

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Recognizing the benefits of effective communication and the costs of the alternative
- » Understanding the differences between personal and business communication
- » Assessing your business communication understanding and skills
- » Focusing on the fundamentals
- » Avoiding common communication mistakes

Chapter **1**

Talking about Communication in the Workplace

Whenever you're approaching a broad and complex topic such as business communication, you're wise to wade in slowly and develop a general understanding before taking a deeper dive into the details. This chapter eases you into the topic and provides a framework for understanding.

Here, you develop an appreciation of the importance of effective business communication and how it differs from personal communication. You evaluate your knowledge and skills and become familiar with the fundamentals of effective business communication. And, you get a small taste of the skills needed to start applying those techniques to specific situations you're likely to encounter in the workplace.

Understanding the Importance of Effective Business Communication

Business doesn't exist without communication. It's communication with yourself and others that leads to new ideas and innovations. It's communication that drives the formation of new businesses and secures the funding needed for its growth. It's communication that draws customers and drives sales. It's communication that enables businesses to function. And it's communication that empowers employees to be their best, collaborating with each other and helping their organizations flourish.

Clearly, effective communication is essential for businesses to thrive, but it's also important for you to be successful in the workplace and to further your career. In this section, I highlight the benefits you'll reap by becoming a more effective communicator — and the potential costs you'll pay if you don't.

Appreciating the benefits of effective communication

Regardless of how long you've been in the workforce — 30 seconds or 30 years — you can discover something that makes you a more effective communicator. If you're younger, you may benefit from a focus on the fundamentals. If you're older, you may discover that what you've been doing all those years could be even more effective as you become familiar with technologies that improve your ability to reach more people and communicate more efficiently. Wherever you are on the continuum, being a savvy and skilled communicator enables you to do the following:

- » Convey information, ideas, and instructions clearly and efficiently.
- » Improve your ability to make decisions, solve problems, and collaborate with others inside and outside your organization.
- » Accelerate your career advancement and/or business growth.
- » Negotiate effectively to get more of what you want.
- » Empower others through your leadership skills.
- » Engage your team members to build a more cohesive team.
- » Embody confidence, charisma, and professionalism.
- » Expand relationships and build new ones.



Skilled communicators draw people and opportunities to themselves because people know that they're dealing with someone who's easy to work with and gets things done.

Counting the costs of ineffective communication

Ineffective business communication can be costly to both organizations and individuals. Consider these costs:

- » Inefficiencies — time wasted on clarifying instructions, fixing mistakes, and redoing work
- » Missed opportunities due to an inability to communicate ideas clearly, persuade others, or communicate your skills and value to coworkers and supervisors
- » Damaged relationships leading to tension and conflict with colleagues, which can create a negative work environment
- » Frustration and stress that result from an inability to understand or be understood
- » Lost sales or customers
- » Loss of job security (in extreme cases)

Distinguishing Business Communication from Personal Communication

In many ways, personal and business communication are similar: Both require you to listen and understand others and tailor your messaging to your audience. The skills you develop by reading this book and practicing will improve your ability to communicate both in the workplace and with family members, friends, and others. After all, people are people. However, business communication has some nuances that are important to consider.

Business communication and personal communication differ in purpose, tone, and structure. In business communication, the emphasis is on efficiency, professionalism, and clarity for the purpose of achieving specific goals or objectives, such as completing a project, negotiating a deal, or serving customers. It typically follows specific protocols and formats, such as emails, reports, presentations, and meetings.

The language used tends to be more precise and technical, aiming to convey clear, concise, and unambiguous messages. In many cases, you may even be required to communicate with an audience you know little to nothing about — talk about a challenge!

Personal communication, on the other hand, prioritizes empathy, emotional support, and social bonding, focusing more on personal connection and less on meeting specific, goal-oriented objectives. It tends to be informal and centers around building and maintaining trust, sharing feelings, and interacting in social settings. It's more spontaneous and less structured, encompassing conversations, text messages, social media interactions, and casual emails. The tone is often more relaxed, and the language more conversational, allowing for emotional expression and personal connection.

These two types of communication are not mutually exclusive. You can have business communication within personal relationships and vice versa. But the main difference is the goal of the communication — and that goal will drive your communicative choices, including tone, channel, form, and more — all of which are covered throughout this book.

Conducting a Self-Assessment

So you think you're a good communicator. . . .

You're not alone. Drawing from my more than 20 years of studying, teaching, and training others in business communication, I can tell you that the majority of people consider themselves to be effective communicators. However, if that were the case, I wouldn't have a business! I believe that most people intend to be good communicators, but most are good communicators in the way they want to be communicated with. Being a good communicator in a way that adapts to the needs, styles, and preferences of others is a much bigger challenge. Many people take their communication abilities for granted, assuming that their audience will always understand their messages as intended. However, this assumption often proves false.

To gain a more objective assessment of your communication skills, answer the following questions:

- » When I explain complex ideas, do people understand me the first time?
- » When I delegate or give instructions, do I get the outcomes I expected?
- » Do people usually understand my email messages and texts without having to ask follow-up questions?

- » Do I pay close attention when others are talking to me, ask questions to clarify what they're saying, and summarize what they said back to them to verify that I understood correctly?
- » Am I mindful of my body language (posture, gestures, facial expressions) and that of others, and is my body language consistent with what I'm saying?
- » Do I adjust my communication style to different audiences and situations, carefully considering their needs and interests?
- » Am I comfortable communicating via different channels, such as email, text, phone, in person, and videoconferencing?
- » Am I persuasive?
- » When I'm negotiating, do I strive to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, and am I successful in those attempts?
- » Do I provide constructive feedback? (If you point out mistakes or areas for improvement without offering suggestions to address them, answer no to this question.)
- » Do my team members enjoy working with me?
- » Do I engage productively in conflicts? (If you avoid conflict or you become overly emotional, the answer to this question is no.)

If you answered no to any of these questions or you frequently feel frustrated, let down, or disappointed when you interact with others at work (a sure sign that you're not being understood or you're struggling to understand others), you have room to improve your business communication knowledge and skills, and this book can help.

Sharpening Fundamental Communication Skills

Effective business communication begins with fundamental skills — skills required regardless of the situation. These are the skills I focus on in the early chapters in this book, and they include the following:

- » Understanding the components of communication, including the communicators involved, the message, channels, feedback, context, and noise and the impact that each of these factors has on communication, as discussed in Chapter 2.

- » The ability to communicate verbally (using words) and nonverbally (using body language, graphics, and other visuals) — as explained in Chapter 3.
- » The ability to choose the most effective communication channel (in person, email, text, videoconferencing, or another mode of communication) for any given situation — something you find out how to do in Chapter 4.
- » Proficiency in *active listening* — the practice of paying close attention to what’s being communicated verbally and nonverbally, asking questions to clarify your understanding, and summarizing what you heard back to your communication partner(s) to check for mutual understanding. I cover active listening in Chapter 5.
- » A talent for asking questions to obtain the information and understanding you need and to lead conversations in the desired direction, which is a skill you develop in Chapter 6.
- » The ability to engage in productive two-way conversations through reciprocity, self-disclosure, and give-and-take, which is the topic of Chapter 7.
- » The ability to make slight changes in how you express yourself that lead to major changes in how receptive people are to what you have to say. In Chapter 8, I share some subtle ways you can change your message or how you deliver it to communicate more effectively.
- » The importance of setting the stage for your communication and what you need to understand about how people make decisions and use willpower, which impact your ability to be effective, as I explain in Chapter 9.

Communication encompasses more than just words, messages, talking, speaking, or writing. When people claim to have great communication skills, they often refer to one or more of these abilities. Job advertisements and recruiters frequently seek candidates with “excellent written and verbal communication skills.” However, being able to write a grammatically correct proposal or deliver a presentation without filler words doesn’t necessarily equate to having good communication skills.



REMEMBER

As I define it, successful, dynamic communication is ultimately measured by the actions and results it generates, not merely by the message produced.

Avoiding Common Mistakes

Effective business communication is crucial for organizational success, but several common mistakes can hinder this process. In fact, these foibles can be quite costly, to your professional reputation and to the organization and others in it.

Here are some of the more common mistakes — remedies for which I present throughout the book:

- » **Not listening well:** Some people seem to think that communication is all about getting people to understand *them*. It's actually more about understanding *others* first. Listening enables you to evaluate your audience and their message so that you can more effectively tailor your message to their needs and interests.
- » **Using inappropriate language or tone:** No, I'm not talking about curse words (though that's part of it). I'm talking about using vague language, words and phrases, or a tone that may be interpreted as more confrontational than you had intended, or speaking or writing in a tone that's not the best fit for the situation (for example, too formal or informal for the context).
- » **Lack of empathy or cultural awareness:** Everyone's unique, and even the same person can behave differently depending on the circumstances. Not paying attention in the moment to a communication partner's perspective and feelings can lead to messages that seem harsh or insensitive. Likewise, failing to recognize and respect cultural differences can lead to miscommunication and even discrimination. Savvy communicators are sensitive to differences and are able to adapt their message and delivery to individuals and situations on the fly.
- » **Letting bias drive communication:** Bias is a distortion in rational thinking that leads a person to unfairly favor one thing, person, or group over another. Bias can result in poor decision-making, ineffective communication, and unfair treatment.
- » **Overloading the audience:** Providing too much information (TMI) at one time can overwhelm your communication partner(s). Breaking down information into manageable parts can make information more accessible and understandable. And, by overload, I also mean not overloading someone's inbox or blowing up their DMs.
- » **Misusing communication channels and tools:** Choosing the right channel and tool for the message is crucial. For example, email and text messages are helpful for passing along information or giving specific instructions or feedback, but when you need to discuss complex or sensitive issues or ideas or work out scheduling conflicts, a face-to-face meeting or a phone conversation is much more effective and efficient.
- » **Lacking in the feedback department:** Effective feedback is clear, specific, actionable, and ongoing. Merely criticizing what's wrong or failing to provide feedback prevents individuals, teams, and organizations from achieving their full potential. Providing no feedback or vague feedback that can't be implemented can lead to serious mistakes that undermine success.

YOU'RE NEVER NOT COMMUNICATING

I wish I could own the axiom “One cannot not communicate,” but it’s not my original idea. So, where did it come from, and why is it widely debated in introductory communication classes around the world? This concept comes from one of the five foundational axioms of communication proposed by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson in their 1967 work *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (W. W. Norton & Company).

When I taught business communication at Arizona State University, I introduced this axiom to my students on the first day of class, sparking often heated debates. By the end of our discussions, students would explore every conceivable way to avoid communicating, ultimately recognizing that not communicating is, indeed, a form of communication. It’s essential to understand that choosing not to communicate still conveys a message, and so does inconsistent communication.

» **Not realizing that you’re always communicating:** If you’ve ever been *ghosted* (suddenly cut off from all communication with someone), you know that silence can speak volumes, and it’s easy to misinterpret. When you go silent, people often feel the need to assume what you’re thinking, and, as I often point out, assumptions can be quite dangerous in the context of communication.

Communicating Effectively in Specific Contexts

Communication fundamentals can only take you so far. They’re like learning to catch, throw, and bat in baseball or punt, kick, pass, block, and tackle in football. Communication fundamentals provide you with the skills you need, but then you need to know how to apply those skills in specific situations, just as you need to be able to use athletic skills effectively in competition.

In the later part of this book, I provide guidance on how to use your communication skills to accomplish common objectives, such as these:

» Promote yourself without coming across as bragging and get others to sing your praises so that you don’t have to toot your own horn too much (see Chapter 10).

- » Deliver persuasive presentations and become more persuasive overall. Presentations and persuasion play major roles in business communication, so I devote several chapters to these topics (see Chapters 11–13).
- » Negotiate effectively in the workplace with respect to salary, workload, resources, and opportunities for advancement. In Chapter 14, you find out how to negotiate in ways that create value so that you're not having to compromise (make trade-offs) to get what you want.
- » Deliver and receive feedback more effectively, which can come in handy for formal performance evaluations and more casual feedback interactions (see Chapter 15). By combining this guidance with what I discuss in Chapter 12 about communication direction, you can become skilled at giving and receiving feedback whether you're interacting with a supervisor or a subordinate.
- » Resolve conflict constructively. As you discover in Chapter 16, *conflict* is not a dirty word. It often serves as the trigger for growth and innovation. In fact, if you routinely avoid conflict, you are likely missing out on great opportunities.
- » Communicate effectively in a crisis. When crisis strikes, you need to shift to damage-control mode and get out ahead of any bad press. In Chapter 17, I explain how to prepare for and communicate effectively when everything's falling apart.
- » Get hired and recruit top talent. Whether you're making your first or next career move or trying to attract and persuade talented individuals to join your organization, you can use the guidance I provide in Chapter 18.
- » Collaborate productively. A great deal of business communication occurs in a team setting. In Chapter 19, I cover the various stages of team development to give you a better understanding of the group dynamics you're likely to encounter, provide guidance on team building, and explain steps to protect your team and make it more successful.
- » Communicate in global audiences. As our businesses span physical and geographical spaces, we have to be more aware of the cultural differences that make a difference and adapt our communication styles accordingly. I cover this in Chapter 20.

If you can communicate effectively in these common business scenarios, you're well on your way to becoming a respected and successful business leader in whatever role you choose to serve.

Putting Theory into Practice and Making It Yours

One of the biggest and most common mistakes I see people making in business communication is trying to fit their message delivery into a theoretical, idealized box. Sure, you can use certain communication frameworks and guidelines to become a better communicator. (And, of course, that's part of what this book is all about!) But theory is different from practice; theory *informs* practice. Okay, that probably sounds a bit too academic. Let me rephrase. . . .

When I teach anything related to communication, whether it's sales skills, the neuroscience of decision-making, how to humanize automation, how to demystify artificial intelligence to help your business, how to personalize communication at scale — in all these areas, the foundation remains constant. I like to view this foundation as my communication skeleton. It consists of all the scientifically researched and proven theoretical constructs of how humans communicate, behave, and interact and how they use various channels of communication. The skeleton remains consistent. However, in practice, the muscles around my skeleton flex in different ways in each and every context.

For example, I know the fundamentals of delivering an effective and persuasive business presentation. I can employ Monroe's motivated sequence (read more in Chapter 13) to structure an effective presentation. That's the skeleton. However, before I craft a presentation for a specific client and deliver it, I need to tone my muscles. I have to understand my client and their industry, their needs, their desires, their shortcomings, and their successes. I need to understand what makes them unique and what makes their customers special. I prepare in this way so that my muscles will flex in the best possible way to serve this specific audience.

However, people often try to fit their communication inside a box. They think that the challenges of business communication can be managed with a one-size-fits-all solution that stipulates specific rules that need to be followed to ensure the desired outcome. For example, some people think that when you're delivering a presentation, you must maintain a straight-back perfect posture behind a podium. They've been taught that speaking too fast or too slow is detrimental to their success and that showing too much enthusiasm can ruin a presentation. Sure, in some situations, certain rules may apply, but certainly not in all.

I was told early on by many professors — mind you, I had already won competitions and been selected to speak in front of crowds of thousands — that I would never be successful as a speaker because my presentation style didn't fit the textbook definition. Well, having reached audiences that number in the millions, and having run a successful speaking business for over a decade, I've proven those

professors (who probably have never gotten paid to give a speech outside of a classroom) wrong. When you can understand the proverbial skeleton, you can decide how and when to flex your muscles, discovering a style that's uniquely yours and adaptable in any situation.

Though you get a lot of skeleton content in this book, I encourage you to make it your own by fitting it to your communication style, your personality, and the needs and interests of your communication partners. Remember that business communication doesn't have a secret formula for success; it's more like a dance that requires the partners to adapt to one another — and it takes two to tango.

TEACHING AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

It's never too late to learn. In fact, writing this book was a learning experience.

For well over two decades, I have cautioned audiences to avoid the common mistake of trying to fit their business communication into someone else's box. But that's exactly what I had to do to produce this book. In my excitement over being associated with an internationally recognized brand (the *For Dummies* brand), I didn't realize that I'd have to fit my unique, distinct, commercially successful communication style into someone else's stylized box. It proved far more difficult than I had anticipated as the author of multiple books and hundreds of articles.

Even I needed a refresher on communication skills and sought outside expertise and perspective to create what you're now reading. I suppose it is possible to teach an old dog new tricks!

