

THE CENTER FOR CORPORATE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**20 WAYS TO ENHANCE YOUR
COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

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INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE ON OTHERS?

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Deborah Easton](#)



Have you ever been around people who say whatever they think without any consideration for the appropriateness of their remarks? Perhaps you finally decided to approach them about their lack of tact, but received the response: “That’s just the way I am. People need to get used to me.”

Contrary to what most people think, **communication style** is not exclusively determined by

personality. It is also affected by the choices we have learned to make by watching others, trial and error attempts, parental influence and a variety of life experiences. Communication style is a choice. For example, we choose words, how loudly we speak, timing of the conversation and the strategies we use to influence others. These choices affect whether or not people hear our point or are distracted by our behavior. When we make the wrong communication choices, people have two thoughts:

1. “Why is this person acting this way?”

2. “Why is this person treating me this way?”

If our improper communication style becomes the listener’s focus, the point we are trying to make is ignored. Unfortunately we are not always conscious of the choices we are making. We have all had conversations in which our emotions dictated our behavior. Also, we are often focused on our intent behind the message and fail to monitor how we are delivering that message. For example, during your last conversation with someone, were you aware of what your facial expression was saying? Much of our communication behavior is difficult to self-monitor. Most of our communication choices have become habit. We are not thinking of how we are being perceived, but instead are communicating on impulse.

We are not thinking about the listener’s opinions, only about what opinions we feel compelled to state. Therefore, learning the **four communication styles** and the positive and negative impacts of these style choices on others is critical to:

- the clarity of our communication;
- the quality of the connection we have with others;
- our credibility and;
- the potency of our influential messages.

Each style can have both positive and negative impact depending on how the style is used and in what situation you use it. For example, it is most effective to be open with others in most situations, but there are times when you may possess confidential information that cannot be divulged. Obviously if you were to reveal what you know, trust would be violated with the people whose secret you were supposed to keep. Trust is a critical factor in making decisions about how to communicate with others. Think of someone whom you do not trust. Your communication with that person is limited, guarded and skeptical. Trust changes everything in relationships. This is the main reason why making effective communication behavioral choices are so important. When people are focusing on how poorly they are being treated in an interaction, they do not accept the point being made – even if that point provides the solution to every problem on the planet! Why trust someone’s idea when you do not trust that person to communicate clearly and respectfully with you?

Open style communicators use trust as a guide for their choices. Ask yourself: “Will my actions, my style and my words improve or maintain trust?” If your answer is yes, then you most likely have chosen your approach carefully and will be communicating in a way that is clear, respectful and influential. In stressful situations, however, we often fail to ask this question and say whatever is on our minds, justifying our lapse in tact with the excuse that a lack of time prevented us from stopping to think about our impact on others. An open style communicator also understands that it is the listener who determines the success of the interaction. The point of view of everyone in the conversation is considered. Paraphrase is used to clarify, empathize and keep the conversation focused on the real issue. Information is shared with appropriate relevance, detail and self-disclosure. “No” is said tactfully, yet assertively. Knowledge is shared freely without worrying about how ownership of that knowledge protects one’s public image or status.

However, there are times when our communication style should be more closed. Have you ever walked out of a meeting regretting that you said everything you were thinking and feeling without filters? That was a situation in which sitting back and analyzing what people were saying and then deciding how to respond would have been the better choice.

But this **closed communication style** can be used to the extreme causing listener frustration. Sometimes the time needed to analyze all of the information and provide an answer takes longer than people expected or longer than the deadline allows. The subsequent explanation of that answer will be very detailed: starting with background information, then describing all facets of the problem, then revealing potential sources of those problems, then stating several solutions one-by-one until we have eliminated the ones that will not work and then describing in detail how to implement the solution that will work. Have you ever sat through one of those presentations? How much of all that detail did you absorb? Talk about TMI! This style is close to my heart, however, because the best example I have experienced of this style is my amazing mechanical engineer father. As I write this commentary, today is his 101st birthday. Yes, you read that right – one hundred and one years old – with a mind that is just as sharp and analytical as it ever was. People sometimes think that it is his age that prompts his long explanations, but I assure you it is his detail-oriented thinking process that drives the beginning-to-end-of-the-story approach. **We tend to communicate the way we think.** For those of us who have these detail-oriented tendencies, we need to understand that not everyone has either the patience or the desire to grasp everything we are presenting. We need to learn to edit. Once we do this, it will be easier for us to focus on the most important information, make decisions faster, speak up more quickly and ensure our opinions are being heard and considered. Remember: too much detail buries your point.

In a crisis situation brevity is critical. We must be decisive, concise yet descriptive, calm and focused on action. Communication choices that distract people from this action could have disastrous consequences. Unfortunately, people who use this **blind style** incorrectly believe that the crisis justifies using any type of behavior that incites action, including intimidation. However, others often react with resistance to the power play. The last time someone said to you: “You have to...” how did you react? A person who uses this style to the extreme has a clear picture in mind of how the world ought to be and how people in the world ought to act. They will demand that their methods be adopted, unfortunately without clearly describing those methods. After all, the picture is completely clear to them, anyone with a brain should be able to figure it out. And they will make this statement about people publicly. Bluntness is mistaken for openness. Listening to others’ opinions is considered a waste of time.

These tactics may work in the short term, but long-term adversely affect credibility. No one respects a bully.

1. Open

2. Closed

3. Blind

4. Hidden

When people are uncertain of how to respond to inappropriate behaviors or unfamiliar situations, they often choose to hide their true opinions and feelings.

For example, how would you respond to the question: “Do these jeans make me look fat?” Obviously we will consider the relationship with the questioner when determining the degree of openness in our answer out of concern for their feelings. There are many situations in which this degree of hiddenness is appropriate, such as customer service. Customers may be yelling and blaming us for their own mistakes. As customer service providers, we must remain calm and be conscious of our word choice (even though they are not conscious of theirs). On the inside we are furious and upset, but on the outside we are smiling, listening and negotiating a solution.

This is appropriate use of the **hidden communication style**. Revealing our true feelings would only escalate the situation. But when this style is used to extreme, the full truth is not consistently revealed, causing problems with trust. Vague words like “as soon as possible” are used leading everyone to their own conclusions of what that means. People may go so far as to agree to an action and then do something completely different when no one is looking. Of course I am not saying who does these things. You know “who” I mean... Did I mention that gossip is an inappropriate use of hidden style? These ineffective hidden style actions are not always chosen for devious purposes, however. Often they are chosen out of fear of disappointing people or appearing to be “the bad guy.” Either way, though, trust is at stake.

There is no doubt that being fully conscious of the communication choices we make requires a great deal of effort. Sometimes we feel too tired and emotionally spent to try. But our reputations are affected. If we choose not to put forth this effort and instead stay in the “This-is-the-way-I-am/Get-used-to-me” mindset, we are communicating to others that genuine connection with them is not worth the effort... that **they** are not worth our effort. Is that really the impact you want to have?

HOW TO FLEX YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE – FORGET THE GOLDEN RULE

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Kristy Frieden](#)



If we want to communicate with influence we need to forget the Golden Rule - “Treat others as you would like to be treated.” Of course we all want to be treated with dignity and respect; that is a given. But beyond that, it is important not to approach or communicate with others in the way we like to be treated, but approach them in the way that suits them the best; the Platinum Rule.

So how do others like to be treated? That can be a challenging question. As I mentioned, everyone likes to be treated with dignity and respect. That is your ticket in the door, but we all are unique and have personal preferences as well. For example, in the workplace some people like to work alone, others like the energy of groups. Some like to thoroughly analyze the situation before making a decision and others like to go with their gut. Some people have a focus on the team while others are more task focused. These are just a few ways we can differ from our co-workers. Before you start looking at others, it’s a good idea to first determine what kind of preferences you have.

The Personal Interaction Style Profile© from PPS International is a great place to start. I have been utilizing this assessment in my programs for years. This is not a psychological assessment; it is behavioral. There are 58 yes/no questions asking what your preferences are when you interact with others. It’s quick, easy to understand, but most importantly, easy to apply in the workplace. After taking the assessment, you will fall into one of four categories:

1. Expresser
2. Director
3. Analyzer
4. Relater

The **Expresser style** is very open and expressive – both verbally and nonverbally, meaning that people in this style tend to be open books. They will tell you anything you want to know, at any time. They are usually the people telling a joke, having fun and enjoying whatever situation they may find themselves in. They have no problem speaking their mind, which if they are not careful, can get them into some sticky situations. Because of their upfront, tell you everything kind of style, they can be overwhelming at times to others who don’t share their interests. They are excellent promoters and can get others on board with their enthusiasm.

The **Director style** is very clear and direct. They are focused on getting things done and getting the desired results. They are fast paced, have no problem taking charge of a situation and telling others what to do. They feel their time is valuable and limited. In their effort to get things done, they may not realize how they are coming across to others or just who they may have left in their wake. They like clear, succinct information. They tend not to make time for socializing or relationship building. They will tell you that they are here to get the job done and that is what they have every intention of doing. They don’t mind conflict and come across very confident (sometimes arrogant) if they are not careful.

The **Analyzer style** is very focused on data and information. The more facts, the better. They prefer to work alone and review all the necessary stats before making a decision. They do not like to be wrong and can sometimes over analyze a situation, causing delays, for fear of making a mistake. They like clear parameters and checklists. They prefer step-by-step instructions and procedures. They can have a difficult time with change. In a meeting, they tend to be quiet, gathering all the information they can, but often have a tough time being put on the spot to make a quick decision. They tend to be black/white thinkers. The data either supports it or it doesn’t. The emotions of others, or the people side of a decision, almost never is considered in their equation.

The **Relater style** is your ultimate team player. Relaters make their decisions based on relationships. They enjoy talking with others and hearing all opinions. They are excellent listeners and often demonstrate great empathy. In their effort to make everyone happy, they may shy away from conflict. They do not like to rock the boat. They tend to be on the quieter side, asking a lot of questions, but unlike the Analyzer who is focused on the facts and data, Relaters are focused on others’ feelings and opinions. Relaters are also very loyal and dedicated. They enjoy a sense of belonging and situations where their opinions matter and are valued. They work through the relationships that they build with others.

After hearing each of the styles, where do you think you fall? How about the people you work with? Live with? It's an interesting and important question to be asking yourself. After you have determined your style and the style of those people who are important to you, you may notice that you are a lot more like some people than others. For example, I am an Expresser and I usually enjoy time with other Expressers. Their approach to interacting is similar to mine, we tend to make decisions in a similar way, and value the same approaches. You may notice that as well; you get along well with those people who are the same style as you.

Now think about the people who are very challenging to you. What style do you think they are? If it is a different style than you, this is your first clue as to what they may need from you (that you may not value yourself). For example, since I am an Expresser, my approach differs greatly from the Analyzer style. So when I meet with an Analyzer, in order to give them what they need, I need to **“flex” my style**. I need to tone down the emotion, be less demonstrative with nonverbal body language and focus on the facts. I may even need to prepare my information and send it to them ahead of time so that they can review it. I need to be more clear and concise with my information and cut out the “fluff” that I may like to share in my reasoning. That is how I “flex” my style to work more effectively with an Analyzer.

Now let us go through each style and think through an easy scenario – being in a meeting – for each style. If I am another style, what do I need to do to “flex” my style to a Director in a meeting? Start on time, prepare an agenda with quick bullet points, focus on the results of what we are trying to accomplish, end on time, minimize small talk and cut out the fluff.

How about a meeting with a Relater? Ask how they are doing and how their family is doing, making time to listen and show empathy. Express your concern about the team. Give them the reasons why a decision is being made. Provide information on all the perspectives and opinions that have been considered.

A meeting with an Analyzer? Send them the information to be covered ahead of time. Provide all the relevant data and statistics. Be clear and systematic in your explanation. Minimize emotion and small talk. Give ample time for questions and discussion around the facts and give them time to formulate and share their decision.

Last but not least, how would you “flex” to an Expresser in a meeting? Create an informal setting. Be flexible. Add humor, smiles and show emotion. Tell them they are doing a good job and are an asset to the team. Allow ample time for conversation, while showing patience and interest in their story.



Some of the above “flexing” behaviors may be very challenging for you depending on your style and how you approach a situation. But when you are trying to be influential with someone, giving that person what they need is the key to great communication. I need to provide others with what they need in order to work more effectively with me. What is important to me may not be as important to others. I need to be very aware of that, especially with those people who I find very challenging to work with. Just try it.

Included below is a summary of the various styles:

- **Expressers** - Are easy to read, very social, show emotion, need recognition
- **Directors** - Are difficult to read, like action and getting things done, need results
- **Analyzers** - Non-emotional, very precise and systematic, need accurate facts
- **Relaters** - Good listeners, focus on relationships, team players, need harmony

The better you are at reading others and providing them what they need, the better communicator you will be. As you begin trying to determine what categories people fall into, don't think so much of the names of the styles, rather pay attention to what behaviors they are demonstrating. Also pay attention to what they are talking about, what is important to them and how they are expressing themselves. Once you have taken the time to make observations about others, then you can try “flexing” your style.

Another way to determine how others want to be approached, is to simply ask them. It is amazing how often we assume things about others that are incorrect. But that's a blog for another day. **Good luck flexing!**

POWER LISTENING

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Deborah Easton](#)

“I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.” - Robert McCloskey

Communication is successful when all parties share the same meaning. Shared meaning happens when everyone pictures the information as similarly as possible. Unfortunately, many conversations can be characterized by the quote above. Certainly miscommunication can be caused by talkers who are insufficiently descriptive; the pictures they are trying to convey look more like murky water than a clear vision of meaning. But, as is often the case, the listener has failed to exert the amount of effort that is required to interpret meaning correctly.

Many people view listening as a passive activity: “Just sit right back and you’ll hear a tale...” The implication is that the talker has full responsibility to ensure that meaning is shared. It is true that people ask themselves “What’s in it for me?” before focusing their attention. Talkers do need to provide motivation for the listener to choose to hear the message. But notice:

listeners **choose** the focus of their attention. Listening is an active choice, requiring considerable effort. Unfortunately our effort is often misguided. For example, have you ever sat in silence at a family dinner nodding your head dutifully while an in-law droned on about the origins of silverware? You probably told yourself you were being a good listener for the sake of family harmony. But, your silence symbolically communicated that you were fascinated by a long, drawn-out explanation of the most appropriate number of tines on a fork! The truth is you were fascinated by how someone could talk incessantly and devour turkey at the same time. Martyrs do not make good listeners.

Good listening skills give us power in conversations. Unfortunately, people often view this power as an all-or-nothing concept. Either we sit silently biting our tongues or we interrupt, debate and dominate. Those are the only choices we believe are available. **Effective listening skills** give us the power to avoid these extremes.

Listening skills give us the power to calm an emotionally-charged conversation, keep the conversation on topic and ensure that everyone’s opinion is considered even if everyone does not agree with that opinion.

The first step to becoming a powerful listener is to recognize and overcome ineffective listening habits. How many of the following statements represent your listening habits?

- When I know someone well, I assume I know what they will say before they say it.
- When someone proposes an action, I immediately start planning what I will do.
- When I disagree with the point being made, I immediately form a rebuttal and start to debate.
- I have no patience for people who lead up to their point instead of giving the “bottom line” first.
- I decide whether or not a topic is relevant to me within the first few seconds of the conversation.
- I often focus on the example itself and miss the point that the example is illustrating.
- I feel that I haven’t really participated in a conversation unless I have added my comments about what others have said.
- It is difficult for me to listen to someone who is less knowledgeable than I am.
- I completely tune out people whom I don’t trust.
- I am sometimes so focused on what the other person thinks of me that I don’t hear what they’re saying.

Each of these statements represents a common problem in focusing while listening. The trick is to be aware that the lack of focus is occurring at the moment it is happening. Since most of our communication behaviors are unconscious habits, this realization can be difficult.

A lack of focus while listening most often results in interrupting others. This happens because as we are listening to someone talk, we are also talking to ourselves about what we’re hearing. Try to think without using words. Can you do it for any length of time? The words we use to think could be louder than anything else that is vying for our attention—like the other person’s comments. This is especially true if we are experiencing strong emotions during the interaction.

The questions we ask ourselves when we are feeling defensive, for example, can be very distracting:

- Is that true?
- Do I agree?
- Why is she saying that to me?
- What makes him think it’s OK to use that word choice around me?
- Am I hearing the whole story?

The best way to prevent these internal conversations from drowning out the external conversation is to remember that the two steps of listening must be accomplished in order:

Step #1 Understand the message from the talker's point of view, then

Step #2 Evaluate the message for its relevance, veracity and persuasiveness.

Understanding the message from the talker's point of view does not mean that I should agree with or say yes to everything I hear. That is why there is a second level of listening that allows us to ask critical decision-making questions about the information. Understanding the message from the talker's point of view means that I am able to describe in my own words the essence of the talker's main point. This paraphrasing is often referred to as **reflective listening skills**. We are acting as a "mirror" for the talker, reflecting back the message as we understand it.

Reflective listening is very powerful. Consider the following examples:

1. You are being given confusing instructions and paraphrase what you are hearing. The talker eventually becomes more concise.
2. Someone is very upset and, even though it sounds like a personal attack against you, you calmly paraphrase their frustration and ask in what way you can assist in resolving the situation.
3. A sarcastic comment has been made. You laugh about the joke but then paraphrase the serious point being made within that joke and redirect the conversation to uncover the hidden meaning of the comment.

In all three scenarios you have taken control of a difficult situation and redirected the focus of the conversation to a much more productive and rational interaction. That is the power of good listening skills.

Learning to paraphrase first after all of these years of defending ourselves first and then straightening out the misunderstanding later, is not an easy task. In fact I consider it to be one of the most difficult communication skills I teach. In elementary school we learn to question what we hear in order to be good consumers of information and avoid believing empty promises and exaggerated claims. Of course this is important to learn, especially in today's society.

We do not want our children believing everything they see in the media or read on the Internet. Unfortunately that means we have learned how to accomplish **Step #2** in listening (evaluate the message) before we learn how to paraphrase and accomplish **Step #1** (understand). Learning to paraphrase as adults feels artificial and awkward.

It is also difficult to change a long-held habit. But with practice, the skill can be used and our personal power and influence can be enhanced.

Some important guidelines to consider when paraphrasing are:

- Do not become a "parrot" who restates everything the talker says. Paraphrase means capturing the essence of the main point. Besides, it would be ridiculous if someone tells you "You're the dumbest person I've ever met" for you to repeat, "So what you're telling me is I'm the dumbest person you've ever met." Instead you would say: "Obviously I'm not understanding what you're saying. This is what I thought I heard you say..."
- When you are unable to determine the main point, acknowledge the emotion: "This is obviously frustrating so let's take it one step at a time to figure out how to fix this." Do not, however, say "I know how you feel" even if you have experienced a similar upset. This is their moment to experience strong emotion, not yours.
- Keep the paraphrase neutral. Remember this is your first response to what you are hearing. Use the power of paraphrase to keep the conversation calm. Avoid putting evaluation in the paraphrase, "You shouldn't be so worried about this."
- Delay responding until you really do understand. Listen for the moral to the story. Or listen for the period at the end of the sentence before jumping in.
- Match your paraphrase style to the talker's style. If they are detail-oriented, paraphrase with detail. If they are "bottom line-oriented," paraphrase succinctly.

With trial and error practice, you will begin to see the advantage of slowing down conversations to truly understand everyone's meaning. Think of how much time is wasted in conversations where everyone is so busy stating their own case that no one realizes they are essentially agreeing with one another. Think of how powerful a person is who can keep a conversation issue focused and who does not react defensively. Being the listener in an interaction is not the passive, helpless position many believe it to be. Good listening skills influence the success of the conversation. That is powerful.

WHAT DOES NONVERBAL LANGUAGE REVEAL ABOUT YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE?

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Christine Zust](#)



One of the most powerful communication tools you possess is your [nonverbal language](#), or body language. Yet all too often people are too busy to pay attention to what their actions say about them. What others see/feel/experience in action guides their interpretation of your personal style. Be mindful of the delicate interplay between verbal and nonverbal language. The key to successful communication is to ensure that your verbal and nonverbal language are in alignment and consistent.

A few years ago, I coached a corporate client on her communication style. I'll call her Nancy. Part of my coaching process included interviewing several of Nancy's co-workers to understand her better. I quickly discovered a common thread throughout the interviews. Here's what was happening:

Nancy was a very powerful female executive. When she led meetings, she wore glasses and leaned forward. She was quite efficient moving through an agenda. Towards the end of the meeting, she would remove her glasses, throw them on to the table, lean back in her chair, cross her arms, and ask the question, "Does anyone have anything else to add?" What do you think happened? No one offered anything. Surprised? Co-workers interpreted Nancy's nonverbal language as this: She was done with the meeting. She really didn't care if anyone had anything to offer because that's what her nonverbal language communicated. When I shared this story with Nancy, she was shocked. She had no idea that she was sending mixed messages. Her verbal language didn't align with her nonverbal language. She said one thing, yet her physical behavior communicated the exact opposite. After learning this, she readjusted her behavior. She remained leaning forward, glasses on and arms open, which meant she was still engaged with the group.

Nonverbal language is considered as the most honest form of communication because the body rarely lies. When you say one thing and do another (when your verbal and nonverbal language are not in alignment), people will believe the nonverbal first. When your verbal language and nonverbal language are in alignment, you are in accord.



When psychologist Albert Mehrabian studied attitude several decades ago, he found that 93% of the attitude that is communicated comes from tone of voice, inflection, facial expressions and body language. Only 7% of attitude is communicated with words. The old adage, "Actions speak louder than words" rings true in this case. It's not just **what** you are saying, it's also **how** you are saying it.

Knowing this, what does your nonverbal language say about you? Is it working **for** or **against** you? Is your verbal and nonverbal language consistent or are you sending mixed messages? How you silently communicate reveals to others if you want to do business with them. It also shows them how interested you are in learning about and fulfilling their needs. We communicate nonverbally in six different ways. Let's take a closer look at these nonverbal communication tools that have great impact.

1 Facial expressions/eye contact. With about 100 muscles in your face, you have the capacity to express more than 60 emotions, with six primary emotions such as fear, joy, love, sadness, surprise and anger at the core. Think about that. One of the most powerful parts of your face that you use to communicate is your eyes. They say, "The eyes are the window to the soul." People who master eye contact reap the rewards. Consistent, engaging eye contact positions you as confident, at ease and interested. Use a relaxed, steady gaze and be careful not to stare at the other person. Pupil to pupil eye contact is the most intimate form of communication. Looking directly at someone with sincerity reveals that you are open and engaging in your communication style. People whose eyes dart around as if they are visually chasing a fly in the room lead us to wonder what they are hiding. If you are shy and have a hard time looking directly into another person's eyes at first, then pick a "safe" spot on the face to look at – on the bridge of the nose or the tip of the eyebrow, which is close enough to the eyes to adjust your comfort level. Over time as you become at ease with direct eye contact, it will feel more natural to you.

2 Body stance/posture. Your level of confidence is communicated through your body stance and posture. Your posture communicates if you are confident, uncomfortable, shy or arrogant. What does your posture say about you? Stand erect, shoulders back, chin up and chest open, with your weight evenly distributed to both feet. Do not slouch. Slouching symbolizes indifference or weakness. On the flip side, don't be too puffed up or people will think you are egotistical and self-important.

3 Gestures. Gestures can either support or substitute verbal language. They can also conflict with or detract from what is being said. Be aware of what hand gestures you are using. If you have a tendency to over-use your hands (too much or repetitive gesture), your gestures could be distracting your message.

4 Movement. How you move through a space communicates your mental state. Are you in a hurry, not feeling well, not interested or preoccupied thinking about something else? Those emotions show. A woman in one of my seminars (I'll call her Jessica) shared a story with me. One day, a co-worker told Jessica in confidence that the department assistant, Stacy, thought she didn't like her. "I love Stacy!" Jessica said. "Why does she think I don't like her?" Her friend shared what Stacy had told her. Every morning when Jessica arrived at work, she walked into the department, briefcase in one hand, coffee in the other and rushed to her desk. Stacy would say, "Good morning!" every day, yet Jessica didn't hear her because she had too much on her mind. Thankfully, Jessica's co-worker was smart to share with her what Stacy had said. The next morning, Jessica stopped and acknowledged Stacy with a "Good morning" in return. Sometimes we are so mentally preoccupied or too busy doing our thing, we don't realize how others are interpreting our movement.

5 Objects/attire. The objects that you surround yourself with communicate who you are. Those objects can be your attire, office décor, even the car you drive. They are all part of your exterior image. What people "see" helps to define who you are as a person. Wearing a stained tie, having untrimmed nails, wearing a wrinkled blouse, all send messages about you to other people. As a professional, you want to look your best.

6 Silence. Silence is a powerful form of nonverbal communication. Unfortunately, many of us, either in conversations with colleagues or in presentations, are compelled to fill every second with sound. Think of how much more powerful President John F. Kennedy's historical "Ask not" speech was because he used silence. "Ask not (pause) what your country can do for you (pause).

Ask what you (pause) can do for your country." The effective use of silence in the form of pausing allowed the audience to absorb his message. Most Americans feel uncomfortable with silence. It feels awkward to us. We don't know what to do with ourselves. The only way to get over that uneasiness is to raise your comfort level and embrace silence. Use silence to add influence to conversations or client presentations. Silence does several things for you – it gives you time to collect your thoughts and stay on track, it lets the listener digest your message, it wraps a statement in power and it gives you some extra time to "read" a client's response.

NONVERBAL LANGUAGE IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

American workplaces have become quite diverse, with employees representing just about every corner of the globe. [Nonverbal communication](#) exists in all cultures around the world, however, meaning is not universal. Nonverbal cues can mean different things in different cultures.

Hand gestures, for instance, are not universal across all cultures. A favorite book that I recommend to clients who work internationally is ***Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands*** by Morrison, Conaway & Borden. The book identifies how to do business in more than 60 countries around the world. While the book was written for Americans traveling and working abroad, it is also a helpful resource when dealing with co-workers from other countries.

From a global perspective, know that throughout Asia, averted eye contact is the norm. I learned this more than 25 years ago when I travelled to Japan on a trade mission. Our Japanese business consultant told us that in the Japanese culture, averted eye contact is a sign of respect. He told us not to be concerned when our Japanese business clients looked away when meeting with us. He reminded us that our American direct eye contact is considered arrogant and unacceptable behavior in Japan. The best lesson I learned through my business travel abroad is to respect the culture that you are visiting.

Know the various cultures of your work team and know a country's culture before you work or travel abroad. As you can see, some of the most powerful messages you send are not spoken. Be sure you are using the right "silent language" to communicate with others.

THE #1 WAY TO CONTROL EMOTIONS DURING CONFLICT: FOCUS ON THE ISSUE

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Deborah Easton](#)

How many times after a difficult conversation with someone have you thought:

“Why didn’t I say what was really bothering me?”

“The other person had me so mixed up that I lost track of what we were talking about.”

“Why can’t I ever keep my emotions under control?”

If you have ever experienced one of these thoughts, you are not alone. Conflict often deteriorates from a discussion of the issue into a confused power struggle.

Emotions interfere with our ability to identify and maintain focus on the issue during conflict. The reason we are so eloquent after the conversation is over is because emotions have subsided and rational thought is now in command of our thinking. Now we know exactly what we should have said. Sometimes the emotion subsides quickly, allowing us the immediate opportunity to identify the real issue, make amends and resolve the issue. Sometimes the emotion lingers, however, resulting in grudges, plans for evening the score and counter attacks. When this happens, the original issue may be lost in an on-going drama that can last a lifetime.

Emotions are a powerful force. Keeping our focus on rational thought while experiencing strong emotions can seem like a superhuman feat.



The good news is that we can train ourselves to switch from emotional impulses to rational problem solving and keep our communication issue-focused during the conflict.

The most important step is to understand what the “issue” really is so that you recognize it when you hear it. In many cases, conflict conversations center around three types of issues:

1. **Misunderstood Information**
2. **Difference of Opinion**
3. **Actions/Behaviors**

In the **first** category, the problem is often created by either the wrong information or by everyone not having the same information. This conflict is easy to resolve if we can simply recognize the lack of shared information or incorrect facts. This sounds simple, but how many times has an argument lasted for thirty minutes before someone finally recognized each person was arguing from a position based on different information? Asking for the background knowledge of each person’s position can unveil this problem and lead to faster resolution. The focus changes from who is right to what is right. That is the real issue.

The **second** category is more difficult. In this situation, everyone has the same information but views it differently. Some may view certain facts as more relevant than others. Some may have a different sense of urgency about acting on the information. People can become very attached to their opinions about what they know. After all, we are actually debating each person’s view of the world here. If we do not keep the conversation focused on the information itself, the focus is then on who is right.

In this category we may need to “agree to disagree.” This is fine, but this is not as far as it goes. We can’t just say we disagree and leave it at that. We must find a way for us to live with the fact that we disagree.

For example, if you and a family member are of opposite political mindsets, agree to disagree but then figure out how you will act as a result of this disagreement. Can you agree not to inundate each other's email inbox with forwarded political messages? If a plan for how you will act on the disagreement is not devised, the disagreement will arise again and again. Every time you hear that "ding" saying: "You've got mail!" you will wonder if that so-and-so sent you more propaganda in an attempt to change your mind. Then you will begin plotting how to prevent him from getting the turkey drumstick at Thanksgiving. That's how silly it can get when the focus is on who is winning, not on how to resolve the real issue – which, by the way, is the fact that we disagree.

Category **three** (action/behavior) is the most difficult type of issue to address. When someone does something we don't like, we are hurt, angry and often determined to get even. The key to keeping an issue-focus in this type of conflict is to separate the person from the choice of action. Visualize it this way: Think of someone you love dearly. Have you always approved of every choice of action they have taken? Probably not. But you continue to love them despite the fact that they did something that bothers you. This is what is known as detachment. Detachment allows us to understand a person's mistake and focus on a better choice of action. When detached, you address the behavior, decide what should be done differently, provide a chance to make a better choice and celebrate success when a better choice is made. You do not label them a horrible person simply because they make a choice you don't like and then treat them unkindly in return. What we are doing is standing up for ourselves and setting boundaries.

Setting boundaries with people is a struggle for many of us. Detachment allows us to empathize with the stresses a person may be experiencing, while stating that being sarcastic when they talk to us is not acceptable. Some people allow unacceptable behavior from others because they focus too much on the excuse or reason for the behavior without ever stating that the behavior itself is not acceptable. They then become resentful when the behavior persists. Others have no tolerance for any behavior that fails to meet their expectations. They then either refuse interaction with that person or show their disdain for them in many symbolic ways. Separating the person from the choice of behavior allows us to remain respectful and dignified in our approach to others, even those we don't like.

"Why bother?" you may ask. Why not just treat them the way they treated me? Because:

- People are often unaware of their own behavior, but will determine your inappropriate reaction to be the issue.
- You work with this person every day, like it or not.
- Other people are watching you in order to predict how you will treat them under similar circumstances.
- When you deal with the actual issue, you make it possible to move on with your life instead of dealing with the daily drama of who's winning.
- Because the world doesn't get any better by adding more animosity to it.

Pick a reason, any reason. Temporarily it might feel better to "put them in their place," but you have just established the rules for how dysfunctionally the two of you will interact from this point forward...possibly forever.

Worse yet, there are three stages that conflict will go through if we do not stay focused on the issue. The steps look like this:

Issue-focus

Stage 1: Personal

Stage 2: Factions

Stage 3: Undermining

If we fail to focus on the issue, we end up "below the line" in a world of on-going personal battles (Stage 1). For example, say you failed to separate the person from the behavior. You said: "You're so lazy" (person-focused) instead of saying: "Please put your socks in the laundry hamper" (action-focused). When people feel attacked, they become defensive and blame others, especially the attacker. No one is focused on change to improve the situation, only on who started it. Everyone forgets that the real issue is about socks.

Stage Two (Factions) happens because no one likes being in conflict alone. We start talking to other people about the “personality clash” we are having. Name-calling, judging motives, psychoanalyzing etc. become a part of the conversation. Why do we do this? We are hoping to gain power by getting others on our side. Now I can say: “Everyone agrees that you’re wrong.” We have created our faction of supporters versus theirs. The focus is on winning and losing and, most importantly, on score-keeping. Everything becomes a competition: who is working harder, how many times one person cleaned the cat litter box versus the other, who has the bigger computer monitor. You get the picture.

When the score is perceived to be uneven for a period of time, then Stage 4 (Undermining) begins to surface. We feel compelled to ensure that the other faction cannot win by:

- Answering emails from them when we get around to it, if ever
- Failing to put tools away so that they must hunt for them
- Refusing to adopt a solution because of whose idea it is

Everyone is focused on out-maneuvering the other side. No one remembers what started the conflict at this point. No one really cares. It is winner take all. Communicating in a respectful and issue-focused way? Forget about it. How can you stay focused on the issue when you can’t remember what it is?

Hopefully you can see the effect that keeping focused on the issue has in not only the immediate conversation, but also in the long-term relationship. We are better equipped to set boundaries with people, stand up for our beliefs and influence others when we remain issue-focused. It is not an easy task, however.

We need to learn how to identify the issue, word our comments correctly and respond in an issue-focused way, despite the fact that the other person is approaching us from “below the line.” We must decide that maintaining our dignity is more important than showing disdain or winning. We need to fight our emotional tendencies to place blame, engaging in problem-solving instead.

The ability to focus on the issue takes practice and, in heated discussions, what seems like super-human strength. But, wouldn’t you rather put in the effort to learn how to focus on the issue and move past it, rather than constantly asking yourself those **“Why-didn’t-I-handle-it-better”** questions?



GEN Y, MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z: DO YOU KNOW THE DIFFERENCE?

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Deborah Easton](#)

By now you have probably heard **something** about generational differences. The information is everywhere: magazine articles, news media, Internet blogs and corporate training programs. There are research institutions who are devoting entire divisions to studying the Millennial generation. There is even a TV show titled “Survivor: Millennials vs. Gen X.” The question now is not whether you have heard about generational differences. The question is “What have you heard?”

Around the year 2000 many studies were published about the unique phenomenon of several generations in the workforce at the same time. This phenomenon occurred because:

1. People are living and working longer and
2. People are entering the workforce at younger ages.

Consider these examples: Many Baby Boomers state that they will not retire until they have something else important to do. High school interns are working in professional jobs for an entire summer and not just performing “make-the-coffee” types of tasks, but actually doing what a professional in that line of work does. And when Baby Boomers do retire, not all of their positions can be filled with experienced employees, aka Gen X, because Gen X is the smallest population of all of the generations. This means that younger employees have greater opportunities to be promoted into decision-making or management roles faster than ever before and are, therefore, influencing the workplace earlier than previous generations had the opportunity to do. Obviously how they view “work” matters.

Many of the early resources on generational differences explained this phenomenon well and helped us to understand how shared historical experiences affect our mindsets about the world in which we live and work. Many articles and [corporate training programs](#) still use these resources. However, these sources have limitations:

1. They often fail to mention that two people who were born on the same day may have experienced history differently due to gender, race, religion, geographical location, etc.

2. The books describe generational differences that existed at that time. This is a starting point, but should not be considered to be the full story. A lot has changed since 2000. For example, America has its first black president. Skype and FaceTime allow families to stay connected in more intimate ways than technology of the past allowed. The economy experienced a recession. There have been many changes in history that created changes in our mindsets, especially September 11th.

Understanding generations means understanding how changes in society affect people. And the world is changing at faster and faster rates, requiring us to keep pace in this understanding. This is not intended to divide people. But by recognizing how our past experiences affect our perceptions, we can actually interact more proficiently and compassionately. Perception affects the choices we make. When we see people handling the same situation so differently, we tend to perceive this as a personal conflict. Rather, it is simply diversity of approaches based on past experience.

It is essential to understand these rapidly changing influences and not believe all of the negative stereotypes. Not everyone born after 1980 is the stereotypical young person who has no direction in life or sense of responsibility and is trying to “find themselves” by hopping from job to job. Many (who, yes, are living in their parents’ basement) have a clear career path and believe that paying off student loans instead of paying money for rent is a responsible decision. Others in this generation are all by themselves, halfway across the globe, making the world a better place. Some of these choices are because of individual characteristics, but some of these differences are because of the timing of when they entered the workforce and the stability of the economy at that time. We must understand that just because people are younger than we are, they are not all alike. Remember: only a small percentage of Baby Boomers were actually members of the hippie movement.

Many discussions of the post-1980 population lump everyone together and call them all Millennials. Increasing numbers of research studies, however, are recognizing that even a five to seven year difference in age can create significantly different mindsets. Some of these differences are, of course, due to phase-of-life differences – those in high school versus those who are married with children for example.

However, because society, technology and education practices have changed so rapidly since 1980, mindsets of the younger generations have changed rapidly as well. For example, how old were you when you received your first cell phone? There is a difference in mindset about the constant use of technology if you were in college when you bought your first phone to keep in touch with friends, versus if your parents gave you your first phone at the age of ten to keep track of you and keep you safe.

Change happens so quickly that researchers use varying beginning and ending dates to establish generational boundaries. These dates are often chosen because of the researcher's focus: population growth, historical event, economic change, technological change, etc. Based on a number of factors many researchers are now describing the post-1980 generations in three groups: (The dates listed here are an average of several studies.)

Gen Y

born between 1980 and 1985

Millennials

born between 1986 and 1995

Gen Z

born after 1996 until?

Based on listening to the comments of participants while facilitating [“Generations at Work” training programs](#) for thousands of people over the past ten years, I agree with these delineations. For example, many participants in the Gen Y category have said that they may have started out exhibiting the traits that were attributed to early Millennials, but now that they have been in the workforce for a while, they believe the description of Gen X fits them more aptly. This makes sense, since many Gen Ys are supervised by Gen X. You see, it is not just historical influences that define our generational mindsets. We must consider the generation who raised, coached, taught or mentored us.

Consider this: we have noticed for quite some time the differences between Baby Boomers and Gen X. Many Millennials' parents are Baby Boomers. Many of Gen Z's parents are Gen X. There is bound to be a difference in these two categories simply because of parental influence. Millennials entered the workforce during a time of economic optimism. Baby Boomers told them that finding a job you are passionate about will mean that you will never “work” a day in your life; hence, the job-hopping tendency. Gen Z has seen the impact of the economic recession on their families. And, being parented by Gen X who has seen more ups and downs in the economy than any other generation, Gen Z realizes that getting a college degree is not a guarantee of career stability.

Unfortunately, because of the economy, not as many entry-level part-time jobs are available to them to gain the experience they seek as were available to the Millennials. Millennials are often described as “dreamers,” while Gen Z are being described as “realists.”

One of the biggest differences between **Millennials** and **Gen Z** is technology. That might seem like a strange statement to you if you are older than anyone in this post-1980 category. We have a tendency to define them all by their use of technology. But consider this: Millennials are tech savvy. They grew up experiencing huge advances in technology. Gen Z, however, are digital natives. Flip phones are antiques to them. Millennials learned to use notebooks and tablets as those technologies became available to them. As toddlers, Gen Z played with iPads they found lying around the house. For Millennials, technology advanced faster than the guidelines for its use were established. They posted private information on Facebook then later discovered that their employer was monitoring negative postings they had made about the company, creating unforeseen consequences. Gen Z has already heard about these consequences. The cautionary guidelines for use of technology are provided to them at the moment they first gain access to that technology. Their views of privacy are different. Their views of what to share and how to share it are different. Their views of sources of information are different. Millennials find “how-to” instruction on websites. Gen Z prefers instructional YouTube videos.

Information about the differences among the post-1980 population is just now evolving. How can we know for sure what their mindsets will be about their careers when the majority of Gen Z hasn't entered the full-time workforce yet?

One thing is for sure, the world is a much different place than when most of us grew up. We are only beginning to discover how Gen Z is distinct from Millennials. Yet, it is important to recognize these differences among our younger generations if for no other reason than to decide the best means of communicating with them: email, text, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.

But what is the most important reason to keep up with the latest information about generational mindsets? Because the perceptions created by each generation's experiences create diverse empathies toward the world. We learn from the experiences of our elders. We are energized by the optimism of youth. And the varied, ever-changing experiences of our younger generations can be assets utilized by all of us. After all, how many of us have had to ask a ten-year old to teach us how to turn off our new cell phone so that we don't also take a picture of our foot?

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

WHY BE HAPPY?

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Kristy Frieden](#)

Research shows that people would rather talk with someone nice over someone knowledgeable. Think about that for a moment. Can you remember a time in your career that you knew the person who had the answer to the question you had, but they weren't very nice; so instead you asked around among the people you liked, hoping they had the answer you needed? I know that I have. As we take a step back and look at the implications of this, how much time/effort/money is wasted because there are miserable individuals in the workplace and no one wants to interact with them? So what do we do? Unfortunately the starting point is not fixing THEM, it's taking a look at ourselves.

So how do you rate? Think back over the past week. Would you say you experienced more negative emotions over positive? Equal negative and positive emotions? Or more positive emotions over negative ones? There is a magic ratio that indicates an individual is flourishing in their lives. Barbara Fredrickson, author of the book *Positivity*, has done extensive research on the topic and says the ratio is 3:1, three positive emotions to every one negative. If you find that you regularly experience more negative, or equal positive to negative

emotions you have some work to do. ***“But that’s just the way I am”*** you say, ***“why do I need to change?”***

The following is some compelling evidence as to why being happy is such an advantage at work. Besides the benefits of co-workers wanting to talk and collaborate with you, studies indicate happy workers have higher levels of productivity, produce higher sales, perform better in leadership positions, receive higher performance ratings, receive higher pay, enjoy more job security and are less likely to take sick days, quit or become burned out according to Shawn Achor, author of the book, *Happiness Advantage* (2010). People who are happy not only experience great benefits on the job, but experience success in every other domain of their lives; socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically. In fact studies show that positive people can actually live up to an average of ten years longer! Yes, ten years!!!!

There are several proven ways to increase positive emotions. Exercise, acts of kindness, meditation, keeping a gratitude journal and focusing on strengths are just some of the ways to help improve mood. Getting enough sleep and eating a healthy diet also play a huge role in how we feel.

Studies indicate happy workers:

- ✓ Have higher levels of productivity
- ✓ Produce higher sales
- ✓ Perform better in leadership positions
- ✓ Receive higher performance ratings
- ✓ Receive higher pay
- ✓ Enjoy more job security
- ✓ Are less likely to take sick days, quit or become burned out

But more often in my classes, I am asked not how to increase happiness, but how to decrease negativity and reduce stress.

Stress is not all bad. Some stress (good stress) is episodic, can help you get ready for a challenge and GIVES you energy to perform at your best. When you are in a state of “flow,” you are experiencing enough stress to challenge you, but not overwhelm you. Bad stress however, is chronic, leads to burn out and makes you feel exhausted. When you are in a constant state of low to mid-level stress (which a lot of us are most of the time), your body never has a chance to recover. You go and go and go, like the Energizer Bunny until you crash. You may get physically sick, become depressed or not even want to get out of bed in the morning. Sound familiar?

Stress results from the gap between our expectations (of ourselves, of others, of the situation) and reality. We often think we can accomplish more than we can and overpromise or don't say “no”. We think we can change our miserable boss, co-worker or direct report, and tend to focus on everything they are doing wrong. We have high expectations of how we should be treated, rewarded or compensated by our organizations, and are disappointed, frustrated or even angry when they fall short. How do we reduce stress? Focus on what we can control.

The Serenity Prayer states this perfectly “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” So how do we do this? Picture a target with three rings. The center most ring in the middle represents our “circle of control,” the next outer ring represents our “circle of influence” and the third outside ring represents our “circle of concern (or no control).” What type of things fall into our “circle of control?” Ourselves – our attitude, our mindset, our behavior, the way we think about things, what we say and do. That's it!!!! The only thing we can control is ourselves! We spend so much of our time trying to change our spouse, our boss, our kids and our co-workers, but the only person we have any true control over is ourselves.

Lets take a look at the second ring, the “circle of influence.” Who or what falls into this circle? Everyone that you have some type of relationship with – friends, family, neighbors, boss, co-workers, direct reports, areas of responsibility in our jobs, etc. We may be able to make changes here, but only if we can be influential with those people. Being influential involves developing our listening skills, our empathy for others, avoiding arguments or situations that make others feel inferior. Again, how we act and what we do falls into our “circle of control,” how others respond to us does not; it falls into our “circle of influence.” To effect change with others, the only thing you can do is to keep trying different approaches but you can not make others change. At some point you need to quit trying, quit stressing and move on.

What falls into the last circle, the “circle of concern (or no control)” is everything else. Your company downsizes, there is a policy change, you get a new boss, new technology, you are put on a different team or in a new department, etc. The list goes on and on. We spend so much time worrying and stressing about the things we have absolutely no control over, it wastes A LOT of mental energy. You may experience stress or negative emotions when a change happens to you, but the choice is yours. You can either get on board or move on. Of course accepting change does not happen overnight, but again, you can only put your mental energy into what you are doing, your “circle of control” and make the choice that’s best for you.

When faced with people and situations at work that are challenging and causing you stress, you essentially need to ask yourself three very important questions:

1. “Can I change the situation?” If the answer is no, then move on to number two;

2. “Can I change my thoughts about the situation?” If the answer is no then move onto the third;

3. “Is it time for a change?” That change may be a new position, department or organization.

These questions aren’t easy, but worth a try. I have a personal example of going through these questions. I once had a very challenging boss. I struggled with this person daily and the situation caused me much stress and emotional strain. For the first question, “can I change the situation?” I came up empty. No, I did not feel as though I could change the situation. I tried talking with this boss but nothing I said seemed to matter and it appeared it was making the situation worse.

Moving on to question two, “can I change my thoughts about the situation?” At first I could. I knew that working for this person was giving me opportunities that I would not have gotten working for anyone else, and it was meeting my career goals at that time. I knew that this would be great experience for my future plans. So I managed to change my thoughts for a while, but eventually the stress was back and I had to go to question three, “is it time for a change?” Ultimately I did have to change positions and departments. It was a lateral move, but for me, it was what I needed to do. I am not saying that any of this is easy, but to reduce the stress and negativity in your life, it may be time to be honest with yourself about the situation.

Finally, I have one additional set of questions that can help you change your mindset about a negative, stressful situation. Think of a situation that you are currently facing that is very challenging for you at work. Take out a piece of paper and jot down your answers to the following questions:

- What is wrong about my current situation?
- What is bothering me about it (or them)?
- What could be different and/or better?

Once you have answered those questions, notice how you feel; frustrated, angry, anxious, fearful, confused, hopeless?

Now think about the same situation and jot down your answers to these questions:

- What is right about my current circumstances?
- What makes me lucky to be here?
- What aspects of my current circumstances might I view as a gift to be treasured?
- How does it benefit me or others?

Now what emotions are you feeling? Grateful, empowered, focused, optimistic? Amazing isn’t it? Just a quick shift in questions, can shift your mindset and put you in a more positive mood. (Source: Positivity by Barbara Fredrickson.)

If you want to work more collaboratively with others, be more influential, reduce stress and improve your overall mood and effectiveness, try being happy. It works!

EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING CHANGE

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Jessica Thomas](#)



Typically [communicating change](#) within an organization is a one size fits all and a one-way experience. In other words, leaders communicate information about a change that will be occurring the same way they do other general information. Announcements are made by email or the information is shared in a meeting. Rarely are feedback mechanisms in place, messages crafted by audience or sent by the most influential people. I call it

“vanilla” messaging - very generic and not really impactful or comforting during times of change.

Communication is the cornerstone of a [change management strategy](#), and creating and implementing an effective change communication plan takes a lot of work. To break out of “vanilla” planning and to achieve the desired behavior changes, leaders must handle communications about a change initiative similar to how they would execute an internal marketing campaign. After all, you are ‘selling the change’ to your employees. Once you make this paradigm shift, pulling together a change communications plan is made easier by following proven principles of good marketing. Too often organizations feel communicating change is just that...telling employees about the change. Marketing firms know that successful selling is all about the emotional hook. Think about the car salesman whose main objective is to get you into the car for a test drive rather than just reviewing a brochure.

Change Management research has shown over and over that you have to appeal to people’s intellect AND to their emotions to see lasting behavioral change. Communication is a key factor when attempting to appeal to people’s emotions. However, openly talking about people’s emotions is not common in the traditional workplace. It’s uncomfortable and difficult, and emotions are a moving target. In my opinion, this is why organizations have not caught onto the secret of using marketing techniques to sell their change.

Communications about a major change initiative start long before a formal communications plan is complete and the messages are carefully crafted. In fact, they may have been happening for months before the project kicks off. Communication about change always begins when the rumors about the change start. Nothing is more emotionally charged than a rumor. That’s why rumors spread so fast. Oftentimes, employees revel in continuing to enhance the rumor and love being in the know.



So let’s take a page from the marketing book and look at how our marketing counterparts ‘launch’ a product. They start the rumors themselves with ‘teaser campaigns.’ A teaser ad reveals only a little about the product. Its purpose is to arouse widespread attention, and build excitement and expectations through consumer curiosity. Let’s use an example of a current, common organizational change: rolling out Office 365. You could use a slogan ‘Coming in December, a better way to manage your time’ on banners, posters, videos etc., and then change slogans periodically until you can start a communications plan in earnest.

Now that you have launched your teaser campaign, the next step is to gather the information you need to create effective messages:

1. *What’s changing?*
2. *When is the change happening?*
3. *What’s the change impact?*
4. *Why should employees change?*

What’s changing? Describe the new

‘product’: It’s important to make the definition of the change easy to understand, easy to remember and short. Remove all technical jargon.

- Office 365 is a Microsoft email and social networking software.

When is the change happening? Timeline:

Don’t give a specific date early in the project. Dates change and it can jeopardize the credibility of the project team. Once the date is solidified, be more specific.

- You will begin using Office 365 in Q4 of 2016.

What's the change impact? Your audience:

Doing your homework is extremely important when determining the change impact. Your efforts here will drive the quality and success of your communication efforts. For example, let's say I work for Nike. When selling new basketball shoes, I use LeBron as my spokesperson for TV, print and social media advertising to male audiences ranging in age from 12 to 25. I repeat these ads with the message 'These shoes will improve your basketball performance.'

In this case I knew who my audience was, the best way to send the messages and the most influential spokesperson to send the messages.

Now, let's look at this scenario from an organizational change perspective. The spokespeople for Office 365 will have to be the company's leaders. Executive leadership sends a strategic message 'Changing to Office 365 modernizes our administrative efforts, improving efficiencies and ultimately keeping us competitive. It offers enhanced features that help you manage your email more efficiently. For the first time, we will have secure social media opportunities.' Middle managers send tactical messages. For instance, telling employees when to go to training and encouraging the use of Office 365. Messages from the project manager, change manager, HR etc. will not be as effective.

If the audience is global, providing messages in appropriate languages shows respect and special effort. Websites, social media, video conferencing and printed speaking points are some of the best vehicles to reach global audiences. Use different tactics for smaller audiences less geographically dispersed. In either case, make sure to repeat messages seven to 12 times; which research has shown is best practice for message retention.

Why should employees change? Emotional

hook: Now it's time to bring emotions back into the picture and encourage action. One-size fits all messaging won't be effective in this situation. For each audience, prepare a message that explains how the change will impact them and what benefits they will realize for embracing the change. For marketing examples, emotional advertising is all around us. Budweiser draft horses just make you smile. Speaking of smiling, share a Coca Cola. Speaking of Coke, messages don't get any more personal than having your own name on a can of pop.

Don't think organizational change can be this emotional? Try messing with someone's email and you will see emotion. Office 365 may sound pretty benign, but it also changes how calendars will be managed, how conference rooms will be reserved and how many people can be sent an email at once.

Who will be the most impacted? Administrative Assistants will be impacted more and differently than a staff employee who only uses email functions. Emotions will run higher with the former group and the benefits will be different for the latter. It's important to be transparent with change impacts, both positive and negative. This honesty builds trust in the messages. Either way it is important to talk to the benefits each group will realize. Describe how pain points will be alleviated and efficiencies gained.

Stay in contact with your audiences. They may be on-board with the change today, but if they don't hear something on a regular basis you will lose momentum. People fill in the gaps with poor communications. Unfortunately, humans are a fearful bunch and the gaps are rarely filled in with optimism. In the end, it's about encouragement and trust built through all your change management efforts including communications.

As a parting thought, don't forget marketing's best tactic, i.e. free stuff. Messages can be placed on, in, around promotional items. Giveaways are always well received. They are an attention grabber and generally make people smile, which is always good during times of change. It never ceases to amaze me the lengths people will go for a bottle of hand sanitizer with a silly cap.



CREATING A COMMUNICATION CALENDAR

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Tim Kraft](#)



There are few things in business that aren't done based on a plan. For anything related to spending, there are budgets. When it comes to employees, there are performance plans. Any significant undertaking is based on a project plan.

What's surprising is how few organizations create an employee communications plan. Despite the fact that almost everyone agrees good communication is

essential to engaging and motivating employees, there's seldom any thought given to the content, format or timing of those communications. Instead it's a largely ad hoc and uncoordinated effort that isn't nearly as effective as it could be. What's needed is a communication calendar that will ensure your employees are kept well informed, not just on the routine and ad hoc information, but more importantly on the bigger topics related to your organization and its success.



MORE PLANNING, NOT MORE COMMUNICATING

Creating a communication calendar seldom means adding more communication events.

Rather it's a matter of thinking about the events you already do in a more coordinated way. Consider for a minute how many formal communication interactions you already have with employees. Do you have routine team or project meetings? Performance review meetings? Lunch and learns? Sales team meetings? No doubt, you have some or all of them. They become the framework of your calendar.

With the events identified, start plugging in the high-level content. Your plan can include standing topics, the things discussed in every meeting, if you like. Doing so creates a precursor to your actual meeting agendas. (You DO have an agenda for each meeting, right?) What's more important to include, though, are the larger themes or topics you want to present to your team in a thoughtful, coordinated way. These are the topics that will engage employees and help them feel more in sync with your organization.

What kind of topics or themes might provide grist for your communication calendar? The list is long.

- **Organizational Performance:** Employees feel more engaged when they are kept in the loop about how your organization is doing. What metrics are of the greatest interest to employees? Identify one metric per month to share with employees in depth. Be sure to include an explanation of the employees' role in improving those metrics.
- **Personal Development:** What skills or behaviors do you want to encourage in your employees? Teamwork? Innovation? Safety? Select one per quarter to discuss with them. Share ways to build or improve those behaviors, and recognize employees who successfully model them.
- **Financial Results:** Employees like to know how well their business is succeeding in the market, but for many of them the financial results are just numbers. They don't really understand the significance of your inventory or cost of goods sold. Pick one aspect of your financials per quarter and educate employees about it. Again, include an explanation of what they can do to move those financials in the desired direction.

- **Corporate Culture:** You, no doubt, have a clear picture of your corporate culture. You know what the company aspires to be and the image you want to project to your customers, community members and suppliers. Do your employees know those things? That would be a great conversation to have. Why not plan to do it?



PLAN TO PLAN

Most leaders are so caught up in their day-to-day activities that creating a communication calendar is something that falls to the bottom of the to-do pile. Don't let that happen. If

you believe in the power of communication to engage and motivate employees, then the half hour it will take to create a communication calendar could be the most important thing you do today.

Set aside the time to give some thought to what would be beneficial to share with your employees over the course of the year. Most people do too little of this kind of big-picture thinking. Don't be surprised that the act of thinking about what you want to communicate with employees forces you to clarify for yourself what's useful or important to your organization. Over and over, when working on a communication plan with my clients, the simple act of discussing their communication goals provides them with valuable insights. Developing a communication plan is a valuable exercise on several levels.



ACT ON THE PLAN

Once your calendar is created, be sure it doesn't end up buried in a folder, never again to see the light of day. As the year progresses, rely on the calendar to remind you about the things you identified as being important discussion topics.

What format should your calendar take? That doesn't matter one bit. Use whatever tool is convenient for you to capture the information. It could be as simple as an Excel spreadsheet that shows the communication event (team meeting, for example), the timing (Week 1, Week 2 or January, February, etc.) and the topic(s) to discuss in each event.

Creating a communication calendar takes only a small bit of planning to create and a moment or two each week to refer to and identify upcoming topics. The payoff for this small investment of time can be huge. Sharing higher-level topics and themes with employees in a planned, coordinated communication effort is guaranteed to help them feel more informed and engaged in your organization. That will pay off in providing a clearer vision of their role in your organization's success, and increase the likelihood that they can and will fulfill that role to the best of their abilities.



WHY CHANGE MANAGEMENT?

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Jessica Thomas](#)

CHANGE MANAGEMENT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER TO ENSURE PROJECT SUCCESS.

Fifteen years ago twenty-five percent of major business change initiatives impacted less than fifty people and cost less than \$100,000. Today, that same twenty-five percent impacts more than 5,000 people and costs more than \$10M. This is a one hundred times increase in fifteen years! This growth has been driven by globalization and an increase in technology projects. That means projects have become one hundred times riskier. Few companies can afford a \$10M loss if a change project fails. The number one reason projects fail is employee resistance to change. If this seems improbable, ask yourself what percent of the success of your current projects is based on employees changing their behavior? When I ask that question to my clients I often get the answer 90 to 100 percent. If that is the case, what percentage of your budget are you dedicating to support that change in behavior?

Investing in proven project management strategies and structures that monitor project timelines, scope and cost is critical to success. However, delivering a project on time, within scope and budget doesn't guarantee success. Your employees have to embrace and adopt the new systems or processes. [Change management](#) is a structured methodology whose purpose is to engage employees in the change. It complements the formal project management efforts. Ideally, the project plans combine project management tasks along with change management tasks so they both can be budgeted, tracked and delivered.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT IS SO MUCH MORE THAN TRAINING AND COMMUNICATIONS.

Typically, organizations believe change management consists only of training and communications efforts and those activities are usually part of the budget. While employees have to have the knowledge of the new systems or processes to be able to perform in the 'new' company environment, it's rarely enough to get employees engaged. For example, my teenage daughter knows how to use our brand new dishwasher. That doesn't mean she is motivated to load it with dishes and turn it on. However, when employees are asked why they are not adopting the new desired behaviors, their answer undoubtedly will be: "I wasn't trained."

Don't confuse their opinion about the quality of the training they received and their level of proficiency. Proficiency comes when people push through their low level of comfort using the knowledge they gained in training.

Communications becomes the tool by which companies 'tell people' to push through that low level of comfort. So employees are told or asked to perform the new desired behaviors. Let's see how that worked for me. I asked my teenage daughter to load the dirty dishes into the new dishwasher. She said she would, but then she didn't. I asked her again, and again she failed to complete the task. Then, I told her to do it, no more Mrs. Nice. She grudgingly did what I told her to do, but then I had to keep 'telling' her time and time again to regularly get clean dishes. I had training and communications in my 'new dishwasher' plan, but it continued to be difficult to have clean dishes.

I understand that this example is oversimplified; however this process and result are very common in business situations as well. Leaders feel that 'telling' their employees what to do is sufficient to get them on-board. This is partly true. The key is how to relay the message, the content of the message and who sends it. These considerations are part of a structured change management plan.

LEADERSHIP COACHING IS ACTUALLY THE MOST IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT.

The interesting thing is, while having a structured [change management](#) approach is important to engage employees in the change, the most important part of that approach is leadership coaching – not training or communications. Prosci is the global leader in change management research and they have recently completed their ninth change management best practices benchmarking report. They began this research in 1999 and have since worked with thousands of global organizations spanning most industries who are undergoing transformational change. Their top two findings have been the same for the past seventeen years: **The number one reason projects fail is employee resistance to change. The best way to mitigate the resistance to change is active and visible sponsorship¹**, not training or communications.

The number one reason projects fail is employee resistance to change.

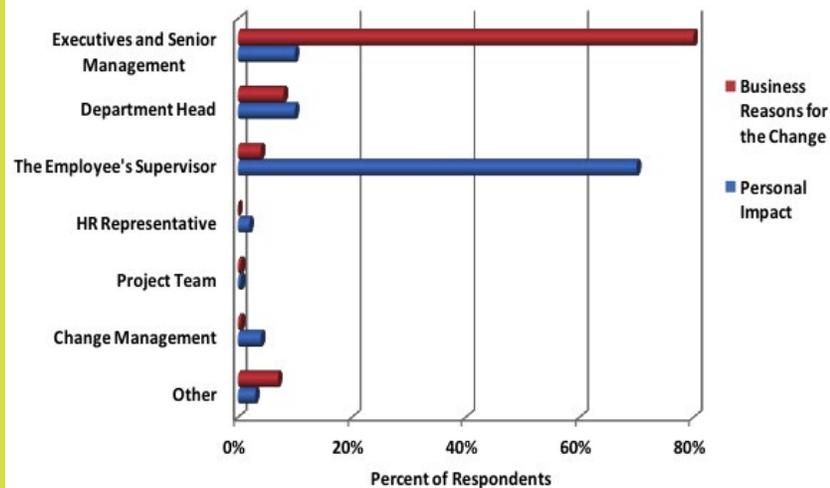
Therefore the main responsibility and role for a change manager is that of a leadership coach. Think of the change manager as the 'Chief of Staff,' keeping sponsors in front of their employees sending the right messages to keep their constituents supporting their efforts. This isn't difficult for leaders. It doesn't take a huge time commitment just to be visible. Employees can only get behind leaders they recognize. In fact, sponsors need to treat their change efforts as leading a campaign sending meaningful messages to rally the crowd. Their messages have to contain information about why employees should engage, how it's important to the organization and 'what's in it for them' to get on-board. This is a far cry from 'telling' people to just get it done.

CHANGE MANAGERS COACH LEADERS TO BE ACTIVE AND VISIBLE, SO COMMUNICATORS ARE SUPPORTIVE OF THE CHANGE.

It's not enough for sponsorship to 'say' they support the change, they have to model the desired new behaviors. If the company is installing a new human resource software, teach and support the CEO to demonstrate the software to their leadership team. Ask the CEO to come speak with the project team to stress how important their work is to the company. Leaders should be the first to go to training and they need to require their employees attend as well. They need to recognize that there will be a dip in proficiency and reassure employees that's OK.

Most if not all employee communications need to come from leadership. Change managers create the messages and communications plan and then support sponsors in executing it. Don't let them delegate this responsibility to the project team.

Most Effective Message Senders



Prosci Benchmarking Report 2011, Data from 650 global companies undergoing major change projects

This diagram shows how important it is that they be the message senders².

Executive leaders communicate the importance of the change to the overall strategy and vision of the organization. Mid-level managers communicate the 'what's in it for me' message, otherwise known as the WIIFM. Managers best understand how the change will benefit their department and how their employees will be impacted. They will be the people who require their team to attend training and who will reinforce new behaviors.

Ironically, mid-level managers tend to be the most resistant to the change. They are absolutely key to employee engagement, yet are the most difficult to get to buy-in. Your change management plan needs to recognize this and have special tactics to address their resistance. Reward and recognize early adopters, give them the additional resources they need to work through the productivity dip. Develop resistance and sustainment plans with them. Most importantly, the change manager should be an advocate for managers and their teams – bringing feedback, questions and concerns to the project team to ensure they get addressed.

THERE ARE SEVEN WAYS LEADERSHIP CAN SUPPORT EMPLOYEES THROUGH TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE.

Chances are the lion share of the Return On Investment (ROI) for your change initiatives is rooted in employees changing their behavior. Leaders have the biggest influence on whether employees adopt new systems and processes, and change management supports leadership in achieving this goal. In fact, change management best practices research participants identified seven top contributors to a successful change initiative and they all are dependent upon sponsorship buy-in and support³.

Ranked in importance they are:

- 1. Active and visible sponsorship**
- 2. Using a structured change management approach**
- 3. Dedicating change management resources and budget**

4. Integration and engagement with project management

5. Employee engagement and participation

6. Frequent and open communications

7. Engagement with middle managers

I want to pull these concepts together using a real-life story. A few years back I had the opportunity to work with a large healthcare system and some great executive leaders and project directors. They were required by the government to install an electronic medical record. The sponsors had been part of a failed attempt in the past where the doctors refused to use the new system. After spending millions of dollars they learned firsthand the power of employee resistance. This time around, they invested in a Change Management Office using a structured approach. The project director insisted the change management plan was integrated with the overall project plan. The sponsors were active and visible throughout the entire project even after installing the new system. They constantly communicated directly with employees. They held their managers accountable for the project's success and they met all their project objectives and achieved what they called their 'people ROI.'



PRESENTING INFORMATION

ANSWERING: “WHAT TIME IS IT?” DOES NOT REQUIRE EXPLAINING HOW TO BUILD A WATCH

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Deborah Easton](#)

Have you ever been frustrated by the detailed answer someone gave you to a simple question? Today’s society values brevity. People send short but frequent text messages to update others on their whereabouts and happenings. Few people listen to an entire State of the Union Address, but instead prefer to be informed later by the summary sound bites provided by the news media. This is not a new phenomenon created by technology, however. Back in the day this preference for concise communication was referred to as “Give me the Reader’s Digest condensed version.” You see, not everyone has patient listening skills. If they did, then interruptions would not be such a common occurrence in conversations.

People who have this tendency to provide more detail than listeners require are talking in the manner in which they think. Their process is very much a problem-solution pattern of thinking: describe the history of the topic so that people understand how the current situation evolved, discuss the problem and how it affects people, provide insight as to the potential causes of each one of these problems, brainstorm possible solutions, eliminate solutions one-by-one by providing reasons why these solutions are not viable and then reveal the solution considered to be the best option. And, if there is time, the implementation of this solution is listed in step-by-step detailed instructions so that error can be eliminated, thereby ensuring that the chosen solution really is best. Considering the run-on sentence I just wrote, it is probably no surprise that I also can have detail-oriented tendencies.

For many of us, the reason for providing all of this detail is to convince others that our idea has credibility. The proposed idea is thoroughly evaluated as to remove any margin of error. Detail may also be offered due to a fear of not being able to hold our own during a debate. The thinking is that if all detail has been presented in a methodical way with all aspects of the topic already considered, no debate should be necessary.

Unfortunately this detail-orientation can interfere with the very influence we are trying to achieve. Our credibility can be adversely affected in several ways:

1. People stop asking for our opinion because they do not have either the time to wait for us to analyze the problem or the patience to listen to the long, drawn-out answer. Result: Our expertise is not being utilized.

2. We have “buried the lead,” meaning that the solution is surrounded by so much other information that its magnitude has been diminished. Result: Our solutions are not adopted.

3. Our reputations for perfectionism can lead people to conclude that we are difficult to please. Result: The perception that we are not cooperative project partners.

This third point requires some additional thought: Perfectionism requires a focus on detail; without detail how can anything be accomplished perfectly? It can be difficult to work with someone who has such a clear picture of how a task should be performed and so little tolerance for those procedures not being followed. Often the perfectionist is left to complete the task alone because others are simply tired of being corrected. Maybe this solitude was the goal. But, going it alone does not make us a good team player, now does it? There is another critical reputation factor that can adversely be affected by perfectionism: accountability. Think of how many times you may have avoided starting a project until all of the details had been considered. The mind-set is: “Don’t do anything until you are certain of the outcome.” Fear of being wrong is a strong motivational force for detail-oriented people. It is often why we cannot speak up as quickly as we would like, resulting in many missed opportunities for our creativity to be acknowledged.

There are several ways to improve detail-orientation and its credibility-diminishing effects in communication:

1. Loosen up. Learn to prioritize which issues require detailed attention, like safety for example, and which issues do not. Limiting detail in your thinking process will ultimately teach you how to edit detail from your communications. For example: Answering the question, “Do you want cream in your coffee?” is not a high priority issue and therefore does not require a dissertation on one’s history with lactose intolerance.

2. Sync your inner clock with others. In a meeting, are your colleagues ready to vote? Be careful of choosing this moment to finally state your objections. Bad timing creates the reputation for being negative. During the discussion of ideas, simply state that you have reservations but haven’t thought it through completely. This is a concise statement of the truth. Nothing more needs to be explained at this time.

3. Speak up even before your thoughts are perfectly formed. Give people a general idea of what you are thinking even before you have it thought out. This builds trust. They can see your “wheels are turning,” but are uncertain of what you are thinking. This makes them uncomfortable, especially if their perception is that you are critiquing them. Even if you say: “I have several ideas but haven’t sorted them all out yet,” you are providing important understanding.

4. Resist the urge to tell the entire story. Are you one of those customers who call with a question about payment on your account, but cannot resist the urge to tell a long story about why you needed to buy the product in the first place? Customer service reps are trained to listen patiently, but they may also have a timer determining the efficiency with which they handle each call. Your detail may be affecting their job performance review.

5. Give the moral before telling the story. Learn to put your conclusion first and then determine how much explanation is necessary to describe the idea or prove your point. Notice how these bullet points are arranged. The point first; explanation after.

What if you are not a detail-oriented person, but are trying to communicate with one? First remember: people talk in the manner in which they think. Perhaps you pride yourself on being able to make quick decisions. You are probably the person people turn to in a crisis. But in other situations that are not at crisis level, your quick decision-making can be perceived by the detail-oriented person to be impulsive. In the words of my detail-oriented father: “He just slapped that idea together.” Therefore, if you are trying to interact effectively with a detail-oriented person and to blend your desire for timely and concise information with their need for completeness, consider following these steps:

1. Talk in detail. If you make a brief statement and walk away expecting that statement to have been accepted... wrong! What you have just done is to send the detailer into research mode. They will be there for days looking for the information that will prove to you that you rushed to judgment.

2. Stop talking while they think. If in an attempt to get them to decide more quickly you keep saying: “Think about this...” you have just given them more detail to consider and added significant time to their decision-making process.

3. Tell them how much you trust their judgment. Since detail is used to prove the credibility of their point, reinforce your belief in their expertise often. Then begin to negotiate how much detail they need to present to you. Tell them that even when they are “talking off of the top of their heads,” you believe their ideas are much more thoughtful than most people’s.

4. Try not to interrupt. Interrupting to move them ahead in the discussion will be counterproductive. They will either shut down and then send you a twelve-page email later (you cannot interrupt them in an email) or start over again. The thought process is that you interrupted because you do not understand. Therefore, they need to go back and provide more detail the second time to help you catch up. If you do ever need to interrupt them, do so with a detailed paraphrase of their point. Do not simply say: “Yes I get what you mean, so what’s your conclusion?” State your understanding of their point in detail. (See Bullet Point #1)

5. Resist the urge to provide too many templates for talking points. I have seen many managers who have provided templates for their detail-oriented people to use when writing emails or making presentations. This can help the detailer understand what points the manager deems relevant. However, it may also discourage the detailer from providing additional data when the situation warrants it. This is, after-all, a person who is a stickler for the rules. Plus, if all meeting attendees follow the same presentation format every time the group meets, the redundancy creates one boring meeting!

We hear so much about striving for balance in life. Balancing brevity with descriptiveness is one of the areas that we need to consider in effectively communicating with others and establishing our credibility and power of influence. Plus, this balance can affect relationships. If someone is avoiding a detailed person because they fear being “trapped” in a long-winded conversation, a potentially important human connection may be lost. So, next time you are talking with others, avoid TMI.

(NOTE: If you are not aware of what TMI means, please Google it. After all, I am trying to be concise here.)

PRESENTING A PERSUASIVE BUSINESS CASE

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Deborah Easton](#)

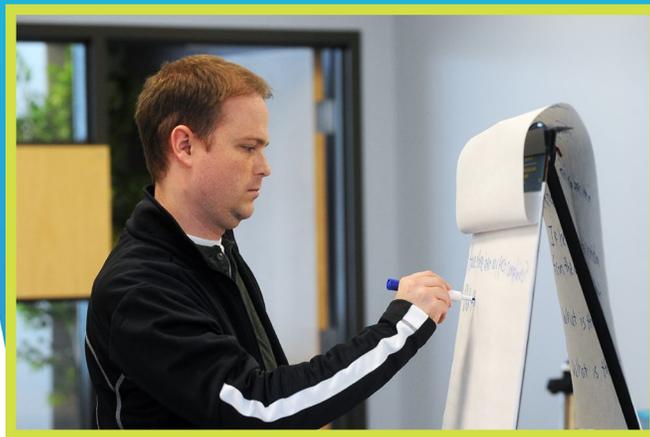
A problem has been reoccurring for years. Everyone agrees it is time to stop talking about it and finally implement a solution. Yet, every time a solution is presented to decision-makers, the idea is met with resistance and no action is taken. Once this situation has happened a number of times, people who were creative thinkers and enthusiastic problem-solvers have now become complacent and silent. People often say, “Why bother trying? No matter how great the idea, the answer will be ‘no’ anyway. They keep saying they want logic, not magic. What does that mean?”

Does this situation sound familiar in your workplace? Perhaps you have become one of those who have given up trying to present new ideas because you believe nothing you say matters. If only magic words really did exist that would convince others to our way of thinking – words that speak the truth so clearly that no one could possibly possess an opposing view or act in opposition to our call for action. Unfortunately, these magic words do not exist...with the obvious exception of the words “please” and “thank you” that our mothers told us are quite powerful. But, how many times have you become frustrated that your logical idea was not adopted and incredulous that the idea was actually questioned and debated? After all, the idea is pure common sense that anyone should understand, right?

Therein lies the problem: what exactly is logical, common sense? I have heard many people assert that the instructions they gave someone were “simply good common sense steps,” but then became confused when no one followed those instructions. People solve problems by different methods, possess different knowledge, perceive the world in different ways and have different priorities. Why then do we expect people to accept an idea simply because it makes sense to us? How often are we guilty of imposing our will on others without thinking about why this would be a logical course of action from their point of view?

People are adamant about what they believe to be simple, easy-to-accept common sense concepts. Showing passionate commitment to an idea can be very persuasive. However, if the idea itself is not relevant to the listener’s situation or is not presented in an understandable way, the idea will be dismissed no matter how passionately it was presented. In fact, the more a listener knows about a subject, the less likely that person will be influenced by emotional appeal or charisma.

The first and most important guideline for presenting a **persuasive business case**, therefore, is to define the topic from the decision-maker’s point of view.



What do they need to hear to be persuaded? An example of the importance of this strategy happened several years ago in a presentation skills course I was teaching at Kent State University. The student’s topic choice was to convince us that Richard Nixon was a good president. Unfortunately, the presenter failed to define the factors that make a “good president” from her audience’s point of view. Instead of talking about leadership decisions that impacted the country in a positive way, for example, she used the following argument to convince us, “When Nixon was in China, he arranged to have panda bears brought back to zoos in the U.S.” Jaws dropped in simultaneous disbelief throughout the room. Procuring pandas makes someone a good president?

Now consider your target audience or decision-maker. If this person is only concerned with budget, talk about how your idea affects the budget. If you start your presentation by talking about how your idea affects customer service, it may be a valid point, but it will be ignored because of the budgetary concern. You must “sell” your ideas based on your “buyer’s” needs. How many sales associates have you ignored because they started droning on about features of a product you do not need? You must capture attention by starting with what matters most to your listener. Once the primary concern has been sufficiently addressed, you can then discuss customer service or any other selling points the listener will find important.

Note that the operative words are “selling points the listener will find important.” You may be working with a problem directly and know how your solution will affect you and your colleagues, but what are the concerns of your target decision-makers? If you are presenting to high-level managers, they must make decisions based on a high level view of the organization, not just on how the problem affects you and your group. How does your idea affect other departments or company goals? What would persuade the board of directors if your decision-maker were to present your idea to them? In order to be persuasive, it is imperative to go beyond how the topic affects us. If our focus is only on what we believe to be important or how we are affected by the problem, we could be perceived as nothing but whiners whose proposal is not critical to consider.

Do you want to be a complainer or a convincer? Remember: humans are constantly asking themselves “How does this idea affect me?” To be persuasive you must provide the answer to that question for them.

But, what if their primary concern is a negative aspect of your business case? When a strong objection is universally known, you must acknowledge its existence and address it early in your remarks. Hopefully, you will be able to refute the objection with new information the listener has not heard before. No one is convinced by the same information they have already considered. Give your listeners a new perspective on the topic. At the very least, present old information in a new way.

If you fail to acknowledge a universally known objection, you may be interrupted and challenged before you even have a chance to offer positive attributes of the idea. In the student’s “Nixon and Pandas” presentation, she failed to even mention Watergate. Question-answer session was completely consumed by discussion of this issue and any persuasive arguments she had made were lost in the melee. In her situation, however, refuting Watergate was not an option. What could she say, “Oh, it wasn’t that big of a deal?” No, but the strategy would have been to acknowledge Watergate and agree with listeners about its negative affect on the country. The next step would have been to ask the audience to put the objection aside for ten minutes while other points were presented. The negatives and positives of the subject could then be weighed during a group discussion after all other information was revealed. Of course it is possible that listeners would maintain their objection that Watergate was too negative for them to view Nixon’s presidency as a positive, but she would have had the opportunity to offer other arguments in that ten minutes. Sometimes the goal of a persuasive message is to open listener’s minds to another point of view. Listeners may then be willing to schedule a follow-up presentation in which a call for action to support and implement the solution could be proposed. Trying to accomplish too much before decision-makers are ready to even listen to the idea can result in a “no” answer.

If your goal is to achieve commitment for implementation of your idea, then make it easy for action to occur. Keep them focused on doing, not deciding. What can be done today to start the process in an easy-to-accomplish step? Take the stairs instead of the elevator. You are on your way to a 10,000 steps per day goal. Perhaps the decision-maker has an aversion for risk-taking. The business case should include information on how to minimize the risk, examples of when similar risks were taken with successful outcomes in the past and a simple starting point plan. Suggest reviewing the success of each implemented step before embarking on the next step.



This way decisions are being made about small steps, not huge, devastating-if-it-fails initiatives. Remove fear of taking action.

Preparing the content of your proposal to create connection with your listeners is critical to being persuasive. However, smooth, confident delivery of the message is also important to your business case being accepted. Too many PowerPoint slides will detract from your ability to look people directly in the eye and demonstrate your commitment to the proposal. Presenting too much background detail or extraneous data will not only confuse the decision-maker, but will also surround your strongest arguments with “noise.” Avoid technical jargon. Know your audience. Terminology used by chemical engineers may be unfamiliar to electrical engineers simply for lack of daily use of the word. Be descriptive, but not wordy. Often presenters know their information, but are unfamiliar with the order in which they want to present this information causing awkward pauses. Practice. View questions as opportunities to adapt your message to the immediate needs of your listeners, not attacks or interruptions. Believe in yourself and your ideas. State your case and prove it.

Hopefully it is clear that the more directly focused on the listener’s needs we are, the more persuasive we are. So many issues bombard decision-makers on any given day that they often most readily accept information that can be visualized the most easily and approve the proposals that answer their questions before they even ask them. Remember: the listener determines how successfully a message was delivered and received, not the presenter. And the decision-maker determines what will ultimately persuade them. This is what is meant by “logic, not magic.” It makes sense to me!

TECHNICAL ≠ DULL

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Deborah Easton](#)

Often when [presenting technical information](#), people believe that some topics are just inherently dull and nothing can be done to change that fact. This belief is not fact. Detail can be presented in a way that motivates people to listen because the relevance of this detail is made clear to them. Statistics can be described so that people can picture their significance and magnitude. Processes can be described in ways that make the information easy to follow. A good example of these adaptations is the methods that many science teachers use to make science fun. In fact, if you Google the words “make science fun,” you will find numerous TED talks and YouTube videos demonstrating various techniques for turning complex scientific principles into interesting and understandable concepts.

So, why is it then that people continue to show an infinite number of PowerPoint slides filled with so much technical data that you can't even see any one statistic clearly? Most often the presenter is concerned that “dumbing down” technical information will insult the listener's intelligence or diminish the importance of the topic itself. They fail to realize that listeners will not agree to any idea that they cannot visualize clearly. How comfortable would you be if someone tried to convince you to walk into an unfamiliar room in complete darkness? Also, people can't implement a process they don't understand. There is a difference in being condescending (“dumbing it down”) toward listeners and adapting the message to their level of experience with the topic.

Condescension is created by remarks like, “You won't understand this anyway, so trust me on this.” Adaptation is accomplished by utilizing clear and descriptive examples relating to listeners' experiences.

Frequently it is the presenter's expertise that can be the problem in adapting the message. Certainly pat yourself on the back for what you know and what you have accomplished! Understand, however, that the most difficult subject to teach someone else is a subject you no longer remember learning. That subject has become instinctive knowledge. Have you ever taught a child how to tie shoes? You must first remember what the steps are, then find a way to help the child follow those steps (bunny ears for example). The problem is that we have failed to consider the lack of dexterity in those tiny hands, making following the instructions difficult for them and frustrating for us. Perhaps improving dexterity would be the best first step. Then we can talk about tying shoelaces.

Therefore, the most important adaptation to make is to start at the level of your listeners' experience. This does not mean providing detailed background or historical information to help them catch up. Instead, think about why this topic should be of interest to people. How does this subject affect them? Your first step should be to motivate them to listen by showing a direct connection between them and the topic. Taking the time to establish this motivation may mean that you don't have time to go into great detail about the subject. Good! Your goal is to create a clear new picture of this subject in the minds of these listeners, not to create the same detailed picture filled with nuances that you have in your head. Information overload does not teach; it only confuses.



Secondly, be sure your word choice is understandable. Have you ever witnessed a presentation in which the speaker knew that the audience would not understand technical jargon, but used it anyway? Or perhaps worse yet, a handout of technical terms was distributed, expecting that you would have enough time to find the term on the paper, interpret its meaning and not miss anything else that was said after the word was used. Vocabulary only impresses people if they picture its meaning. Listeners aren't impressed if word choice requires too much effort to comprehend.

The same advice applies to utilizing unfamiliar symbols or formulas. If you are the only one who will recognize the symbol for an element on the Periodic Table, then use its common name like iron or aluminum instead of Fe or Al. When listeners struggle with understanding, they tune out!

Statistics are another element of **technical presentations** that require some creativity so that their significance can be visualized. And, no, sorry, bar graphs and pie charts don't always help. For example, you are leading a safety meeting and are giving statistics about how many people have hearing loss because of a failure to wear hearing protection. The statistic states that 1 out of every 3 people will suffer from hearing loss. To avoid the that's- people-somewhere-else excuse, state: "There are 24 people in the room and that means 8 of us will have hearing loss." Make the statistic have personal impact. If the numbers are in a technical formula, use an analogy to something familiar to everyone. Let's say you have been computing the time your team loses every week by having to correct mistakes or engage in do-overs. Instead of merely showing the numbers and the computation, tell them that the amount of time wasted could be spent playing an 18-hole round of golf. And then perhaps, if they improve efficiency, take them out for an 18-hole round of golf!

Perhaps the most important advice to enliven a dry, technical subject is to personalize the message. Tell people about your **"aha" moments** in working on the project for example. These comments break up the monotony of a list of facts presented on endless slides. This technique allows you to be your conversational self, not a monotone robot. In presentation skills programs I have facilitated over the years, though, I have heard many technically oriented speakers balk at this suggestion. "This isn't story time," they said. I say "Why not?" People remember stories better than a series of facts and figures. I remember a history professor who almost defied us to learn. He would talk as fast as he could, presenting very detailed information that was not in the textbook, and would not allow recording of his lecture. What was his purpose as a presenter if we didn't grasp anything he was saying? We had to guess which aspect of the topic he believed was important because all of the information ran together.



We were never certain if the research we had done on our own would be the right information to pass his tests. However, early in the semester he had an unfortunate health problem and a substitute teacher was brought in. The substitute walked into class that first night, looked at the detailed syllabus and outline of topics we were to research, threw that handout on the desk, sat down on the edge of that desk and said: "Let me tell you a story about the French Revolution." For the next hour and a half all attention was on him. We were enthralled! And we were motivated to research the topic further. But now we were researching because of interest, not because we feared failing the class. He made a litany of names and dates and conflicts come to life. I still remember much of that information, even though it's been a few (that was sarcasm) years since I heard that presentation.

There are many ways a technical topic can be made interesting. Believing "it is what it is" communicates to listeners that they are not worth the effort of adapting your message to their needs. Yes, this effort takes time that many people feel they just don't have. Think of it this way, without these adaptations a lack of understanding could occur. How much time do you have to straighten out these misunderstandings with each person who heard the original message? Get proactive and creative. Make information easy and memorable for your listeners. Then watch how much more respect for your expertise you will receive!

WHEN DELIVERING A PRESENTATION, LOOK AT BOTH SIDES OF NONVERBAL LANGUAGE

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Christine Zust](#)

It's not just **what** you say, it's **how** you say it.

Part of the "how" is nonverbal language.

When you deliver a presentation, people observe two things: Your verbal language – the words you use – and your nonverbal language – what your body language says about you.

In this article, I will present [nonverbal language](#) from two different perspectives: Your own nonverbal language that you use while delivering a presentation to others and the nonverbal language that your audience shows to you while you're presenting. Both forms of communication are beneficial to you as you prepare, deliver and improve upon your presentation style.

First, let's talk about you, the presenter.

BE AWARE OF YOUR NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR AS A PRESENTER

The most powerful nonverbal cues that you can give to your audience are these:

- **Walk with confidence.** Have good posture. Stand tall. Walk confidently to the presentation area.
- **Engage in direct eye contact.** Look into the eyes of your audience. Don't look at the walls, floor or ceiling. Definitely do not read your notes to the audience. That will disconnect you from the audience.
- **Use hand gestures to reinforce your message.** This is an important one. When using hand gestures, make sure they look natural. When they are natural, you appear to be authentic, genuine and real. I have seen speakers over-rehearse their hand gestures. It sounds silly, doesn't it? Yet it happens to be true. Over-rehearsing gestures creates a speaker who is artificial and robotic. Gestures, when they come from the heart, are interpreted as being true and honest. With that said, be careful of a few things: Don't over-exaggerate. If the fish was just this big, then don't say it was THIS BIG! Don't use repeated gestures because they can distract the audience from your message.

An example: If you have a tendency to "roll" your right hand when you are talking, then you don't want to continue rolling and rolling and rolling. Pretty soon, the audience looks at your rolling hand gesture and doesn't listen to your message.

- **Move a little.** Movement is good for presenters. Too much movement is distracting. If you walk from the front of the room to the back of the room, that's fine. If you move all around the entire room during your entire presentation, your audience will get tired of adjusting their necks or their chairs. A little movement is fine. Avoid repetitive movement. An example: Pacing. When you begin to pace, it creates a rhythm that has an almost hypnotic effect. Think of your pacing body as a pendulum, "you're getting sleepy, very sleepy." Before you know it, your audience will be anticipating your next pivot or turn to return to the other side of the room rather than listening to your message. Robotic pacing is a death knell to any presenter.
- **Express yourself!** With more than 100 muscles in your face alone, you have the amazing capacity to share six primary emotions (fear, joy, love, sadness, surprise and anger) and more than 60 emotional expressions. All of that power comes from less than one square foot of space! What are you doing with it? If you are sharing declining numbers, show it. If you are delighted that you exceeded year-end quotas, show it. If you are sharing a sad story, show it. Your facial expressions reinforce your message. Just make sure that they are not in conflict with your message. If you say, "I'm delighted to be here today to deliver this presentation" and your face shows no emotion, your audience will believe your face. They will say, "She's not really delighted. She looks angry."
- **Enhance your image.** Your appearance is the first thing people notice when you enter a room. It speaks volumes about who you are as a person and about your level of professionalism. Take a long, hard look at your professional attire. Are you wearing the same suits that you have been wearing since the 1980s? If so, throw them out! Nobody wants to see someone with larger-than-life padded shoulders (just think of the suits that David Byrne of the rock group The Talking Heads wore in the 1980s). Look at the colors you wear. You want to look current, not dated.

A few years ago, I was asked to coach a man on his professional style. The moment he walked into the room, my first impression was set. After we chatted a while, I shared with him those initial thoughts. You see, he was a "mousy" man and everything about him was "mousy." He wore glasses, a light beige pullover sweater, a light beige shirt and brown pants.

His [communication style](#) was on the quiet, shy side. Nothing about him stood out or communicated power. He was essentially invisible. I recommended navy blue as a more professional base color for him. Now when he walks into a room, he looks more businesslike and commands attention. A simple wardrobe adjustment has tremendous impact on how others see you.

- **Pause and be silent.** Effective pausing, or silence, is one of the most powerful nonverbal cues that you can use while presenting. Yet, most Americans are accustomed to filling every second with sound. Within a presentation, there are certain portions that you want to emphasize. Let silence help you. You have the option of either saying “Our year-end sales were up 25%” OR “Our year-end sales (pause) were up (pause) twenty (pause) five (pause) percent.” This is much more powerful.

As you can see, your [nonverbal language communicates](#) a great deal to your audience.

The more you present, the more confident and comfortable you will feel.

Now, let’s talk about the nonverbal cues of your audience.

ANALYZE YOUR AUDIENCE’S NONVERBAL LANGUAGE

There is nothing more unnerving to a presenter than standing in front of a group of people for the first time. It could be 50, 500 or 1,000 people. What’s different is that you are often put outside your comfort zone. So why not treat that presentation to a larger group just like you would a one-on-one conversation?

Here are some nonverbal cues for you to be aware of during your presentation that could help improve your future presentations:

- **The energy level in the room drops.** You have a feeling that your audience isn’t energized by your content. Unfortunately, sometimes a presenter can begin to lose energy or interest in his or her own presentation because of how they are interpreting the audience’s behavior. Now would be a good time to use a different approach. Share a short anecdote. Tell a story. Ask a powerful, thought-provoking question. Give a startling statistic. Anything that shakes up your audience will do. If they were with you all along, they’ll be with you even more. If they weren’t with you, they certainly will be now. The more energy you put out to your audience, the more energy they will return to you. It all begins with you.

- **One person in the audience is distracting you.** What happens when you begin focusing on one person who you think is not interested in what you have to say? You make that judgment as a presenter rather quickly. The person’s nonverbal language is “speaking” to you. Sometimes you are right. And sometimes you are wrong. Don’t get distracted by that one person...who may have been up all night with a colicky baby and is falling asleep because of that rather than your content. Here’s my personal experience:

Several years ago, while delivering a full-day training program, I noticed a woman who – to me – seemed disengaged. She was looking down a lot. She wasn’t smiling or laughing at my humor. I was convinced that she wasn’t enjoying my program. (This is what we call “negative self-talk”). After the program ended, as I reviewed the evaluation sheets, I came across hers. I was fully expecting her to give me a 1 or 2 out of 5 points. Instead, she gave me all 5’s and added the comment, “I would attend any future programs facilitated by Christine.” Whoa. That was not the response I expected. Needless to say, I was pleasantly surprised. When we try to read other people’s nonverbal cues, sometimes we are right and sometimes we are wrong. Remember that the next time you try to read one person in your audience.

- **You are seeing a bored look on everyone’s faces.** If you are using a PowerPoint presentation to accompany your remarks, click on the B button on your computer to go to black screen. That alone will get your audience’s attention. What going to black screen allows you to do is focus on a conversation with your audience. There is no other distraction. PowerPoint images, which are visually interesting to look at (sometimes) can also lull your audience to sleep! Take a break. Have a conversation with your audience about your topic for a few minutes. Then eventually click on the B button again to return to your slide presentation. This simple trick provides a simple visual mental shift. Now, if people truly are bored by your presentation, then it’s time for you to give that presentation a complete overhaul.

The next time you prepare for and deliver a presentation, think carefully about your own nonverbal cues and the nonverbal cues you are picking up from your audience. Being aware of both could mean the difference between delivering an average presentation or a stellar one.

LESS IS MORE: STRIP DOWN YOUR SLIDES

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Tim Kraft](#)

Everyone has heard the quote *“Less is more”* - but few know who said it or what it refers to.

Regardless, it perfectly applies to PowerPoint. Most presenters, though, follow the opposite school of thought that “more is more” and stuff their slides with too many words and pictures. The result is summed up in another quote by author, entrepreneur and presentation expert Seth Godin who said, “Almost every PowerPoint sucks rotten eggs.”

In a survey regarding what viewers disliked most about PowerPoint presentations, they identified the following problems.

PowerPoint Peeves

74%

Presenters reading slides to them

52%

Full sentences instead of bullet points

48%

Text too small to read

The fundamental issue is that presenters try to put too much on their slides. I think there are two groups of PowerPoint abusers who think that more words and pictures are better: intentional and unintentional abusers.

INTENTIONAL POWERPOINT ABUSERS

People intentionally overstuff their slides because it takes pressure off of them as presenters. For most people, the mere act of speaking in front of a group makes them go weak in the knees. In my [“Be A Better Business Speaker” program](#), I ask someone in the audience to describe their job. They calmly begin to rattle off some of their responsibilities. Then I ask them to stand up and continue. In almost every case, they are suddenly stricken by fear. Being a presenter is frightening.

If all the information is on the slide, then presenters don't have to worry about doing as much work and are less likely to embarrass themselves. The audience can just read the slides to get the necessary information. This, however, is a tedious process for the audience and raises the question: if all the information is on the slides, why not just distribute it as a handout? That's a much more efficient – and much less painful – communication method.

UNINTENTIONAL POWERPOINT ABUSERS

Most overstuffed slides, though, are the product of the unintentional abusers. They misunderstand their role as a presenter and the needs of their audience.

The presenters role is to be the source of most of the information. The slides play a supporting role rather than being the star. The slides should include just the key points, never full sentences. Short, concise bullet points provide visual reinforcement for the presenter's words. They also serve as a visual outline that guides the presenter and audience through the content, and increase the likelihood that the audience will recall the information.

A widely used rule of thumb is the 6 X 6 rule; slides should have no more than six bullets and each bullet should have no more than six words. That is probably too limiting, but provides good perspective on how much text should appear on a slide.

Regarding the needs of the audience, presenters seem to assume their viewers have the visual acuity of a hawk, able to spot a mouse at 100 yards. When the font size on your slides gets below 14 point, you aren't creating a presentation, you're creating an eye chart.

I've also seen many slides that look like Christmas trees, chock full of pictures and graphs that the presenter believes help provide knowledge. They usually don't. What they provide is clutter and eye strain. It is almost always better to use one or two carefully chosen pictures or graphs.

Not sure if you are guilty of overstuffing your slides? If you've ever had to tell your audience, "I know you can't see this ...", then you are a PowerPoint abuser.

BUT THEY NEED TO SEE THIS!

The most-common defense of slide overstuffers is that "the audience needs to see this!" Often they don't, but let's assume they do. Putting it on the slide doesn't ensure they can see it if the text and graphics are too tiny. You have two solutions for this dilemma.

If it is critical that they see the information during the presentation, then use more slides. Spread the content across as many slides as is needed to ensure that each is clearly readable. One of the most-common battles I fight with clients is slide count. They fret that they will have too many slides in their presentations if they start dividing too-dense slides across multiple slides. Slide count is a meaningless metric. I can create one slide that, with animations, looks like 10. If it's truly important for your audience to see all that information, then use all the slides you need to ensure they are readable.

Solution two is a handout or take-away document - but not just a printout of your overstuffed slides. If you have a report you need to reference, a checklist you need to review, a document you need to discuss, don't just scrunch it down to fit on the slide and expect your audience to squint their way through it. Instead, create a separate document that you distribute during your presentation as a reference. On your slides, pull out each key point from the document and make a slide of it.

INVEST IN BETTER SLIDES

It's easy to create a deck of slides bulging with words and images. Refining those slides, reducing them to the key points or pictures, and possibly preparing supporting handouts does take some thought and time. Mark Twain famously said, "I am sorry for the long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one."

If you're concerned about [effectively communicating with your audience](#), it's worth taking the time to reduce your word-filled slides to concise bullet points that keep the focus on you to ensure more effective communication.

(If you've been wondering, **"Less is more"** comes from an 1855 poem, but is typically associated with architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe regarding his minimalist design.)



HOW TO THINK ON YOUR FEET

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Christine Zust](#)

One of the most common questions that is asked during my [presentation skills training program](#) is “How can I better think on my feet?” You see, people may feel well prepared to deliver content, yet they feel unprepared to elaborate further on that content or they may fall apart when answering questions. Thinking on your feet spans three important areas that will be covered in this article, including: When presenting information, when elaborating and when answering questions. The key to thinking well on your feet is to decide the best approach to presenting information in a clear, concise and thoughtful way.

WHEN PRESENTING INFORMATION:

- **Be fully present.** To be present in the moment requires mindfulness and self-awareness. There should be nothing else on your mind except the information you are presenting. Don't get sidetracked by self-talk about yourself (“Why is everyone staring at me?” “Do I look okay?” “Do I sound stupid?”) or about something else on your mind (“Did I leave that confidential paper on my desk?”). When you are fully present, you are living in that moment alone. You are bringing your best self to the presentation. You are fully aware of everything you are saying and doing. A great tool to help with presence is deep breathing. Awareness of your breath anchors you in the present.
- **Focus.** People will often claim that they are experiencing a brain freeze, they forget what they want to say, or they can't string together two coherent sentences. Lack of focus comes from a cluttered mind, filled with too many thoughts. Take a moment to clear your mind. Remind yourself of what you need to do here. What information do you have to share?
- **Speak from your knowledge base.** When you know your topic extremely well, you are best equipped to think on your feet because you are sharing what you know best. People who often struggle with thinking on their feet are either absolutely terrified of speaking in public or they may not have an extensive knowledge of the topic. Lacking a deeper level of knowledge, they may be more prone to offering vague, ambiguous content. Know your topic, and you will be able to handle anything.
- **Don't ramble.** There is nothing more deadly than listening to a presenter who rambles. Example (and I know you have sat in and witnessed people like this): “Let me elaborate on this concept a bit more...Two days ago, I met with John Hopkins, CEO of Hopkins International.



He's been a big client of ours for more than 15 years. I know his kids and his wife. We've socialized with them over the years. He's a great guy, you know? We need more clients like him, because he gets it. He understands our business, and we certainly understand his. I mean, I remember when his company was just getting started, and we were one of the first outside vendors he used, so we have history with him, right? So anyway..." Yada yada yada. That's what rambling sounds like. Much of that extra fluff isn't necessary, especially when the time allowed for business meetings keeps decreasing. Which leads me to my next point...

- **Get to the point quickly!** One of the greatest desires of senior-level executives is this: Get to the point quickly. Stack the information so you are presenting a statement first, then backing it up with more information, not the other way around where you keep the audience guessing until you deliver the big reveal (your main statement).

WHEN ELABORATING INFORMATION:

- **Expand your thought or idea.** Often when you are presenting, you may feel the need to go off script to elaborate or explain something more clearly. You may sense a lack of energy around the topic or content. Use an example. Share a short anecdote. “Let me elaborate on this concept a bit more so you understand how it applies to our own Going Green Initiative here at the ABC Company. Two days ago, I met with John Hopkins, CEO of Hopkins International. He told me that, beginning in 2017, his company is only dealing with companies that hold the Going Green certification. Fortunately, our company is already certified. Not only is Going Green a smart investment for our company, it's becoming the Gold Standard by which our company and others like us are measured by important clients such as Hopkins International.” And then return to the rest of your script.

Now that I have provided this example for you, let me warn you against over-elaboration. It is good to set a short example that will help get your point across. What is not good is going on and on and on and on.

- **Respond on the spot.** Someone may briefly interrupt you on the spot and ask you to elaborate on what you just shared. Elaboration simply means to explain something in a deeper way by providing more detailed information. When someone asks you the question, “Could you elaborate on this idea a little more?” then ask yourself this question: “What is the most important information I need to share to get my point across?”

WHEN ANSWERING QUESTIONS:

- **Listen to key words and phrases.** What is being asked of you? If someone asks a broad question, drill down to the specifics. For instance, “Jane recently attended the AMA’s annual marketing conference in San Diego. Jane, give us some highlights of the conference.” The key phrase here is “conference highlights.” You can respond to this question in one of two ways. First, you could answer this question at face value and create your own interpretation of what you believe the phrase “conference highlights” means. Second, you could ask a clarifying question, such as, “What specifically would you like me to highlight?” To this, you may get a response like, “What were two or three innovative ideas that you took away from the conference that you think we could apply within our marketing department?” That is quite a different direction. It’s much more specific. Now Jane can work with focused words like “innovative ideas” and “apply.” Unless Jane brought conference notes with her to this meeting (which she may not have), Jane now faces the daunting task of sifting through her memory. There’s a lot of stuff in there. How does she sort through? How does she recall? How does she do this when all eyes are staring at her right at this very minute? She quickly thinks of marketing’s many areas, like promotion, publicity, advertising, sales, customer relations, to name a few. What stands out? She recalls what she learned by looking at each of these areas of marketing. “What did I learn about customer relations? What did I learn about sales?” She can also tap her memory by using her senses. “What did I see? Hear? Feel?” She may remember a few powerful visual images of a model to track customer inquiries. Now she has recalled and can share several innovative ideas. If she needs to, she quickly jots down a few notes on her note pad, and she’s ready to respond.

- **Be prepared.** There is a lesson from Jane’s example above. Be prepared. Never go into any meeting unprepared. When you attend an industry conference, be prepared for people to ask you about it. If you met with one of the biggest clients recently, you know you will be asked about that meeting. When you understand how people think, and the kind of information they desire, you can anticipate their needs. The person who effortlessly answers an “unexpected” question is someone who anticipated that question. Being prepared can earn you the reputation of someone who thinks well on their feet. Your secret? You simply prepare.
- **Share what you know.** Thinking on your feet does not mean making up stuff! We’ve all sat in a room when a person was asked a question, and you could tell that the person was not only unprepared but had no idea what was being said. If the question is outside your expertise, simply state that. If Stephanie is better qualified to answer that question, direct it to her.
- **Take notes if needed.** I’m kinesthetic, which means that I take a lot of notes. If I have something important to say, or have a question that I want to ask, or have a question I need to answer, I often write it on my note pad because I fear that I will forget what I want to say. Sound familiar? Take a note pad with you to all meetings. There is nothing worse than having no pen and no note pad. Don’t just “show up.” Be prepared when you walk in the door.
- **One final bonus:** To stretch your thinking further, consider studying improvisation. Take an improvisation class. Improvisation exercises will train your brain to think on the spot.

Honestly, some people think on their feet better than others. You may not be able to magically change yourself into that other person. Instead, work with your strengths. Simply improve upon your natural abilities and talents.

Learning to think on your feet is a skill that will serve you well throughout your career. It has less to do with speed and more to do with accuracy, giving people the information they need. Remember that **thinking on your feet** can happen when you are presenting or elaborating information and when you are answering questions. Using these simple techniques – and practicing them – will help you to become more comfortable with thinking on your feet.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

WRITE STRONGER EMAIL SUBJECT LINES

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Tim Kraft](#)

Most writers fail to take advantage of the one of the most powerful elements of their emails; the Subject line. Well-written Subject lines will greatly increase the chance that your email will not only be opened but get the desired response, and get it more quickly.

People who tally such things say that the average business person receives more than 100 emails every work day. Imagine those emails in your Inbox as books on a shelf. Now imagine those books have titles on the spine like “Question?” and “Project Update” and “Need Help!” None of those commonly seen email Subject lines is going to be of any help to the reader in figuring out what the emails contain, or encourage the recipient to open and act on the email. What’s inside the email is a total mystery to the recipient.

Don’t be the Agatha Christie of business communication by making your emails a mystery. The first and most important way to make your Subject lines work harder for you is to craft them to actually inform the recipient about the contents. Use the Subject line to let the reader know what it contains and, when appropriate, what the reader needs to do.

Replace “Question” with “Question about location for Kent State writing skills training”

Replace “Project Update” with “Quarterly project update information: Onboarding process improvement”

Replace “Need help!” with “Need help covering reception desk week of June 10”

Do those Subject lines take a bit longer to write? Yes, a few seconds, but the very small additional time will be more than repaid in faster, better responses.

Stand Out from the Crowd

When you open your email and see the Inbox crowded with new messages, you scan them. Which ones scream for attention and which can you ignore for now? Strong Subject lines make your emails scannable. At a glance, the recipient can tell whether your email requires their immediate attention.

Just as important, the recipient can tell if they don’t need to attend to your email immediately. Many, possibly most, emails are informational CC’s that require no action by recipient. Your readers will greatly appreciate it if you help them instantly identify the emails they can defer for later attention.

On the (Audit) Trail

The benefits continue even after the reader has opened, responded to and filed or deleted your email. One of the major values of email communication is that it provides a record of the conversation, an audit trail that can be followed to determine what was said or done by whom and when.

That audit trail is often hard to follow, though, due largely to opaque Subject lines. Your searches for specific emails will be made much easier if your Subject line includes the key words you are likely to use when looking for that email later.



My work is project based, so every email begins with the name or an acronym for the related project. While working on Phase 3 of the leadership skills program for Alcoa, every email had the prefix “P3” representing Phase 3, followed by the specific topic of the email, such as “P3: Innovation Course Pilot Plan.” Those Subject lines made it a snap to find every email related to the project simply by searching for “P3.”

Here’s a bonus tip unrelated to Subject lines. When trying to follow the thread of an email, once you find any email in the thread, right click on it in the Inbox or other folder and select Find Related in the pop-up menu. Every email in that thread will be included in the results list.

The No-Body Email

When presenting my [Efficient and Effective Email program](#), I suggest a way to be super-efficient in your emailing. Some attendees find this technique annoying but most leave the course eager to put it to work for them.

For information or action requests you can communicate in a single sentence, make that sentence the Subject line and leave the body of the email blank. Examples might look like these:

Strong Email Subject Lines

- **Lean Training Event:**
Please send attendee roster by
Monday morning
- **Leadership Skills Program:**
Plan to arrive at 7:30 a.m.
- **Customer Service Course:**
How many workbooks needed?

I understand how some email writers could be concerned that this technique feels overly curt or that it might confuse the reader. My experience has been that recipients appreciate the technique because it makes it so fast and easy to glean the content and respond. In a few seconds, they can deal with your email and have the satisfaction of clearing an item from their inbox.



Some participants in the email program said that they clarify for the recipient that the Subject line contains the entire message by adding the suffix “EOM” (end of message) or characters like “|||” at the end of the Subject. My email recipients seem to figure it out with no suffixes required.

Boost Your Email Effectiveness

Research shows that within five seconds of viewing an email, the recipient will decide whether to respond, delete or defer it. A clear, action-oriented Subject line makes it much more likely that they will act as soon as they see it. Business emails generally have one of two purposes: Share information or get action. Either way, stronger Subject lines will help accomplish your communication goal.

GET TO THE POINT

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Tim Kraft](#)

In the movie *The Point!* (one of my favorites) a boy named Oblio was the only round-headed person in the Pointed Village. By village law everyone and everything must have a point, so Oblio was banished from his home to The Pointless Forest. He met many odd characters in the forest, notably The Pointed Man. Oblio thought it odd that The Pointless Forest was home to a man who was constantly pointing. When asked about this conundrum, The Pointed Man explained “A point in every direction is the same as no point at all.”

In almost all [business writing and presentations](#), you are trying to make a point. You hope to communicate something you want your audience to know, do or feel. Many business communicators, unfortunately, don't do a very good job of making their point. The primary problem is that they bury their point in too many words, making it difficult for their audience to find or recognize it.

Smaller Is Better

Your readers, like you, are deluged with information and operate in a constant state of partial attention. Many of them are multi-taskers (despite scientific evidence that multi-tasking isn't an efficient strategy), so your messages have to cut through the blizzard of communication your readers face.

Studies have shown that within five seconds of glancing at an email, the recipient will decide whether to read and respond, postpone or ignore it. Compressing your communications to their most-compact size will greatly increase the likelihood that recipients will immediately read and respond to your email.

Harry Houdini offers additional support for using the smallest number of words possible. A regular part of his act was to invite audience members onto the stage. He would give several people 20-foot-long pieces of rope or chain and encourage them to tie him up as tightly as possible.

Once the audience members had done their best, Houdini disappeared into a sack and, after some theatrical thrashing about, emerged with the bindings in hand. The secret Houdini knew was that it is easier to escape from a long piece of rope. The longer the rope, the more slack – and the easier for him to escape.

Writing is like that. The more words you use, the easier it is for your meaning to escape.

Write Less to Communicate More

How to ensure your message won't escape and you will succeed in making your point? A key tactic is to edit ruthlessly. In your first draft, let your fingers fly. Use all the words you want. Once you've finished your first draft, though, get your finger over the Delete key.

- As you review the document, think about the point you are trying to make. Constantly ask yourself **“does this text help make my point?”** If not, delete it.

Now the harder work begins. What words can you eliminate? What things can you say more succinctly? In journalism speak, how can you “tighten the copy?”

Once you start looking for them, wasted words are everywhere. In my [Be a Better Business Writer program](#), attendees are always amused by my example of the gigantic banner above a tanning salon near my house. The banner reads, “Free Tanning – Inquire Within.” When asked what words were wasted, attendees quickly identify “inquire within.” If there's a banner above a tanning salon that says “free tanning,” is there really any doubt about where to go for that freebie?



Here's a surprising way to pare your writing down a bit: you can almost always delete the word "that." The next time you are proofreading something, see if you can delete every one of them. Does that make a big difference? No, but concise writing is achieved through many, small improvements.

Write Like You Talk

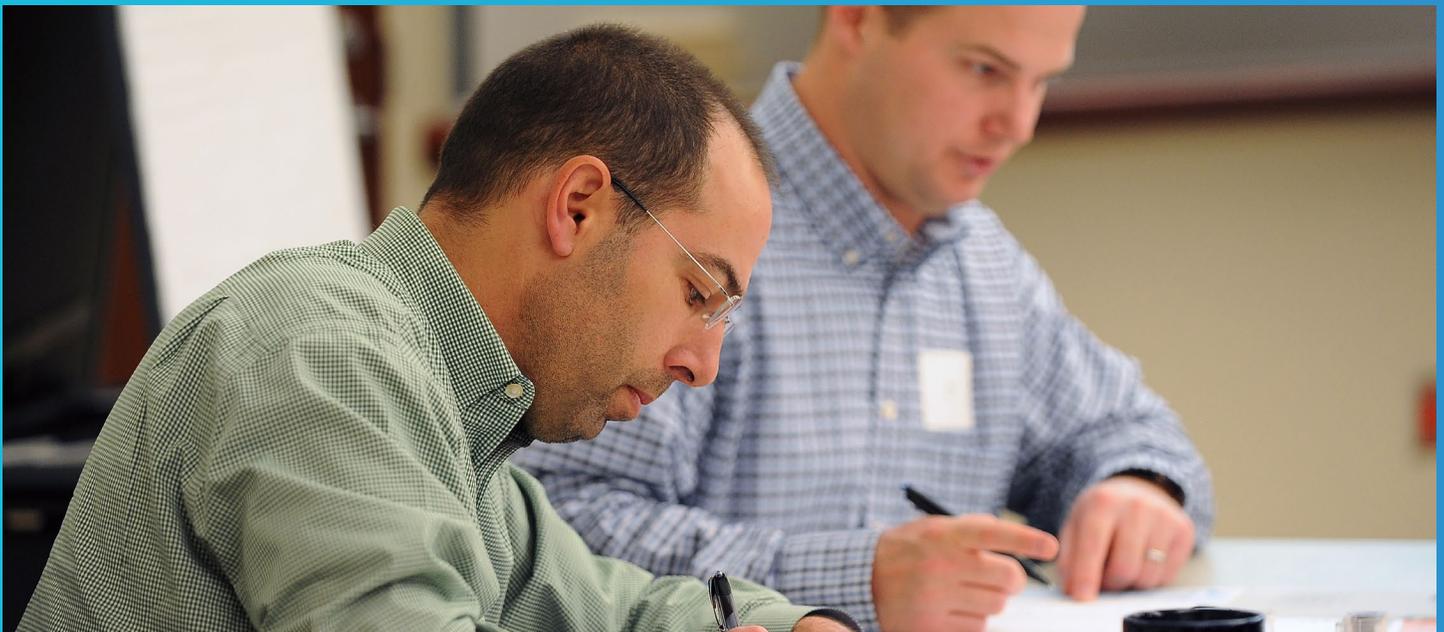
You can further compress your content by writing like you talk. This, it turns out, is more difficult than it sounds, but with practice can greatly condense and improve your writing. Most people write to be read. Instead, try writing to be heard. Use language you would use in conversation.

"Our intention is to further explore alternative opportunities and methods to eliminate excessive verbiage" is grammatically correct and well written – but it sounds like writing. No human would ever utter those words. It's dull, lifeless and verbose. Same idea stated as someone would speak it? "We plan to look at ways to use fewer words." Which is more readable and memorable?

This obviously results in a less-formal style that may not be appropriate for all business communication. I would never use it in technical writing or proposals, for example. For almost all online content, videos and consumer-focused marketing materials, though, it is the style I use. It is more concise and engaging. It's a better way to make your point.

Less Takes More

Writing concisely and getting your point across in fewer words isn't fast or easy. Mark Twain is credited with saying "I'm sorry this letter is so long, but I did not have time to write a short one." My most challenging writing assignments are the ones with very tight word counts. Still, it's worth the investment of your time to write concisely and improve the chances that your audience will get your point.



TIRED OF GETTING CONFUSING EMAILS?

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Nelson Canario](#)



I don't know about you, but I often receive emails that are confusing and unclear. After reading them, I still don't know what the author wants from me. If you have experienced this, or have noticed this in your own writing, then read on for a few tips on streamlining your writing, which can be applied to any form of [business writing](#) (emails, reports, proposals, etc.).

One of the biggest impediments to clear communication is that people often bury their main point or their "action items" (things they want you to do) in the middle of the email or document. Everyone is busy and all our time is valuable. We don't have time to read every email carefully, and most of us are guilty of skimming. When the main point is buried in the middle, it's too easy to skim right past it. If your writing buries the lead like this, it may be necessary for your audience to re-read your email. This is a problem because you risk losing your audience.

Think about this: On average, when you get a new email in your inbox, **how many seconds do you spend** skimming that email before you decide that you can come back to it **later**? (My answer to this is below.) The problem with this is that we all know that later doesn't always come around, especially if more urgent things call us away.

I ask the above question to all the groups that I train in [business writing](#). The results of my informal survey are quite interesting. I've found that on average, people are willing to give **three-to-five seconds** before they decide they can come back to it later. This is an important number to keep in mind (3-5 seconds) because it means that we have just that long to convey our most important information. That means our message must be clear and easily understood.

I believe that the reason **"mud"** exists in writing today is because of the fast-paced nature of our businesses. Email, chats, text, everything is instantaneous. I've met people who must constantly check their email and they'll write and send a response within two minutes of receiving a message. That's exactly how "mud" enters our writing. When we type before we think (or at the same time we are thinking) our typing tends to wander (much like our thinking).

We make our way toward our point in a general direction, but we may forget to mention something, then remember later and include it further down in the message. The danger here is of repeating some information; especially if it's not crucial information. By thinking before we write, we can keep our writing more narrowly focused and more efficient.

My #1 Rule of Business Writing

In order to help keep your message clear:

Always remember: **The Middle is Mud!**

What does this mean? It means that whatever you put in the middle is most likely to get lost. This could be in the middle of a long sentence, the middle of a paragraph or the middle of your email.

Here are **four** easy techniques with explanations and examples to help you get rid of the mud.

1 Effectively use "white space"

- a. Empty space around text will more easily draw our eye to that point. This can be achieved in many different ways, such as adding an extra blank line before and after your main point, arranging important content in an indented paragraph or having a list of short text (putting white space on the right margin as well as the left, from the indentation).

2 Break the big paragraph into smaller paragraphs

- a. This makes it less intimidating and easier for the reader to follow. Additionally, if the reader is interrupted (as so often happens now, by the computer, phone or even a live person) they can more easily find where they left off and continue reading without wasting any time.



3 Use lists or tables to effectively display your information

a. Not only do both lists and tables create some additional white space (lending them more importance) but they also make your content easier to read and remember.

i. Lists – Short and easy to follow. Lists are great for showing connections between things (like steps in a process) or showing unrelated things in the same general category (such as a list of all your favorite foods or all of this month’s Purchase Orders).

ii. Tables – Clearly labeled and with a little white space between rows and columns. Tables are great for comparing attributes or details (such as comparing the specs to two different smartphones, you’re thinking of buying or explaining the difference between two service packages your company offers) and for displaying lots of numerical data.

1. Text – If you want to use text in a table, it should be left aligned and be very concise. If necessary, you can add a note or legend outside the table to provide additional information.

2. Numbers – If you’re showing many different numbers, I strongly recommend using the “decimal tab” in Word (click on the toggle switch in the top-left corner and it looks like an upside-down ‘ T ’ with a ‘ . ’ on the right side.

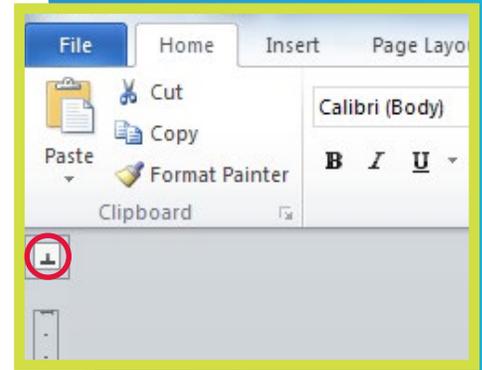
4 Format numbers efficiently

a. When displaying numerical data it’s important that all the data be formatted in a way that is easy to read. For this we have a couple of options:

i. You can list your numbers in-line as a list. If you do this, separate the numbers with a semicolon. (Such as: 2,456.25; 105.26; 45,687.10; 648.04)

ii. You can also put your numbers in a list or table. This gives the benefit of the reader being able to skim the numbers and find a particular number or have a look for trends.

NOTE If you do decide to display your information this way, I **strongly recommend** that you use a decimal tab to align your data. This is done with the toggle switch in the top-left corner of Word, where you see the ruler displayed. **(Pictured below)** Note that the shape is like an upside-down T with a “.” on the right hand side.



Now that I’ve introduced you to these techniques, I’ve included examples so that you can more easily visualize the benefit this formatting will have for your writing.

In the following examples, I’ve changed the formatting, but kept the information (squiggles, in this case) the same, and even kept the same amount – go ahead and count them if you don’t believe me.

Wall-O-Text

First, let’s look at what not to do. I often see this, which I affectionately call the “Wall-O-Text”. This is a great way to scare away your reader. Notice how there is no distinguishing feature to this document. It’s just a sea of words waiting to drown you in useless data and obscure the true main point.



MAKING PEOPLE DO WHAT YOU WANT, THROUGH WRITING!

Written By: Kent State Facilitator [Nelson Canario](#)

No, I'm not talking about mind control, but something much easier. Follow the below steps and you can greatly increase the probability that your reader will do what you want. First, I believe that people, in general, are helpful (but to a limit). They are willing to spend some (short) time to do what you ask of them. The key is how much time they are willing to spend.

We get a first impression of someone in person in 15 to 30 seconds. Well, for writing it's actually much shorter than that! According to my own informal survey, most people only give a new email or letter three to five seconds before they decide that it can wait. Therefore, we must convey our key points within that short time frame.

Here are three best practices to getting people to do what you want through writing. All of these will help improve the effectiveness of your action items and main points.

1. Easy to Find

2. Easy to Understand

3. Grouped Together

These elements contribute to maximizing the chance that your readers will see all of your action items and do them. Otherwise, they may miss one (or more). In the worst case, they won't do any of them.

If the readers can find your action items in three to five seconds, then they already know what you want from them before they decide not to read any further.

Now, let's look at each of those three elements in more detail to see how you can apply them in your writing.

1. Easy to Find

The Middle is Mud

Remember my [#1 Business-writing rule: The middle is "mud."](#) How fast can you find what the reader needs, in the sample below?

We (Jack Johnson and I) would like to get clarification on the policy and guidelines with regard to customer/distributor notifications. Specifically, what can we send electronically and what we must send as hard copy? This request is in general; I am not concerned if we are under contract with a customer or distributor because the contact states specifically how the notification has to be delivered.

Let's try it a different way:

Question:

Please clarify what we can send electronically and what we must send as hard copy.

Background:

Jack Johnson and I are confused about the policy and guidelines with regard to customer/distributor notifications. This request is in general; I am not concerned if we are under contract with a customer or distributor because the contact states specifically how the notification has to be delivered.

In order to keep your action items out of the mud, put them as close to the top as possible. This means that your reader will come to your action items sooner, rather than later. The optimal position for action items may vary with your specific situation.

Persuasion

Writing persuasively often requires your main point to be at the bottom, especially when writing to someone who already has an opposing view of the topic. You first want to present reasonable points that are easy to agree to, and build your case. Then once you've got them nodding their head in agreement, point out why your main point is valid. If you must put your action item in the middle (which is sometimes unavoidable), check out my advice on [how to get rid of mud](#).

In summary, the following will help draw attention to your action items in the middle:

<i>Effective use of white space</i>	Make more, shorter paragraphs instead of fewer longer ones.
<i>Effective use of lists and tables</i>	Know when to use a list and tables. This will help you to organize your information in a way that is easy for the reader to understand quickly.
<i>Good formatting</i>	Be aware of how your document looks, and how comfortable it is to read. Don't just think about paragraphs, but also numbers or different types of data that you may include.

How to Use the Mud

That being said, rules are made to be broken, and there's always an exception. There is, in fact, a legitimate reason you might want to separate your action items. In this case, you will substitute "Key Points" for "Action Items," as the techniques are the same. This particular situation is one that may be familiar to you. I'm talking about the Pre-Approved Credit Card junk mail that is so common.

Think about the credit card advertisement. When you first see it, what jumps off the page at you? It's always the low interest rate. Think about how they emphasize that low APR. They make the text size huge and leave white space around it to draw your attention.

However, they de-emphasize other features like annual fees, late payment fees, etc. We call it "fine print" for a good reason! You can bet it will be buried in the "mud."

The only time I recommend putting your key points in the middle is when you're delivering bad news and want to "hide" it as much as possible. The same can be done verbally; some people call it "the compliment sandwich." First, you say something nice about someone, and then something that you want them to improve, and you finish with another compliment. You bury the bad news in the "mud."

2. Easy to Understand

To make action items clear and easy to understand, it is essential to consider the amount of relevant details. In order to decide how much detail to include, think first about your purpose and your audience.

Purpose

What are you trying to accomplish?

If you do not have this clearly in mind before you begin writing, how will the reader be able to figure it out?

Some common purposes are to:

- Provide information
- Request information or help
- Persuade the reader to your side
- Seek agreement or confirmation, i.e. time of a meeting

Your purpose will influence how much detail you need to include. If you are just relaying the results of the meeting last Thursday, don't include a transcript of the discussion; I only need to know what decisions were reached so that I can complete my tasks.

Audience

- Who are your readers?
- What do they want?
- How much do they know?
- How much do they need to know?

Considering these questions will help you to get into the mind of your reader. Remember: unless it is a diary, you are not writing for yourself. You're writing so that someone else can read what you've written and understand a specific idea. By beginning "with the end in mind," you can maximize the chance that your reader correctly understands what you want to convey.

By combining the purpose with the intended audience, you can craft documents that will achieve your specific purpose with your intended audience.

Wording

When you're writing your action items, use clear, plain wording. This is not the place to impress everyone with your extensive vocabulary. This is business writing; the goal is to get the point across clearly and quickly. Unless you're writing technical instructions for a laboratory procedure using volatile chemicals you probably don't need lots of technical jargon.

3. Grouped Together

This sounds like a no-brainer, but it's surprising how often I find action items sprinkled all throughout the document. I've often seen emails that have a nice list of three action items. Then, at the bottom, just above the closing, they say something like:

“Oh, and please email Sam and let him know what you've decided.”

That is an action item. It should be above with the others. In this case, it's very easy to miss that last-minute addition. This is precisely why I say that all action items should be grouped together, so that the reader doesn't have the chance to miss one.

Accommodating Different Readers

This can be a tricky thing. If you have been working on a project for the past month, and now you need to loop in someone else on the project team to give support, it's quite likely that that person will not know the history of the project or the relevant background information. However, if you send an email to the entire team with all the background information, that is unnecessary for them, you risk them not reading the entire message and thereby losing some action items.

In this scenario, you have two options:

1. Write a separate email to the new team member to catch him/her up on what you've been doing.
2. Start including the new team member on group emails AND put a background section at the bottom of the message (below your action items).

I prefer the second option. Make sure that your background section is clearly labeled with a subtitle. Using subtitles in your writing has benefits for both the writer and the reader. What are those benefits? I've listed them below for you.

Why use subtitles?

Benefits for writer
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allows you to write faster, since the outline is apparent.• Allows you to stay on track. If you are interrupted, it's easy to pick up where you left off.

Benefits for readers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allows them to choose to read OR skip a section, such as the background.• Allows them to refer to document easily in the future.

Try some of these tips to help you improve the quality of your action items. I'm sure you'll be pleased with the results.



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