Chapter 1

Grasping the Finer Points of Great Communication

In This Chapter

- Communicating with your whole self
- Seeking clarity at all times
- Treating other people with respect
- Dealing with awkward situations

You're always communicating. Whether you're dozing by the hearth on a chilly autumn night, praising your children for their successes at school or admonishing an employee for showing up late for work – again – you're continuously sending out messages through your words, voice and body.

Sometimes your communications are crystal clear, such as when your eyes are sparkling, your mouth is in a full-blown smile and you're holding your arms out wide ready to embrace a returning loved one. But at other times you can convey an unintended message, such as appearing sad, angry or despondent when in fact you're simply considering how to respond to a challenging situation. As a result, taking a level of control about how and what you communicate is vitally important in your personal and business lives.

In this chapter you discover the fundamental points for communicating like a pro, which involves using more than just your mouth and the words you say. I guide you through preparing yourself mentally for conveying your messages clearly and connecting with others who have different points of view from yours. You also have a quick glance into the value of treating

other people with respect and taking the time to listen to what someone else has to say before coming in with your opinion. In addition, I provide a series of steps for handling difficult situations.

Using Your Whole Body to Communicate

Great communicators aim to understand others before making themselves understood. They grasp not only what people are saying through their spoken words, but also recognise what others (and themselves) convey through body language, emotional responses and vocal quality.

If you take one message from this book (and I hope you find many, many more!), remember that conveying information involves all aspects of your personality, your mind, your eyes and ears as well as your mouth and facial expressions, and how you stand, gesture and move your entire body.

Getting into the right frame of mind

By getting into the right frame of mind I mean ensuring that you have a good attitude, and so let go of negative thoughts and beliefs that serve as barriers to accomplished communication. Ditch judgement and blame and think about how you want the conversation to proceed. (In Chapter 6 you find suggestions for checking your attitude.)

Negative thoughts and beliefs that may hamper communication include:

- Finding fault with the other person
- Disparaging other people's ideas
- Belittling individuals' beliefs
- Ridiculing someone else's point of view

Knowing what you want to achieve and being open to hearing what the other person has to say are the foundations for great communication. If the old saying 'energy follows thought' is true, whatever you focus on achieving in a conversation is what you can achieve.

When you approach communication free of murky thoughts, you can let your linguistic wizardry steer you towards free and open relationships.

Entering a dialogue with an optimistic focus heightens your chances of communicating successfully.

Putting your eyes and ears to work

The best communicators have a keen sense of observation, paying attention to what they see and hear, keeping their perception antennae tuned and registering what they observe. They gauge accurately their surroundings and people's behaviour, noting the mundane, the extraordinary and points in between.

Here are some suggestions for improving your observational skills:

- **Make eye contact with people you see, whether you know them or not, and observe how they respond.** If they look back at you, they're signalling that they noticed you and are observing in return. Be careful not to stare, however, because your interest may be misinterpreted by the other person.
- **Watch how people move their bodies.** You can tell if people are willing to engage with you – or not – by the way they move in your direction or pull away. Observe whether people are lethargic or energetic. Listen for the words they use and the pitch, pace and tone of their voices. These telltale signs often reveal more about people than what they say about themselves.
- **Open your peripheral vision and take in a panoramic view of your surroundings.** Let your brain receive and release ordinary things, to avoid excess analysis.

- **Eliminate distractions when you're at work or interacting with others.** Putting away your electronic devices when you're with others enables you to notice what's going on around you and so engage in more effective communication.

Communicating with Clarity

Take a moment and consider just how often you communicate with people throughout your day and the importance of getting across your messages accurately:

- You write emails and use social media (the subject of Chapter 12).
- You speak on the phone (check out Chapter 13).
- You compose formal letters (which I discuss in Chapter 14).
- You participate in face-to-face meetings and debates with friends and colleagues (for a collection of essential hints, see Chapter 15).

Your cave-dwelling ancestors only had to grunt, smile and frown to make themselves understood! (Which reminds me, to discover ways of physically speaking more clearly, turn to Chapter 7.) Today, the expanding forms and nature of communication put the burden on you to be clear about what you want and then communicate in a candid way so that your aims are clearly understood.

Sending a clear message

If you've ever sat through a meeting, presentation or even a dinner-party conversation thinking, 'What's this person talking about?,' 'What's the message here?' you're not alone. Without exception, every one of my clients shares tales of sitting through confusing meetings and presentations that are time-wasting experiences.

To send a clear message you need a clear, concise idea of what you want to accomplish (as I describe in the later section 'Being clear about your goals, needs and preferences').

Although this 'core idea' is what you want your listener to remember, you then need to back it up with lucid suggestions and unambiguous, structured and logical recommendations that your listener can grasp. In addition, you have to persuade others to buy into your message. Getting people to invest personally in your idea requires a bit more thought.

The next time you're sending a message to your team, boss or any stakeholder, create a story that provides both a logical and an emotional rationale for people to come on-board. This approach is an essential way to gain buy-in, because you're ringing the bells of people who, like you, can benefit from your ideas and recommendations. People tend to buy on feelings and justify with facts, so by appealing to both their emotions and their intellect, you're onto a winner.

As you're planning your message, think about your audience and what the individuals care about most. Make sure that you include the type of information expected by the other person, which for some may be facts and hard data while others prefer subjective opinions and feelings... Crunch the numbers, gather your facts and analyse how your findings support the core idea. Ensure that you supply only the necessary information to avoid boring or confusing your listeners. By sending a clear, concise and well-substantiated message, you stand a good chance of having your ideas accepted and acted upon.

In Chapter 2 you can find lots of tips for sending clear messages.

Providing feedback

As part of making sure that you're understood at work, and in order to enhance people's growth and development and improve their performance at work or at home, provide them with feedback. Given correctly, feedback can improve morale, avoid dispiriting misunderstandings and reduce confusion around expectations and performance.

Appropriate feedback can help others improve the quality of their work and boost your interpersonal relationships with your employees.

Feedback: it's rocket science!

The German philosopher and psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) was one of the early proponents of group dynamics and action research directed towards solving social problems. Lewin pioneered the practice of T-group training, in which participants find out about themselves through feedback, problem-solving procedures and role play. The technique was first designed as a means of changing attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of individuals. The practice of sharing emotions, as opposed to making judgements or drawing conclusions, enables people to understand how the way they speak and behave can produce specific emotional responses in others.

Lewin borrowed the term 'feedback' from electrical engineering and rocket science. When a rocket in space sends messages to Earth, mechanisms receive and interpret the signals and then send feedback to the rocket in order that it can correct its position or make repairs. Lewin compared humans to rockets, in that people send out signals through their words, body language, actions and other behaviours. When receivers catch the signals, they respond through feedback that's intended to adjust other people's behaviour.

You can provide two kinds of feedback:

- **Positive feedback:** To reinforce desired behaviour.
- **Constructive feedback:** To address areas that need improving.

Both forms of feedback are useful for improving and maintaining quality performance.

Providing positive feedback

The following steps and example statements are a guide for offering positive feedback:

1. **Describe the positive behaviour.** 'I thought you did a great job at the client meeting. You asked a lot of valuable, open-ended questions to understand the client's needs and concerns and expressed interest in the issues they're facing.'

2. **Explain why the behaviour is positive.** 'You treated the client with a lot of respect, and the way you built rapport through discovering similarities between you and them led to them opening up and offering us information we didn't have before. This added data can help us design a winning proposal.'
3. **Thank and encourage the individual.** 'I want to thank you for your efforts. As long as you continue approaching clients in this way you're going to have great success in this business.'

Giving constructive feedback

People frequently shy away from providing constructive feedback because they're concerned about upsetting the other person. That's not surprising because this type of feedback usually focuses on what people did wrong or could do better, instead of what they did well. If feedback is not constructive, the message won't be received or may even be perceived as an insult.

The difference between criticising and providing constructive feedback is in the intention and the way the feedback is delivered. Constructive feedback provides information about performance and behaviour based on objective standards. Delivered properly, recipients feel positive about themselves and their work. Criticism tends to be personal and subjective. For example, if you were to say, 'Your presentation was a mess. Your content was a jumble of unrelated points, impossible to follow and no one could hear what you were saying,' you would be criticising without offering any constructive comments. Instead you could say, 'You had a lot of information in your presentation, some of which was difficult to follow because the points seemed unrelated. In addition, your voice was hard to hear. The next time I suggest you structure your content in related groups, and practise in the room where you'll be presenting to make sure the people in the back row can hear you.' Constructive feedback aids the person receiving the information while criticising only points out what's wrong without offering concrete advice on how to improve.

The purpose of constructive feedback is to provide as clearly and accurately as possible:

- Encouragement
- Support
- Corrective measures
- Direction

The following guidelines help you provide constructive feedback at work, so that it has value for the recipient and for your organisation:

1. **State the purpose of your feedback.** Briefly say what you want to cover and the reasons why it's important. If you're initiating the feedback, explain that you'd like to offer some feedback and make sure the feedback topic means that the recipient doesn't have to guess what you want to talk about. If the other person has asked you to provide feedback, a focusing statement makes sure that you're addressing the expressed need. You can start off the feedback session with statements such as:
   - 'I'm concerned about. . .'.
   - 'You need to know that. . .'.
   - 'I want to discuss. . .'.
   - 'I have some concerns about. . .'.
   - 'I noticed that when you. . .'.
   - 'I was pleased to observe that you. . .'.

   Feedback is frequently offered to help improve performance, but it's also useful for reinforcing positive behaviour.
2. **Relate what you specifically observed.** Have in mind a certain event or behaviour that you can address, including when and where it happened, who was involved and what resulted. Stick to your own personal observations and don't speak for others. Avoid generalities such as 'always', 'usually' and 'never'. For example, perhaps say, 'At yesterday's marketing meeting I noticed that you raised your voice when you were speaking to Robert.'

3. **Describe your reactions.** Tell the other person what consequences they can expect as a result of their behaviour and how you feel about it. Give examples of how the actions affected you and others, such as 'The support team looked embarrassed and I felt uncomfortable when you shouted and denigrated their efforts. Name-calling and shouting are unacceptable behaviour in this office.'

   By describing your reactions to the behaviour and the potential consequences, people understand how their behaviour impacts on individuals and the organisation.

4. **Allow the other person to respond.** After you've spoken, remain silent and look the person in the eye. This behaviour indicates that you're waiting for a response. If the other person remains silent you can elicit a response by asking an open-ended question such as:

   - 'What do you think?'
   - 'How do you view this situation?'
   - 'What's your reaction to my comments?'
   - 'Tell me your thoughts about this.'

5. **Provide specific suggestions.** Offer practical, viable and reasonable examples that can help people improve their performance. When you give suggestions you're showing that you've moved on from your evaluations and are looking to improve the situation. No matter how well people are performing, they can benefit from further ideas to do even better.

   Only offer an idea, however, if you think the other person is going to benefit and find it useful. For example, you can say, 'Kelly, rather than telling Michael that you're not interested in the details of his proposal, you can ask him about his ideas that most interest you.'

6. **Summarise and express your support.** Go over the major points you discussed and summarise the action items to lead to improved performance. Focus on what the other person can do differently in the future and finish up on a positive, encouraging note by expressing your confidence in the person's ability to improve the situation. For example, 'As I said, the group looks up to you and feels confused and upset when you speak

to them harshly. I know that you want to create a positive atmosphere among the new members of staff and I have confidence in your ability to create a happy and productive environment.'

By summarising, you can check that your communication is clear and avoid misunderstandings. In addition, by showing your support at the end of the feedback session you finish on a positive note.

Being clear about your goals, needs and preferences

If your goals are uncertain and have a tendency to change, you can't expect others to understand what you're trying to communicate. After all, trying to nail down the moving target of ever-changing goals and expectations is a worthless exercise. Also, when you're unsure about what you want to accomplish, how can you expect to convey a clear message to others? Clear goals are crucial if you, your clients and your colleagues are to communicate successfully.

In any relationship, whether at home or at work, letting others know your needs and preferences is vital if you want them met. Instead of hiding what you really want, and waiting for others to come up with the correct guess, owning up to what works for you saves time and clarifies communication. Stating your needs and preferences in a non-threatening way enhances communication by clarifying expectations.

Frequently, you hear people say, 'Oh, I don't care,' 'Whatever you want' or 'You decide,' leaving the decision-making responsibility on the shoulders of the other person. But other people can end up making decisions that work for them and aren't what you want at all. Instead, articulate what you need and what your preferences are so that you create your own satisfying result.

Failing to speak out and asking for what you want can lead to strife and resentment. To avoid feeling deprived, disappointed and dissatisfied, express your needs and preferences clearly, knowing that you have the right and responsibility to speak up for what you want.

Chapter 2 addresses the importance of knowing what you're communicating and provides hints and tips for conveying your needs and preferences.

Some cultures discourage open expression of personal preferences. Check out Chapter 11 for more about communicating with people from different cultures.

Distinguishing between personal and business conversations

Essential to communicating with clarity is knowing the type of communication you're involved in and acting appropriately. If you employ an unsuitable approach, you give off mixed signals, creating confusion and possibly offence.

Personal and business communication is different in several ways, including form, content and purpose. In personal conversations you can afford – and are expected – to be informal, casual and relaxed, adjusting your tone of voice depending on whether you're speaking to a child, a friend or an aged relative. In business conversations you're focused on a subject that has professional implications, requiring a more formal tone and wording as you seek to further your career goals.

Although you may use slang and even be a bit crude when talking to a friend, you're looked upon with suspicion if you speak that way against the formal backdrop of an office environment. When you enquire about a client's golf game, a customer's child or a colleague's ailing parent, you're demonstrating a polite interest without crossing into personal territory.

The simple rule for business conversations is to keep the tone professional and the purpose clear. Of course you can speak with trusted colleagues or business relations in a casual manner as long as the conversation is appropriate for the environment.

Displaying Respect for Other People

Effective communication requires the people involved to trust one another, which means that respect is needed on both sides. Listening with the intention to understand, appreciating other people's opinions and making efforts to detect and adopt others' communication preferences are all part of showing respect.

Behaving respectfully

Being aware of the impact of your actions on other people and recognising the fundamental worth of individuals is at the heart of behaving respectfully. If you keep in mind the rule 'treat others as they want to be treated', you're well set to treat people with respect.

Behaving respectfully doesn't mean that you have to like or agree with the person, organisation or institution you're engaging with. Instead, you have to bring integrity, honesty and truthfulness to all your relationships, including, but not limited to:

- Valuing the opinions of others.
- Listening to others before expressing your point of view.
- Appreciating people's privacy.
- Treating people with kindness, courtesy and politeness.
- Never insulting, name-calling or disparaging people or their ideas.
- Never belittling, demeaning or patronising others.
- Treating people consistently and fairly.
- Praising more frequently than you criticise.

If you want others to respect you, you have to respect them.

Turn to Chapter 5 for the benefits of treating people with respect.

Listening with an open mind

Listening properly is fundamental to communication and behaving with respect, and it's an active exercise rather than something that just happens. Good listeners concentrate and put effort into understanding the spoken words and underlying feelings that individuals are communicating. Listening with an open mind means focusing on the person speaking and closing the door on prejudice, preconceptions and assumptions.

When you listen with an open mind you're willing to be influenced by what you hear and consider the merit in what someone else is saying. Self-discipline is an essential element of listening with an open mind because it stops you from anticipating what your conversational partner is going to say and jumping to conclusions, a common behaviour. When you do so before hearing the other person out, you're bound to find yourself in a mire of misunderstanding.

The hardest time to listen with an open mind is when you're receiving a message you don't want to hear; for example, when your boss is debriefing you on your behaviour at a client meeting where you contradicted the agreed approach. Here's when you have to muster up all your reserves of self-control to avoid pushing back against a message that makes you want to squirm with shame, anger, embarrassment and any other uncomfortable feelings you can think of. Although listening with an open mind can sometimes be tough and testing, doing so is worth the effort.

I list a few barriers to open-minded listening below with some examples to help clarify. You may notice that many are interrelated and more than one can happen at the same time:

- **Judgemental listening:** The receiver listens with the intention of determining whether the speaker is right or wrong.

  Nigel is talking about problems he's having with one of his valued employees. He admits that he fired the guy without having anyone to replace him. Nigel's wife, Ros judges him and thinks to herself, 'Well, that was a stupid thing to do.' By judging Nigel's behaviour, she's closing herself off from listening to his feelings and concerns.

- **Distorted listening:** Here the receiver listens through filters, such as personal prejudices, that distort what the speaker is saying.

  Andrea is talking about her new friend, Lynne, who's a lesbian. One of Andrea's work colleagues, Al, has a distorted image of 'those kinds of people' and thinks 'If she's hanging out with her, she's setting herself up for big trouble.' What Al fails to hear are all the good things Andrea has been saying about Lynne.

- **Stereotype-based listening:** The listener has built-in prejudices that get in the way of receiving the message.

  John, head of a global team of engineers, is speaking with Maria, one of the clerical workers on the project. Maria makes some insightful observations, which Nigel fails to hear because he thinks of her as 'just a clerk'.

- **Resistive listening:** Some people have an immediate aversion to ideas that aren't their own. They can also be so conservative in their views that they see anything that challenges their thinking as the enemy.

  Fiona is a member of the church choir. When the new choirmaster proposes that the choir include some modern hymns in their repertoire, Fiona thinks to herself, 'Why can't people just leave things as they are?'.

- **Interpretive listening:** In this instance, people use their own life experiences and beliefs to interpret rather than understand what the other is saying.

  Henry is talking about the problems he's having with his father. His friend Susan, a big fan of Freudian psychology, laughs and says, 'Ah, another case of the Oedipus complex. Why don't you stop competing with your father for your mother's affections and get on with your life?' Her filter of psychological theory colours her hearing.

- **Past-behaviour-based listening:** Here listening is based on a person's past experiences of the speaker, not allowing for the possibility of change.

  From Seb's experiences of Angie during the time he's known her, he expects her to complain about everything. Even when she's doing her best to change this behaviour, he hears her complaining no matter what she says.

- **Attraction-based listening:** The receiver connects the truth of what someone says to how attractive – or not – the receiver finds the speaker.

  Emma thinks George is attractive and whatever he says sounds good to her. She finds David unappealing and so his opinions always sound foolish.

Open-minded listening avoids these traps as much as possible. I say 'as much as possible' because even the best-intended people are influenced by the various cultures that colour their lives (such as family, country, religion and so on). These cultures spawn *filters,* or ways of seeing the world, that inform beliefs, opinions and points of view. The most accomplished communicators accept that they grow up with filters, but still do their best to concentrate on what other people are actually saying.

Open-minded listening isn't the same as approving of what the other person is saying. For example, when I listen to my friend Rick's ideas about politics I seldom approve of his point of view. I do, however, aim to listen with an open mind with the intention of finding out something I hadn't considered before.

For more tips on remaining responsive to new ideas and using open-ended questions, as well as other essentials on communicating effectively, go to Chapter 16.

Connecting with different types of people

No two people are exactly alike. Although some are more similar to you than others, everyone has their own unique way of seeing and making sense of the world (which is something you can exploit during negotiations, as I describe in Chapter 10). Your ability to connect with different types of people affects the quality of your communication and determines the success or failure of conveying messages and being understood.

In order to connect successfully with people who are different from you, you first need to want to connect. When you take the trouble to understand your own personality type and preferred method of communicating and discerning those of others, you bring a powerful dynamic to your relationships, allowing for better understanding and communication.

In Chapter 3 you gain insights into the benefit of engaging with people who are different from you.

Handling Challenging Communications

At some point in your life, if it hasn't happened already, you're going to come up against a situation filled with the potential for challenging communication. Whether you're facing a make-or-break interview, dealing with a disgruntled individual or ending a long-term relationship, you can make the best of a bad deal by being mentally prepared.

When you take the time to figure out what may be coming, you avoid the negative nervous energy that courses through your veins when you're unprepared. Dealing with people's difficult behaviour – whether they're your most valued client who's really angry with you or your best friend who's finding fault with the way you behave after one drink too many – requires you to take the following steps to smooth things over and leave the other person feeling satisfied:

1. **Fine-tune your way of thinking.** When you realise that someone is presenting you with a challenge, get into that person's mindset and point of view. Put aside any negative feelings about the situation or the other party and focus solely on them and their feelings about the situation.
2. **Listen actively.** Give people time to air their grievances and be heard. Perhaps say something along the lines of, 'Tell me what happened' or 'Tell me what's upsetting you.' By speaking this way you subtly form a partnership between you and the other person and indicate that you're ready and willing to listen. Avoid jumping to conclusions or trying to solve the problem. With this step you're aiming to encourage the other party to tell their story. (You can pick up more tips about active listening in Chapter 4.)
3. **Repeat the expressed concerns.** By clarifying your understanding you're sure to address the right issue. If you're uncertain, ask questions to identify the dif-

ficulty correctly. Make sure that your tone is calm and your language is objective. By rephrasing what's been said, you show that you've been listening and focusing on the situation that needs to be resolved.

4. **Demonstrate empathy.** Show through your words, tone of voice and body language that you care about how the other person feels. (You can find out how your body language can calm troubled waters, as well as how the way you use your voice can comfort listeners, in Chapter 8.)
5. **Offer a solution.** If you have an idea how to resolve the problem, let the other person know and then follow through. If you're not sure what's necessary to improve the situation, or if the other person resists your offer, ask for their suggestions. As long as you show willingness to resolve the problem, you stand a good chance of successfully addressing the challenge.
6. **Confirm what you're going to do and follow through.** When you've addressed the challenge, take immediate action (you can find ideas for managing tricky situations in Chapter 9). Aim to go above and beyond expectations to change a difficulty into a win– win result. (In Chapter 10, I offer you suggestions for handling challenging negotiations.)
7. **Learn from the feedback you receive.** Identify how the problem began and what made it escalate. By getting to the root of the problem and fixing it immediately, you may be able to avert challenging communications in the future. If you can't do that, at least you now have the skills for dealing with them.

If all else fails in a challenging situation, keep calm and carry on, practising the preceding steps.