

Professional Communication Skills

Here are some practical tips created to help you work on becoming a better communicator. Let's go.

Be Clear and Concise

Communication is all about words and when it comes to words, you don't have to say a whole lot to get your point across. Before engaging in any form of communication, define your goals and your audience.

Outlining carefully and very clearly what you want to say and why will help ensure that you include all necessary information. It will also help you get rid of unnecessary information.

Avoid unnecessary words and overly flowery language, which can distract from your message and while repetition may be necessary in some cases, be sure to use it carefully and sparingly. Repeating your message can ensure that your audience receives it, but too much repetition can cause them to tune you out entirely.

Prepare ahead of time!

Preparation, preparation, preparation...We can't stress this point enough. The more prepared you are, the more confident you will become in communicating.

Know what you are going to say and how you are going to say before you begin any type of communication. However, being prepared means more than just practising a presentation.

Preparation also involves thinking about the entirety of the communication, from start to finish. Research the information you may need to support your message. Consider how you will respond to questions and criticisms. Try to anticipate the unexpected.

Before engaging in a salary or promotion negotiation, know exactly what you want. Be ready to discuss ranges and potential compromises; know what you are willing to accept and what you aren't. And have on hand specific details to support your case, such as relevant salaries for your position and your location (but be sure that your research is based on publicly available information, not company gossip or anecdotal evidence).

Before entering into any conversation, brainstorm potential questions, requests for additional information or clarification, and disagreements so you are ready to address them calmly and clearly.

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Be Mindful of Non-Verbal Communication

Our facial expressions, gestures, and body language can, and often do, say more than our words.

Nonverbal cues can have between 65 and 93 percent more impact than the spoken word and we are more likely to believe the nonverbal signals over spoken words if the two don't match. If you want to lead or maybe climb up higher in a leadership role you must become aware of and learn to read nonverbal cues.

If you are aware of others' body language, you may be able to adjust your communication tactics appropriately. At the same time, you must also be able to control your own nonverbal communications.

Your nonverbal cues must, at all times, support your message. At best, conflicting verbal and nonverbal communication can cause confusion. At worst, it can undermine your message and your team's confidence in you, your organisation, and even in themselves.

Watch your Tone

How you say something can be just as important as what you say. As with other nonverbal cues, your tone can add power and emphasis to your message, or it can undermine it entirely.

Tone can be an especially important factor in workplace disagreements and conflict. A well-chosen word with a positive sound creates good will and trust. A poorly chosen word with unclear or negative sound can quickly lead to misunderstanding.

When speaking, tone includes volume, projection, and intonation (The rise and fall of your voice as you speak) as well as your choice of words. In real time, it can be challenging to control tone to ensure that it matches your intentions. But being mindful of your tone will help you to alter it appropriately if a communication seems to be going in the wrong direction.

Tone can be easier to control when writing. Be sure to read your communication once, even twice, while thinking about tone as well as message. You may even want to read it out loud or ask a trusted colleague to read it over, if doing so does not breach confidentiality.

And when engaging in a heated dialogue over email or other written medium, don't be too hasty in your replies.

If at all possible, write out your response but then wait for a day or two to send it. Take a deep breath and relax...In many cases, re-reading your message after your emotions have cooled allows you to moderate your tone in a way that is less likely to escalate the conflict.

Practise Active Listening

Communication nearly always involves two or more individuals.

Therefore, listening is just as important as speaking when it comes to communicating successfully. But listening can be more challenging than we realise.

In her blog post *Mastering the Basics of Communication*, communication expert Marjorie North notes that we only hear about half of what the other person says during any given conversation.

The goal of active listening is to ensure that you hear not just the words the person is saying, but the entire message. Some tips for active listening include:

- Giving the speaker your full and undivided attention
- Clearing your mind of distractions, judgements, and counter-arguments.
- Avoiding the temptation to interrupt with your own thoughts.
- Showing open, positive body language to keep your mind focused and to show the speaker that you are really listening
- Rephrase or paraphrase what you've heard when making your reply
- Ask open ended questions designed to elicit additional information

Build your Emotional Intelligence

Okay this may sound kind of wild and out there, but Communication is built upon a foundation of emotional intelligence. Simply put, you cannot communicate effectively with others until you can assess and understand your own feelings.

"If you're aware of your own emotions and the behaviours they trigger, you can begin to manage these emotions and behaviours," says Margaret Andrews in her post, *How to Improve Your Emotional Intelligence*. People with a high level of emotional intelligence will naturally find it easier to engage in active listening, maintain appropriate tone, and use positive body language, for example.

Understanding and managing your own emotions is only part of emotional intelligence. The other part—equally important for effective communication—is empathy for others. Empathy means understanding how someone else is feeling or what they are thinking about. When you have empathy you become a better communicator.

Have you ever heard the line, “Read the Room...” That means look around you, who are you actually talking to or communicating with? How are they feeling, what are they thinking, putting yourself in their shoes helps you deliver your message so much more effectively than if you just think of only yourself.

(Adapted: <https://professional.dce.harvard.edu/blog/eight-things-you-can-do-to-improve-your-communication-skills/>)

Taking the time to practise these skills will be time seriously well spent.

“Communication is a skill that you can learn. It’s like riding a bicycle or typing. If you’re willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life.”

– Brian Tracy

Many people fail at communication because they don’t try to improve their ability to do it well and like we said at the beginning the good news is that you really can improve your ability to do it well, so keep practising.