Top data professional communication practices

The importance of communication and the PACE framework

You have learned about three key elements of communication: the purpose, the sender, and the receiver. You also learned that your message is at the heart of the relationship between purpose, sender and receiver. Your message is impacted by all these key elements of communication and each element affects your message in very different ways. In this reading, you will learn more about communication and analyze some examples of how to become a more effective communicator.

Over the course of a typical work day, you will interact with various stakeholders through a variety of correspondence. Some of your interactions will be through emails and messaging, others through meetings and one-on-one conversations. You could be speaking to a colleague about network architecture while receiving an email from a marketing executive inquiring about quarterly reports. Each interaction requires an individualized approach to ensure that your audience understands what you are trying to communicate.

Communication is important. It flows through each stage of PACE, whether collecting data, constructing models or sharing results. Regardless of where you are within the PACE framework, revision and clarification are part of a thoughtful analysis. Throughout the stages of PACE, stakeholders can offer feedback, pose questions, or ask for clarification. Here are five best practices to guide your communications through any stage of the PACE framework.

Five tips for effective communication

1. Speak the language of your audience

Identify the needs of your audience. It is important to know the objectives of the person you are communicating with. Focusing on their needs allows you to gain insight and assess how technical the conversation should be. Consider the following questions:

- Why has this person contacted you?

- What does your stakeholder want from this interaction?

- What's important to them, their team, or their organization?

In your role as a data professional, you will interact with a variety of stakeholders. When speaking to another data professional, the exchange can go deeper into technical concepts. When sharing information with an executive who may not be familiar with those more technical aspects of your work, you need to consider what is important to someone in an executive role. Determine what they know, what they need to know, and what might go beyond their level of involvement in a project.

- Break down technical concepts into simpler terms.

- Use shorter sentences so main ideas are easier to understand and remember.

- Use direct language and minimize embellishments or unnecessary detail.

- Pay attention to diverse backgrounds and respect the lived experiences of others.

Pro tip: Avoid jargon, acronyms, and technical "buzzwords" that could lead to confusion.

2. Invite questions and welcome feedback

A data professional in the workplace must expect feedback and questions. Since your recommendations can have an impact on the future decisions of your company and its employees, it is natural to want your work to be perfect. The reality is that everyone can use feedback--whether it is positive or points out areas for improvement. When you are deep into a task, focused on the details, it is possible to overlook something. Feedback is essential since no single person can envision every possible perspective. Another person's feedback offers you a great way to gather insights for your personal growth and professional excellence. By accepting the challenge that feedback and questions present, you will strengthen your own skills and help the overall project.

- Merge your passion for finding solutions with the goals of the project.

- Continue to strive for greater understanding of the results.

- Elicit feedback and questions to improve communication about your projects.

- Consider opportunities to reflect on your communication skills.

Pro tip: Analyze feedback. Is it valid? Does the person have a complete understanding of the goals of the project or data analytical process? If not, set up an additional meeting to help clarify.

3. Be the connection to the data

You are your team's direct connection to the insights your data offers. Your goal is to help other stakeholders understand the process and how it addresses their needs. When everyone understands the process, communication can be highly effective.

- Focus on the objectives to help others better understand your data process.

- Tell the story of the data with a compelling and cohesive narrative.

- Respond to questions in a timely manner.

- Demonstrate your value to the team.

- Find opportunities to address stakeholder questions.

Pro tip: Continue to proactively identify ways the data and tools you have access to can address the objectives of your team and drive new insights.

4. Let your visualizations help tell the story

Visualizations are one of the best ways to communicate ideas, especially when dealing with big data. Visual references help bring to life the details inside your data. Graphs, charts and infographics can promote general understanding. Later you will explore Tableau, a visualization tool that you can use to create compelling visuals from data.

- Be sure that your visuals tell the story within the data.

- Design visualizations for inclusivity.

- Use labels and text to clarify, not clutter. Use fonts that are easy to read.

- Use high contrast, shading, and other customizations to communicate your messages clearly.

- Offer handouts, slides, and other material in accessible formats.

Pro tip: Keep visualizations simple. When deciding what to include in a presentation, less is more.

5. Build positive professional relationships

When you consider the responsibilities and objectives of others, your communication will reflect that consideration. This builds credibility and influence in your workplace and allows you to continue growing throughout your career.

- Focus on what matters to your audience.

- Invite feedback and discussion.

- Be a trusted subject matter expert who communicates clearly and inclusively.

- Cultivate positive interactions to strengthen working relationships and improve morale.

Pro tip: When you are contacted by a stakeholder, be accessible and engaged in your communication.

Key takeaways

Effective communication is important for data professionals. Regardless of where you are in the framework of a project, communication can inform and empower your stakeholders. Identify the needs of your audience and invite feedback. Remember that your role is to connect the data, technology and the stakeholders. Demonstrate your value by being available and ready to share insights in a simple way that promotes general understanding.

Resources for more information

- How to make your presentations accessible to all ↗: Suggestions from the Web Accessibility Initiative

- Build accessible dashboards in Tableau ↗: Tips for creating accessible dashboards

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