



Common Sense Communication: Four Keys to Communicating your Way to the Top

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COMMON SENSE COMMUNICATION:

Four Keys to Communicating Your Way to the Top

By Bett Andersen

“Qualifications: Strong communication skills.” Although the vast majority of job descriptions mention “strong communication skills,” the unfortunate truth is that many young professionals do not actually possess the skills most wanted by employers. In today’s modern, digital age, “18- to 29-year-olds have been harmed (in terms of developing social skills) by the proliferation of communication devices in ways that are just beginning to emerge.”¹

When face-to-face interactions with others are limited, individuals will fail to gain experience in how to respond to an unexpected or difficult situation. Technology (e.g., email, text, social media, etc.) grants individuals the opportunity to decide when, where, and how to respond to any given circumstance.² Although this capability to choose is great under certain circumstances, it is not always feasible or the most appropriate, especially in the workplace. Any individual who is seeking employment, or would like to improve job performance, should strive to (1) be personable, (2) learn to listen, (3) develop presentation skills, and (4) improve written abilities to become a stronger communicator.



Be Personable

A study done at Southeastern Louisiana University reveals that the top skills that recruiters are looking for are soft skills, such as the following (in order of importance):

- (1) having a positive attitude,
- (2) being respectful of others,
- (3) being trustworthy, honest, and ethical,
- (4) taking initiative,
- (5) taking responsibility,
- (6) cooperating/being a team player, and
- (7) being a good communicator/possessing interpersonal skills.³

These seven skills, leading up to being a good communicator, all have to do with how you are perceived by others and the ways in which you interact. Therefore, before honing in on becoming a better listener, presenter, or writer, be sure to build good rapport with those that you are working with. If you do have their trust, are not viewed as a team player, or are not respectful of others, efforts to communicate and propose change will be inefficient and lack luster.

Learn to Listen

Christopher Morley said, “There is only one rule for being a good talker—learn to listen.” In a study conducted “to assess the alignment of oral communication (OC) skills between the workforce and business schools” accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, researchers Kyle Brink and Robert D.

Costigan determined that “listening” is ranked as the most important oral communication skill by employers.⁴

The skill of active listening is more difficult to develop than other skills such as presenting because business schools focus on abilities that are more easily tested.⁵ However, active listening is something that can be easily applied to our lives at any point during the day. According to Business Insider, in order to become a better active listener, follow these simple steps:

1. “Don’t monopolize the conversation.” Be more concerned about asking others what they hope to achieve, rather than pushing your own agenda.

2. “Focus on the speaker, and look him in the eye.” Whether you are chatting with someone on a video chat or in a room with thirty other people, maintain eye contact to maintain engagement.

3. “Appreciate first; judge later.” Avoid judging others for not speaking as eloquently as you might desire; listen to what they have to say and to the points that they are trying to convey.

4. “Summarize and develop key points.” As you listen, determine what the speaker’s message is trying to accomplish and then add your own insightful comment.

5. “Finally, follow up. Send a clear, concise recap message that summarizes all the important parts of the meeting.”⁶

Develop Presentation Skills

How hard can having a conversation, holding a meeting, or making a presentation really be? According to Forbes, only 62 percent of students are confident that their oral communication skills are strong enough to help them succeed in the workplace.⁷ To further demonstrate the need for improvement, only about 28 percent of employers agree that the students demonstrate strong

communications skills in the workplace. Any time you are presenting information to an individual or a small or large group, you will need a special skillset to engage the “audience,” even if it is just one person.

As our face-to-face communication decreases due to the increase in virtual communication, schools are not taking the necessary steps to mitigate the negative effects that living in a high-tech world has on students. “Business-meeting skills and conflict resolution are two OC competencies that are over-looked in the typical college business curriculum.”⁸ The following guidelines (although not comprehensive) can be used to start improving your ability to convey the right message and persuade the audience.

Know your audience. Research, observe, or inquire about who your audience is, what they are interested in, and how they communicate. Be sure to understand the primary objectives of those you are speaking to.⁹

Be Passionate. Be enthusiastic about the topic on which you are presenting and make sure that your audience knows how you truly feel. Part of being passionate about a subject matter is being comfortable discussing it and avoiding a robotic rehearsal of facts.

Listen. Similar to active listening, as discussed earlier, read the audience as you present. Adapt the presentation or conversation and your own body language to their nonverbal cues. A well-rehearsed presentation does not benefit an audience if they do not connect with the speaker. Similarly, a crucial conversation can be redirected with the right nonverbal cues.¹⁰

Speak with clarity. Do not use more words than you need to and think through what you will say before you open your mouth.

Be friendly and respectful. Help those you are communicating with know that you care about them and their ideas. Focus your attention on them and you will most likely get the same respect in return.¹¹

Be empathetic. When having a difficult or highly emotional conversation, strive to understand the other person’s point of view and express understanding.

Although these guidelines may seem simple in nature, entering into a conversation with the wrong body language or speaking in long, drawn out sentences can derail the intended message from being properly communicated.

Improve Writing Abilities

While Siri might be able to dictate our text messages and bots, like Conversica, are able to correspond with individuals via email, writing is still a very necessary skill in the workplace. In fact, a study done by the National Association of Colleges and Employers reveals that



“73.4% of employers want a candidate with strong written communication skills.”¹² A few minor grammatical errors can decrease the author’s credibility and confuse the reader if a message is unclear. In order to sharpen your skills, here are a few tips and tricks.

Go back to the basics. Use online tools such as Grammarly.com, read a grammar book, or download an app to help you learn to avoid common grammatical errors and make sure your sentence structures and grammar are clear.

Take a business communication or writing course. In such a course, you will learn the basics needed in the workplace.¹³

Keep it simple. Do not use complex words or phrases to make your writing look more “advanced” or “sophisticated.” The clearer and more straight forward a text is (especially in business), the faster your point will get across, and the greater success you will have.

Practice and proofread. As you are striving to improve your writing skills, be sure to apply what you learn, write as much as possible, and proofread before sending anything out to the public.¹⁴ Although our means of communication are evolving as dependence upon technology increases, the need for strong communicators is that much stronger. With only 7 percent of human communication being attributed to spoken words, strong communication skills are more vital than ever.¹⁵ If you want to be able to stand out among your peers in the workplace, prove to the 72 percent of employers who don’t believe that students demonstrate strong communication skills that you can.¹⁶ By strengthening

your ability to be amiable, listen, present, or write, you will not only broaden your scope of opportunities, but become more effective in accomplishing your goals.

Notes

¹ Michael Jones, Cindi Baldi, Carl Phillips, and Avinash Waikar, “The Hard Truth about Soft Skills: what recruiters look for in business graduates.” College Student Journal 50, no. 3 (2016): 426, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A466783191/AONE?u=byuprovo&sid=AONE&xid=0f8713d0>.

² Jones, Baldi, Phillips, and Waikar, “The Hard Truth,” 427.

³ Jones, Baldi, Phillips, and Waikar, “The Hard Truth,” 424.

⁴ Kyle E. Brink and Robert D. Costigan, “Oral Communication Skills: Are the Priorities of the Workplace and AACSB-Accredited Business Programs Aligned?” Academy of Management Learning & Education 14, no. 2 (June 2017): 209. doi:10.5465/amle.2013.0044.

⁵ Brink and Costigan, “Oral Communication Skills,” 209.

⁶ Omar Tawakol, “I’m a CEO and the most underrate business skill is one most people are terrible at,” Business Insider, August 16, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/communication-business-skill-2018-5>.

⁷ Michelle Riklan, “Five Hacks to Improve Your Workplace Communication Skills,” Forbes, September 7, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/09/07/five-hacks-to-improve-your-workplace-communication-skills/#6c52fe4933a6>.

⁸ Brink and Costigan, “Oral Communication Skills,” 211.

⁹ “Career: What Employers Mean by “Good Communication Skills,” Capella University, March 12, 2018, <https://www.capella.edu/blogs/cublog/what-employers-mean-by-good-communication-skills/>.

¹⁰ Nick Morgan, “How to Become an Authentic Speaker,” Harvard Business Review 86, no. 11 (2008): 118, <https://hbr.org/2008/11/how-to-become-an-authentic-speaker>.

¹¹ Alison Doyle, “Communication Skills for Workplace Success,” The Balance Careers, last modified November 4, 2018, <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/communication-skills-list-2063779>.

¹² Kaleigh Moore, “Study: 73% of Employers Want Candidates with this Skill,” Inc., April 7, 2016, <https://www.inc.com/kaleigh-moore/study-73-of-employers-want-candidates-with-this-skill.html>.

¹³ Etelka Lehoczy, “How to Improve Your Writing Skills at Work,” Forbes, March 9, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2016/03/09/how-to-improve-your-writing-skills-at-work/#678848cd899b>.

¹⁴ Karen Hertzberg, “How to Improve Writing Skills in 15 Easy Steps,” Grammarly Blog, June, 15, 2017, <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/how-to-improve-writing-skills/>.

¹⁵ Thai Nguyen, “You Don’t Say? Body Language Speaks Volumes More than Words,” Entrepreneur, November 24, 2014, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/239831>.

¹⁶ Michelle Riklan, “Improve Your Workplace Communication Skills.”

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