk about all sorts of scenarios where effective communication can help you in your career and personal life. In addition, there are tips and tactics extrapolated from those principles we discuss that can immediately be employed so that you can begin to see results almost immediately.

Before we jump right in to how you can make your own communication more effective, however, we need to take a quick look at what effective communication actually is.

Effective Communication

What is effective communication? The end goal of communication is obviously to have all involved parties "on the same page", so to speak; to come to a conclusion where everyone has the same understanding of the situation and has reached a consensus about how best to proceed. Effective communication, then, can be said to be any style of communication that leads to this goal of clear understanding.

What should be abundantly clear to all of us, however, is that the vast majority of the communications that we experience on a daily basis are anything but clear. Often we'll receive information about an assignment and carry it out to the letter, only to be told that it must be redone because it doesn't conform to some specification that we were never told about initially. Or maybe we're put in charge of procuring supplies for a project, only to order the wrong thing simply because we weren't given enough details to know any better.

These are just minor examples, as well. The real consequences of unclear communication could ultimately be much more devastating. It's not been unheard of for a miscommunication to mean the difference between the success and failure of an entire company, or even between life and death.

Since effective communication is obviously of such great importance, why is it that it so often is overlooked and ignored? Why is it that we must constantly contend with *ineffective* communication that at best, is a major annoyance, and at worst, puts us in extreme jeopardy?

To understand where communication goes wrong, we must break down the very concept of communication into its most basic elements.

The Communication Process

When seeking to understand most abstract processes such as communication, it helps to remove it from the human context, to divorce it from psychological considerations for a moment and just think of it in a technical way. In line with this tactic, let us look at communication as we would the sending and receiving of a telegraph signal.

First, on one end of the line, a signal is encoded. This means that the raw data of the message is transformed into a form that can be broadcast down a line. Think for a moment of Morse code and it might help you to understand this. On one end, the telegrapher will have a written message, but in order to send that written message, it must be transformed into a series of short and long beeps. Although we mentally think of those beeps as being the same thing as the letters on the written message, they're not at all.

They're merely symbols!

Similarly, we erroneously think of the words we speak in verbal communication as being the same thing as the ideas themselves that we're trying to transmit... but more on that later.

After a message is encoded, the second step of communication is enacted: transmission. In the example of the telegraph, this would be the physical act of sending the short and long pulses down the wire, where they'll travel to a listener waiting on the other end.

When that signal is received, the third step of communication takes place. The message is decoded. In our example, the series of short and long beeps is taken apart again and transformed back into the words that represent the ideas being broadcast. It is once again made into a form that is understandable to the listener.

The last stage, feedback, refers to the interpretation and (hopefully!) the understanding that takes part in the listener. Just as when radio signals are broadcast, the receiving terminal emits “feedback” that reflects the signal it received, the human being receiving a communicated message issues “feedback”, either in the form of repeating the idea as he or she understands it, or in acting upon the received information in a way that he or she thinks is appropriate.

Of course, problems arise because the signal that is received sometimes differs from the signal that was sent. If this is the case, then what we have on our hands is ineffective communication.

So, what went wrong?

It’s pretty simple. Now that we have an understanding of how communication works in a technical sense, let’s bring it back to the human context and see what we’ve learned.

First, a person has an idea that he or she wants to communicate. He or she then “encodes” this idea in the form of words and language, before “transmitting” it through the medium of speech or writing. The message is then delivered to the recipient, who “decodes” it through his or her unique understanding of the words and the way in which they were broadcast. Finally, the decoded message is understood and “feedback”, in one form or another, is issued.

It should be plain to see where the problems of ineffective communication arise. If we could simply transmit our ideas to other people directly, bypassing the encoding and decoding phases of communication, we would never have any misunderstandings. Unfortunately, the very nature of individuality prevents us from doing this.

Unique human beings will choose to express the same idea in different ways: they'll choose different visual aids to represent it, they'll choose different words to convey it, they'll choose different tones of voice with which to issue those words, they'll react to it with different emotional states that influence how they broadcast. These differences are only compounded on the other end of the broadcast when a similarly unique human being receives the visuals, words, tones, etc. and looks at them through the lens of his or her own unique set of experiences and understanding.

This might be a somewhat depressing realization to come to. Because it's impossible for two human beings to have the exact same frame of reference to work with, how is it possible for communication to ever travel unhindered? How is it possible to ever be sure that the person we're speaking to really understands what we've just told them?

It's not easy, but take heart; there are many different things that we can do to ensure that our communications are effective.

Your Personal Communication Style

Communication, of course, is about more than just words. Anything that helps to transmit an idea (or hinders the transmission of that idea) can be said to be a part of a person's personal communication style.

The things that make up your communication style are manifold. You have your own personal vocabulary, the words that you use most frequently. You have your body language; how you move and stand when conveying an idea to another. There are even matters that are usually subconscious, such as your tone of voice or the pace and rhythm with which you speak. All of these things have a huge effect on the communications process.

By mastering them, we take an unprecedented degree of control over the "encoding" phase of communication. If we can understand exactly what is influencing the way in which we choose to communicate, we can make different decisions, decisions based upon what will make any particular piece of information easier for the recipient of our communication to understand.

In other words, the real secret to effective communication is simply becoming aware of your personal communication style and adapting it to fit each unique scenario as it's needed. That's all there is to it!

Communication Styles

Of course, that's easier said than done. But to get us started, let's take a quick look at some commonly seen types of communication styles. Each person is unique, yes, and so is each communication style, but there is often enough similarities between them that we can place them into categories that make it easier for us to understand them by forming generalizations about them.

There have been many studies conducted that have attempted to classify the most common personality types in regards to how they communicate. For the purposes of this article, we'll take a look at one of the most famous, the CEDA Meta-Profession Project.

In this model, there are four main types of communication style, which are known as the Expresser, the Driver, the Relater, and the Analytical. As we describe each, you're bound to see traits of others you know in these descriptions, as well as a bit of yourself.

The Expresser is generally considered to be an emotional type of person. For him or her, the process of communication is all about expressing how they're feeling at any given moment. They tend to get excited easily. When asking questions of others, those questions seem to verge upon the personal; they want to know how you *feel* about given situations more so than what you *think* about them. Likewise, this is the kind of information that they'll most readily volunteer about themselves. When an Expresser is asked to deliver a sales pitch, he or she will typically adopt an argumentative stance, and feel that they must "sell the idea".

The Driver is, of course, characterized as the "driven" type of person, someone for whom success seems to be the primary goal of every action they take. For them, the process of communication is all about trying to figure out how best to get ahead and get the job done. They tend to ask questions of others that center around facts, often to the point that these facts are totally removed from the human context. They like to take charge of situations, and usually excel in managerial roles for this very reason.

The Relater is an emotional type of person much like the Expresser, but lying perhaps on the other end of the spectrum. Whereas the Expresser is extroverted, the Relater is more empathic. For him or her, communication is all about understanding how you feel and what drives you to do the things that you do. He or she values personal relationships highly, and tends to ask questions that are intended to strength these personal bonds. The prototype of the Relater communication style can perhaps be seen in the traditional therapist, asking questions of a patient so as to better understand them.

Lastly, there is the Analytical person. This type of person can be thought of as a mix of the Driver and the Relater. He or she wants to understand things most of all, but rather than achieving an emotional, intuitive understanding, he or she desires one based in the cold, hard facts of the situation. For them, communication is all about getting the facts that he or she needs to reach this understanding. They tend to ask questions that get to the heart of matters in a systematic fashion, clearing things up for their sharp analysis to draw conclusions from.

These four types are by no means inclusive of all communication styles, but they do offer an important function. By looking at them, we can begin to understand where to look in order to categorize the styles of others and to determine what style we ourselves belong to.

Consider asking the following questions of yourself and others:

- What kind of questions do I tend to ask when I want to understand a situation?
- What sort of responses to those questions do I like and dislike?
- How do I react to pressure?
- What strategies do I normally use by default when I really want to get my ideas across?
- What strategies do I normally use by default when I'm looking to end an argument?

By leveling questions like this at other people, and at yourself, and then comparing them to the categories of communication style that we've talked about, you can determine where you and others stand.

By knowing what style others employ, you will be able to speak to them more effectively because you can tailor your questions and responses to suit the kind that they like best, all while conveying the exact same information. Likewise, in knowing what style you yourself employ, you'll be able to identify what areas of your typical communication strategy need to change in order to communicate most effectively in any given situation.

Now that we have a clear understanding of what effective communication is, how we can identify it, and how we can work towards it, we can now turn our attention once again towards the art of influencing and persuading others.

In this next section, we'll take a look at how the principles of effective communication that we learned in this section can be applied towards being influential and persuasive.

Influential and Persuasive Communication

The principles of effective communication revolve around the idea that if we can eliminate the amount of "noise" that interferes with the signals that we transmit to others, we can ensure that they receive and understand exactly what it is that we want them to. We can reduce misunderstandings and communicate not only more effectively, but also more efficiently.

Of course, in the process of doing so, we also become better speakers in general, and this is a skill that we can use to become more influential and persuasive in our business dealings.

As we mentioned earlier, the idea isn't at all to be deceptive or sneaky. Too many people think of business dealings in that way, with the impression that to "get the upper hand", they must become ruthless cutthroats without a shred of honesty in their character. While that kind of strategy might get you somewhere, you will eventually reach the point where your reputation precedes you and you hit a standstill, a plateau where no one in the business world is willing to negotiate or deal with you. A sad place to be, no?

So let us avoid that. Our plan to be persuasive, instead, is simply to tell others what they want to hear. By doing so, we automatically instill our listeners with a sense of receptiveness and openness that they wouldn't otherwise have. We can take the edge off of tense business meetings and speak openly, naturally, and honestly, arriving at mutually beneficial conclusions.

But wait, the secret is just telling others what they want to hear? How is one supposed to do that while simultaneously making something for themselves? The end results of our dealings are supposed to be beneficial to both sides, right?

Of course. To truly understand how clear communication makes us persuasive and influential to others, we must realize this critical principle: it's not about giving in to any demand the listener makes, but about presenting our own demands and information in a way that we know will appeal to them personally!

So, how do we accomplish this?

It's actually fairly easy. If you think back to the previous section, you'll remember the various categories of communication style that we've covered. Knowing the style of communication that someone uses enables us to know the kinds of information that they crave, the sort of things that they consider important and essential to understanding a situation, what their goals and ambitions are. If we know this, it makes sense that we can frame our communication with them in such a way that makes them more receptive to us.

Let's go over a couple of examples.

Say, for example, that we're dealing with a client of the "Relater" type, someone who values interpersonal relationships very highly. We're trying to sell our business to them, but find that they're experiencing some degree of reluctance because this will be the first business that they've ever owned. They're afraid of making critical mistakes that will run the business right into the ground and leave them with nothing.

Clearly, in order to move forward in negotiations, we must assuage their feelings and give them a sense of confidence in the establishment we're trying to sell them.

To accomplish this, we might take the following approach. We could go into our files and show them how their fears might be valid for some situations, but your business in particular has been benefited by the advent of many "self-sufficiency" systems you've implemented over the years. The business has become less of a job and more of an investment, meaning that in a lot of ways, it can continue to function and grow even without the active involvement of the owner. We could back up this assertion with charts and graphs showing how it's been the case with many other businesses in the area that fall into a similar category.

This is great information to pass on, and we might very well expect it to sway the buyer over to our way of thinking. Why, then, does he still seem unconvinced? Something's still holding him back, and we can feel the brakes being applied to the negotiations as we speak.

What went wrong?

Consider another approach that might be more effective.

We could say to the buyer that we understand their fears because we had them too when we first purchased the business that we're now selling. We might relate a personal story about how it seemed all was lost, only to realize that the solution we had been looking for was sitting right in front of us all along. The buyer might ask how we overcame our fears, and we go on to talk about how we set up this business with these feelings in mind. We created all kinds of systems and processes throughout the business that allow it to run pretty much without the owner's involvement. Managers were chosen for their self-sufficiency and policies are in place that allow productivity to continue and increase even in the absence of the owner, who need only ensure that policies are being following by checking with the managers periodically.

In this case, the buyer seems relieved and negotiations begin to move forward at a much more rapid clip. Discussions now seem unencumbered and free, and both parties are excited about the prospects lying before them.

Do you see the critical difference here?

In both scenarios, the same information was given out. We talked about the systems and processes that we established in our business that are relevant to the buyer's fears. However, in the first scenario, we presented them in the forms of facts and figures that couldn't appeal to the emotional person we were trying to sway. By contrast, in the second scenario, we presented them in the form of a personal anecdote that allowed him to relate with us in a very personal way. The result was that he took it to heart and felt calm and reassured.

This is the key to using communication style to become more persuasive and influential. You must learn to speak in a way that appeals to the listener, no matter what information you have to present.

In order to do this, however, we must take a look at our questioning and listening skills.

Enhancing Your Questioning and Listening Skills

Learning more about another person's communication style and consequently the kind of communication strategy that will prove to be most influential and persuasive with them is a tricky process. One way to help this process along is by enhancing your questioning and listening skills.

By developing better questioning and listening skills, you will know what questions to ask to get the most information out of the person you're talking to, all in a natural way, and in addition, you'll better be able to comprehend what it is that they're telling you.

For starters, let's look at questioning skills.

One of the best things you can do for your communication is to learn to ask the right questions. These are the kinds of questions that get the other person talking, that cause them to open up and volunteer information about themselves that will be useful to you. The wrong kind of question on the other hand, will only cause them to close themselves off to you and you'll have a hard time getting anything through to them or out of them

So how do you tell the difference between the right and the wrong questions?

Basically, questions can be broken down into two distinct categories. These are called "closed" questions and "open" questions.

Closed questions are those that tend to shut off conversation. They encourage simple, one-word answers such as “yes” or “no”. While they might occasionally elicit thoughtful responses, this will be dependent upon whether or not the person being asked the question is already a good speaker or not. Since most of the time this won’t be the case, and you’ll be trying to draw someone out of their shell, you had best learn to avoid them.

Traditionally speaking, closed questions are identified by the word which begins their phrasing:

- Do
- Is
- Can
- Could
- Will
- Shall
- Should
- Would

Questions that begin with these words are usually the kind that aren’t going to give your much information.

On the other hand, open questions are those that can’t really be easily brushed off, and encourage lengthy, detailed explanations. These are identified in a similar fashion, by the words they begin with:

- How
- When
- Where
- Why
- Who
- Which
- What

If you've ever taken a journalism class in school, this second list will likely look very familiar to you. There's a reason for that; these are the questions designed to get at relevant information quickly and concisely.

Let's look at a couple of examples. Say you want to get information out of someone to the effect of what they would bring to your company if hired. Consider the two ways that it could be phrased.

“Would you bring valuable assets to our company, if hired?”

“What valuable assets would you bring to our company, if hired?”

Sort of an obvious example, but obvious examples can help us see how sharp the difference is between good and bad questions. The first one, a closed question, might get you the same information as the second one, an open question, but it might also just get you a simple “yes” with no further detail. The second question, on the other hand, is not so easily dealt with. It requires something specific in order to be addressed sufficiently.

However, should one just avoid closed questions altogether. There may end up being times when a subject doesn't respond to an open question quite the way we'd like. This might be because of shyness, or maybe because they simply don't realize they have anything worth talking about.

Consider the person who goes skydiving every single weekend. If you were to ask them what they did over the weekend, you might get a shrug and a “nothing much”, because to them, the spectacular event was nothing out of the ordinary. In such a case as that, a more specific question like “how was your skydiving this weekend?” would be best.

In other words, to use open and closed questions effectively, you must employ each type at just the right moment to peel away the layers and get at the information that you really want.

One last technique you should employ to become a master at questioning is the direct question. This is a powerful technique that shouldn't be overused. In fact, it's best to reserve it for those times when you can't seem to get a person to open up, or when it seems as if they're hardly listening to you at all.

To frame a direct question, you must use the subject's name, and also phrase the question in a manner that subconsciously gives the subject an order.

A couple of examples:

“So tell me, Mr. Jenkins, what are you looking for in a business partnership?”

“Describe to me, Ms. Smith, just what are your qualifications for the job in question?”

In both cases, these just come across as sounding like perfectly natural questioning techniques, but they hold secret power!

The use of the subject's name shocks them into listening to what you have to say in an active way. If you're lost in a fog of one word answers and sluggish trance-like responses, give it a shot and you might be surprised.

Secondly, phrasing the first part of the question as a direct order has the subconscious effect of making the subject obey you without realizing that they're being bossed around!

If you combine these techniques with others that you'll discover during the course of your career as an effective communicator, there's no doubt that you'll be a master at getting to the information you want, quickly and precisely, each and every time.

The flip side to getting information, however, is just as important as asking the right questions. You must be able to listen to and comprehend the responses that you receive. Oftentimes, the people you are talking to will be open but their responses still come across as vague or obscure. In these cases, it's not that they're holding back, but rather that they lack the proper skills to communicate to you clearly and effectively. If you know how to properly listen, however, you can filter out the noise and get at the heart of the matter.

Here are some tips for learning to be a better listener.

- Devote your full attention to the person who is speaking to you. Don't allow anything else to occupy your attention, or even let it seem like it is. No clicking your pen, no tapping your fingers, nothing but full, undivided attention.
- Don't make assumptions about what the person is going to say next. While it might seem like anticipating a person's response would be a great way to establish rapport, if you get it wrong, you're just going to annoy them. Furthermore, if you're constantly anticipating what's coming next, then you aren't really listening at all.
- Likewise, interruptions are among the worst things a listener can do. Even if the speaker tends to ramble and touches upon a lot of topics that are at best tangential to the core issue, you must wait for them to stop before you ask the right questions to bring them back to topic effectively.
- Don't anticipate what you're going to say next while listening. Let the person finish speaking completely before you begin to process what they said, and then (and only then) begin to formulate your response.

- Learn to listen for those areas that are the most important. If you watch the speaker as he or she talks, you can pick up upon clues as to what parts of the speech he or she is giving are most important to him or her. When you identify that, you can follow up with questions about it to draw out more information.
- Listen with your whole body, not just your ears. Remember to react with body language to what the speaker is saying. Smile when appropriate, nod on occasion, interject a small affirmative such as “Right” when there’s a small lull in the flow of the conversation, or even frown if the time is right. By doing this, you will let the speaker know for certain that he or she has your attention and consequently, they will be much more open and confident when sharing information with you.

These are just a few of the steps you can take to ensure that you’re doing the most you can to draw critical information out of the person you’re speaking with.

Once you master these techniques, you’ll quickly be able to identify the types of communication that are most effective with any given person, and allow you to tailor your own communication style to work with them more effectively.

Gaining Agreement

Having learned how to effectively ask questions and listen, you must remember the final part of using effective communication to be influential and persuasive. The end goal of all of your communications must be to gain agreement.

Gaining agreement means that when you part ways with the person you were speaking with, both of you have the same ideas in mind. Each of you knows what the other wants, and you each have a very clear idea about what’s going to happen next. In business, this might mean that either the deal is closed, or is well on its way to being so.

Too often, both sides of a communication will walk away from the table confident that they know what was discussed and settled upon, only to get back together later and realize that they were operating under two very different premises. Because of this, it's always critical to end communications by asking a few clarifying questions.

One example of this might be restating and summarizing what you think has just occurred:

“So then, we'll meet back together on Friday at 11AM in the Hotel Lobby?”

“So just so we're clear, you plan to finish the designs by Wednesday afternoon, and I'll work on securing the funding?”

Just asking simple questions of this nature is often enough to forestall disastrous misunderstandings.

The other side of this, however, is that it works to reaffirm the person's agreement with you. After you've used your persuasive and influential communication skills to bring someone around to your way of thinking, asking a simple question of this type is often useful just to solidify matters for everyone involved. Furthermore, it create a finalized impression that makes it more difficult for people to change their minds later on.

Having taken a look at how effective communication skills can help us to not only convey our ideas more effectively, but also to become more influential and persuasive in our business dealings, we'll now take a look at some more specific examples where these skills can be useful.

In the remainder of this article, we'll look at three areas where effective communication is of paramount importance, thus reinforcing our understanding of its principles.

Positive and Assertive Communication

As we mentioned earlier, one of the key points to being a persuasive and influential communicator is telling the listener what he or she wants or needs to hear. We discussed how this differs from just being pandering or manipulative, but it bears further discussion.

There is a fine line between tailoring your style of communication to meet another's needs and tailoring the content of that communication to meet their needs. If you do the latter, you'll find yourself meeting with great success in a variety of mutually beneficial business dealings. If you fall into the latter trap, however, you'll quickly find yourself being taken advantage of constantly, until you have no assets left.

There are several techniques you can employ to guard against being taken advantage of while still being accommodating to others. Here are just a few of them.

Don't Be Pressured into Saying "Yes"

Too often in the process of negotiation, we feel compelled to make unrealistic promises for the sake of endearing ourselves to the people we're communicating with. However, if we offer things that are too good to be true, we're only getting ourselves into trouble. Clearly, there will come a time when we must own up to our dishonesty and admit that we're incapable of delivering on the promises we made. When that happens, any ground we gained by making the false promise in the first place will be lost, and then some. You'll lose credibility and your attempts to communicate effectively will have ended up undermining your ability to communicate at all.

Therefore, when you're involved in discussions with others, learn to think before you speak. If you're asked to make a promise, or whether or not you can accommodate some particular need that the other person has, your natural inclination might be to just say "yes" and worry about the details later on. After all, no one likes to hear a flat out "no" when they were hoping for the contrary.

Take heart, though, in the fact that you don't have to issue that flat out "no".

By learning to take a step back and use phrases like "Let me think it over and get back to you on that," you're allowing yourself the distance to consider something fully before you commit to it. It might seem counterintuitive to productive communication in that this strategy will tend to drag negotiations out a little longer than usual, but in the end, you'll be confident going forward at each and every stage. The alternative is being caught out on a false promise that can derail the situation altogether, forcing you to start over (if you're lucky).

In short, never be pressured into saying "Yes" if you're not certain you really mean it.

Expressing Your Ideas Assertively

When choosing the communication style that you use to express your ideas, always be certain that it's an assertive one. Sometimes you might have to tone down your natural aggression in order to avoid overwhelming someone who is more sensitive than normal, but when you do, there's no need to become wishy-washy.

Be confident in what you have to say, and don't back down from it, even if you do have to tone down the volume a little.

Some examples of language patterns that you should strive to use when communicating in a situation like this are as follows.

“I'm of the opinion that we should move forward.”

“I think we should reconsider this idea.”

“I feel good about this plan.”

“That plan seems underdeveloped to me.”

These tactics are very straightforward and not at all vague, but neither are they aggressive and alienating. By expressing yourself in this fashion, no matter how you have to adapt the rest of your communication strategy, you can ensure that you'll always be effectively representing yourself.

Contributing at Meetings

If you're like most people, you dread company meetings. It's not that you're disengaged with the material, but rather that nothing ever seems to get done. People endlessly debate with no consensus in sight, and the agenda is never clear. Off topic speeches overwhelm things and nothing ever follows any rational or comprehensible order.

By employing the effective communication skills that we've discussed so far, however, you can change all that.

If you've had trouble in the past getting your point across in a meeting, or contributing at all for that matter, try out a few of these basic pointers:

- Listen to what others have to say so that you can respond to what they've said effectively. Just as in one on one communication, being certain that you're aware of what the other person is saying is crucial for keeping the discussion on topic and headed towards a conclusion.
- When you're speaking, be certain to phrase your ideas in a concise and clear fashion. You might be compelled to make a fancy speech in order to be remembered amidst the chaos of the rest of the meeting, but this will only work against you. People have short attention spans naturally, and at meetings they're already trying to remember a lot of information, so phrasing your ideas assertively, in a short, easy to remember, but thorough fashion will make you the favored speaker at the table.
- By listening to the talk that surrounds crucial decisions, you can identify areas where communication between other members of the meeting is not going as smoothly as it could. When this happens, you can use your communication skills to act as a subtle mediator and interject with thoughts such as "I think what John is really trying to say is..." or "So Bill, let me make sure I've got this straight..." Using this strategy will allow you to use your own communication skills to make matters more plain and apparent to everyone else at the table.

Dealing with Difficult Situations with Effective Communication

There are many difficult situations in business where you'll find that your newfound communication skills are especially helpful. Let's take a look at just a few of them:

Creating a Positive Impression

When dealing with others for the first time, the last thing you want to do is create a negative impression. The internet and books are full of advice for how to make a "good first impression", but these often deal only with superficial matters such as how to dress, or the importance of a good handshake. While those matters are definitely of critical importance, they're not going to help you if you lack basic communication skills.

When you're meeting a person for the first time, use your effective communication skills to quickly establish what type of communication strategies would best appeal to them. Even if you're not yet involved in active debate or negotiation, you can still use these skills to establish what is known as "rapport".

Simply speaking, rapport is the sense between two people that communication is easy and natural, that it flows effortlessly. It is the difference between enjoying talking with a person and dreading having to talk with them. It's an intangible quality to be certain, but it's also one where you can take certain steps to make it more likely.

Because rapport is largely a subconscious matter (when was the last time you thought to yourself, "I sure have good rapport with this person?"), establishing it is a subtle matter. Try out some of the following tactics:

Listen to the pace at which the person you're dealing with speaks. Try and match their natural rhythm by adapting your own to fit it. If you speak at a pace that is significantly slower than the person you're speaking with, they'll get impatient with you and find the talk unpleasant. If you speak much faster than they do, they'll feel overwhelmed and it'll be hard for them to keep up with you. Matching them is ideal.

Listen to the vocabulary that the person you're talking to uses and try to match some of it. If they seem to have a few "favorite words" that tend to stand out, subtly working one of them into your own phrasing is a good way to establish rapport without their realizing what you've done.

Listen to the communication style being used by the person to whom you're speaking. If he or she seems to be concerned with facts, you might reflect an appreciation for this quality in your own speech. If he or she seems more like a "people person", go ahead and relate a personal anecdote that you think he or she would enjoy.

Establishing rapport is critical, and while it's not suitable as the basis for a long-term relationship, it will help you get that all-important foot in the door to open up the avenues to those conversations that will build up the actual, solid relationship.

Communicating Sensitive Messages

Effective communication isn't all about brokering good deals for yourself and being clear. There will be times when you'll need to call upon your communication skills to help you convey a message to someone that they won't necessarily like to hear.

In such a situation, clarity reaches an all time high point of critical importance. By communicating the unwelcome news in a clear and concise way, it gets everything on the table all at once and the person has to deal with it immediately. Holding back will only give the impression of a bad situation that continues to get worse as more of the truth is laid bare.

Once the information is conveyed, you can use your knowledge of the person in question to do what you think would help them to accept the news the best. An analytical person might be comforted by your giving them facts and figures that indicate how they'll get through the bad situation, whereas an emotional person will be more comforted by your asserting that you're there for them emotionally. This comforting, however, must come secondary to the initial conveyance of the information.

A Word on Negotiation

As we've seen, one of the areas where you stand to get the most out of being an effective communicator is during business negotiations. As such, it would serve us well to spend a few moments looking at the process of negotiation and gaining a more in-depth understanding of it.

There are many models of the negotiation process, but the one we'll concern ourselves with involves three critical stages, as follows: preparing for a negotiation, carrying out the negotiation, and concluding the negotiation.

When conducting the negotiation, one simply recalls all the principles we've already discussed. However, in order to be able to use these most effectively, we must prepare and conclude the negotiation in a way that properly allows for that.

Preparing for the Negotiation

When preparing for the negotiation, the most important thing to remember is that you must never go in blind. If you already know what you want to discuss and what your negotiation goals are, you can focus on communicating effectively when you're actually at the table.

Therefore, make sure that you understand all the details beforehand. Understand what it is that you hope to achieve in your negotiations, what the time limits on negotiation are, if any, and any other factors that might influence matters.

Also, if you have a team of professionals negotiating with you or for you, make sure that you know each of these team members well, and that you can communicate effectively with each of them.

The main thing to remember is that when you actually get to the negotiation table, you should already have a clear idea of what you'd like to happen. Your focus during the time of the negotiation should be on listening and responding well.

Concluding the Negotiation

As we mentioned before, establishing clarity at the end of a discussion is a key part of effective communication, and negotiations are no different. When talks come to an end, whether for good or just for this one particular session, you must walk away from the table confident that you and everyone else involved are on the same page, that you're all certain about the conclusions you've reached, and that you all know how to act next.

Some simple tactics for assuring this are as follows:

- Restating what was discussed in the form of a question that encourages responses from others. By getting others to state what they see as the conclusion of the issue, you can listen closely to their responses and gain a new clarity of what transpired.
- Consult with your negotiation team and be involved in the process of drawing up the documents that are to be signed, if any. Having clear, concise, and easy to understand documents that match your own communication style will help to facilitate things along to a proper conclusion.
- Go over the process with your team and establish ways in which you could improve upon your negotiation tactics. Establish where you went right, and come up with ideas to improve upon it. Establish where you went wrong, and figure out how to do better next time.

In the end, negotiation is a very complex issue and this is just a brief overview of how effective communication techniques can help you to get the most out of it.

A Personal Plan of Action

So, here we are at the end. Hopefully, in reading through this e-book, you've identified all the ways in which effective communication skills could help you out in your own career, and even in your personal life. Having realized how important these skills are, it only makes sense that you'd want to learn them, right?

If so, the next step is to establish a personal plan of action for yourself. This plan should take a look at all the aspects of effective communication and help you train to make them a part of your natural communication process. Obviously, for this plan to be effective, it must be suited to your unique lifestyle, so each person's plan will be different.

However, an effective plan should cover several crucial points:

- Understanding the principles of effective communication. This includes how the processes of “encoding” and “decoding” work and how you can work to avoid the distortion that these processes normally cause.
- Understanding and identifying your particular communication style. Once you know your own style, you can identify areas that exist for you as “blind spots”, points where you need more practice in your listening and questioning skills.
- Understanding and identifying the communication styles of others. Once you can identify the communication styles of others, you can adapt your own style to communicate with them more effectively. “Give them what they want”.
- Understanding the importance of questioning and listening skills, and how they relate to communication.

Once you understand these points, you must of course practice them. Establish a routine for yourself in which, throughout the course of your daily life, you engage in conversations where you try out your newly discovered skills. By practicing in non-critical situations in your daily life, you'll be more prepared when the real thing comes up on the job.

- Practice listening to others and getting them to open up and offer more information by asking the right questions.
- Practice identifying the communication styles of others and adapting your own style to work with theirs. Observe the ways in which this seems to work the best, and those in which it doesn't seem to work.
- Practice reaching consensus and agreement by using tactics such as restating the issues and using personally tailored communication tactics.

Conclusion

Well, there you have it: a brief, but detailed, overview of all the issues that have an impact upon effective communication skills. By now, you've seen the importance of communication and the effect it can exact upon your life, spelling the difference between success and failure, or in extreme circumstances, even life and death.

By working devotedly to understanding the principles we've discussed here, and practicing them daily, you can become a highly effective communicator who has no problem conveying his or her ideas clearly, quickly, and concisely. Imagine the advantage that this will afford you.

Of course, there are many techniques and principles that we didn't discuss here. The reason for this is that communication is always a highly individualized process. As such, you can only discover your most powerful communication tactics and strategies through rigorous practice and getting to know yourself and those you communicate with on a frequent basis.

With time, if you pay attention and assimilate the lessons learned from all of these observations, you will meet with success and learn to wield your communicative powers with precision and confidence.

Good luck!

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Initially qualifying as an accountant in New Zealand, Patrick then obtained his Master of Business Administration majoring in Marketing and Finance.



In 2000 he completed his PhD which was focused on Business Strategy and Leadership. His postgraduate studies were completed in Australia, United Kingdom and the U.S.A.

After a successful international corporate career in a variety of industries across 13 countries with responsibilities for up to 14,000 staff he then went on to become a serial entrepreneur owning businesses in the hospitality, retail, IT and food and beverage industries. His last business covered fuel and oil distribution and had a turnover of \$US 1.6. billion and 600 staff.

For the last 12 years whilst owning the above businesses, he has also worked as a high level management consultant in various business sectors as well as an international public speaker on a variety of business and people management topics. He continues to deliver regular training seminars and speak at international conferences.

Patrick is a director of SME Academy (www.smeacademy.co.uk) and runs courses and programmes on Business Growth.