

## CHAPTER 1

### What Do You Mean by That?

#### *Conveying a Clear Message*

**W**e communicate in a professional context to accomplish one of two goals: we either want to convey a specific point, or we want to build rapport with someone. Both involve focusing on the needs of the person or people with whom we are communicating.

I recently attended a conference on current economic conditions in New York City. The speaker was a senior leader of a global banking institution. He clearly had taken a great deal of time putting together his slide deck, which included complex graphs and charts. He spoke with a booming voice and had a strong presence in front of the room. He was clearly very intelligent, and he knew his content. The audience of 150 people included banking professionals with a wide range of experience. I was picking up occasional interesting data points, but was having difficulty following any themes. It turns out I wasn't alone. At the end of the talk, the speaker

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asked for questions. A 40-something audience member raised his hand and asked, “This is all very interesting, but what do you want us to know?” The speaker seemed baffled.

“Do you want me to repeat my whole presentation?” he asked.

“Not at all,” the audience member said. “I just don’t know what you want us to know from all this. Are you hopeful for the economy? Are you concerned? Is there some specific action or approach you think we should adopt? What do you want us to know?”

“Oh,” the speaker said. He paused, looked at the screen where his last complicated slide was still projected, and said, “I guess I want you to think about the following.” He then gave a two-sentence statement that summed up what he wanted the audience to know. It gave context to all of the data he had been sharing. Without that statement, attendees would have left the room with their own ideas of what the talk was about, or worse, befuddled by what they had heard.

At Exec | Comm, over our 35 years of experience, we have helped tens of thousands of people hone their presentation skills, often in one-on-one coaching settings. When coaching someone, I usually start by having him run through what he plans to say to his audience, whether the person is meeting individually with an important client or speaking at his company’s quarterly “town hall” meeting. The person often arrives with a complete set of notes or slides he has spent hours preparing. After he has delivered his content, I’ll start by asking, “What’s the key take-away for your audience? What is the one sentence you want resonating in everyone’s head when you are done talking?” I’m surprised by how often the presenter says, “Hmm. That’s a good question. Let me think about it for a minute,” which means he hasn’t

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verbalized it for himself and therefore didn't tell his audience his main point. Think about that. If the *speaker himself* doesn't express his main point very clearly, his listeners don't know what they are supposed to hear. Since we all take in information through our own filters, each person in the audience may have picked up on a different point in the speaker's talk, and each person leaves with a different impression of the speaker's intent. As a result, the speaker has no ability to control the message his audience hears.

Most of the time, we only have impact if the person to whom we are speaking can convey our message to someone else. If you are a lawyer and you're speaking to the Assistant General Counsel for your client, that person has to convey your point to the General Counsel. She has to convey your message to the company president. He has to convey it to the chairman, who has to tell the board. There is a better chance that your message will be conveyed consistently if you are clear about the message yourself. If you aren't clear about what you want them to know, there is no hope the message will get through.

Now think about it from the audience's perspective.

We all make snap decisions. The "we" applies to everyone: to us as professionals, to our clients, to our teams, to our colleagues. Many issues we decide on the fly *should be* decided that way. Fax the document or email it? Delegate the assignment to a junior person or just do it myself? Mustard or mayo?

Unfortunately, we also make snap decisions about important matters. "Which client's work is a priority?" "Is Jack the best associate for this assignment?" "Should I recommend 'buy' or 'sell'?" We make snap decisions because we have so many things to decide in a given day. Since everyone makes snap decisions, each of us has a better chance of influencing

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others if we have clear, strong messages that can be easily understood. Honing your message therefore becomes crucial to your success.

Whenever you are participating in a discussion with clients or colleagues, craft a clear message. A clear message:

- Is short
- Uses simple language
- Is focused on the needs of audience

## KEEP IT SHORT

Limit your key message to one sentence, preferably fewer than 10 words long. Because so many complex business documents are written in long, complex sentences, we have trained ourselves to think in large chunks of information. While that is arguably necessary in written documents, it isn't helpful or effective when conveying messages orally. Consider breaking the content into smaller sentences to help your listeners.

If we talk for 20 minutes in a meeting, our audience will remember only a few essential comments. The audience needs to be able to grasp your message quickly and efficiently. The key question is: "Will my audience be able to repeat this message to someone else after this meeting?" If it's unlikely that listeners will be able to do so because the message is too long, too vague, or too difficult, it is unlikely you will have the impact you desire.

Read the following aloud:

Everyone's active participation in the bank's events is crucial to helping us develop a conscious and cohesive firm culture that we can all be proud of and that will help us attract high-quality associates.

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Now, turn your head away from the paper and repeat the statement you just read.

You can't do it, right? It's too long. You have to translate what it means to you.

Now try the same with the next sentence:

We hope to see you at as many firm functions as possible.

You are probably able to repeat that sentence easily because the message stands on its own. Save the “why” and the details for separate sentences. Those sentences help me buy into your idea, but they are separate from the idea itself. Give your audience a simple concept to grasp and convey to others.

You may want to consider bringing closure to this issue in the near future before the economic situation changes drastically enough that the fundamental reasons for structuring the deal as we have envisioned it no longer exist.

By the time the speaker finishes that sentence, the audience has forgotten the key message. It's simply too much for a listener to digest in one gulp.

We need to close the deal soon.

That statement is clear and direct.

## USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE

Sophisticated professionals fall into two traps. First, we try to show how smart we are. Second, we fail to recognize our industry jargon.

Big words do not impress anyone. Big ideas do. Exec | Comm recently surveyed more than 1,800 business professionals,

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asking what impresses them about other people's communication skills. When asked to rank the top three communication skills from a list of dozens of items, not a single person ranked "Using sophisticated vocabulary" as a top-three choice. In a professional setting, you're not graded on smarts. People *assume* you are smart. You're graded on having impact. That means getting people to take action based on your ideas.

Get to your point. Your goal when communicating is not to be cute or clever. Your goal is to be clear.

### **Messages That Resonate**

During the time of Sarbanes Oxley, when risk and regulation were very hot topics in business, I was working with the leadership of a large professional services firm as it prepared for an internal annual meeting.

The partner in charge of the firm's risk management group was very worried about his message to his partners. He knew they were concerned about their own risk, but also worried about the restrictions that the new regulations would impose on them.

He originally thought the message should be something like: "We must have a strong risk management system in place so that we stay out of jail." Clearly, this message did not fit our suggested message criteria in that it was:

- Too long and not easily repeatable (17 words)
- More negative than upbeat (albeit somewhat "lister directed")

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After applying our message criteria, his revised message for the meeting became “Let’s actively manage risk so it doesn’t manage us.” His partners heard the message loud and clear but also jumped on board to support risk management’s new policies and procedures.

*Lisa Bennis, Former Managing Partner, Exec | Comm*

### Avoid Jargon

We all spend most of our time interacting with other people who do what we do. As a result, we start to think that our internal dialogue, understood intuitively by our colleagues, is understood by everyone. We forget how much jargon has crept into our vocabulary. Jargon promotes efficiency when used with our colleagues, but it becomes problematic when we fail to *recognize it as jargon* and use it in inappropriate settings. Challenge yourself—first, to always recognize jargon, and second, to eliminate it when it will get in the way.

Every industry and every discrete function within a company develops its unique jargon. Accountants, lawyers, IT professionals, and HR generalists all use phrases that mean something specific to them and their colleagues. Jargon allows us to be efficient when speaking with others in our field. However, jargon is misconstrued by, or completely unintelligible to, the general population.

Most of the time, we don’t realize we are using jargon. A few years after joining Exec | Comm, I was in Washington, D.C., working with a small group of partners at a law firm. At the start of the day I chatted with a few of the partners to get to know them better. One of them, a litigator, mentioned that he had three grown children. When I asked where they

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all lived, he responded, “They live in three different *venues*,” using a legal term that impacts the jurisdiction for a case. Anyone else would have said, “They live in three different cities” or “They live all over the place.” Only a litigator would mention where his kids live based on the county in which he would have to file a lawsuit against them. He didn’t realize how steeped he was in his own jargon.

## FOCUS ON THE AUDIENCE

As we mentioned in the introduction to this book, your message is never about you, and it is rarely about your content. It is always about *how your audience*—your listener or reader—*needs to use your content*. To craft an audience-focused message, ask yourself: “What does this audience need to learn by attending this meeting?” Let’s say a financial analyst is delivering a “morning call” announcement about a key stock he is covering. His audience includes a large number of bankers who would like helpful information for potential calls to their clients.

An analyst-focused version:

I have revised my thesis about Acme. Months ago we advised that Acme’s fundamentals were sound and that adjustments to the company’s structure being implemented by management would reverse certain adverse decisions made previously. We have revisited this issue and now believe. . . .

If I’m the financial advisor listening to this call, I’m already bored. The analyst has used the first 15 seconds of a three-minute call to talk about himself and his thought process. I have yet to hear anything I can use on a call to my client.

An audience-focused version:



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Call your clients today and recommend that they sell Acme. Our “buy” recommendation a few months ago was the right decision at the time, and now it’s time to change tack.

In the first two sentences the analyst has given the advisors their key message for their phone calls to clients. He has focused not on his content, but on *how his audience needs to use his content*.

You won’t know how quickly certain members of your audience will form an opinion. Give your audience the bottom-line information so if they make a snap decision, that decision is based on the proper content. Your audience will rarely take the appropriate time to consider fundamental issues about their situation. Therefore, for your sake, and for the sake of your audience, keep your key message short, easy to understand, and focused on the audience’s needs. You will improve your ability to have impact.

### When Building Rapport

Sometimes we communicate in a professional context simply to build rapport. While many business decisions are based on analytics and credentials, just as many are based on the personal connections people feel with one another.

You should be proud of what you offer your clients and customers. It’s unique. It’s based on your intellect, your experience, and the weight of your firm or company standing behind you. What you offer your clients is, in fact, special. Unfortunately, from our clients’ perspective, what most of us offer is a fungible good. They can get great quality products or services from us, and if they aren’t getting the right level of service or the right price point, they can cross the street and get equally great products or services from someone else.

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That's not bad news; that competition keeps us all on our toes. It makes us strive to be better and keeps us from falling into complacency. It's that combination of pride and humility that makes our business lives dynamic.

Because we all work in a competitive marketplace, we have to build relationships. People have *to want* to work with us or it's too easy to go work with someone else. How can we communicate in a way that builds rapport?

Let's go back to the basic concept that we're all self-focused. Again, that's not a criticism; it's a reality. When someone asks in a casual conversation, "How are you?" or "How was your weekend?" we should each assume the person is making polite chitchat, not looking for a deep analysis of what's going on in our lives or the minutia of our kid's birthday party. Usually, a simple "The weekend was great. Pretty low key. Just family stuff" is sufficient, followed by, "How was yours?" When the person responds with a similar level of detail, ask one or two questions. Then you're done. Rapport built. Now segue to work. Assume no one is that interested. If someone asks for more details, feel free to provide some. Of course, these are not hard-and-fast rules. If your first sentence about the kid's party is, "Well, once we got the bouncy castle out of the tree and the fire trucks left . . .," you're entitled to a few more sentences. Keep going.

And, of course, you must factor in cultural etiquette issues. In some cultures, you build rapport and then build business. In many cultures, building rapport is the first step in building a relationship, and it's only after there is a genuine relationship that you move on to building business. In that setting, the "*How* are you" isn't a casual inquiry. It's really "So, *who* are you?" There's an interest in and an attempt to get to know the *you* under the surface. In those situations, be

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ready for a longer conversation, to provide more substantive responses, and to ask deeper questions yourself.

Always stay positive. If a colleague or client asks about your recent vacation and you start with “It was awful! We were miserable!” then guess what? You still are. No one wants to hear that. Share the awkward moment, the ridiculous expense of your friend’s Vegas bachelor party, or the challenge keeping your teen engaged while visiting grandma’s house; those things make us all human. But after a sentence or two, only your closest friends care, and even they are getting bored. Build rapport by staying positive and turning the conversation back to the other person. Part of building rapport is learning about the other person. If you’re talking, you’re not learning.

Some of us struggle to make small talk. Here’s the easy approach. Start with what’s immediately in front of you. If you arrive for a meeting with a customer or client and the weather is bad, comment on the rain. If you’ve never been to their offices before, compliment the décor and ask how long they have been in this space. If you’re at an industry conference and you’re in the buffet line, a simple “Wow. They really put out a nice spread here” is all you need to start a conversation.

Many of us struggle to start the conversation. The other person is likely feeling just as awkward about how to introduce himself. He will be glad you said *something* and likely respond appropriately. “This is my first time at this conference. Have you attended before?” is all you need. Once he responds, you’re in a conversation. Take your cues from the other person. If he asks where you’re from, a simple two- or three-sentence response is all he wants. Now it’s your turn to ask him. Here’s a simple rule of thumb: If you’ve heard your

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voice and not his for more than two minutes, it's time to ask the other person a question. Remember, it's not about you. It's about him.

### Messages About Yourself

What about you?

Most of the time at meetings or when giving a presentation, we need to convey content—from the perspective of how that content is relevant to the particular audience. But sometimes, we do need to talk about ourselves, usually when we are introducing ourselves to others. At Exec|Comm, we often help people figure out how to introduce themselves simply. Picture yourself in a social setting. You're at a party at a neighbor's house or at a conference reception. After a bit of chitchat, eventually the other person says to you, "So, what do you do?"

Before reading further, write down how you normally respond to that question.

If you're like most people I've met, you just wrote down what appears on your business card.

I'm a Managing Director at Citi.

I'm a Partner at Deloitte.

I'm the Director of HR at Aetna.

When we introduce ourselves based on our titles, we're conveying that we see ourselves based on our roles, on a status that we have achieved. I suggest that we have more impact and train ourselves to be more focused on others if, instead of seeing ourselves based on our status, we view ourselves from the perspective of how we impact other people.

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How is the population you serve better off because of what you do for a living?

You aren't "a real estate attorney." You "help build housing."

You aren't "a Private Wealth Manager for UBS." You "help people make sure they have enough money for retirement."

You aren't "the principal of a girls' high school." You "foster girls' growth into wise young women."

If someone asks me what I do, I never say, "I'm a partner at Exec | Comm." That doesn't mean anything to anyone. I say, "I help people communicate better."

Obviously, your message about yourself will change based on who you are talking to and the nature of the setting. If I already know the person I'm speaking with is a lawyer, when asked what I do, I say, "I help lawyers improve their communication skills." If I know the person is an accountant, guess what I do for a living. "I help accountants with their communication skills." It's all about being relevant to the other person.

Introducing yourself from the perspective of how you add value communicates not only your contribution to the world around you, but that you view yourself as having impact, rather than just having status.

The first line of your introduction should make people want to hear the next line. I was helping corporate lawyers at a global law firm work on their networking skills and asked each of them what he or she did for a living. The first one said, "I'm a tax partner at (name of firm)." Well, telling someone you are a tax partner doesn't start conversations; it ends them. We found many other better ways to show how he added value to his clients. One of his peers, however, didn't need any help. He had built a career structuring financing

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for art projects. When I asked him what he does, he replied, “I marry money to movies.” What a great line! I wanted to hear more. He not only had a strong introduction, but after sharing a few more sentences, he flipped the focus back to me and asked what kind of movies I liked. He knew that staying engaging meant not talking for too long about himself.

So try again. What do you do for a living?