

A Guide to Mastering Communication in the Workplace

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Introduction

In our digital, hyper-connected world, individuals increasingly communicate via email, text, and other electronic means such as social media and cloud-based collaboration tools. However, despite the change brought about by advances in technology, the art of face-to-face communication in the workplace remains of utmost importance. Face-to-face communication brings context to human interactions and provides many opportunities for individuals to generate understanding, convey emotion, and make a first impression. In one study, researchers found that face-to-face communication can be up to 34 times more successful than email.¹ Another survey revealed that 80 percent of millennials and 78 percent of Gen Xers prefer face-to-face meetings when communicating with colleagues.²

Digital communication isn't going away, which means that individuals in the workplace need to be effective communicators both online and in person. Thankfully, the components of effective face-to-face communication also apply to digital communications. When employees learn how to master both, the whole organization benefits.



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Benefits of Effective Communication

Communication excellence is much more than a useful soft skill. A workforce of effective communicators delivers a range of benefits for individuals, the teams they lead, and the organization as a whole, including:

Improved Teamwork and Collaboration

Clear and honest communication is at the heart of teamwork. When individuals routinely share information and communicate frequently, each member of the team is “in the loop” and able to approach tasks and challenges armed with the information they need. Effective communication also ensures that individuals understand expectations and responsibilities, helping to reduce duplication or missed steps between and within teams.



Effective Leadership

Strong communicators are often more effective leaders. In one study, strength in communication ranked among the top 10 leadership competencies for global business leaders.³ Leaders who communicate effectively help teams understand expectations, give feedback and coaching that results in performance improvement, and develop deep, authentic connections with others.

Improved Productivity

When individuals are equipped with all the necessary information, they are able to productively complete tasks and projects. Whether it be through meetings, emails, or internal workplace social networks, communication that is simple, to the point, and gives someone everything they need helps them get the job done better, if not faster. In fact, according to research conducted by the McKinsey Global Institute,⁴ productivity improves by 20–25 percent in organizations where everyone feels connected, which leads to a potential increase in revenues of up to \$1.3 trillion per year.

Key Components for Mastering Communication in the Workplace

Individuals who communicate effectively can achieve far more than those who give confusing feedback or struggle with an awkward communication style or poor message delivery. It's one of the reasons most organizations list strong communication skills among the competencies necessary for hire or promotion. In a survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), employers rated verbal communication skills as the most important skill sought in job candidates.⁵

Strong communication is more than a buzzword. It's a powerful tool that can make a difference in an individual's overall performance. To become effective speakers and listeners, individuals need to master a range of communication techniques and behaviors.



Here are some key components that form the building blocks for effective communication in the workplace:

Clarity

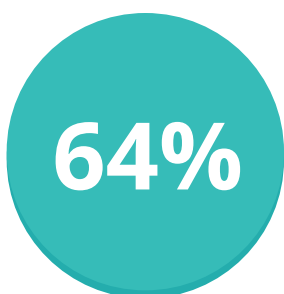
The goal of any type of communication is for the recipient of your message to have a clear understanding of it and its intent. Strong communicators recognize that it's not enough to assume this is the case. Instead, they use proven techniques and best practices to ensure their messages are delivered with clarity and understood fully by others before moving on from the conversation. For example, the use of analogies often helps people visualize key messages and information, thereby creating a bridge to understanding. Sports terms are commonly used to explain business scenarios, such as "hitting a home run" or "knocking it out of the park." When individuals engage in a conversation in the context of a familiar topic, they're more likely to draw parallels that deepen their understanding.

Simplicity also contributes to communication clarity. Yet the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) reports that only 21 percent of communicators say they keep their language simple and jargon-free. When communicating, simplicity does not mean eliminating complexity or even oversimplifying, but distilling complex concepts so that they are made clear to others. In his book, *In Your Hands: The Behaviors of a World Class Leader*, Phil Geldart explains that "individuals learn more when they've been given less information, but more time to understand it."⁶ Boiling down a message to its essence helps individuals absorb and remember its meaning and importance.

Frequency

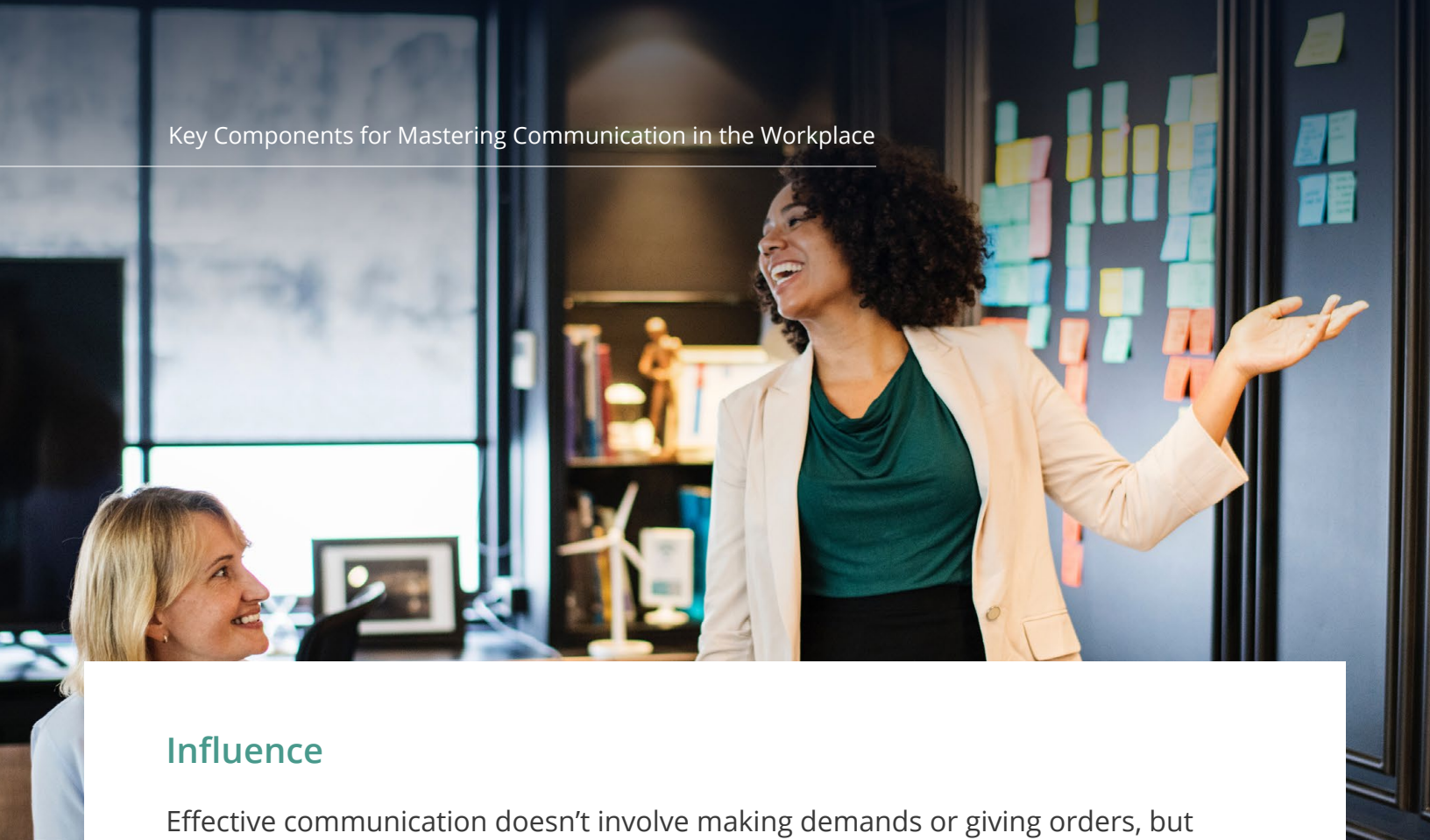
Stating something only once or infrequently gives limited opportunities for the message to “sink in” and resonate. Important messages such as performance feedback should be delivered frequently, offering employees many opportunities to hear what is expected of them and what they’re doing well or need to improve. Similarly, new initiatives that will impact the entire organization may need to be communicated multiple times and in different forums—one-on-one, in a team or departmental meeting, and in a town-hall setting.

Research shows that employees value frequent communication with their manager as a way of improving their engagement. In one survey, 64 percent of employees said they wanted their supervisor to check in with them at least every two weeks to discuss how they were doing and how they could be more satisfied at work.⁷ When those conversations are happening with regular frequency, individuals have more chances to hear and act upon the feedback they need to excel.



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Influence

Effective communication doesn't involve making demands or giving orders, but speaking in a way that influences the mindsets and behaviors of others. The ability to influence is central to strong leadership. Effective leaders influence the actions of others through persuasion, negotiation, and inspiration. For example, strong communicators use time as a powerful tool of persuasion. Saying, "let's agree to discuss this again on Monday before we make our decision on Tuesday," imposes a new deadline that creates a sense of urgency and buys more time for discussion and negotiation. Other tools of persuasion include providing facts and information and pointing out opportunities for mutual gain that help others to see the possibility of a "win-win" solution.

Strong communicators are also masterful negotiators, as negotiation can be a useful tool for influencing others' decision-making. For example, when negotiating the sale price of a product, a seller will be more likely to settle on a reduced price closer to their desired goal of \$10,000 after negotiating in small increments (\$9,900, \$9,800, and so on) than if a buyer immediately asks them to drop the price to \$7,000.

Influencing others also requires communicating in a way that inspires people to act. A positive, inspiring message helps teams overcome tough obstacles and rallies individuals around a shared goal. It's not surprising that people are more likely to follow a leader who inspires them. A survey of 1,700 global CEOs found that the ability to inspire was one of the top three traits most important for effective leadership. Moreover, in a related study, the ability to inspire was the leadership trait found to create the highest levels of engagement and commitment among employees.⁸

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Active Listening

Attentive listening goes a long way in helping others feel understood and valued, and it encourages mutually respectful two-way communication. When individuals practice active listening and patiently seek opportunities to talk and listen, communication is more fruitful. Some examples of how individuals can demonstrate active listening include:

- Knowing when to interrupt and when to allow others to interrupt
- Taking the time to look for the central theme of someone's message and perspective
- Restating comments and asking clarifying questions as a way of demonstrating understanding

Candor and Empathy

Before launching into weighty discussions, it's essential to use good judgment to determine where, when, and how to deliver an important message. For example, a manager might give a positive word of recognition or appreciation in passing, but wait to have a difficult conversation at a time and place where both parties can speak candidly.

To communicate with candor, it's important to stick to truth and take care to avoid telling half-truths, only discussing the easy topics, or speaking in terms that are too general. This way, others know where they stand and can appropriately respond or act. Likewise, seeing things from another perspective and recognizing the issues that are important to others can help individuals communicate with empathy. Empathy brings people closer together and can help individuals reach agreement when they otherwise would have been in conflict.

Delivery

The effective delivery of any message requires a careful balance of three components: style, passion, and fact.⁹ The mix of these three components will be different depending on the audience—for example, a one-on-one discussion versus a team meeting—but each supports the impact of one’s message.



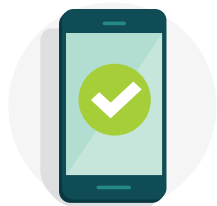
Style

Communication style isn’t just the way a person talks. It’s a series of choices about body language, tone of voice, and attentiveness. Style choices can help an individual make a positive impression on others and break down communication barriers. Style is also unique to each person, and can be tailored to fit the circumstances and audience, whether laid back or more formal.



Passion

Enthusiasm can elicit a positive reaction in others, making them more open to sharing and listening. Communicating with passion and enthusiasm also benefits employee engagement and performance. Research studies have found that leaders who communicate with high energy and enthusiasm help to increase employee motivation, attentiveness, and absorption in work activities.¹⁰



Fact

A presentation that includes relevant facts and reasoned arguments makes an impact. When delivered with the right style and an appropriate level of passion, facts and evidence can change minds and behavior.

Becoming an effective communicator has a great deal to do with personal experience using these components of communication. It will take time and training to understand where and when to use each, depending on who you are communicating with and in what context.

Improving Communication at Every Level of the Organization

Communication skills influence how employees interact with each other and with customers, as well as how they approach problems and deliver feedback. Improving communication may involve some simple concepts, but achieving it will be a challenge if individuals don't know how or what to change. Training that provides the necessary communication skills and knowledge will help employees at every level of the organization become effective communicators.

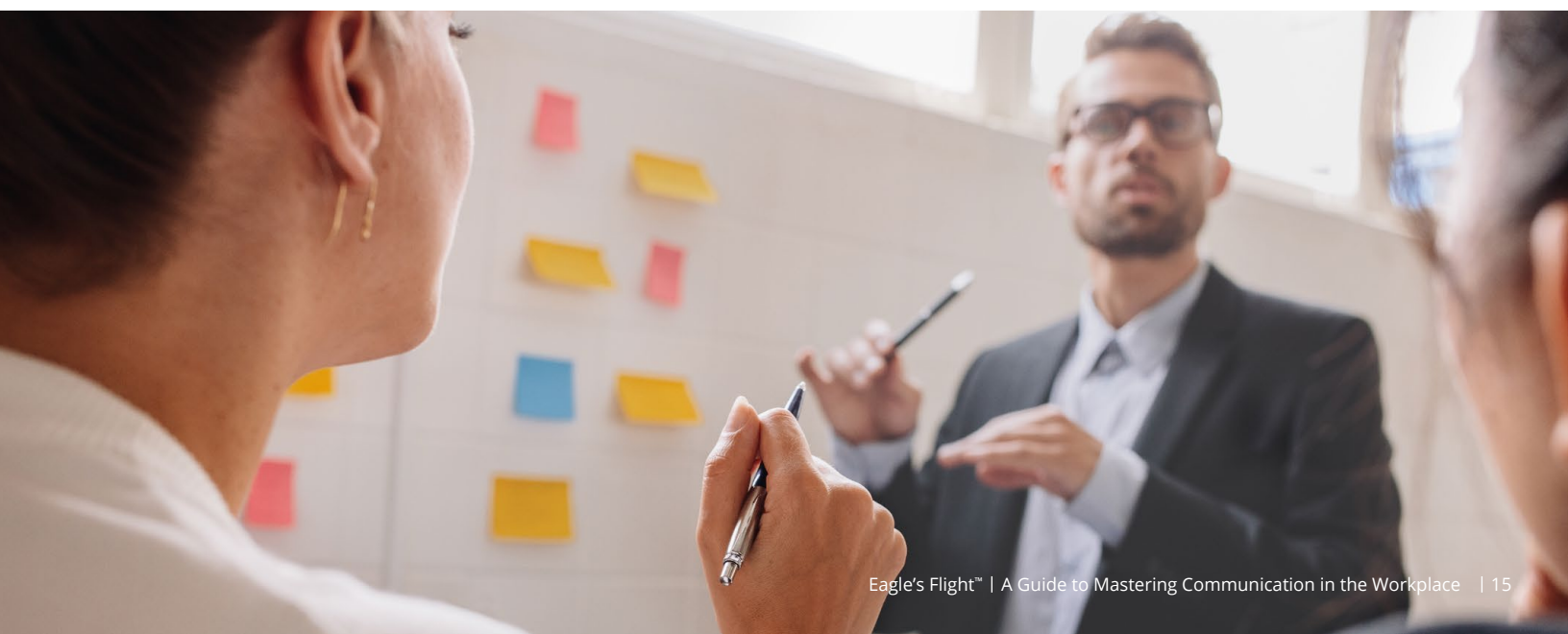
Communication is not a skill that employees can learn to do brilliantly by just reading, watching a video, or listening to a presentation about it. Instead, employees need opportunities to learn how to become better communicators by doing. Experiential learning teaches communication skills by presenting individuals with a low-risk opportunity to learn and practice face-to-face communication techniques in an engaging experience that seems completely unrelated to their lives at work. By engaging in experiential learning, individuals begin to understand why communication skills are so important in the workplace, how to improve them, and how to apply what they've learned back on the job.

In addition to communication skills, leaders at every level can benefit from leadership development and communication skills training that teaches them how to set clear expectations, deliver feedback with maximum impact, and coach employees to help them improve performance and succeed in achieving goals.

Partner with Eagle's Flight to Improve Communications in the Workplace

At Eagle's Flight, we understand the importance of effective communication as a core competency and one that directly impacts the results of the business and the success of its employees and leaders. As such, over the past 30 years we have developed a range of communication courses to train everyone, from individual contributors to senior leaders, on how to make their communication more effective. While becoming a brilliant communicator may be a lifelong journey, the right training at every level will ensure everyone feels supported and engaged along the way.

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Since our founding in 1988, Eagle's Flight has developed and refined a framework for creating predictable, sustainable behavior change. We specialize in experiential learning and provide organizations with a better outcome by truly engaging the learner. Successful organizational development programs require ongoing work, but this can easily get lost in the shuffle of daily tasks that feel more urgent. Partnering with a provider that has a strong track record of helping organizations achieve long-term measurable change will help ensure that your development goals are met.

If you would like to learn more about what a partnership with Eagle's Flight could look like, contact us today.

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