Principles of Management and Leadership in an Organisational Context

Lesson 7

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Study Information and Tips

This Study Text replicates the video content for the lesson

Supplementary knowledge can also be found in the information sheets and text boxes that accompany the videos, as well as in the resources in the Insights section

Activities to help you consolidate your knowledge are deliberately delivered through practice questions and exercises found in the Test and Apply sections on the VLE. These help you to further build on your knowledge and apply the learning in a way that supports your assessment

You can use this Study Text to test your understanding of the learning content at the end of each lesson. It may also be helpful to refer to it when preparing for your assessments

We recommend that you also produce your own notes in addition to the Study Text. Research has shown that handwritten notes can be very effective for learning retention

If you decide to print this Study Text, set the layout to print 4 or 6 slides per page to save on paper and ink

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Factors Affecting Communication Techniques for Managers and Leaders

Communications channels and methods

Factors that influence the effectiveness of communication techniques

Communicating Effectively

In this lesson, we'll consider the factors that affect how we choose to communicate with others, and some of the methods that help us communicate more effectively.

The CMI defines communication as 'the exchange of messages – including information, ideas, attitudes, emotions, opinions and instructions – between individuals and groups, with the aim of creating understanding and coordinating activities'.

Communicating Effectively (cont.)

Communicating effectively with your team members and stakeholders will save you all manner of headaches during your managerial career.

Firstly, of course, people need to understand your instructions so they can follow them. But beyond this, the way you communicate can build a relationship with your team that makes them happier to carry out the tasks you require. Performance can even be enhanced as a result.

This taps into the concept of leadership, too. Great leaders are able to communicate so well with their followers that they inspire them to work their hardest in pursuit of the desired goal.

Communication Techniques

The CMI's term 'communication techniques' can be understood in two ways.

Firstly, it can be used to describe methods such as active listening or awareness of our tone and body language.

Secondly, it can refer to communication channels – that is, the medium you use, such as emails, meetings, presentations and reports. Both meanings are important for effective communication, and we'll cover both in this lesson.

Transmitting Your Message

We'll turn first to the channels and media that can be used to transmit our message, before later looking at methods to help us ensure our message is understood.

There are a number of ways we can categorise different communication channels, such as digital versus analogue, or in-person versus remote. However, one of the most intuitive ways to categorise channels is to separate written communications from verbal communications, both of which can be digital too.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication takes place whenever we speak, whether this is in person such as in a meeting or presentation, or through technology such as a pre-recorded video, telephone call, video conference or webinar.
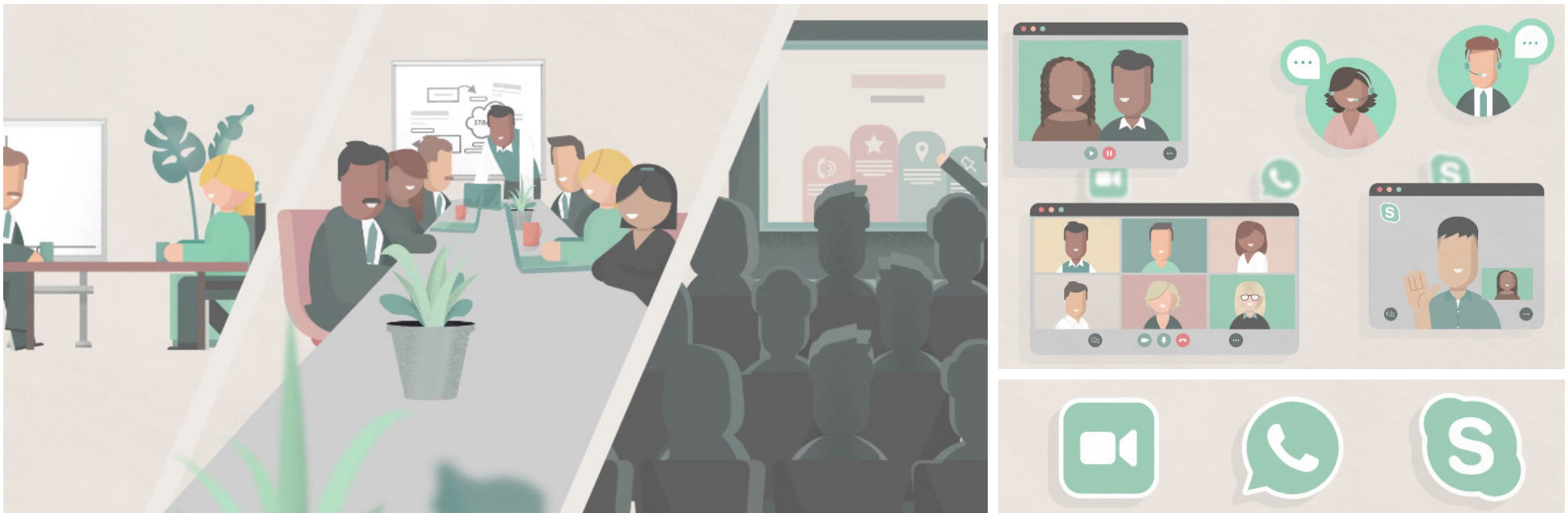
Written Communication

Written communication covers all methods of exchanging messages in writing, such as reports, but also messages written and transmitted using digital technology such as emails, websites, blogs, social media sites and instant messaging.

Choosing Appropriate Communication Channels

Managers can't assume that all these written and verbal methods are equally effective. They each have strengths and weaknesses, which can be more or less important depending on why the communication is needed.

The key point is to understand which communication channel or channels are most appropriate to use in any given situation.

Choosing Appropriate Communication Channels (cont.)

It is really important to consider this because not only can judicious selection improve our communication, poor selection has the potential to do outright damage.

For instance, have you ever felt offended by an email that delivered important news in an impersonal or insensitive way? Or perhaps you've received news in a team meeting that you felt should have been shared in a one-to-one catch-up?

Alternatively, you may have struggled to follow detailed information shared in an all-staff meeting, and would have instead appreciated a report that you could have digested in your own time.

'The Medium is the Message'

Marketers, whose business is effective communication, sometimes use the expression 'the medium is the message'.

This maxim, originated by the philosopher Marshall McLuhan, highlights the fact that sometimes the method – or medium – you select to communicate a message can send a powerful message in itself. The intent of a message can be entirely undermined by the channel that has been selected to communicate it.

Factors to Consider

Now let's look at the factors we need to consider when evaluating which communication methods will be most suitable.

These include :
- The nature of the information to be communicated, such as its complexity and sensitivity
- Timing
- The need for feedback
- Audience size and location, and other characteristics
- Costs

Nature of the Information

First, the method you choose needs to reflect the nature of the information you are presenting. For example, complex subject matter might be better suited to a report. In this way, people can process the information in their own time, rather than trying to take it all in during a single meeting.

On the other hand, you might need to share competitive information when explaining a decision. In this case, a meeting is preferable – you wouldn't want documents containing sensitive material to be misplaced.
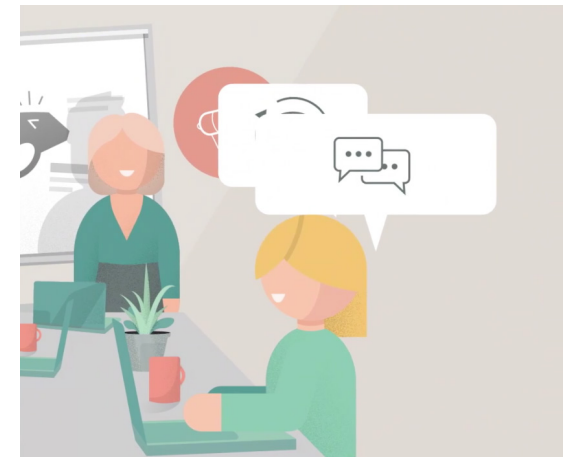
Timing

Next, you'll have to factor in timing – how quickly you need to communicate. If it's business critical information, you may need to share it with the entire organisation. If so, a group email could deliver the information more swiftly than an all-staff meeting.

However, you may find that not everyone will thoroughly read the news you're trying to deliver.

Feedback

You should also consider whether you need feedback from your audience, and if so, how quickly. If immediate feedback is important, a meeting or a post on the company's social media page might be better than a report.

On the other hand, you may be very keen to limit feedback – at least any that might be visible publicly. Posting an announcement, even internally, may be something you wish to avoid.

Audience Size and Location

Logistical factors, most notably your audience's size and location, will also affect the method you choose.

For example, if your audience is very large or spread over a wide area, a physical all-staff meeting may not be practical. An all-staff Skype meeting or webinar might be a better option.
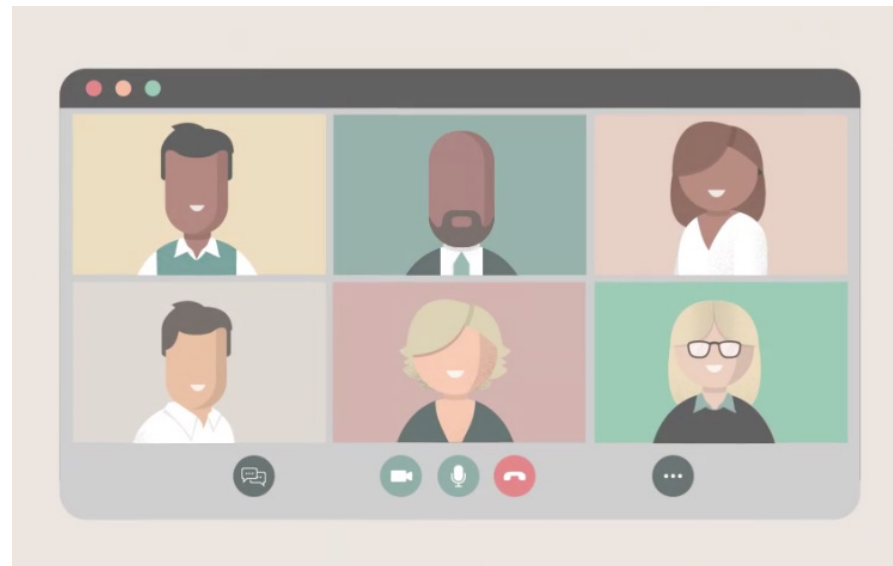
Audience Characteristics

You'll also need to consider whether your audience has any particular characteristics that are relevant to your choice. For instance, do any members have special visual, auditory or other needs that you should take into account?

More broadly speaking, as communications pioneer David Berlo maintained, your audience's characteristics include their knowledge and capabilities. There is no point in delivering complex financial information to people who are not practised in receiving it. Instead you need to break it down into layman's terms and put it in context, rather than blind them with complex terminology and inaccessible charts.

Audience's State of Mind

You should also take some time to reflect on the audience's current state of mind. For example, have they been subject to a large degree of change recently? Are they nervous about their roles or the future of the business? Do they feel that senior management are listening to them?

You might wish to select more personal or private communication methods, such as small-scale, face-to-face meetings, rather than impersonal reports, emails or very large gatherings.
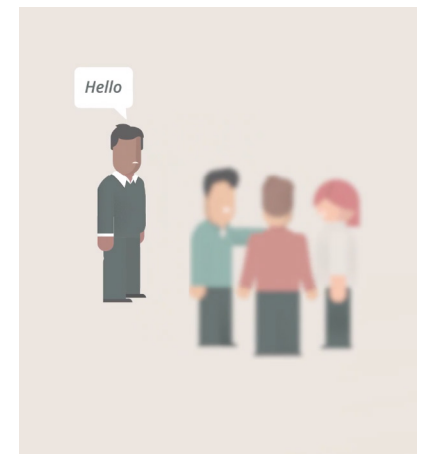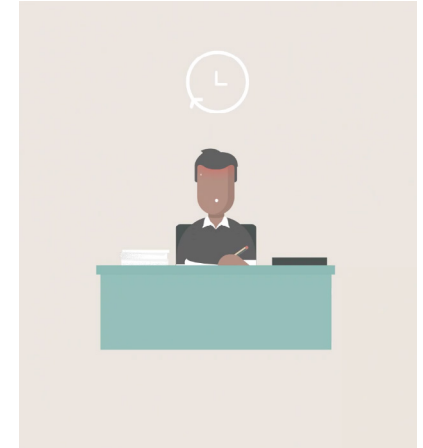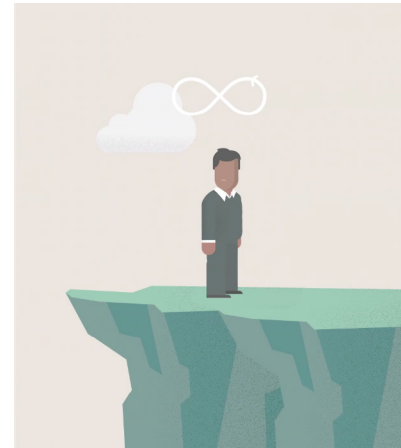
Costs

Finally, you'll need to factor in the costs involved in communicating. An internally produced report may be cheaper than an all-staff meeting, especially if you need to fly people in from various global offices. By the same token, a Skype presentation will be more cost-effective than a slick, externally produced video.

However, managers and leaders need to remember the cost of 'knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing', and appreciate the wisdom of investing in communication channels that will deliver the message so that is received as intended, and in good spirits.

Prioritising Factors

We've just explored a number of factors you need to consider when selecting a communication channel or channels. But you also need to evaluate which of these factors you should prioritise. For instance, speed, detail and feedback might all be important in a particular context, but you may decide that speed is the most important. Therefore, you might choose a phone call to deliver your message, but reference organising a meeting later, to cover the detail and have a discussion.

Understanding that not all factors are equally important when choosing communication channels can help focus your decision making, so you deliver a message more effectively.

Taking the Right Approach

We've just examined how important it is to think carefully about the communication channel you choose. Now, we'll move on to explore the second area of effective communication techniques – taking the right approach.

Some of this advice may sound obvious, but it's worth checking and re-checking we follow it throughout our careers, given how important communication is for sound management.

Verbal Communication

Let's start by thinking about verbal communication.

How we engage with others when we speak is crucial for effective communication. For instance, the content of our message may be carefully planned, but this will mean nothing if we use the wrong tone.

Verbal communication methods can be enhanced by a number of techniques, including:
– Attention to tone
– Attention to body language
– Active listening

Tone

We'll now look at each of these in more detail, starting with tone.

Let's consider the following phrase:
'I think it's time for a little catch up'.

If a manager delivers it in a disapproving, sarcastic and slightly sinister manner, it will be extremely unsettling for the person receiving it. They would approach the meeting with a sense of foreboding, and could be extremely anxious about what possible recriminations or accusations lay ahead.
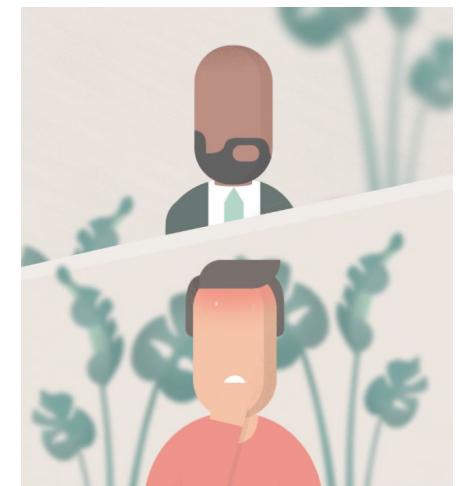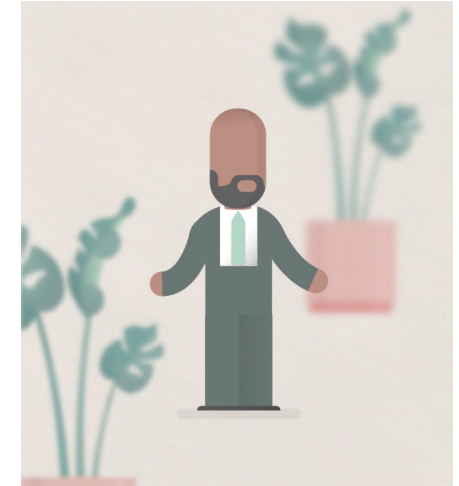
Tone (cont.)

Alternatively, a bright and breezy 'I think it's time for a little catch up' wouldn't present any such alarm – it would signal that now was a good opportunity for a standard meeting to touch base.

This is an exaggerated example, but illustrates that the way we deliver our words can be very important.

Tone (cont.)

Tone describes the intonation of the words we use, as well as the expression, volume and emphasis. Tone can signal our mood, but also audibly stress key words and phrases to help underscore our meaning.

For instance, a quality assurance manager may stress to all new recruits that she must be alerted to '**any** suspected quality issues on the production line', rather than 'any suspected quality issues on the production line', so that team members are encouraged to alert her to even the smallest problem.
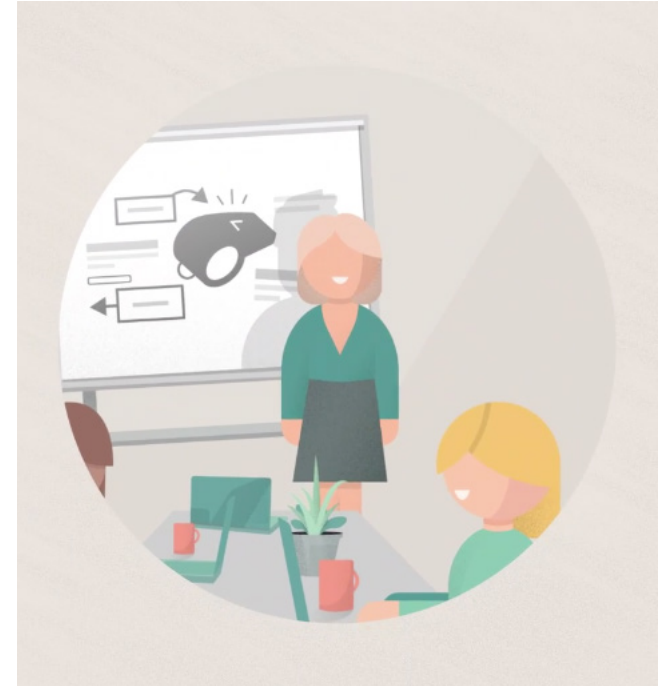
Volume

We also need to adapt our volume in certain situations in order to communicate more effectively.

No one wants to strain to hear a presentation, for example, so you need to project your voice when delivering to a large group. But you might speak more quietly when discussing difficulties a team member has been having at work, to help them open up to you and trust that you are dealing with their problems in confidence.

Body Language

The second technique we need to develop is awareness of our body language, which can send powerful signals.

Have you ever looked around the room during a meeting and noticed your colleagues' body language? You may have been surprised by how unengaged one of them looks, while another might look downright hostile. They may not have said a word, but you can pick up on these feelings by observing their body language. Crossed arms can be perceived by others as defensiveness or even anger, and low levels of eye contact or, worse still, not even looking in the direction of those who are speaking, can signal boredom.

Body Language (cont.)

If you spoke to your team members after the meeting, they might be horrified by the way their body language had been understood.

This could be due to embarrassment that their true feelings were so obvious, but, alternatively, could be because their body language was misread. Crossed arms could have resulted from feeling vulnerable, or even the air conditioning being cold. Some people frown when concentrating, not because they are angry.

Body Language (cont.)

However, the fact that body language can be misread means that you need to be fully alert to your own body language, and use it to help the delivery of your message, rather than hinder it.

Ensure you address the recipients of your message directly, using eye contact where appropriate, but not to the extent that it's intimidating. This can help you communicate that you care about them hearing what you say. Keep your body upright to demonstrate that you're confident in what you're saying, whether it's good or bad news. Tilting your head to one side when listening to another can help signal that you're sympathetic to their views.

Adjusting our Message

You might also want to ask a colleague or friend you trust for feedback on your body language, as it can sometimes be hard to observe our own behaviour. Awareness and practice can help improve the messages your body language sends.

But communication isn't all about delivering our message. We need to understand what others have taken it to mean, and understand their needs, thoughts and feelings. We can then adjust our message, or the way we communicate it, accordingly.
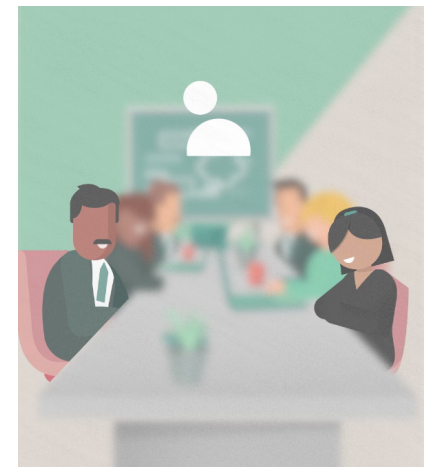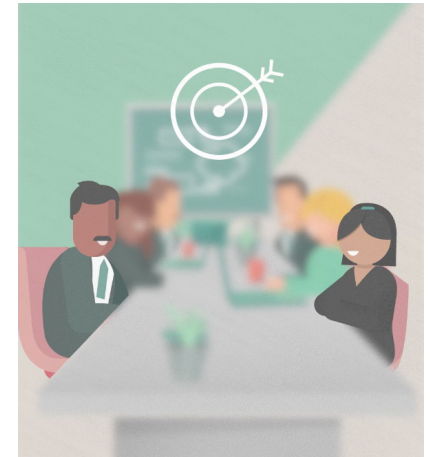
Active Listening

We'll now look at how paying attention to our listening abilities helps us become better communicators.

One of the most famous techniques to help improve our listening – and therefore our overall communication – is known as 'active listening'. This term was popularised by psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson from the late 1950s. They described it as listening sensitively, to the extent that it could bring about changes in those being listened to. There are a number of key aspects to active listening.

Active Listening (cont.)

Firstly, you must tune out others and listen intently to the person speaking to you. You also need to ensure your expressions and body language make clear that this is the case. Tilting your head to one side, and making eye contact is important here, too.

While you will spend the majority of your time listening rather than speaking, there are three ways in which you'll need to talk to your speaker. Mirroring involves repeating key elements of what the speaker is saying, to demonstrate you have listened and understood. If a team member is complaining to his boss about a lack of cooperation from another department, briefly echoing lines such as 'no, not helpful at all' or 'yes, a considerable delay for you' could be useful.

Active Listening (cont.)

Clarifying or 'probing' questions help you to ensure you have fully understood what the speaker is saying, but also show you're paying attention to them and are interested. You might say 'so tell me more about how that affects your daily operations' or 'how does that make you feel'.

As the conversation reaches its end, it can be helpful to summarise the speaker's key points to show you've taken the time to listen, and to avoid any confusion. This is another opportunity to make the speaker feel listened to and valued. You might begin this by saying 'So, to summarise, the key points you wanted to make us aware of are…'. You may not agree with everything the speaker has said, but by taking the time to understand their viewpoint, you will be better placed to think about a mutually agreeable way forward, and have gained credit with them for actively listening to their position.
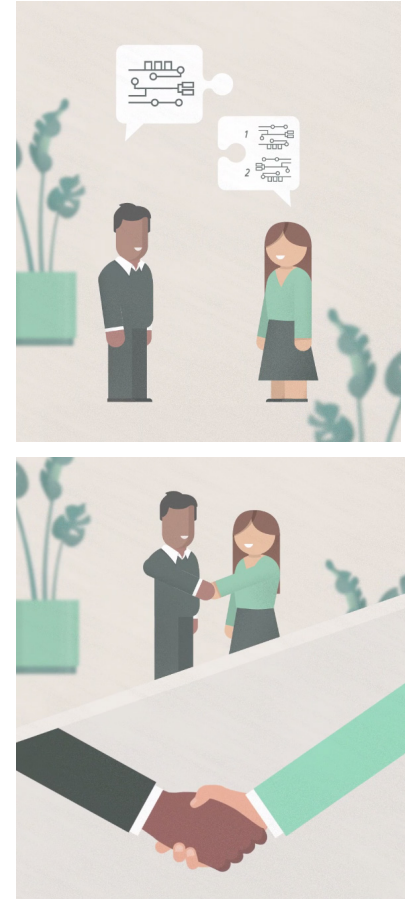
Written Tone

Let's now move on to consider some pointers that can help our written communication.

Tone is as important in written communication as in verbal. It's likely you've received more than one email in your career that sounded unnecessarily abrupt, blunt or even downright rude. It's also likely that in at least some of these cases, that wasn't the sender's intention at all.
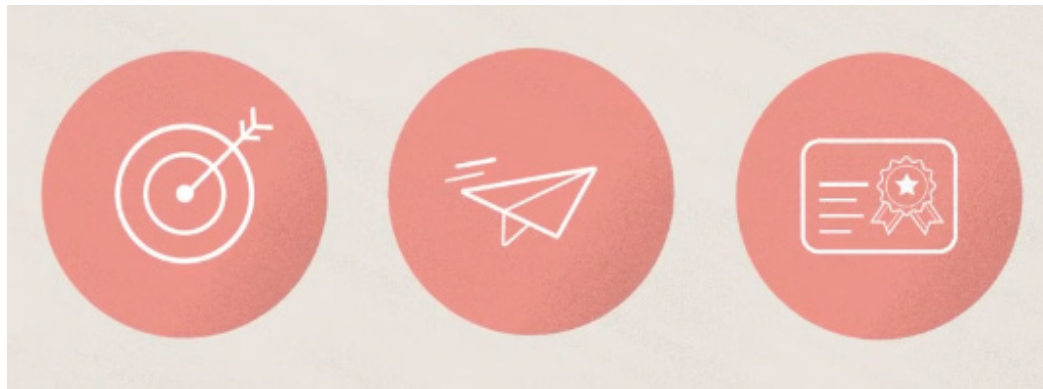
Written Tone (cont.)

Tone can be difficult to convey in writing, so you need to pay extra attention in order to communicate politely, injecting warmth where appropriate. Expressing gratitude can go a long way to ensuring that the overall tone of your email comes across positively, as can checking that none of your requests could be interpreted as orders.

Reading and re-reading your writing is also important, to look for passages that could be viewed as being challenging or irritable in any way, where this was not your intent.

Proofreading

Our writing can also send a different message, if we aren't careful. Emails or reports strewn with typos, and poor grammar and punctuation say that we don't care about the recipient, the task in hand, or both. Some recipients might even question our competence.

Checking our own work is vital, but technology is also useful. Specialist software packages can help those with dyslexia, and most word-processing software will automatically check for errors and even suspected errors. Sometimes, however, there's nothing better than a fresh pair of eyes, so for particularly important communications it's well worth asking a colleague to proof-read your work.

Effective communication, day-to-day, can help build an environment in which individuals feel comfortable and secure and are best placed to perform at their best. We'll cover the benefits of such a climate in our next lesson.

Recap

In this lesson, you have learned about:

- Communications channels and methods
- Factors that influence the effectiveness of communication techniques