

Improving Business Communications

How you communicate with coworkers, management, clients, and other business professionals is as important as what you communicate. This short course provides you with practical communication techniques you can use in any business setting to make your communications more effective so you can achieve your personal and business goals.

Business Communications Basics

Communication skills. How many times have you heard that good communication skills are the key to successful business relationships? And just as often, have you wondered just what exactly this broad term refers to?

Don't worry; you're not alone. Not only can most people use a refresher course on the subject -- even those who have seemingly aced their careers can also usually identify an area that could stand some improvement. Think of the star financial analyst who can't spell, or the software engineer who barely speaks above a whisper.

Business communications is a broad topic that might seem obvious at first glance. Reading, writing, and talking -- what's so difficult about that?

But, as you will see here, there's more to it than that -- quite a bit more. For instance, are you aware of the impact your body language makes, even on the subconscious level? Believe it or not, body language "conversations" can run entirely counter to the spoken conversation going on! Think of the edge you could gain in your next important meeting if you knew how to harness the subliminal messages that are being exchanged through body language.

In fact, body language is such a broad topic in and of itself that entire books have been written about it. We can't explore it in detail here, but we'll cover a few important basics in the "Running Successful Meetings" section of this short course. You might be surprised by the big difference these tips can make.

Listening skills is another topic that might hold some surprises for you. The ability to be a good listener is regarded as one of the most important communication skills. Why? Because most people don't realize that it's just as important to show you are listening as it is to hear and understand what is being said. And since nearly 75 percent of Fortune 500 business executives rate the ability to listen as "extremely important," it's one of the easiest ways to make a good impression.

Another important and time-tested way to make an impression is with letter writing -- but whether it creates a good impression or not depends upon your writing skills. Remembering to pay attention to a few important points that can improve your letters, memos, and e-mail correspondence.

In short, good communication skills can separate you from the crowd. Here is a list of the ways in which you will be able to communicate more effectively after reading this short course:

- Write effective letters and memos
- Communicate clearly through voice mail and e-mail
- Run successful meetings
- Strengthen your listening skills
- Use communication tactics to focus your thoughts and stay on track
- Crafting Clear, Concise Memos and Letters

One of the most common mistakes when you're writing interoffice memos and business letters is failing to remember to write for the reader rather than for yourself. People in a hurry often tend to ramble, which obscures the heart of the message and ultimately produces something that leaves out important facts, contains too much extraneous detail, and takes more time to read than it should. As a result, your memos run the risk of being transferred directly into the trash, and your business letters can get you remembered for the wrong reasons.

Even though they have different applications, well-written memos and letters follow the same essential guidelines. Perhaps the only major difference is the form each one takes. Many companies have their own standard letter and memo templates for employees to use, but if you need a template, they often come with word processing programs. A variety of templates can also be found on many Web sites.

Once you have your template, you have two main ways you can make an impact on your reader:

Visually/Verbally

Visual Impact

Designing for visual impact not only creates an organized, aesthetically pleasing document that reflects well on you, it also automatically coaches you to be concise.

White space: Balancing white space is half the battle. Too much white space and your reader will doubt that you have anything to say; too little, and the content you have worked so hard to produce will seem too dense to wade through. Create white space by limiting most paragraphs to five or six sentences and double-spacing between them. Widening the margins will help a text-bare letter appear more substantial. Shrinking font size (within reason) will help a wordy letter fit onto one page.

Lists: Never pass up an opportunity to organize the important points of your message into lists, whether numbered or bulleted. This makes the heart of your message easier to understand at first glance, and easier to find again later.

Headlines: Headlining your lists using a slightly larger font size adds even more emphasis. Headlining paragraphs -- every single one if you like -- not only helps your reader, it will also help you over time to distill your ideas into concise language with greater ease.

Bold type: Boldfacing your headlines is another way to add emphasis, but perhaps even more

useful is boldfacing important dates or deadlines within a paragraph. Boldfacing instructions or actions you want the reader to take can also make a big difference when you need results.

Verbal Impact

Using your dictionary and thesaurus regularly will improve your verbal skills more rapidly than you can imagine. This is perhaps the single most efficient way to make your work stand out and convey that you are of exceptional intelligence. There are no two ways about it: good spelling, word choice, and grammar make you look smart.

Don't save your dictionary for tough words -- use it to look up easy words, too. It only takes 15 seconds, and new meanings of old words are easier to remember than new words. Also, placing a small dot next to all the words you look up, each time you do so, helps identify problem words.

Do the same with your thesaurus -- use it to simplify rather than to complicate. Mining your thesaurus for 10-dollar words is a dead giveaway that you're trying too hard. But if you find that you're writing the word "communication" for the 20th time, a thesaurus can lead you to terms like "speech," "content," and "text." This can give you a whole new start and save your letter or memo from being boring and redundant.

In addition, following these guidelines for achieving verbal impact will help you produce professional-grade memos and letters:

Message placement: Place your main message at the top. Think about what it is, and then write it first. The same goes for each paragraph -- your most important point should be either in a paragraph headline or in the first sentence.

Paragraph focus: Limit paragraphs to one topic. Sentence length: Limit most sentences to 15 words.

Proofreading: This is the most enduring guideline there is. Spell-checkers are helpful tools, but they don't find punctuation errors or words that have been left out. They can also trick you into complacency. For example, an all-too-common and embarrassing mistake that a spell-checker won't catch is when a sticky "s" key adds an extra letter to the end of the word "as." So it really pays to proofread.

If all this seems like a lot to keep track of when you're just dashing off a quick letter or memo, remember that it's a natural progression from the main rule: Write for your reader, not for yourself. From this launching point, simply focus on maximizing Visual Impact and Verbal Impact. Carry these skills over to electronic communications, discussed in the next section, and you'll be an expert in verbal communications before you know it.

Don't Leave Your Desk without It

Communicating Effectively by Voice and E-mail

Combining voice mail and e-mail in one section may seem odd -- since all of the written communications guidelines in the previous section also apply to e-mail messages, it makes sense to wonder why e-mail wasn't covered there.

But voice and e-mail have something in common that paper communications lack: immediacy. Voice mail and e-mail don't sit on your desk during lunch, waiting for you to discover that one last typo before being sealed and stamped.

In fact, a good rule of thumb to help you avoid the major pitfall of sending an e-mail message you later regret is to ask yourself: "Is this something I would be willing to say to the person over the phone or face to face?" If not, don't send it.

E-mail

E-mail is largely regarded as a more casual mode of communication, but that's no excuse for errors, vagueness, or inappropriate content. To stand out from the crowd, always use proper grammar and punctuation in all your business e-mails, and watch your tone. In other words, save your casual writing style for home.

Use all the guidelines for memos and letters when composing e-mail. Also, consider the following:

Avoid using all capitals. IT'S THE E-MAIL EQUIVALENT OF SHOUTING. Conversely, avoid using all lower-case. It's difficult to read. Also, it makes your message seem trivial. If your message exceeds the length of one screen, put it into an attachment. Hold the humor. It doesn't translate well in e-mail, even when flagged by "emoticons" -- those little smiley faces that take the place of vocal intonation. The fact is that in e-mail, irony sounds serious, puns look like misspelled words, and jokes can make you sound like a stand-up comic who's trying too hard. Watch your tone. Make sure you are not being too curt. For instance, when giving instructions via e-mail, writing "I need this from you yesterday" sounds harsh, even though it might be more acceptable in conversation.

Voice Mail

When leaving voice mail messages, all the rules of common telephone courtesy apply. Always give your name, your company or department, and your telephone number first, then state your message briefly.

Opting not to leave a message tends to encourage a round or three of phone tag. If you find yourself in that frustrating cycle, expand your next message to include the information you intended to discuss, or state a specific time and number where you can be reached.

Creating a courteous outgoing message in your own voice mail will prevent others from getting annoyed about not being able to reach you. The best way to achieve this is to be as brief as possible while providing some appropriate options, such as:

- Leave a message
- Call another extension or cell phone number
- Hold for a receptionist

If you are often called away from your desk, it makes a great impression to periodically re-record your outgoing message with the date and time updated. This shows that you are on top of your voice mail messages and reassures your caller that you are making an effort to connect.

Running Successful Meetings

Most people attend more meetings than they run, but sooner or later, you'll need to make a presentation to a group of colleagues. Remembering a few simple rules will boost your confidence and help you run a productive meeting that doesn't waste anyone's time.

Being Prepared

Planning your agenda includes creating a list of attendees, so do that first. Eliminate anyone whose presence is not necessary. Invitations can be made by phone if the meeting is small. Larger, in-house meetings should be announced one week in advance. Formal meetings that include attendees from another company should be announced two-to-four weeks in advance.

Create any materials you will need well in advance to give yourself time to review them. To create a positive, lasting impression, always use the best quality materials for visuals and handouts. On the day of the meeting, arrive early and arrange your materials so that you don't have to fumble when you need them.

Getting and Keeping Their Attention

If you don't know everyone present, introduce yourself to attendees as they enter, if possible. Speak with authority, and begin the meeting at the appointed time. If you notice people becoming distracted, try slowing down and raising the volume of your voice -- but only very slightly. Coming on too strong in this manner makes a person seem pushy and may lose more listeners than it gains. Used judiciously, however, it can be helpful. If you are sitting down, stand up when making important points. If you are already standing, lean forward. Don't monopolize the floor. Encourage discussion by inviting and/or asking questions.

Keeping Time

If you can, appoint someone as timekeeper and instruct him or her to signal when time is up. If you absolutely need to continue, do so with an eye on the clock. Try not to look at your wrist to check the time. If you have to be the timekeeper, put your watch on the table so you can glance at it without seeming to be in a hurry. Be succinct. Plan in advance to eliminate less-important material on the fly if you go into overtime. If that is not an option, schedule another meeting.

Body Language Tips

Don't touch your face or scratch your head. These are signs of indecision and uncertainty that will undo the authority you're working hard to establish.

Make and hold eye contact. If you lack confidence, following this rule will disguise it and, in turn, serve to increase your confidence level.

Don't cross your arms or legs -- these are "closed" stances that will turn your audience off.

Be an Active Listener

Whether you're running a meeting or participating in one, put your time to optimum use by being an active listener. When you're the one running the meeting, using active listening techniques while you and others speak keeps you connected and responsive to your audience. As a participant, effective listening skills help you focus, tune in to the speaker, and make the most of what you're hearing. The same simple techniques apply to both situations; we'll cover them in the next section.

Developing Effective Listening Skills

If you run meetings on a regular basis, you have no doubt encountered people who don't or won't listen, no matter what you do to capture their attention. There are times when it is not your fault -- specifically, when you are dealing with someone who needs a lesson in etiquette.

But listening is more than just a matter of etiquette -- it can make or break a good impression or make you miss important cues. And of course, failing to pay attention can create major problems if you tune out and miss important instructions.

Here are some ways to improve your listening skills:

- Do not interrupt. Be patient when someone else is talking.
- Maintain eye contact. Watch the speaker even if the speaker is not looking at you. When you are given an opportunity to speak, try to repeat a few key points back to the speaker. This will illustrate that you have listened and comprehended -- something that will certainly be appreciated.
- Body Language for Good Listening. Certain mannerisms can be employed to both let the speaker know (perhaps even subliminally) that you are paying attention and to help yourself tune in if you find you are distracted: Blinking your eyes shows that you are interested. Tilting your head to either side takes it a step further by showing that you are processing information. Resting your chin on your knuckles shows that you are not opposed to what the speaker is saying. Conversely, identifying these signs in listeners when you are the speaker can give you a great deal of useful information.
- Demonstrate What You've Heard. An excellent way to tie your listening skills to your other communications skills is to organize the information you have been given into a thoughtful memo, letter, or e-mail message and send it to the speaker. That way, if you have misunderstood anything, there is an opportunity for it to be clarified.

Using Good Communication Tactics to Sharpen Your Focus

Many people don't realize that business communications aren't simply a hot seminar topic -- they are the most basic element of business itself. Without communication, no business can be done. Therefore, it follows that good communications pave the way for good business.

As you go through the process of improving your business communications skills, you will begin to enjoy the fruits of your labor in a myriad of ways. Maybe you are being trusted with more important project or finding that your opinion is sought more often. Perhaps you've even received a raise or a promotion!

Inevitably, however, there will be times when you find that you're a bit scattered. At such times, you can use your improved communication skills to help sharpen your focus in several ways:

When chatty co-workers show up at your desk just as you are trying to finish a time-sensitive assignment, it benefits both of you to gently postpone the chat by saying something such as, "Let's go over this when we both reach a good stopping point."

Let your voice mail take your calls. In general, this is not a good habit to get into, but when you are racing the clock, sometimes it makes sense to eliminate the phone as a potential distraction.

Prioritize your projects in much the same way you prioritize information for a letter or memo. This will help you tackle your work in a much more efficient way. When you need to handle multiple deadlines, try to clear your mind of distractions and focus only on the project you are currently working on. Thinking several steps ahead to the next project keeps you from giving the work at hand your full attention.

Maintaining folders for each active project helps you maintain focus and keep materials at your fingertips. As ideas come to you about other projects, use organizational tools to file away your thoughts until you need them.

Moving Forward

Employing these communication tactics can really help make things happen in your job and in your career. If you find yourself feeling more connected to your colleagues and co-workers, then you are right on track. Using the techniques we've covered here, you'll find yourself wasting less time -- your own time as well as that of others -- and better able to communicate your own thoughts with ease, power, and clarity. Furthermore, you'll tune in more easily to the messages of others.

Once you have begun to improve your business communication skills, the techniques will become second nature and you will notice others responding to you differently. When you maintain focus in all aspects of your business day, from e-mails to meetings to voicemail to project management, you accomplish more and feel better. Practice these skills every day, and enjoy the results that come your way!