Communication skills for data professionals

As you have learned, the PACE framework provides an initial structure to guide you through projects. Regardless of where you might be in the workflow, communication is what drives a project to its realization. As a data analytics professional, you will serve as the connection between data, business, and technology. The most effective way to make these connections is through communication.

Data professionals are often involved in organizational decision making. In order to fulfill their responsibilities, data professionals are required to communicate about data analysis with a variety of stakeholders.

The purpose of analytics training is to balance technical knowledge with effective communication so that you can gain and share insights from data. In this reading, you will learn best practices for communication and how you can improve your communication as a data analytics professional.

Active Listening

As you begin your career in data analytics, you will spend a lot of time in meetings and in conversation. Many stakeholders are from different departments both inside and outside of your organization. The information shared during these interactions is valuable. Often, it's where you gather insight into how the business operates, its goals, key milestones, and parameters within projects.

Why should I practice active listening?

- Invite understanding of others

- Develop empathy for others and their responsibilities

- Build a connection with colleagues

- Promote trust

When you are practicing active listening, you make the effort to understand the speaker's point of view. Here are a few tips that can help you:

- **Be curious and consider all viewpoints.** You may hear suggestions or recommendations that differ from your own. While it's important to listen to what is being said, it can be much more helpful to understand **why** the idea was shared. You may need to look beyond your personal or team goals in certain situations.

- **To be an active listener, be engaged.** Taking notes is a great way to stay involved during meetings. By doing so, you are also creating documentation that you can reference later. A good practice is to verify your notes with someone who attended the same meeting, ensuring that you have the same understanding of roles, responsibilities, and project goals.

- **Listen to respond.** Place a high value on the insights gained from others. Resist any tendency to formulate responses before the other person has finished talking. Give yourself time to consider what is being communicated. Often these ideas could spark creativity and innovative problem-solving.

One-on-one and small groups

- **Schedule time to talk.** Set a time when you are able to focus and provide undivided attention. If you're not able to give the conversation the proper focus, reschedule.

- **Convey interest.** Show the other person that you are invested in the conversation. Make eye contact, focus on the speaker, and place your phone face down.

- **Check for alignment.** Make sure that you understand what is being said. For example, "What I am hearing you say is that_____. Is that correct?"

- **Demonstrate patience.** Not everyone will be able to follow your explanation of data processes. You may be asked to repeat or re-approach certain information.

Asking Questions

Data professional work is not an automated solution generator. For data analysis to be effective, data professionals need to ask the correct questions. In fact, the entire data analytical process depends on it.

Asking questions is a powerful communication tool. Asking the right questions can lead to institutional learning and a fruitful exchange of ideas. Many times, questions invite innovation and initiate efforts that can help improve projects and overall workflow.

Asking questions builds rapport and trust among team members. The right questions can often help mitigate business risks by uncovering unforeseen pitfalls and hazards.

Why should I ask questions?

- Help you learn and grow

- Create rapport with stakeholders and make stronger connections

- Show others you are passionate about deepening your understanding of your work

Here are a few tips to help guide your questioning.

Ask better questions

- **Be sure that the answer hasn't been provided already.** If you are new to a company or a team, this will be expected. If you are invited to a meeting, you can prepare by reviewing the frequently asked questions (FAQs) on the company website, company documents, and other provided resources.

- **Understand how best to ask questions in your team.** Many companies use an online messaging system. This is much less time consuming than a meeting, phone call, or email.

- **Ask questions that go after the bigger picture.** Each stakeholder has their own point of view on a project. Gaining insight into the responsibilities of other stakeholders helps to clarify the goals of the entire project.

- **Be sure your question is about gathering information or furthering the knowledge of the team.** Asking clarifying questions that are relevant to the project can benefit everyone. It's also important to respect everyone in attendance and reserve questions about individual concerns for a one-on-one conversation.

- **Ask questions that can help clarify.** This helps to eliminate misunderstandings and open dialogues that can benefit everyone. If you miss a point or are having trouble understanding something, don't be afraid to ask for the speaker to repeat it. If you would like additional information, just ask.

Offer direct responses to questions

Here are a few tips to help you sharpen your communication skills:

- Time demands and deadlines require efficient communication

- Think before you respond

- Select the correct words to deliver your message

- Directly address the questions posed

- Be aware of your tone

- If communicating in-person or on camera, consider body language

- Be clear and concise

It's also important to keep in mind that it's ok to not know the answer to someone's question. No one is expected to have all the answers all the time! If you are unsure about how to respond, let the person know that you will look into the issue and follow up with them in the near future. For example, you can say, "I don't have that information at hand, but I'll investigate and get back to you."

Key takeaways

In this reading, you learned that communication is present in all aspects of data professional work. By becoming an active listener that asks relevant questions, you enable more efficient communication and invite the perspective of other stakeholders.

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