

The Importance of Effective Communication in the Workplace

It doesn't matter whether you rely primarily on interpersonal communication, email, written copy, or some other form of messaging to connect with coworkers, employees and customers. It's important to differentiate between business and everyday communication by keeping the former polished, professional and clear.

Avoiding Pitfalls: 7 Common Barriers to Effective Communication and How to Break Them

Have you committed or been the victim of one of the following communication faux-pas? Don't worry, you're not alone! You can recover, and by implementing some of these easy recommendations, you'll be on your way to exemplary inter-office communication in no time!

1. **Speaking in Unclear Terms:** One of the biggest mistakes we make when communicating with others is narrating through our own perception and understanding. In this way, we take for granted the importance of plain language. Don't assume your audience always understands your intention and meaning. Be sure to set up the scenario, provide useful background information or a

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contextual recap, and speak slowly and clearly.

2. **Distractions:** Another common barrier to effective communication is distraction. In a time when multi-tasking and hyper-connectedness are ubiquitous, it can be really difficult to get the attention you deserve when trying to relay an important message. On the other hand, it can also be hard to consciously avoid distractions when giving your attention to someone else (or even the task in front of you). It stinks when we feel like we're not being paid attention to. Don't make the people you work with feel that way. We all know everyone's time is valuable, and as such, it should be respected. Making someone repeat themselves because you were checking your phone notifications while they were talking is disrespectful and unprofessional. It also conveys the message that they're boring you, that your time is more important than theirs, or that they're attempting to communicate about a topic that doesn't matter to you. So, when you're talking to someone, whether over the phone or face-to-face (especially if you're in a meeting), do everyone a favor, including yourself: silence the incoming calls by putting your desk phone on Do Not Disturb mode, turn your cell phone to silent and put it in your desk drawer, and close your email application so that your attention and focus are on the task at hand and the people who are vying for your time.

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3. **Responding Emotionally:** Ever heard the advice "think before you hit send?" Whether you're texting or emailing (and this applies to both your professional *and* personal life), it's always a good idea to take a step back when you could be *reacting* to something rather than *responding*. If an interaction, issue, or occurrence has ruffled your feathers, take a half hour to let off some steam before blurting out something you'll regret.

 4. **Communicating Via Email About Important Issues:** When a decision needs to be made, a deadline needs to be met, or an issue needs to be resolved, I probably don't have to tell you that email is *not* the ideal way to communicate. For one thing, there's no real urgency. It doesn't matter what you put in the subject line or whether you mark or flag the email as urgent. If it's so important (and if you want to be sure it's understood and handled promptly), it deserves a phone call or a face-to-face. Secondly, the absence of audible and visual cues like tone, inflection, and body language can lead to misunderstandings which eventually become problematic. So much is assumed through text-based communication, and intent can be frequently misread (or altogether missed). And, when expectations aren't clear people tend to jump to conclusions. The burden doesn't land entirely in the other party's lap for not asking you to clarify if you didn't make a concerted effort to be as clear as possible. So pick up the phone or stop by someone's desk if you have a pressing need to communicate on an important topic. Then follow up with an email to recap and document the conversation and expectations, if necessary.

 5. **Inappropriate Gestures or Comments:** It's important not to offend anyone at work, you know that. But you may be unaware of

the eyes and ears that could be on you at all times, and perhaps you get carried away joking around with your work BFF at the water cooler on your lunch break and inadvertently make someone uncomfortable. Profanity, derogatory comments of any nature and workplace complaints are taken very seriously by HR departments. Always compose yourself as if someone is watching or listening. Overuse of physical cues also falls under the realm of inappropriate gestures. We get it; you talk with your hands. But try to keep your gesticulating to a minimum, especially in situations where you're presenting to a senior group of colleagues. It's distracting and it can undermine your message.

6. **Lack of Enthusiasm and/or Eye Contact:** Nothing says "don't believe a word I say" or "don't buy from me" like a lack of enthusiasm and conviction. Look alive and show some excitement; display some expertise by providing facts which will help your passion shine through. Don't be afraid to inject some personality into a conversation so that people can relate to you without thinking that you're a lackluster business 'bot. And when you get the chance to converse with or present to someone in person, maintain eye contact as much as possible. In a one-on-one conversation, your counterpart will think you're disengaged, distracted and disinterested if you don't look up from what you're doing to meet their gaze. Much gets lost in translation without eye contact, and valuable opportunities for positive connection are missed. In a situation where you're presenting, do your best to come prepared with an outline of what you're going to say and try not to read directly from notes or slides. Look around the room and shift your attention from person to person. It will make you appear more confident, poised and organized.

7. **Nerves and/or Lack of Focus:** Unless you're the most confident person in the world, you've probably experienced nervousness at some point or another. The idea of public speaking, or even communicating to a small group, makes a lot of people very anxious. This can understandably destroy one's focus and derail the effective delivery of ideas. Concentration can also be a problem for those who don't suffer from stage fright, though - when distracted or unprepared, people tend to ramble, talk in circles, or become unresponsive. To get ahead of the nerves, calm your scattered mind and maintain your focus, try taking a few deep breaths before heading into any meeting. Request that all participants turn off their cell phones or refrain from bringing them to the meeting so that they won't be disruptive, and always jot down a quick outline of the points you wish to address and where you stand on important issues. If you're not the presenter, your involvement will be expected, but it's essential to respect everyone's time by getting to the point quickly, making yourself clear, and keeping things on topic. Questions or comments unrelated to the current discussion should be written down and saved for later.

"The most powerful leadership tool you have is your own personal example."

John Wooden

What's In It For You?

As individuals and professionals, if we aren't constantly improving we're declining. By refining your communication skills, you'll not only further your evolutionary progress but you'll gain the respect of your coworkers, be viewed as a trustworthy, no-nonsense individual with whom people like to interact, and you'll notice that things start going a lot more smoothly. It will also make you more marketable: organizations place a premium on exceptional interpersonal skills.

Some rules of thumb for ensuring you're always taking measures to effectively communicate include being an active listener, asking for clarification when you don't understand, reflecting and thinking before you respond, verifying your listener's comprehension, and offering/requesting appropriate feedback. In today's environment, sometimes we have to press the reset button and revert to manual tune-ups when things start getting too automatic, but it pays off.

Perfecting your professional communications will pay dividends. When businesses communicate to their customers in the right way, success is magnetic and undeniable.

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http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Jessica_Champion



1650 Faxon Avenue
Memphis, TN 38112
Tel: 901-272-7390

bburtch@harmonycc.net
www.harmonycc.net

Schedule of Public Courses

The following courses are being offered to the public by Harmony Coaching & Consulting. Click on the associated link for more information on the program or to register.

Course Title	Date(s)	Time	For More Information/Registration
SHRM Learning System® is the preparation course for the HR Certification Exam <i>(Every other Saturday)</i>	September 26 – December 5, 2015	8:30AM – 4:30PM	http://www.cbu.edu/shrm
The Coaching Clinic® is a two-day workshop for executives, managers and leaders to experience and learn coaching skills and competencies.	November 19 & 20, 2015	8:30AM – 5:00PM	www.harmonycc.net/coaching-clinic.php

