

# ACCENT ON CLARITY

Communication has become more complex—and we might not realize that we often create our own barriers.

BY SHEILINA SOMANI, FAPM, PMP, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



**Something as seemingly slight** as an accent can have a huge impact on communication.

While delivering a recent ethics and values session in the United Kingdom, a participant asked me how to manage communication across geographical boundaries, “especially when they have such difficult accents.”

The individual raising the question was completely unaware of his own accent, focusing solely upon issues he has had with team members and suppliers.

When communicating, perception can cause distortion. A speaker, or sender, perceives that he or she is saying something of interest and value, sharing information or seeking confirmation.

But if a listener, or receiver, has already decided a speaker is “difficult to understand,” he or she is predisposed to find a communication less interesting or useful, or to completely dismiss the content.

As project team members, we manage an increasing range of accents and vocabulary; variations arise from geographical, technological and colloquial sources. The receiver can choose to respond in a variety of ways—dismissive, inclusive, avuncular or judgmental.

When communicating, we can consciously choose our emotional state, our willingness to cooperate and how much time we want to invest.

## THE ART OF COMMUNICATION

How can we, as project professionals, improve communication in a global network? Some of the approaches I use include consciously increasing awareness of how I filter information, and selecting what I communicate and, indeed, what I receive.

As someone who is demonstrative when speaking, I literally sit on my hands and focus on the sender to ensure that I actively hear the content, rather than passively listening. It’s a conscious process that ensures I invest my attention fully.

I keep a notepad handy to illustrate the conversations, creating branches for other conversations already taking place or that have yet to be had.

When communicating, we have filters, including our emotional state, our willingness to cooperate **and how much time we want to invest.**

I also employ flip charts to illustrate and share content. When others have ideas and suggestions, they add to the charts. Subsequently, I photograph and distribute the images.

When communicating remotely, I often use Skype. Prior to the call, I send annotated documentation and images. I always clearly number each item so we can cover them during the call without team members having to struggle with terminology, enunciation or pronunciation. After we’ve exchanged pleasantries, the team runs the meeting, citing the numbers with which they’d like to start and finish.

When we work on Skype, we have agreed practices of rechecking what we’ve heard from one another, regularly summarizing the information. When the conversation has concluded, we circulate written updates and include images.

As technology advances, project professionals will need to master an exponentially growing skill set. However, we still need traditional values: respect, appreciation, acknowledgement and collaboration.

We often have different accents, intonations and approaches to communication, but we all have a similar goal: to successfully deliver working solutions to our users.

So with good humor, grace and patient repetition, we can rise above communication distortion. **PM**



Sheilina Somani, FAPM, PMP, is the owner of the U.K.-based consultancy Positively Project Management, a project manager, a speaker and a mentor.

This material has been reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner. Unauthorized reproduction of this material is strictly prohibited. For permission to reproduce this material, please contact PMI.