

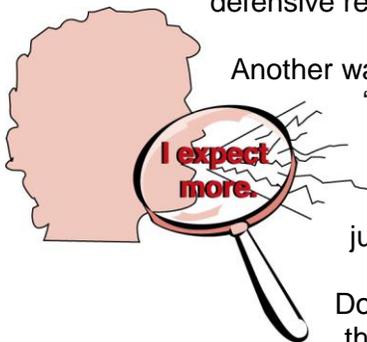
FOUR ADVANCED COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The art of communicating authentically is a learned skill. It takes coaching and practice to do it well. Communicating authentically means being honest, open and thoughtful in what you say – and in how you listen and respond to what you hear. This tool describes four skills that will help leaders communicate authentically.

Speak for Yourself

Effective leaders express their views directly. They state their concerns up front. One good way is to *personalize* your comments, taking responsibility for your positions, opinions and values, rather than offering generalizations or blaming others or outside forces. Say, “I feel disappointed about our progress,” rather than, “This group is the pits.”

The advantage of this approach is that it reduces defenses by not placing general or even specific blame on others. No one can argue that you’re not really concerned or that you’re secretly more optimistic than you admit. “I would like us to begin promptly at nine” is clear; “You’re late again! You hold us up every week” is guaranteed to provoke a defensive reaction.



Another way people hide their real positions is by burying them in questions. “Are you planning to make that statement in public?” is an attack, not a question. “I would rather you would not say that when we make our presentation” is also a negative comment, but at least you are directly acknowledging that this is your view, not an absolute judgment.

Does it seem like nitpicking? It’s not really. The major difference is in the kind of response you seek to evoke from your listeners.

Tailor Your Communication Style

Everyone has a signature style of communicating. These styles can be scientifically broken down into four categories: Directors, Expressers, Thinkers and Harmonizers. Straight Talk® enables you to discover your own style, and the style of others, and gain tips on how to make your communication more balanced and effective. (Visit www.leadingresources.com and click on Straight Talk – there’s no cost to take the online survey and discover your style.)

Once you understand your communication style, you’ll have a deeper appreciation of what it takes to communicate into someone’s “listening space.” Directors, for example, want information in quick, bottom line bullet points. Expressers want a fuller exploration of different options and ideas. Thinkers want to hear the detailed thinking behind a proposal. And Harmonizers want to understand the impact of any proposal on people.

The most effective communicators tailor their style to fit their audience. By tailoring their style, they help people relax and feel more receptive to what they're saying. This makes them more successful as managers and leaders. As needed, they also make overt reference to differences in style to defuse tension and resolve conflicts between styles. This goes a long way toward building trust.

Be a Powerful Listener

Powerful listening is not a passive activity. A good listener concentrates not just on words, but on understanding the underlying point of view of the other person. Powerful listeners focus on subtle tones, facial expressions and context, and then respond in a way that demonstrates they have heard the speaker's meaning as well as the words. They listen *to understand*, not just to figure out how they're going to make their argument.

One way to be sure you understand exactly what the speaker means, and to communicate your understanding, is by reflecting back to the speaker what you believe he or she is saying. Paraphrasing does not mean just parroting their words. It means restating the speaker's position in your own words, taking into account the non-verbal signs you see and the tone of voice you hear.

Typical lead-in phrases for paraphrasing are "It sounds like . . ." or "I can see that . . ." Paraphrasing is also invaluable when you disagree with someone and must, nonetheless, offer an encouraging reply. Being able to express the speaker's position clearly says to the speaker that, even though you disagree with the position, you value him or her enough to listen carefully.

When you paraphrase, you also give the speaker a chance to clarify his or her position. He may say: "Yes, that's it." Or he may respond: "You know, let me clarify a bit." That sets the stage for a deeper conversation – one in which you can play the role of facilitator.

Remember that 60 percent of communication is non-verbal. In other words, if you listen only to what someone says, you're missing more than half of the conversation.

It's not enough to listen; you also must *show* that you are listening. Maintain eye contact, lean forward, nod, vocalize agreement when appropriate by saying, "I see," "Um hmm"; take notes if that is appropriate. Don't glance at your watch, focus on outside events, wear your dark glasses, cross your arms and lean back, watch TV, or wave to other people. Instead, teach yourself to focus entirely on the communication at hand.

Be Data Driven

When you're data-driven in your communication, you do two things:

First, you put your own assumptions on the table. "I assume that we're going to experience the same downturn in the economy everyone else in our industry is experiencing."

Second, you probe for missing data. You ask: “Does anyone have any data that would help me clarify my assumptions?”

When you’re data-driven, you also look to get other people’s assumptions and issues on the table. You ask: “Help me understand your thinking. What are you assuming will happen?”

When you’re data-driven, you make sure you bring issues to the table. If there’s a relevant conversation in the hallway, you raise it in front of everyone. If you’re experiencing confusion or discomfort, you let people know (recognizing that if you’re experiencing it, others are likely to be experiencing it, too). If there’s an issue you feel you can’t raise without suffering some grave consequence, you consult the chair or someone else in a position to help you develop a strategy.

When you’re data-driven, you use concrete examples and specifics to help people get on the same page. You don’t get mired in generalities; you introduce specific cases that help people understand whether you’re talking about a 2% increase in spending – or a 20% increase.

Finally, when you’re data-driven, you stay humble. You assume that you don’t see things perfectly. You ask for other people’s points of view. You are aware that human beings can fall prey to the “assumption of competence.” You appreciate that people who assume they are competent are usually the least competent among us.¹

¹ A significant body of research shows that “the assumption of competence” is highest among those who are least competent in a variety of activities.