

Mastering Communication at Work

What's in it for me? Become a master communicator at work.

The workplace is filled with many different people: CEOs, junior employees, leaders, managers. But something that unites them all is communication. No matter what role you play within your organization, it's vital that you communicate effectively with everyone around you. For managers, that means forging strong communication channels with the staff who report to them – but also knowing how to talk to the people at the very top of the company. But good communication is much more than practicing your talks in front of a mirror. It's about knowing who you're talking to. Because a truly effective communicator adapts their communication style to their audience. And in these blinks, you're about to learn how to do just that. In these blinks, you'll discover

the difference between inductive and deductive thinkers; how to frame a difficult conversation; and what it really means to validate your team.

Deductive and inductive thinkers communicate differently - so you should adapt.

What type of thinker are you? Here's a quick test. Your co-worker comes up and tells you about a family dinner, at which his mother-in-law said he should start jogging. So he went to the mall, had trouble parking, and visited a few stores. After trying several on, he bought a lovely pair of white sneakers. He's going to break them in this afternoon, but wonders about the weather. So he asks, "Do you think it'll rain?" How are you feeling? If you're rolling your eyes at all that detail, you're a deductive thinker. But if you see where your co-worker is coming from, your tendency is inductive. The key message here is: Deductive and inductive thinkers communicate differently – so you should adapt. In the example, your co-worker is a pretty extreme inductive thinker. Inductive thinkers need context: it would feel wrong to him to ask, "Do you think it'll rain?" without first explaining why he's asking. A milder inductive thinker might simply say, "Hey, I don't want to get my new pair of sneakers wet. Do you think it'll rain?" On the other hand, deductive thinkers prefer details straight up: an extreme deductive thinker might just look at you and say, "Rain?" She might then provide context, but that'll come second. Neither type of thinking is superior – they're just different.

Problems only occur when people don't take each other's tendencies into account. So as well as knowing your own tendency, you need to know your colleagues'. A good manager learns the tendencies of their team, and communicates with each of them appropriately. The same applies to presentations. Say you have to give the board a choice between cuts and a new round of fundraising. How do you do it – go straight in, or cushion the blow? It depends on how the board members think – although a majority of board-level people tend to think deductively. So it might well be best to present the key point right at the start, before rowing back and giving the context the inductive thinkers need. That's not all it takes to give a good presentation, of course. It's always vital to be upfront with your listeners about what you'll be telling them, how long it'll take, and why the presentation will be worth their time. Also offer a clear, actionable summary. But a master communicator will always be adapting to their audience's

inductive or deductive tendencies. Because communicating isn't just about you: it's about the people you're talking to.

Maintaining a good ethos is vital for workplace communication.

Imagine a law firm. Everyone is dressed in suits – everyone except for one attorney. He always wears jeans and sandals. There's a chance that this guy is the best, most creative and imaginative lawyer at the firm – and his unusual appearance only enhances his reputation as a free thinker. But now imagine he drops the ball on a big case. Suddenly it doesn't look so smart to be dressed like a college student. And people will start to interact with him differently. Put another way, his ethos has changed. He's lost credibility, so his ability to communicate with the rest of the team has been damaged. The key message here is: Maintaining a good ethos is vital for workplace communication. Ethos, in a nutshell, is the impression you give to those around you – your level of credibility. And as our scruffy lawyer friend has shown, it can go up and down: it's relative to your performance. It changes depending on the context, too. Who has more ethos, a CEO or a tech support worker? The CEO, right? Sure – until the Wi-Fi goes down. What about your own ethos? Well, whether you're conscious of it or not, you already have one. It's vital to know what it is – and it might be worth asking a trusted co-worker to tell you how people perceive you. But the even bigger question is what you need your ethos to be. What ethos do you need to achieve your goals? Until your ethos is strong enough, you might find it difficult to move your ideas forward or motivate your staff. Maintaining your ethos is vital at all times at work, and so is understanding other people's. But here's a specific example of when it's particularly important: giving feedback. The power dynamic is always awkward when you're giving feedback to someone you manage – but it's vital in order to get results and develop your staff. Giving feedback should be a healthy and well-appreciated habit. But you always have to get your ethos right. If you're too personable, and try and give feedback as a friend, it'll seem insincere. That's not really who you are to your employee: you're the person who pays their salary. Of course, you don't want to seem too formal either. The key is to be respectful. If you're getting your ethos right, the employee will respond respectfully and thoughtfully – and no matter how critical you've been, their own ethos will remain intact.

Motivate your team by understanding what makes each person tick.

Say you need to get a project done in two weeks. You thought you had a couple of months, but things have shifted, and the deadline has been brought forward. How do you motivate your team to meet the new target? Well, if possible, you should treat them as the individuals they are. And that means approaching each of them differently, depending on their own motivating factors. To one of your team members, you might just need to say: I believe in you, you're the right person for this. To another, you might need to dangle a possible award presented by the CEO. A third person, meanwhile, might respond best if you offer them a future leadership role. The key message here is: Motivate your team by understanding what makes each person tick. There are three things that people are motivated by, and three things they're motivated for. And you

should approach every box on that 3x3 matrix in a different way. The factors people are motivated by are ethos, emotion, and logic. If you're motivated by ethos, you want to appear respectable in front of senior colleagues – it's all about credibility. Emotion and logic speak for themselves: emotional people perform when fired up, while logical people need to understand why. People are motivated for achievement, recognition, and power. For achievement junkies, getting the job done is the reward in itself – but if recognition is their driving factor, they'll need external validation and applause. Power-motivated people seek leadership roles, and respond well to offers of extra responsibility. Because these factors vary so much, you should be wary of a one-size-fits-all approach to motivation. Imagine your team is attending a conference in Las Vegas. You might try to motivate them by offering \$100 in gambling chips to the best salesperson. But team members motivated by achievement might actually be offended by the idea of a bribe for good performance. One example of when to think about motivation is when you're delegating. Never just hand off excess work to junior employees – think about what's driving them, and present the work to them in a way that works for them. Reward them accordingly as well: one person might appreciate a thank-you note and a bunch of flowers, but another may just need – or even prefer – a simple nod of the head.

A good communicator is an expert at framing their message.

Doug Ludwig isn't a corporate manager, but many could learn from him. He's a guide for a rafting company on a river in West Virginia, and every day up to eight rafts of amateurs navigate a dangerous stretch – on his watch. Communication, for Doug, is life or death. When he's giving his safety talk, it's critical that everyone remembers his instructions. His trick is to frame the talk right. He gets everyone excited, and projects a sense of control. But he also subtly hints at the dangers. Instead of calling it a helmet, for instance, he says "brain bucket" – reminding people why they need to wear a helmet in the first place. Framing a message is as simple as choosing the right words to describe it. But the effect framing has can be immense. The key message here is: A good communicator is an expert at framing their message. Another thing Doug does to get the frame right is stay flexible. He'll adopt one tone when talking to a football team, and another when addressing a group from a church. He knows that different people will respond best to different communication tactics. Say you're talking to a senior, old-school staff member. You want to advance the underfunded digital side of the business. What you mustn't do is stride up to her and say, "Webinars!" – even if she's a deductive thinker. That'll scare her off. Instead, frame your pitch carefully. Start by saying you have a new idea that could generate huge numbers of leads compared to existing methods. Only introduce the bold new concept once you've explained its benefits. She's much more likely to appreciate a new idea if it's presented within a frame that she understands. Make sure your meetings are framed well, too. A single sentence, stated at the start, can frame the whole meeting in a way that will keep everyone focused and engaged. Further frame your meeting by clarifying what type of conversation you want to have: there are different types of meetings, from debates, to brainstorming, to information-giving sessions. Good framing isn't all it takes to lead a meeting. You'll also need to make sure everyone gets good opportunities to contribute. Remember that some people – external thinkers – talk as they process information, while internal thinkers need a little quiet first. Give internal thinkers ample time and opportunity to participate too – don't always let the external thinkers dominate.

The best communicators are masters of validation.

Mike Phalen, former president of the endoscopy business run by Boston Scientific, was in Europe one day for a global meeting. Delivering the keynote in front of hundreds of people, he spotted a sales manager he'd met briefly three years before. On that previous occasion, the manager – then still quite junior – had made a good impression. But the meeting had only been brief. Phalen remembered, though – and now, delivering an important speech to senior company figures, he singled out the manager to congratulate him on his success. The manager couldn't believe it. It isn't easy to keep track of everyone and everything. But the effect of getting validation right can be immense. The key message here is: The best communicators are masters of validation. Why do people need validation? Because everyone wants to know that their work matters – and that you value it. Validation is affirming the value of someone's work – and, by extension, that person too. Everyone on your team, though, needs validation in a different way. As you've already heard, workers motivated for recognition will likely need more explicit validation than those who crave achievement. But everyone wants to feel seen and heard. They want to know you're listening. How to do it? Validation can be as simple as employing a stock phrase, like "Good job" – so long as you get the tone right so it doesn't sound patronizing. Add a "because," and flesh the phrase out, to really show you're listening. Another technique is to paraphrase: provide a summary of what your employee has just said to you. Don't underestimate the power of body language, either: a well-placed smile or a thumbs-up can go a long way. Validating doesn't mean agreeing. You need to acknowledge the other person's feelings and views, but not necessarily to go along with what they say. Once again, it's all about framing: if you have to say no, frame this in a way that still makes them feel valued. Validating is especially important when people get defensive. This happens a lot at work: the moment someone feels they're being criticized, they'll start to feel threatened and become rigid and inflexible. They'll stop listening to you – so the trick is to listen properly to them. Ask a defensive employee: "What do you need?" or "Help me understand." Let them show you their own perspective – and validate the way they feel. That gives you the perfect frame to work through the problems and find a constructive solution.

Add color to your voice to convey the message you mean to.

Here's a little exercise. Unless you're being driven somewhere in a car right now, say the word "Stop" in your normal, everyday voice. How does it sound? Now say it as if you're watching someone about to run across a busy road – their life is in danger. How does your voice change as you yell "Stop" now? We've already talked about framing your message. But that goes beyond just choosing the right words. It's about how you say them too – it's about the color of your voice. The key message here is: Add color to your voice to convey the message you mean to. How do you add color? The trick is to think about the four horsemen of delivery. These are speed, volume, stress, and inflection. And the key to all four of them is variation. When you're making an important point, slow down the speed. If you're talking to a younger crowd, consider picking up the pace. Volume should also keep listeners on their toes: it can be immensely effective to speak quietly to a large crowd, if you've managed to capture their attention. Stress

and inflection can both completely change the meaning of what you're saying. If you don't emphasize the right word, people might completely miss your point. And if you inflect the ends of sentences upward too much, as if each sentence you say is a question, you'll sound hesitant. Deepen your tone to project a confident impression. Another useful vocal trick is to emphasize your plosives. These are the hard consonants: B, P, T, K, and so on. Say your plosives clearly to sound like you really believe what you're saying. It makes what you say clearer, too, so do it especially if you're on the phone or meeting virtually. You can practice your plosives on a sentence as simple as "Great job!" Listen for other people's tone, too, not just your own. Take, for example, a job interview. The candidate will likely be nervous, sure, but how do they speak? What attitude are they projecting through their voice – and will it fit with your company's culture? In general, when hiring, don't underestimate the importance of good communication. A candidate might have the perfect résumé for your team, but if she's a deductive thinker who'd be joining a strongly inductive team, she might not be a good fit after all.

Communication is a hard skill that's vital for the workplace.

Harvard Business School used to have communication on its MBA syllabus, but it doesn't anymore. But that doesn't mean they don't teach it. In fact, the opposite is true. These days, every single class is effectively a lesson in communication. Students are graded on class participation – the way they listen, speak, and debate. To do any of that well requires top communication skills. Communication underpins the whole course. That's how important it is. The key message here is: Communication is a hard skill that's vital for the workplace. Your organization probably has a strategy for things like marketing, talent management, and sales. Does it have a communication strategy, though? Maybe it should. Every business should aim to foster a culture of communication. That might mean taking a Harvard-style approach and integrating communication into everything else. Or it could mean seizing opportunities to talk explicitly about communication. That's more like what happens at Google, where employees can learn about communication through specially designed courses and networking groups. Their data-driven approach helps, too. People are encouraged to engage in open debate all the time – but to always have data that backs up what they say. That way, every opinion builds from a strong foundation. However you do it, just make sure that your organization, and your employees, understand how important it is to communicate properly. This remains important as we transition toward a hybrid model of work where work time is split between the office and our homes. Virtual meetings require a different communication style – but not a lesser one. Still think carefully about how you appear to your co-workers, when you do and don't interject, and what ethos you have on screen. Think about micro-interactions, too: if your team is remote, they'll no longer get to have those tiny but significant moments of bonding just before or after a meeting, or in the lunchroom or the hallway. Factor that in, and look to create opportunities for people to relax in each other's company online. Start meetings a few minutes early so people can have a casual conversation at the start. Use breakout rooms to mix things up. Follow up with messages – a group chat can become the new water cooler. Just don't let a new way of working mean that good communication takes a back seat. It's much too important for that.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Communication is a vital skill to bring to the workplace, whether you're managing employees or reporting to your boss. A master communicator will adapt their communication method depending on the listener's tendency and motivation, provide validation when it's needed, and frame their messages in a flexible and effective way. Creating a culture of communication is essential for high-functioning workplaces. And here's some more actionable advice: Find out how good you are at framing. If you're framing your one-on-one meetings in the right way, you'll be deploying a particular set of words and phrases that powerfully communicate your message. But is that message getting across? To see if your communication strategy is working, listen carefully to how people respond to you. If they start picking up on the vocabulary that you've been using, you'll know that your framing is having its desired effect.