

COMMUNICATE, LEAD, AND TRANSFORM

Behaviors to Break Free from
Your Mental Wheel Ruts

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CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xii
About the Authors	xiii
1 Communicate, Lead, and Transform	1
Chapter Roadmap	1
1.1 The Definitions	2
1.2 The Foundation	4
1.3 The Path Through the Chapters	6
1.4 Part I: Communication	9
1.5 Part II: Leadership	9
1.6 Part III: Transformation	10
1.7 Key Takeaways	10
Endnotes	10
Part I: Communication	13
<hr/>	
2 Failing to Communicate Is Not an Option.	15
Chapter Roadmap	15
2.1 The Communication Process.	15
2.2 Assessing Your Communications Behaviors	18
2.3 Communicating in the Virtual Environment	23
2.4 Reconfirming the Path Forward	25
2.5 Key Takeaways	26
Endnotes	26

3	Who Are You? Your Personality Traits	29
	Chapter Roadmap	29
	3.1 Introduction	30
	3.2 The Insight Inventory®—An Overview	30
	3.3 Understanding Your Personality Traits	32
	3.4 Focus Areas for Improvement	43
	3.5 Improving Team Performance	44
	3.6 Key Takeaways	45
	Endnotes	46
4	Listen Better to Succeed	47
	Chapter Roadmap	47
	4.1 The Benefits of Improved Listening and Questioning	47
	4.2 Listening Instead of Hearing	49
	4.3 Sharpening Your Listening Skills	49
	4.4 Understanding the Barriers to Listening Effectively	52
	4.5 Asking Better Questions	55
	4.6 Focus Area Update for Listening and Questioning	57
	4.7 Key Takeaways	57
	Endnote	58
5	Receiving and Giving Feedback—Are You Ready?	59
	Chapter Roadmap	59
	5.1 Introduction	60
	5.2 Receiving Feedback About Yourself—Your Experiences	61
	5.3 Enablers and Barriers to Feedback About Ourselves	65
	5.4 Not All Feedback Has the Same Purpose	69
	5.5 How to Manage or Decline Feedback	74
	5.6 Giving Feedback—Your Experiences	76
	5.7 Practical Guide for Providing Feedback	80
	5.8 Three Modes of Feedback	83
	5.9 Challenging Performance Evaluations	89
	5.10 Expectations, Commitments, Permissions	92
	5.11 Feedback in the Virtual Environment	93
	5.12 Focus Area Update for Giving Feedback	94
	5.13 Prioritizing Feedback Focus Areas	94
	5.14 Key Takeaways	95
	Endnotes	96

6	Every Relationship Has Value	99
	Chapter Roadmap	99
	6.1 Introduction—The Language of Relationships	100
	6.2 An Assessment of Your Relationships	102
	6.3 Going Forward: Create a Relationship-Building Strategy	106
	6.4 Relationship Enablers	111
	6.5 Relationship Inhibitors	112
	6.6 Building/Maintaining Relationships in the Virtual Environment	113
	6.7 Key Takeaways	115
	Endnotes	115
7	Consequential Communication	117
	Chapter Roadmap	117
	7.1 Perform an Assessment	118
	7.2 Plan the Conversation	121
	7.3 Conduct the Conversation	122
	7.4 Close the Conversation	123
	7.5 Case Exercise	124
	7.6 Focus Area Update for Consequential Communication	124
	7.7 Key Takeaways	125
8	Mining Disagreements for Value	127
	Chapter Roadmap	127
	8.1 Introduction: What Are Disagreements/Conflicts?	128
	8.2 An Assessment of Your Experiences with Disagreements	129
	8.3 When Should You Resolve Disagreements?	133
	8.4 What Can You Do to Manage Disagreements/Conflicts?	135
	8.5 Strategies for Managing Disagreements/Conflicts	138
	8.6 Checklist for Responses to Disagreements	141
	8.7 Focus Area Update for Disagreeing Well	145
	8.8 Key Takeaways	145
	Endnotes	146

9 Presenting Is Leading 147

Chapter Roadmap 147

9.1 Opening Exercise 147

9.2 Know Your Constituents 149

9.3 Know Your Message 150

9.4 Do Your Research 152

9.5 Organize Your Presentation 153

9.6 Overcoming Anxiety 155

9.7 Deliver 156

9.8 Focus Area Update for Presenting Is Leading 158

9.9 Selecting Your Highest Priority Communication
Focus Areas 159

9.10 Key Takeaways 162

Endnotes 163

Part II: Leadership 165

10 Lead to Succeed 167

Chapter Roadmap 167

10.1 What Leadership Is—The Basics 168

10.2 Assessing Your Leadership Behaviors 173

10.3 What Leaders Say 174

10.4 Why People Follow 175

10.5 Leading in the Virtual Environment 178

10.6 Updating Your Leadership Focus Areas 180

10.7 Key Takeaways 181

Endnotes 181

11 Team Dynamics 185

Chapter Roadmap 185

11.1 Characteristics of Great Teams 186

11.2 Forming a Team 186

11.3 Leading Through the Storm 189

11.4 Norming the Way 191

11.5 Performing for Greater Results 193

11.6	Adjourning	193
11.7	Focus Area Update for Team Dynamics	194
11.8	Key Takeaways	195
12	Coaching for Success	197
	Chapter Roadmap	197
12.1	Accountability for Results	198
12.2	Characteristics of an Effective Coach	199
12.3	The Continuous Cycle of Coaching	202
12.4	Coaching the Team	206
12.6	Focus Area Update for Coaching for Success	208
12.7	Key Takeaways	209
13	Good Teams to Great Teams	211
	Chapter Roadmap	211
13.1	Developing a High-Performing Team: The Role of the Leader	212
13.2	Building Trust	213
13.3	Commitment to Mission	214
13.4	Unbridled Communication	217
13.5	Adapt to Change	221
13.6	Accountability for Results	224
13.7	Leading Self-Organizing Teams	228
13.8	Concluding Remarks	229
13.9	Establishing Your Focus Areas for Developing a High-Performing Team	232
13.10	Selecting Your Leadership Transformation Focus Areas	233
13.11	Key Takeaways	236
	Endnotes	237
Part III: Transformation		239
14	Transformation: Develop Your Plan—Make It Happen	241
	Chapter Roadmap	241
14.1	Your Personal Transformational Journey	241

14.2 Transforming Your Team	248
14.3 Key Takeaways	250
Appendix A: The Johari Window	251
Appendix B: Relationship-Building Tool	253
Appendix C: Multi-Criteria Decision Tool	255
Appendix D: Goals, Planning, and Metrics Templates.	259
Appendix E: Example: Team Ground Rules.	265
Appendix F: Facilitation Guide	267
Index	271

PREFACE

Numerous books on how to improve your leadership and communication skills are based solely on theory or the author's experiences. This is not one of them. This book employs an empirical approach to meaningful improvement and aims to help you leverage your own observations, experiences, and learning experiments, not just ours as the authors. You'll be asked to think about what worked and what didn't, as well as what you did to achieve or hinder your desired outcomes. You will also be asked to elaborate on what behaviors you believe you should start, increase, stop, or decrease. Throughout this book, we will share our observations and what we have learned over many decades of training leaders in order to assist you with identifying focus areas for improvement. As you might infer, the emphasis is a hands-on, practical application of behavior-based skills and how to grow into a successful communicator and, ultimately, a leader.

Leadership and its supporting skill, *communication*, impact everyone, regardless of their position or role in an organization or whether we are referring to our personal or professional lives. Consider how your communication skills have influenced your life. You can probably think of numerous instances when you were an excellent communicator and others when you were not. Consider others who have influenced your life. Was their ability to communicate a critical component of their effectiveness? Almost everyone to whom we pose this question responds, "Yes." As a result, we believe that communication is one of the most critical skills to acquire as you make your way through life and on your journey to effective leadership.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION TODAY

Effective communication skills are more important than ever as we try to navigate through a world with numerous socioeconomic hurdles: the
(continues)

COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, migration/immigration disruption, unending political rhetoric, and the wail of those who feel they have been left behind. Pick up a newspaper, listen to a newscast, or open your smartphone to see the preponderance of evidence telling us that we are talking louder than ever to ears that are not listening and to minds so tired that they are closed.

The skill-building information in this book is based upon the research of successful leaders and our own experiences with thousands of people during our working, consulting, and training careers. These professional experiences have taken place in some of the largest oil, petrochemical, healthcare, airline, banking, and information technology organizations in the world. Our academic experiences as adjunct professors at Rice University and the University of Houston, as well as being certified trainers for the Project Management Institute, have reinforced our conviction that good communication is a vital component of a leader's success.

So, how do leaders communicate to transform organizations? It encompasses more than just motivational lectures. A splendid illustration is the story of the transformation of Continental Airlines in the late 1990s under CEO Gordon Bethune¹ and COO Greg Brenneman.² Continental offered employees a \$65 bonus every month that Continental was among the top five U.S. airlines with on-time arrivals. When the checks were first issued, Kay, Gordon's administrative assistant, waved her check and thanked Gordon for acknowledging everyone's work. Gordon looked at the check and said, "This is not \$65." Kay responded with, "They have to take out taxes." Gordon picked up the phone, called HR, and told them to "Gross up all the checks and ensure that everyone receives \$65." It cost Continental less than \$10 per employee per month for this modification, but the tale spread like wildfire throughout the company. Senior executives at Continental began to listen and communicate the importance of employees by deeds, not just words. Bethune developed a strong team at Continental, fostering relationships and trust across the firm. Continental moved from being the poorest among the largest airlines in the United States to being first in all 10 of the Department of Transportation's customer service indicators in less than a year. By the way, the initiative was self-funding due to the cost savings associated with fewer flight delays and cancellations.

Transformative communication and leadership behaviors involve a commitment to improvement, patience, practice, change, hard work, and small victories in order to reinforce your efforts. However, you have to start somewhere. This book is intended to serve as a jumping-off point. We wish you success on your adventure!

ENDNOTES

1. Bethune, Gordon. 1998. *From Worst to First: Behind the Scenes of Continental's Remarkable Comeback*. New York. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
2. Brenneman, Greg. "Right Away and All at Once: How We Saved Continental," *Harvard Business Review*, Sept–Oct 1998, pp. 162–168.

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- Isaac Montoya provided candid comments on the opening chapters and how they helped (or hindered) the reader's journey.
- Dr. Kurt Edwards gave us a physician's perspective on our efforts and helped clarify many of the concepts presented in this book.
- Patrick Handley of the INSIGHT Institute did yeoman's work in reviewing and editing Chapter 3 in regards to the INSIGHT Inventory®. In addition, thank you, Patrick, for recommending excellent editors Kristen at Upwork and Imane at Fiverr.
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Besides the list above, a big thank you goes to the students at the Glasscock School of Continuing Studies at Rice University who attended our soft school classes and validated many of the exercises contained in this book. These exercises are the bedrock for building new habits for improving communication and leadership.

Bill Murray
Eddie Merla
June 2022

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

William J. Murray has over 45 years of industry experience including senior management at a large multinational chemical company; owner and managing director of W J Murray & Associates, a strategic management consulting organization; and as a senior consulting manager at Expressworks International, LLC, a change management consulting organization. He has also served as an adjunct professor at Rice University and the University of Houston. Bill's consulting focus is on assisting leaders in the development



and, more important, the execution of strategic plans. His consulting clients have included IBM, Chevron, Shell Oil of North America, United Airlines, Exxon Mobil, Rolls Royce, BMC Software, Kellogg Brown and Root, Baylor College of Medicine, Baker Ripley House, Saudi Aramco, the University of Texas Health Science Center, and the European Academy for Thoracic and Cardiac Surgery Limited.

During Murray's career, he realized the challenge people had with changing their behaviors. To grow professionally, people must often adopt new behaviors and/or abandon behaviors that have become ingrained habits. Bill developed a passion to provide a more realistic pathway to change rather than offering people a list of *do's* and *don'ts*. This pathway involves a commitment to change, hard work, patience, persistence, and a roadmap to guide people through the process of developing more productive behaviors.

Murray earned his undergraduate degree in chemical engineering from Texas Tech University and his MBA and Ph.D. in industrial psychology from the University of Utah. Murray also holds the Project Management Professional (PMP)[®] and Agile Certified Practitioner (PMI-ACP)[®] certifications from the Project Management Institute.

Eddie Merla, PMI-ACP, PMP, is the owner and founder of Duende Project Management Services, a training and consulting company. Over his many decades of experience, Eddie has implemented project management programs, strategies, and best practices for multiple organizations and in multiple industries. His project management engagements have included North America, Europe, the Middle East, South America, and Asia. He has also implemented organizational structures to support large projects and improve the delivery of project and program results.



In addition, Eddie has coached corporate clients in the transition from traditional project management practices to agile methods.

As a trainer and coach, Eddie has trained several thousand project management professionals throughout the world on project management, leadership, and soft skills topics. He has published articles with the Project Management Institute (PMI) and has been a frequent speaker at PMI Global Congresses, including the Latin America Congress, the EMEA Congress, the Asia Pacific Congress, and the North America Congress.

Eddie is an instructor at the Rice University Glasscock School of Continuing Education on project management topics, including preparing students for the Project Management Professional (PMP)[®] exam. Also at Rice Glasscock, he served as the primary subject matter expert for the development of the Strategic Project Management course and codeveloped the Soft Skills for Business Professionals course to help executives develop their communications and leadership skills.

If our book has helped you identify and change behaviors that has made you a more effective communicator and leader, please feel free to recommend it to others in your organization. In addition, we are available to provide seminars and workshops to take teams through a process of identifying desired communication and leadership behaviors and building habits to improve identified skill sets. To learn more about seminar and workshops offerings, contact either of the authors at:

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CHAPTER 1

COMMUNICATE, LEAD, AND TRANSFORM

“The difference between mere management and leadership is communication.”

—Winston Churchill

CHAPTER ROADMAP

This book will guide you on a journey to assess and improve your communication and leadership skills in the shortest amount of time. The skills addressed in this 14-chapter book include: disagreeing well, listening, building high performance teams, self-awareness, and relationship building—to name just a few. All topics are discussed in terms of communication and leadership. More specifically, the goals of this chapter are to:

1. Provide a definition of key terms used in this book to ensure understanding of processes, tools, and techniques presented.
2. Present the behavioral foundations for this book.
3. Provide a roadmap of how this book is organized to assist you in developing more effective communication and leadership skills (see Figure 1.1).

In addition to those three goals, this chapter also provides an overview of:

1. Part I: Communication
2. Part II: Leadership
3. Part III: Transformation—transforming skill areas you identify as crucial to improving your success as a communicator and as a leader into goals, plans to achieve those goals, and how you will measure progress

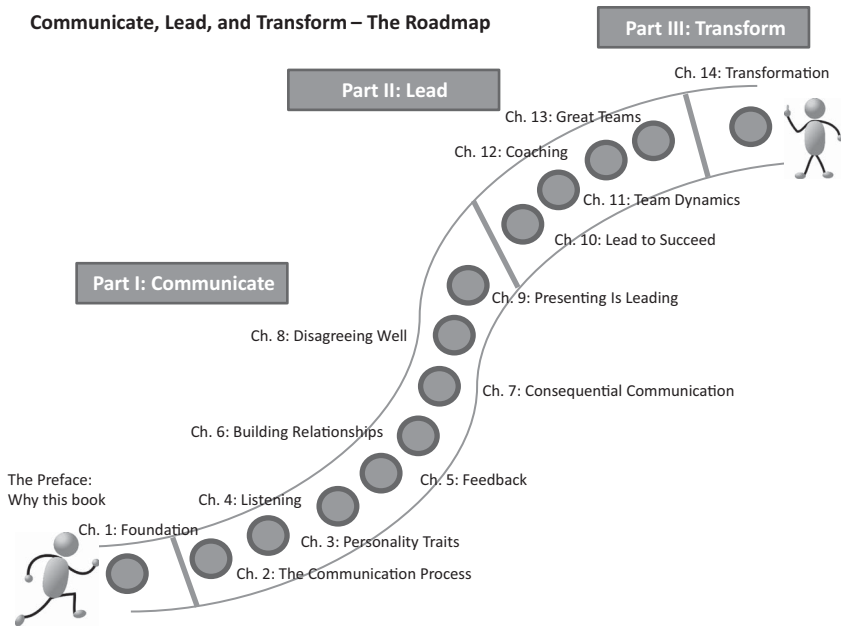


Figure 1.1 Chapter roadmap

1.1 THE DEFINITIONS

Communication, leadership, and transformation are powerful terms. As authors, we are committed and passionate about helping people become successful in all three. But skill development is a process with multiple levels of learning required to break the wheel ruts of the past and develop the skills and underlying behaviors necessary to produce success. It is important before we begin the journey of skill development to align the meaning of key terms and phrases used throughout this book:

1. **Skill:** A skill is the learned ability to do something well.¹ Skills are developed through learning, practice, and experience and enable people to perform an activity successfully. Skill is acquired after putting in a lot of hard work and using all available resources to develop it. Skills can be in technical activities such as writing software or investigating scientific questions. In this book, we will focus on *soft skills* such as communication, working well in a team, listening, leading, etc.
2. **Behavior:** A behavior is anything a person does in response to stimulation.² Behaviors can be thoughts, feelings, or physical

activity or all three in some sequence. It is important to clarify how skills and behaviors are related. *Listening is a skill. How a person listens is a behavior.* Let's say that a person listens (a skill) in order to respond (a behavior) so that when the speaker is finished talking, the listener is prepared with counterpoints (i.e., listening to respond). Now assume our listener (after reading Chapter 4, Listen Better to Succeed) decides to improve their listening skills by *listening to understand*. The skill is still listening but to improve it, our listener must change their behavior. Practicing new behaviors is therefore necessary for skill development. This book is focused on helping you practice behaviors that result in building skills in areas you have identified as important for you to grow as a communicator and a leader. Consequently, you will see the term *behavior-based skills* throughout this book in order to underscore the importance of the need to change behaviors in order to develop effective skills.

3. **Focus area:** *Focus area* is the term used in this book to identify higher priority behavior-based skills. There are tools, techniques, and exercises to assist you in identifying areas for development of behavior-based skills in each chapter. Among the many opportunities for development, you will be asked to prioritize those that will have the greatest impact on your abilities at the end of each chapter and to further prioritize focus areas at the conclusion of the three parts of this book.

Let's pause to confirm that we are all on the same page regarding the development of focus areas. Think of focus areas as zones of emphasis that you believe will help you improve your communication or leadership behaviors. For example, in Chapter 5 you will be asked to review your experiences in receiving and giving feedback. As a result of that review, you jot down a brief note like "provide more impactful feedback" as a focus area. Additional reading in Chapter 5 and in other chapters may help you identify additional focus areas or assist you in clarifying a previously identified focus area. For instance, further reading in Chapter 5 may prompt you to rephrase the focus area from simply "provide more impactful feedback" to something more descriptive, such as "when providing feedback to someone about performance relative to expectations, begin by having them assess their performance on ways they can improve."

1.2 THE FOUNDATION

Allow us to be candid about the nature of the journey through this book—it involves change. More precisely, this book is about helping you to change and this process requires you to identify what you wish to change (i.e., your focus areas). You will *transform* your highest priority focus areas into specific goals, build plans to help you reach your goals, and determine how you will measure progress (Chapter 14). The underlying premise is that growth involves *changing your behaviors*.

A person is usually considered a skilled communicator based on the behaviors that others observe. Consequently, you will see the term *behaviors* throughout this book. Furthermore, when behaviors are continually practiced, they become habits. These habits (i.e., mental wheel ruts) may be productive and others far less so. Ray Dalio’s advice was on point when he said, “Choose your habits carefully because they are one of the most powerful tools in your brain’s toolbox.”³

Why are habits hard to change? Research on the brain shows that people enhance their neural networks when they continually practice behaviors.⁴ Your brain changes (neural scientists call this concept *neuroplasticity*).⁵ These repeatedly exercised behaviors strengthen neural networks and become wheel ruts in our brains, causing us to become stuck in either good or bad habits. As an analogy, consider the concept of muscle memory. Golfers such as Tiger Woods, gymnasts such as Simone Biles, and tennis players such as Novak Djokovic have spent nearly every day, week, month, and year practicing. They strengthen particular neural networks. When Tiger Woods approaches a golf ball, he is not thinking about how to move his club through the swing. His muscle memory takes over in the form of a habit.

POWER OF EFFECTIVE HABITS

Doing something well—simply out of habit—was displayed by Breanna Stewart, one of the stars of the U.S. women’s basketball team that won the gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. She showed the capacity for basketball excellence without the need for complex calculations. “To be honest,” Stewart said about how her mind works during one of her basketball masterpieces, “I don’t think I’m thinking at all.”⁶

Have you ever tried to change a habit you have, particularly when it is an ingrained muscle memory? Was it easy to do? Now let’s consider

our personalities. Have you perhaps completed The Birkman® Questionnaire, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, or the INSIGHT Inventory®? When we administer those questionnaires and provide results to people, we typically hear, “I’m just like that” or “People say that about me.” These instruments are predicated on the idea that people do not change significantly over time. Five years ago or ten years from now, a Myers-Briggs assessment will yield nearly identical results.⁷

Our habits can hijack our behaviors. This *hijacking* frequently expresses itself in our prejudices that may be unconscious. Consider your involvement in, or observation of, debates about politics, climate change, or immigration, to mention a few recent headlines. Are people receptive, able to listen to another viewpoint, capable of moving beyond disagreement? Regrettably, our experience indicates many more thumbs down than thumbs up responses to these questions. In many cases, continually thinking and speaking about our positions on these matters, selective reading that supports our position, and accumulating cohorts who share our views all contribute to developing habits (i.e., wheel ruts) that are difficult to change.

Roger Birkman once explained that people’s brains are hardwired, making change difficult. Birkman theorized that most people are 70–80% hardwired and that only 20–30% of our “free will” can be utilized to modify the wiring (i.e., neural networks) and introduce new behaviors. These new behaviors must be practiced to develop more desirable habits, and that practice is difficult.⁸

If you wish to develop yourself as a communicator and a leader, it will entail changing certain behaviors. And, if you want those behaviors to develop into more productive habits, you must practice those behaviors (build the muscle memory, so to speak). The following list describes the expectations in terms of what this book is asking you to do:

1. Commit to identifying behaviors you want to change and practice those behaviors to build a more productive skill set.
2. Commit to abandoning habits that are preventing you from reaching your goals.
3. Commit to doing the work involved to further develop and strengthen the behavior-based skills that will make you more effective as a communicator and leader.

1.3 THE PATH THROUGH THE CHAPTERS

The format that is used in the chapters that follow is:

1. We ask you to consider your own experiences with each chapter's subject. For instance, the subject of Chapter 5 is *Feedback*, where you are asked to think about impactful experiences that you have had when receiving feedback as well as what you did to facilitate those positive interactions. Next, consider instances when the feedback that you received was not impactful or helpful and what you might have done to contribute to that poor experience. You will then be asked to list behaviors that you wish to modify due to your feedback experiences.
2. The chapters then present information provided by the authors, other subject matter experts, and lessons learned from others. For instance, when receiving feedback, the chapter will present ways for mining value from feedback even when it appears to be unfair or poorly delivered.
3. At the end of each chapter, you will choose no more than two to three focus areas (feel free to write in the book or download the blank focus area template at www.jrosspub.com/CLT) that will provide the greatest impact for you to develop more effective behaviors as a communicator (Part I) and as a leader (Part II).
4. You will engage in a transformational process in Part III where you will choose no more than three of these previously identified high-priority focus areas from your work in the communication and leadership chapters that provide the greatest opportunity for improvement (see Figure 1.2). You will then transform your focus areas into goals, plans to achieve your goals, and how you will measure progress:
 - Behavior-based goals will detail what you want to accomplish—it is important to set *SMART* (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals. For instance, a goal of *improving team members' performance by establishing a feedback process* could entail:
 - Preparing for conversations regarding feedback on performance by reviewing your observations and the observations of other team members
 - Beginning feedback conversations by asking team members to assess their own performance

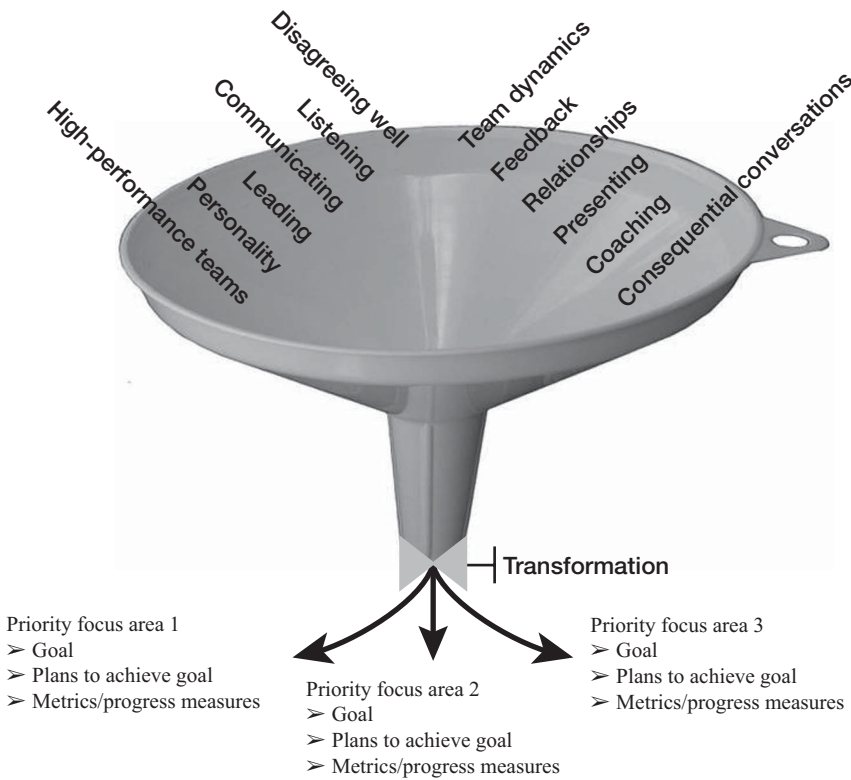


Figure 1.2 Prioritizing focus areas to goals

- Aligning with team members on areas of strengths, with examples of exemplary and satisfactory performance, as well as opportunities for improvement
 - Developing action plans to assist with skill development
 - Supporting the skill development of team members through training, job rotation, and mentoring
 - Conducting regular informal conversations about progress toward outcomes
- Create plans to accomplish the goal, including milestones, a timetable, and specific activities to practice new behaviors—for instance, plans for reaching feedback goals could contain the following:
 - Meet monthly with HR for training, coaching, and obtaining ideas for improving feedback

- Meet with other team leaders monthly to discuss ideas, challenges, and successes regarding offering feedback to team members
 - Attend at least one training program within six months regarding how to receive and give feedback
 - Self-assess on goal achievement monthly
 - Obtain feedback quarterly from team members on the impact of feedback, including what to do more of or less of and what to start doing or stop doing
 - Determine metrics to track your progress—this will include feedback from others:
 - A minimum of 90% of the performance objectives of team members are achieved within an agreed-upon time
 - Commitments to modify the feedback process are received within two weeks
 - Obtain buy-in from team members that the process is effective in helping them improve their skills
5. In addition, Part III concludes with tools to help you develop a leadership message to transform your team into a high-performance team.

LIMITING PRIORITIES

A word of advice before proceeding with the exercises throughout this book: improving in a few key areas is better than trying to work on many goals only to be discouraged by a lack of progress due to the demands of other priorities. And, when progress is inhibited, the commitment and motivation to develop more effective behaviors drops off dramatically. Consequently, the goal of Part III is to assist you in prioritizing areas for improvement to the critical few where you are committed to develop more effective communication and leadership behaviors.

The following is an outline of the material in each part of this book—Part I: Communication, Part II: Leadership, and Part III: Transformation.

1.4 PART I: COMMUNICATION

Part I begins with an assessment of your baseline communication skills in Chapter 2. You may refer to that baseline in later chapters to help you identify and clarify focus areas. You will then complete a personality profile (Chapter 3) to identify your personality traits, how you can work with your traits, and how they can be perceived by others—both positively and negatively. In Chapter 3, you will begin to identify focus areas for improvement and continue that effort throughout the remainder of the book.

Up next is to explore communication concepts and tools including:

1. Listening
2. Giving and receiving feedback
3. Building relationships
4. How to disagree well
5. How to plan and conduct critical conversations
6. How to build effective presentations

You will have the opportunity to select or update focus areas at the end of each chapter.

Part I concludes with an opportunity for you to update and prioritize your focus areas for improvement in communication.

1.5 PART II: LEADERSHIP

With communication as a foundation, Part II focuses on leadership. Our sojourn is similar to the communication journey.

1. You will complete an assessment of your leadership skills in Chapter 10. Identify key focus areas for improvement based on the assessment, your experiences with effective leaders, and insights gained from the reading material.
2. A framework for managing team dynamics is provided in Chapter 11. Coaching is a key role for leaders of high-performing teams. Chapter 12 details tools and coaching techniques while a process for developing and leading high-performing teams is the subject of Chapter 13. Each chapter presents an opportunity to update or add to your focus areas for improvement.

1.6 PART III: TRANSFORMATION

The book concludes with Part III—your personal and team transformational goals and plans.

1. Throughout this book, you will assess your current communication and leadership skills and identify focus areas for improvement. You transform your highest-priority focus areas into goals, plans, and how you will measure progress.
2. Your *team* transformation plan is the capstone section of the book—the *team* can be your workgroup, department, division, or enterprise. Chapter 14 outlines the steps to build and implement the team transformation plan.

We will conclude the book by ensuring your development and transformation plans are aligned and integrated.

1.7 KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. An understanding of how this book is structured
2. An understanding of key terms
3. An awareness of the behavioral foundations for the recommendations throughout the book
4. An understanding of the commitment and work required to change behaviors
5. An understanding of the content of Part I: Communication, Part II: Leadership, and Part III: Transformation

Let's begin your journey to build better behavior-based communication and leadership skills!

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Part I

Communication

FAILING TO COMMUNICATE IS NOT AN OPTION

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

—George Bernard Shaw

CHAPTER ROADMAP

More than likely you have encountered the truth of George Bernard Shaw’s quote, wondering, “How could they have misunderstood what I meant?—I was so clear.” With this in mind, the objective of this chapter is to lessen the likelihood of miscommunication by:

1. Aligning and agreeing on what we mean by communication
2. Aligning the communication process—participant’s roles and responsibilities
3. Exploring the communication process and your roles and responsibilities
4. Completing an assessment of your communication skills to establish a baseline for improvement opportunities to be further clarified in subsequent chapters
5. Understanding how the virtual workplace impacts communication
6. Key takeaways

2.1 THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The starting point of this book is communication because, as James C. Humes reminds us, “The art of communication is the language of

leadership.” However, before beginning, let’s define communication. *Communication* is defined, for the purposes of this book, as *a process in which you have a critical role*. To explain, this process involves:

1. The sender plans and then develops (encodes) a message.
2. The sender transmits/sends that message through a medium/channel to a receiver.
3. The receiver translates (decodes) the message.
4. The receiver encodes and transmits a response (feedback), at this point becoming a sender.
5. The original sender decodes the feedback. The process may go through another loop, depending on whether the participants are satisfied that it has fulfilled its purpose (that satisfaction may or may not be based on a valid assumption!).

As seen in Figure 2.1, when senders and receivers encode and decode messages, the results are influenced by a number of factors including their life experiences, age, gender, personality, education, and cultural background. In addition, *noise* (shown by the wavy lines) might affect how signals are formed and interpreted and can deflect the receiver’s focus away from the message. Examples of noise include: physical, semantic, psychological, organizational, cultural, etc. As the communication process progresses, there are many opportunities for misunderstandings to occur. These misunderstandings can result in more work

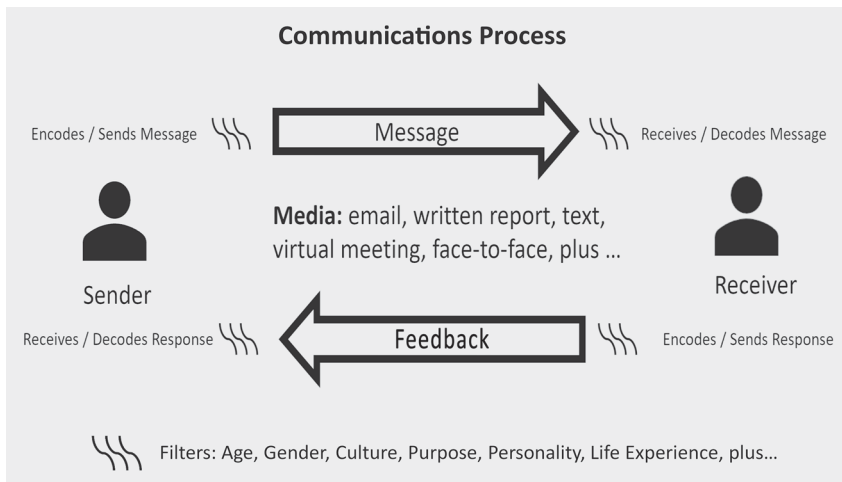


Figure 2.1 The Communications Process

to clarify what was intended, emotionally charged conversations, and unproductive conflicts.

A critical component of the communication process that is often overlooked is the medium or channel used to transmit the message. Often, the channel chosen is dictated by circumstances. For example, the CEO of an organization may choose a virtual town hall with call-in questions when announcing a new strategic initiative. In contrast, a manager may choose a face-to-face meeting with a subordinate to discuss performance relative to expectations.

Figure 2.2 depicts a notional view of the effectiveness of several communication channels. Not only do the sender and receiver play an important role in the effectiveness of communication so, too, will the channel that is chosen. The more critical the communication in terms of impact and the requirement for commitment, the more participants in the process will move up to the right-hand corner of Figure 2.2. Even the CEO, who uses the practicality of the virtual town hall, can enrich the communication by answering call-in questions and identifying the person asking the question.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON COMMUNICATION

The information in Figure 2.2 helps communicators to consider the growing prevalence of social media to transmit information. Many readers may be comfortable with texting, Twitter, email, Facebook, or something similar as a means of communicating. Since these modes of communication are *word-based*, much of the richness of communication may be lost. Research shows that words can be less than 10% of the information communicated,¹ whereas more information, such as how the communicator feels, can be communicated nonverbally with voice inflection, tone, body language, gestures, eye contact, etc. While the communicator can indicate in a text that they are angry or happy, communications are more effective when they include tone, body language, and gestures. In addition, research has shown that emails are often misinterpreted and, in fact, can cause resentment and confusion in the workplace.² Nonetheless, the *virtual environment*—including social media tools—is a reality that requires leaders to adapt as the virtual environment becomes a bigger part of the typical work world. In recognition of this reality, several chapters will contain a subsection addressing the impact of the virtual environment on communication and leadership.

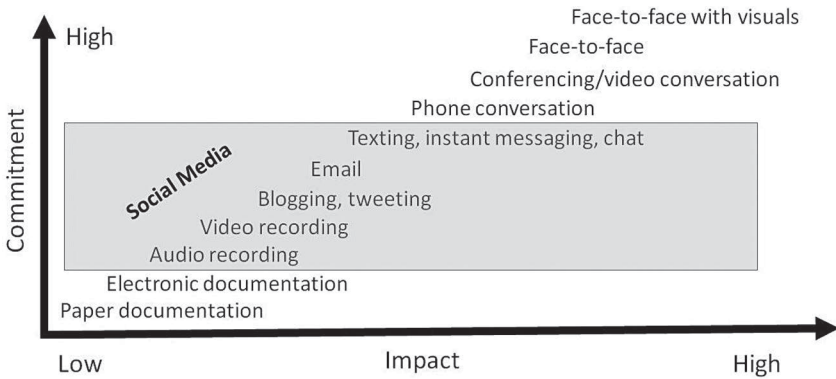


Figure 2.2 Effectiveness of communication channels

2.2 ASSESSING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS BEHAVIORS

We have defined communication as a process; now let's continue the journey. The URL for a communication behavior assessment is provided following this paragraph. Complete the questionnaire (it takes about 5 minutes) by typing or pasting the URL into your web browser:

www.jrosspub.com/CLT

After completing the questionnaire, select the *Calculate my scores* button and input your overall score here. (List the scores for each functional area in the next paragraph.)

Overall score: _____

1. **Score above 90:** Excellent! You have exceptional communication abilities, whether you are sending or receiving a message.
2. **Score between 65 and 89:** You demonstrate strong communication skills. You may occasionally have difficulties when sending or receiving communications. Examine your scores and concentrate your skill development efforts on areas with lower scores.
3. **Score below 64:** You have substantial opportunities to grow as a communicator. Make note of the sections that have the most room for growth and devote your attention to them as you progress through the book.

Input your communication process component scores below. When reviewing your scores, a score below 15 is an indication of a process area where you can improve your skill as a communicator. You will further clarify these improvement areas in subsequent chapters:

1. Planning the message: _____
2. Encoding—creating a clear, well-crafted message: _____
3. Choosing the right channel: _____
4. Decoding—receiving and interpreting a message: _____
5. Feedback: _____

Consider the scores as an indicator of skill and not an absolute measure or evaluation.

The following information is intended to aid you in identifying areas in the process where you can enhance your communication skills. As you read through the information, keep in mind that the amount of time spent on the process is proportional to the level of commitment and impact that your communication involves.

Planning your communication is important. The validity of this statement is underscored by the confusing communications we have all received. When planning communications, be sure to ask yourself, have I:

1. Clarified the purpose of the communication?
2. Clearly stated requests? Ask yourself what the receiver should do with the information when you are *just* providing information.
3. Provided the information the receiver needs to take action/make a decision? Consider the following points when providing information:
 - *Must-know* information is required for the receiver to take action in the present.
 - *Should-know* information, while important, is not needed at the present time for the receiver to make a decision or act. It may become *must-know* information in the future.
 - *Nice-to-know* information can be put off without jeopardizing the receiver's ability to act.

As a general rule, include *must-know* information in the communication and exclude the *nice-to-know* information. *Should-know* information can be added where appropriate, but in communication, *less is more*

is often preferred. Strive to be efficient when communicating as well as being effective.

Encoding entails *how* the sender wants to develop a message whereas planning is concerned with *what* the sender wants to say:

1. When encoding a message, the acronym *BIC* provides guidelines:
 - Brief—Keep the message short and to the point
 - Informative—The communication should inform the receiver of the purpose of the communication
 - Clear—There should be no confusion for the receiver as to what actions are being requested
2. The adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” applies when encoding a message. Use charts, graphs, and pictures where possible.
3. Be sensitive to cultural nuances in written and verbal communication, as well as avoiding jargon.

The *channel of communication* chosen determines how the communication will be delivered. Consider the following points when you choose a channel to send your message:

1. The level of commitment you are seeking and the impact on the receiver (refer back to Figure 2.2).
2. Preference of the receiver, as to how they wish to receive communications.
3. The sensitivity of the message.
4. The need for a conversation to ensure understanding and commitment.
5. The level of detail needed to ensure understanding. There is always a hybrid approach when choosing the channel, such as sending material prior to a face-to-face meeting.

Decoding the communication is concerned with how a person receives and interprets a communication. Both the sender and receiver impact how a message is decoded:

1. **The sender**—The following points can help the sender increase the probability that the communication is interpreted as intended:
 - Ask the receiver if the message was clear and understood (depending on the relationship with the receiver, ask the receiver to summarize their understanding of the message).

- When the channel allows for visual contact with the receiver, be aware of nonverbal cues such as body language, eye contact, and tone of voice. Are the receiver's nonverbal signals indicative of engagement, interest, and commitment, or impatience, reluctance, and a lack of interest or commitment? If so, pause to confirm that the message is being understood.
 - Listen to feedback in order to try to understand rather than contemplating how to respond. Use the active listening techniques discussed in Chapter 4.
 - Confirm that the receiver will fulfill a request when one is called for in the communication. Focus on what the receiver *can* do and negotiate an acceptable agreement.
2. **The receiver**—You are now decoding a communication that you have received. Feedback to the sender can be provided while decoding the communication or after developing a complete response, depending on circumstances surrounding the process—e.g., face-to-face meeting versus the need for a written response. Key points while decoding and providing feedback include:
- Listening in order to understand rather than to respond.
 - Asking for clarification when you do not understand any part of the communication. Summarize key points to assure alignment with the sender.
 - Responding with what you can do rather than what you cannot do when a commitment is requested.
 - Keeping an open mind and avoiding the urge to prejudge the sender or discount the value of the message based on previous experiences.
 - Focusing on the *what* of the communication and not on the person sending it.
 - In a meeting situation, being straightforward and asking to reschedule when you do not have the time to give the sender the attention they deserve.

As the receiver progresses from decoding to delivering feedback, they transition from receiver to sender, and the process begins anew with planning. In many cases, the entire procedure is completed in a minute or two, but in some cases, there may be several passes through the process over a period of time.

Feedback in the communication process is an indispensable aid in confirming that the sender and receiver are aligned on the purpose of the communication (whether or not they agree is another matter). While Chapter 5 will cover the subject of feedback in detail, it is discussed briefly here in the context of the communication process. Both the receiver and sender of a communication give feedback:

1. **Receiving feedback**—Most conversations and training about feedback focuses on how to *provide* feedback with far less emphasis on how to *receive* feedback. Learning how to receive feedback is just as important as learning how to give feedback:
 - When receiving feedback, listen in order to *understand* rather than *respond*.
 - Focus on mining value from feedback, regardless of whether the feedback seems unfair, inaccurate, or poorly delivered. Remember, you don't have to accept feedback and act on the feedback you receive, but listening is important.
 - Focus on the *what* of the feedback and not on *who* provides the feedback.
 - Ask questions to clarify the purpose or expectations of the person sending the communication when the purpose and expectations are not clear.
 - Ask the sender if you have met their needs when you are responding to a request for information.
2. **Giving feedback**—This is an opportunity for people who are engaged in the communication process to clarify the purpose of the communication, to express their expectations, and to confirm or negotiate commitments. Feedback is usually solicited, unsolicited, or scheduled, as in a job performance evaluation. Listed here are guidelines for providing feedback that is relative to these situations:
 - Provide *SMART* Feedback:
 - **Specific**—Feedback should be specific in the sense that there is no confusion as to what is meant. Telling someone to be more assertive is not specific.
 - **Measurable**—There should be an intended outcome that can be assessed or measured.
 - **Attainable**—The feedback should have an expected outcome that is attainable or achievable given the receiver's social, economic, or cultural resources and time available.

- ◻ Relevant—The feedback should be relevant to the receiver, such as improving performance in the work environment, and/or meaningful to the receiver in improving relationships, such as achieving a goal, etc.
- ◻ Time-bound—There should be a time frame when an outcome is to be achieved.
- Feedback is a conversation that helps assure:
 - ◻ The receiver understands the feedback—and not just the words but also the feelings behind the words and the cultural context, so differences in cultural norms do not mask understanding.
 - ◻ There is alignment on expectations.
 - ◻ Expectations are understood and commitments are agreed upon.

2.3 COMMUNICATING IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

Communication opportunities and challenges in the virtual world are not new and extend back to the 1980s.³ The use of tools and techniques that support the virtual world has accelerated since then due to:

1. Globalization of economies and work has necessitated more efficient communication. The bedrock of more efficient communication is internet-based communication tools and techniques. Globalization has also been a catalyst leading to a more diverse and collaborative workforce.⁴
2. Busy lifestyles, work-life balance considerations, and smart devices that open a world of information-sharing opportunities have reduced the priority of work in people's lives. These trends have necessitated more efficient and faster communication.⁵
3. The COVID-19 pandemic required more work be conducted away from centralized office space to home offices, or anywhere there is an internet connection, including airports, coffee shops, hotels, etc. Employers are becoming more comfortable that productivity can be maintained in the virtual environment, allowing many employees to work virtually or provide a hybrid approach with working virtually and at other times coming to a centralized office.⁶

4. The proliferation of smartphones with applications that provide access to almost unlimited information, ranging from weather, restaurant menus, games, and all types of social media, have blurred the distinction between work life and personal life.⁷

These trends support the conclusion that virtual tools and techniques are here to stay and will likely increase. The question becomes whether the widespread use of internet tools and techniques will benefit companies and employees. The evidence is unequivocal. It depends! The research is not conclusive. Many believe that the tools and techniques inherent in the virtual world are beneficial:

1. The global economy and a dispersed workforce can communicate quickly to solve problems, access information, and collaborate on new ideas.⁸
2. Using virtual teams can increase productivity, with some organizations seeing gains up to 43% among virtual teams compared to non-virtual teams.⁹
3. Internet-based applications provide organizations a platform for job postings outside the company website and allow access to potential employees' information on LinkedIn, Facebook, etc., that speed up the recruitment effort.¹⁰
4. Internet-based tools provide a means to communicate with customers, vendors, and other stakeholders anywhere in the world.¹¹

Others say:

1. Easy access to online tools and techniques brings a multitude of distractions. Many complain that the preponderance of texts with senders expecting instant responses is distracting.¹²
2. Social media can become addictive, promulgating new terms including *nomophobia*¹³ and *social media reversion*¹⁴ when people cannot self-regulate and thereby spend enormous amounts of time at work on nonproductive activities involving social media tools and techniques.
3. There is an increasing amount of cyberbullying and offensive content.¹⁵
4. There is an increased risk of the organizations' data being hacked when social media is used on company equipment.¹⁶

Assuming that the virtual work environment is here to stay, the question becomes: What should organizations and their employees do about

communication in the virtual workplace? The communication process shown in Figure 2.1 is relevant regardless of whether people are in the physical or virtual world. That is to say, in either environment:

1. There is still a sender and receiver of information.
2. The sender and receiver both encode and decode messages.
3. Messages are delivered through a channel.
4. As messages are encoded, sent, received, decoded, and feedback is provided, there are opportunities for miscommunication. Biases, cultural differences, language differences, and *noise* can cause miscommunication, strain relationships, produce stress, and result in unproductive time being necessary to realign intentions.

There are two differences as to how the communication process can be practiced in the virtual world when compared to the physical world. One difference is somewhat minor; the other difference more significant:

1. Channels in the strictly virtual world are limited to internet-based applications, including email, video conferencing, texting, Snapchat, Twitter, etc. It is important to remember that the actual and virtual worlds are not mutually exclusive. Numerous firms take a hybrid approach with the team spending time in both spaces.
2. There is a greater need for individual responsibility when using internet-based tools appropriately—especially social media—and a greater need for organizations to provide efficient and effective tools and guidelines to facilitate efficient and effective communication in the virtual world.

We will discuss opportunities and problems for communication and leadership in the virtual world throughout this book, including listening, relationship building, and leadership in the virtual environment, to mention a few.

2.4 RECONFIRMING THE PATH FORWARD

Let's pause for a moment to review what you can expect going forward. In this chapter you established a baseline of your skills used in the communication process. In future chapters you will develop focus areas for improving and developing your behavior-based skills as a communicator and leader. You may find opportunities to refer back to your baseline communication process skills to help clarify areas for improvement. It

is possible that you will discover many areas for improvement. Consequently, you will be asked to prioritize focus areas by the most impactful to avoid diluting your efforts or becoming discouraged by a lack of progress.

2.5 KEY TAKEAWAYS

Let's summarize to ensure everything is in place before we continue:

1. You understand the components of the communication process
2. You have established a baseline of your communication process skills that may be used to clarify opportunities for improving behavior-based skills identified in future chapters
3. You understand how the virtual environment impacts the communication process

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