

Improving Communication Effectiveness

Best practices for on-the-job learning (OJL)



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Introduction

What does it mean to communicate “effectively”? The answer requires an understanding of the reason why we communicate. Simply put, we communicate because we want to be understood; we want to understand others; we want to gain acceptance for ourselves, our ideas, and produce action. We want to inform, persuade, motivate, and entertain. Ultimately, we communicate to achieve a desired outcome.

80%

of all communication is non-verbal

The better we are at communication in all its forms, the more effective we become at achieving our desired outcomes and, therefore, success. Effective communication gets results. Ineffective communication holds us back from accomplishing goals and achieving objectives—both business and personal.

Types of Communication

Effective communication is more than simply the ability to speak clearly. Communication takes place across multiple planes and mediums. Therefore, to be an overall effective communicator, you must be effective at communicating across the spectrum of ways that communication takes place. The five predominant forms of communication include:

- Verbal Communication
- Non-Verbal Communication
- Written Communication
- Listening
- Visual Communication

On-the-Job Learning

CHALLENGES

A traditional, widely implemented learning model proposes that employees gain a certain percentage of their learning, growth, experience, and development through some combination of course work, training, interactions with peers, and on-the-job work experiences and assignments. Though reasonable, the reality is that such models are aspirational at best. The reasons include: 50% of organizations neither formalize nor emphasize the on-the-job learning (OJL) aspect of the model; neither employees nor managers track the progress made through the effort; and many recommendations for improvement are complicated, require too much effort, and seem ineffectual to the employee.

Four steps to developing and adopting a communication effectiveness plan

The following best practice is provided to facilitate adoption of the OJL recommendations for improving communication effectiveness.

START

Step 1

Work with your manager to formalize and gain support for your OJL plan and efforts to improve your five types of communication (where needed). Formalization should include:

- a. The incorporation of your communication plan/efforts into your formal development plan; and
- b. Reporting of the efforts you've undertaken to improve, and any results of the efforts.

Step 2

Assess your current level of communication effectiveness following an approach that includes the following activities (a more detailed description of the Communication Effectiveness Assessment is provided below):

- c. Understand how you currently communicate (the "Current State")

Four steps toward more effective communication

1



Work with your manager to formalize and gain support for your OJL plan and efforts to improve your five types of communication (where needed).

2



Assess your current level of communication effectiveness following an approach that includes the following activities.

3



Review the Communication Effectiveness Activities provided below and develop a *communication improvement plan* incorporating the options that suit you best. Share and review the plan with your manager.

4



Periodically, document and report your progress.

- d. Determine how you would like to communicate (the "Desired State")
- e. Gap Analysis. Identify the differences between your Current and Desired States
- f. Close the gap by minimizing the differences between the two states

Step 3

Review the Communication Effectiveness Activities provided below and develop a *communication improvement plan* incorporating the options that suit you best. Share and review the plan with your manager.

Step 4

Periodically, document and report your progress.

Overcoming the Challenges with Adoption

85%

of plans are never fully adopted or executed

Developing, using, and adopting an OJL plan to improve communication is not difficult; in fact, it's pretty easy.

The keys to adoption are to:

- **Formalize it:** If you are not tracking and reporting the progress made through the activities in which you engage, your improvement efforts will significantly diminish over time.

- **Keep it simple:** If an improvement activity is too complex or difficult to perform under normal circumstances, studies show that you will not do them.

- **Add the activities to your daily (or periodic) to-do list:** Be intentional about improving your communication effectiveness.

- **Do it:** Practice, practice again, and then practice some more. Just like any skill that you want to improve, you should do a little bit each day.

Communication Effectiveness Plan: Resources

The following sections include additional resources for planning, implementing, and succeeding with a communication effectiveness plan

A Practical Communication Effectiveness Plan

140%

greater success can be achieved by writing down your goals and developing & documenting your plan

Improvement is not possible without knowledge

There are four steps to Implementing a simple Communication Plan that gets results:

1. Understand how you currently communicate (the “Current State”)
2. Determine how you would like to communicate (the “Desired State”)
3. Gap Analysis. Identify the differences between your Current and Desired States
4. Close the gap by minimizing the differences between the two states

The 4-Step Plan: Details

1. **Understand how you currently communicate (the “Current State”); it is the first step toward improvement.**

A first step in any improvement effort is to understand your current state, how you do things today, and to what degree of goodness. Such an understanding requires some form of an assessment (including proper feedback) or self-reflection.

2. **Determine how you would like to communicate (the “Desired State”)**

Next, identify or develop a model for what you (and your manager, team members, other stakeholders) consider to be an ideal or desired approach to verbal, non-verbal, written, listening, and visual communication. Then, compare your current communication approach to the desired communication approaches and identify the differences or gaps between the two states. Finally, work to address the gap conditions by changing and improving your approach to communication.

There are many things one can do to gauge the current state of their communication approach toward each type of communication, including, but not limited to:

- Obtain feedback. Asking for feedback is a hit-or-miss proposition, mainly because people are bad at giving productive feedback. Consider asking stakeholders to give you some suggestions that will help you achieve excellence with your [insert type here] communication.
- Maintain awareness of your communication and document your opportunities for improvement. Think daily / continuously about *how* you communicate in all forms. For example, when you write an email message, do you start by defining your purpose of the message? Does its content deliver that desired outcome? Take a look at past email messages and ask these questions in hindsight. Then, identify opportunities to improve your e-mail writing.
 - > How do you communicate verbally: Confidently? Concisely? Clearly? Appropriately?
 - > Are you aware of the non-verbal cues you and your conversation partners communicate to each other: facial expressions, gestures, loudness, tone of voice, body language, personal space, eye contact, touch, appearance, and artifacts you display?

Plan (continued)

- > Are your written communications constructed in a manner that will yield the desired outcome? Will it give the reader the impression that you are credible, or will it say you are careless and unprofessional?
- > Are you an “active” (present, listening for understanding), perfunctory, or disengaged listener? Are you a good listener? If you answered “yes,” why do you believe that? Can you prove it?
- > When presenting an image for consumption (including photos

posted on social media), can you reasonably guarantee that the image will convey the meaning or communicate the message you are trying to disseminate?

3. Analyze the gap between your Current State and Desired state.

After you have defined a desired state communication approach or model across the various forms of communication, compare your current state communication to your desired state communication; the differences between the two states are the “communication gaps.”

4. Close the “Communication Gap.”

Follow the 4 steps recommended on page 2, and work toward improvement by practicing some of the Communication Effectiveness Activities presented in the following section.

Communication Effectiveness Activities

The following section include proven, practical activities that you can perform and practice on the job

Communication Effectiveness Activities



100%

of people can improve through practice and commitment

These best practices can be performed randomly and independent of a formal plan. However, a plan yields better long-term results

Improving Verbal Communication

- **Find a practice “conversation” partner.** A practice partner is a person you can use to serve as your intended audience; ideally, your partner should also be someone who is working on improving their communication. Practice having discussions with each other and providing/receiving feedback. Use this as an opportunity to work on *all* aspects of communication.
- **Start with the purpose.** Before providing verbal or any form of communication, ask yourself: what is the outcome, response, or action I hope to achieve? How can I best achieve that outcome through my communication? These answers will help ensure that your content achieves the desired result. After you’ve created your communication content, review it (or have your conversation partner review it) to see if it will successfully achieve your desired outcome.

- **Ensure message clarity.** Ensure that your message is clear and understood by your audience (and conversation partner). How will you ensure message clarity and understanding? One way is to ask the partner or someone who is an effective verbal communicator. I had a colleague who—after he shared some instruction or important information with me—would always ask, “Ok, now repeat that back to me.” It annoyed me, but it made me a better listener because I never knew when someone else would ask me to do the same.
- **For presentations, consider the 3-Part Proposition.** The most effective presentations are not necessarily the ones that sound the best, instead, they are the ones that deliver on the purpose for why the audience attended and your goal for the presentation. To help

remember what is important in a presentation, remember the 3 parts of an effective presentation. The 3 parts are (in order of importance): Part 1: *The Goal* of the presentation (to satisfy the audience’s reason for attending, and your desired result); Part 2: *Content is King*. More than fancy slides or a slick presenter, the content of the presentation will deliver the day; Part 3: *Supporting tools*. PowerPoint slides should represent the content and support the goal. They are a supporting player, NOT the star of a presentation. And remember, practice, practice, practice. Take every opportunity to practice and deliver presentations, speeches, and even introductions or kickoffs.

Activities (continued)

Improving Non-Verbal Communication

- **Be aware of your non-verbal cues.** Non-verbal cues are unspoken indicators of a listener's degree of engagement or compliance. Types of cues include facial expressions, gestures, loudness or tone of voice, body language, personal space, eye gaze, touch, and appearance. During a conversation (meetings are conversations, too); everyone gives non-verbal cues during a conversation/communication. "Listen to" the non-verbal cues shared by others and act accordingly. If someone is smiling or nodding affirmatively, your message is probably being well received. If people look puzzled, they probably don't understand your message. It's always ok to ask conversation partners if you need to provide more clarity.
- **Use non-verbal cues *intentionally* to communicate a message.** For example, if you want to communicate that you are enjoying a speaker's message non-verbally, intentionally let them know by sharing a smile or other affirming gesture.
- **Practice eye contact.** Be intentional about maintaining eye contact and demonstrating engagement. The degree or quality of your eye contact can send a message to your partner about your degree of interest or engagement

in a conversation. In a presentation, poor eye contact sends a signal of weak commitment and a lack of confidence.

- **Do a periodic posture check.** Your posture can convey confidence, strength, energy, engagement, and power. Poor posture can send the opposite message. Is your posture conveying a message that you don't want to be conveyed to the partner or audience?

Improving Written Communication

- **Write! Work on the craft.** The best way to communicate more effectively through writing is to write daily/frequently.
- **Find a writing partner and write daily.** A writing partner should be someone else who wants to communicate more effectively through writing; ideally, your communication and writing partner will be the same person. Each day, write a paragraph about anything real or imagined. Exchange it with your partner and correct & improve each other's paragraphs. Then run it through a tool like Grammarly for additional input and to see how you did.
- **Start at the end. Before writing your communication, ask yourself:** What am I trying to achieve through this written communication? Then, after writing it, check to see if that outcome will be achieved

from the reader's perspective. Have your writing/conversation partner (or a good writer) review it and provide feedback. Over time, as you become a better written communicator, you will need little-to-no feedback from others—unless desired.

- **Take advantage of technology.** Use a tool, such as Grammarly or an alternative, like Hemmingway Editor, Ginger, Beewriter, and others. Poorly constructed sentences and obvious errors can give readers a bad impression of you and can negatively impact your credibility.

Listening

- **Pay attention to more than just words being spoken.** Notice what is being said and what is *not* being said. Notice non-verbal cues, and pay particular attention to emotions. If the speaker is exhibiting signs of anger, fear, discomfort, stress, or consider shifting the course of the conversation/discussion to understand whether there is an alternate issue that is being communicated or needs to be addressed.
- **Validate your understanding.** During a conversation—as needed—repeat or paraphrase what you've just heard back to the speaker to validate your understanding. This will not only ensure that you've heard the speaker correctly, but

Activities (continued)

Listening (continued)

it will also signal to the speaker that you are genuinely listening and trying to understand their message. After a person speaks, ask yourself: Do I have a clear understanding and appreciation for the message the speaker hoped to convey? Can I demonstrate it?

- **Implement productivity practices to minimize distractions.**

Distractions can take your focus away from your communication partner and affect listening. During a conversation, remove distractions and interruptions, such as email, your phone, and other people. Focus on the conversation. Clear your mind of to-dos and other issues on your plate. Document them in a to-do list to get them out of your head so that you can focus on the conversation at hand.

- **Don't judge.** Practice avoiding the mental temptation to form an opinion or judgement of your partner's information being shared. Instead, look to be supportive. When judgmental thoughts arise, replace them with thoughts of how you can be encouraging and supportive, rather than allowing the judgements to form and staking a position based on those judgements.

Visual Communication

- **Only use visual aids when and as needed.** Visuals are not always needed or helpful. Ask yourself if the content you have is suitable for visual expression? If your words can convey your message more impactfully and effectively than a visual image, then use verbal communication. However, if the visual communicates a message that complements your verbal message making it stronger, then consider using both. Visuals are powerful communication tools, so use them thoughtfully. Strong visuals can connect with an audience faster and more emotionally than words alone. That is true for the potential negative impact of imagery, too.

- **Ask these questions when developing or choosing visual communication elements:** What do I want the audience to know, feel and do? Am I trying to explain something, motivate people to action, or persuade the audience? These answers should inform your choice and design of visual communication.

- **Use visuals to support your message, not to become the message.** When planning visual communication, don't jeopardize the message integrity with an ill-considered design. For example, if you are trying to describe what a certain type of car looks like, showing a photo of the car can

complement any descriptive information you provide. If you are trying to explain the crime rate in New York City, showing a fancy, colorful photo of the NY skyline becomes a useless distraction.

- **Be original—within reason.** There is a cognitive process known as the *Distinctiveness Effect*, where people are more likely to recall unique or unusual information. Make your visual communication is original, creative, unique, or atypical—but not too far out.

*** Some of these recommendations depend on available opportunities, and can only be performed as situations present themselves**