

Welcome to C is for Communication!



C is for communication, it's a big and all-encompassing word. It's a foundation for successful leaders, people, projects, companies, and relationships. Finding communication a "challenge" at an early age made me appreciate it more! I didn't say a single optional word in first grade. When I was sixteen I snuck out and paid with my own money to attend an assertiveness training workshop. Not being a natural communicator, I've spent my life learning to speak up and communicate better, and somewhere along the line I figured out how important communication is. Leaders can inspire and motivate others with a look or a single phrase. When the university I work for started a graduate level Project Management Course, the course I believed was the most important, and that I helped to create and then teach, was Leadership and Communication for Project Managers. In this class, each student became the class leader for 10 minutes to review one homework assignment. From that class and other personal sources below I have listed the top ten communication challenges.

Communication is a **three-step** dance.

Step one - You put a message out - Honey I'm cold, can you pass me the blanket?

Step two - The message is acknowledged. Honey says, "yes" or shakes his head.

Step three - The message is understood - Honey hands you the blanket.

If I'm not acknowledged (step 2), I might get frustrated and keep asking for what I want in different ways: Please pass me the blanket. Is there a blanket next to you? Are you using the blanket? If I'm acknowledged (step 2) and not understood (step 3), I might rephrase the message, I might get mad, I might get up and get the

blanket that is next to Honey. Honey may understand (step 3) my request differently, and instead of getting me a blanket he might hug me or get up and turn up the heat or tell me to get a sweater. All three steps keep repeating until clarity and understanding occur. If the communication dance stops before understanding happens, communication breakdowns and misunderstandings occur that can lead to:

- Stress
- Overwhelm
- Frustration
- Anxiety
- Conflicts
- Difficult relationships
- Trouble getting results

Excellent communicators are flexible and adaptable in the three-step dance. The ability to communicate effectively reduces stress, improves influencing ability, and increases trust.



TEN Communications Challenges

The standard for what a good communicator is has been based on the culture of American business.

1. Not Understandable - Sometimes a speaker's voice is too soft or too loud, or it conveys an underlying emotion that's not desirable for the communication being given. Speaking too fast, using slang, acronyms, or speaking with an accent can make the message less clear. **Speaking like a Disney Channel character or a CNN/Fox anchor** is considered understandable to most people in the United States.

2. Too Serious or Too Nervous - Being too serious or too nervous interferes with another person's ability to hear and understand you. Research proves that when you are calm and relaxed people are more open to hearing and

understanding what you say (and you get bonus points for genuine humor and laughter). Learning how to **calm yourself** and relaxing can be useful!

3. Technology Monsters - Technology and props can support the message or they can make it harder for people to understand what you are trying to get across. Slides, props, and visuals make a more powerful communication if used properly, as long as they don't become the focal point of your talk. Complex numbers and ideas benefit from supportive visuals. If you are discussing something not commonly known, **a visual can help**. (e.g. minions, snow apocalypse)

4. Winging it - Don't do it. Important communication requires planning. Get clear about what needs to be communicated *before* the communication occurs. What's the intended outcome? How much research is needed? Are complexities made clear? What are the key facts, beliefs, feelings? Are there time limits around the communication? Constraints? Who is the intended audience? What is known about the audience? Is there a larger agenda or event structure to be worked with? **To fly you must have a flight plan.**

5. Shoulda/Coulda/Musta - Story Needed. Stop telling others what to do. You can make the same point in an indirect and memorable way by using stories. Stories can be powerful, keep an audience's attention, and can help them relate both to you and to the matter at hand. Telling stories well isn't easy for everyone, but anyone can get better with practice! **Cinderella did lots of hard work** before she got to the ball.

6. Broken Connection - Are your listeners falling asleep or checking their phones? When you look out and see them making eye contact, holding themselves in an alert body posture, or nodding in agreement they are either faking it or acknowledging your communication. If the proper emotional response occurs at the right time, chances are they also understand. If not, adjust your communication - stop, ask a question, use an individual's name, **listen** to them.

7. To Push or Pull? - "Get out!! Fire!" is an example of "pushing" information and is appropriate for that kind of situation. "Pulling" information is used to draw out information. Pulling is a technique used to keep a listener connected to you.

Collaboration in a conversation requires pushing and pulling back and forth, so that a solution emerges. Keep in mind: **whose turn is it to talk now?**

8. Talks too much - Stopping to let your words "sink in" can be a powerful communication strategy. Using silence to get a reading on how the audience is

reacting before proceeding can be very useful in adapting your message for effectiveness. In great storytelling, using silence at a critical juncture can heighten an effect that you would like to create. **Silence is golden.**

9. Unaligned voice or body language - When words, gestures, body language, and voice are aligned to convey a message, understanding is easier. Telling a sad story in a happy tone is confusing. So is saying "yes" or agreeing to something while shaking your head "no." These examples of unaligned communication send mixed messages and make understanding more difficult. **Ensure communication alignment.**

10. Meandering - While in your own mind your communication may be perfectly clear, to your listeners it may seem like disconnected phrases, statements, and questions that don't add up or go anywhere. There is nothing memorable for them to take away and people leave confused. **Keep a communication goal in mind** so you (and your audience) can get where you want to go!



TWO Ways to Improve on Your Communication Challenges

1. **Feedback** - Get feedback any way you can and review it consistently. It's very easy to do with technology. Video tape or audio record yourself. Ask someone else to video tape or record you. Ask others for specific feedback, and allow them to give it to you directly or anonymously. Most people are fairly aware of their communication challenges. It's the blind-spots and the impact of their communication challenges that are more difficult to see.
2. **Be a Professional** - Professional athletes practice and are constantly trying something new to improve. Practice, practice, practice.



This material is based on the "C is for Communication" webinar that was delivered last month, and is available to be customized as a live presentation to your business. Email us for rates at star@starleadershipllc.com

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