What It Means to be a Competent Communicator

When we think of straight talk, we think of speaking candidly and openly. We imagine saying what we mean so that other people understand us perfectly. We imagine a world of insightful exchanges, where people from all backgrounds talk to each other in constructive ways. We imagine everyone taking responsibility for clear, honest, and open communication.

Straight Talk is aimed at building such a world by helping us to define to each other what it means to be competent communicator.

What does it mean to be a competent communicator?

We mean more than the ability to use language well, or to articulate one's thoughts and feelings clearly. We mean more than knowing how to get a message across. We mean more than being able to listen well, although that too plays a part. **When we talk about competence in communicating we really mean three things**:

1. Understanding everyone has their own unique ***style***.

Our different styles affect everything we hear and say. Competent communicators acknowledge how our different styles lead to misunderstandings. In the long run, it means developing and expanding our repertoire of communication styles so that we can communicate easily and fluidly in any situation.

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2. Understanding and avoiding the pitfalls in how we ***process***.

This means understanding that these pitfalls occur in a moment's time and that we are thus unconscious of them. It means acknowledging that how we process information can be changed and made more effective by challenging the way we think.

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3. Using ***ground rules*** to acknowledge barriers and overcome them.

This means recognizing competence in communication does not come easily. It means acknowledging that ground rules, like rules of the road, are necessary to avoid crashing into one another while we communicate.

Why is being a competent communicator important?

Several trends are making competence in communication more important today than ever before. Here are five recent trends in workplace communication:

1) The **accelerating pace** of market changes.

This creates the need for a less rigid and bureaucratic work environment. Information must flow up, down, and across traditional channels. No longer is it enough to have a few skilled communicators at key nodal points. The need for fast response time requires everyone to be a competent communicator.

2) The **emergence of teams** as the basic unit of business.

This requires people to communicate effectively and reach consensus quickly. They need to know how to work through complex issues on their own and how to resolve conflicts without relying on a boss.

3) The increasing number of people in **global organizations**.

This drives the demand for skillful communicators. When people collaborate on projects from offices separated by thousands of miles, when cultural differences can exacerbate shortfalls in communication, the standard opportunities to build trust and goodwill simply don't exist. Small misunderstandings can escalate into bigger conflicts. Knowing the tools for effective communication is therefore an essential – if not the essential – competency of the global corporation.

4) **Technology** is driving new ways of communicating.

More people are working in virtual offices, spread across multiple, sometimes moving, locations. Video conferencing and e-mail are replacing staff meetings. But virtual teams can grind to a virtual halt in a hurry if poor communication prevails. Technology has increased the volume of communications, but quantity has not improved quality. If the human software is not glitch proof, technology will inevitably increase the number of communication snafus.

5) The **old ways have reached the end** of their useful life span.

Today, new competitors arise so quickly that organizations that don't continually change and improve are left in the dust. Organizational thinkers like Chris Argyris and Peter Senge have laid out strong, persuasive arguments for "learning organizations" in which culture, structure, and interpersonal behaviors create a process of continuous improvement.

How do you teach competent communication?

Straight Talk is intended to provide a set of tools for people who aspire to be part of a learning organization. It is for people who need to know how to challenge their own thinking – and to engage others in the search to find effective solutions. Straight Talk is intended to help build the social underpinnings of the twenty-first-century organization, where straight talk is the norm, not the exception.

It doesn't matter if you use Straight Talk or some other system. What's important is to create a **shared understanding**, which is creates culture. What does good communication look like? Why is it important? Straight Talk provides the common ground and tools to understand and utilize our differences. Diversity is a strength!

Here are **Five Core Principles** to frame the importance of communication:

1. Communication Builds **Trust**... authentic, humble, and sincere
2. Communication Drives **Execution**... memorable, clear, and consistent
3. Communication Finds the **Best Idea**... diverse, safe, and meaningful
4. Communication Generates **Energy**... appreciative, growth-oriented, and rejuvenating
5. Communication Creates **Culture**... inclusive, innovative, and transparent

Communication culture is created by habits and systems. The NeuroLeadership Institute offers a great explanation: “Habits are the automatic, non-conscious behaviors we perform on a regular basis. Systems are the physical or mental cues — the scaffolding — that reinforce our habits. Someone who wants to build the habit of running before work, for instance, may implement the system of laying out their sneakers and clothes the night before. The system helps reinforce the habit by making it easier to perform. Leaders looking to create culture change can rely on the same scientific wisdom. The way to create a new culture is to remember that culture is merely shared everyday habits. By changing (and supporting) people’s habits, leaders can tilt their entire organization in the desired direction.”

Here are several tools to help get the right conversations started:

- The Straight Talk survey is a powerful tool on its own, to open up the dialogue and bring communication into focus. The blog and newsletter teach the basic principles over time.

- Tools like Inner Scripts, The Circle of Assumptions, Helping Groups Reach Consensus, Using the GROW Model to Facilitate Conversations, are all handy tools for leaders and managers to use within their teams.

- Executive teams can strive to achieve a balanced culture, set ground rules, and clarify decision-making roles and responsibilities.

- With the video course individuals learn about Straight Talk at their own pace. However, to get everyone on the same page we recommend a live workshop, or our trainer’s guide for the scripts and workbook to host your own workshop.

- The Straight Talk book provides the common ground to help teams gain competency in communication as quickly and effectively as possible.

3 Reasons We Fail to Communicate Well

Surveys regularly show communication to be the biggest barrier to successful relationships, whether with your spouse, children, friends or colleagues. Yet few people know how to get a handle on this issue.

This is not a simple matter of being more articulate. It means becoming aware of our patterns of communication – and the traps and pitfalls that we lead ourselves into.

1. People communicate in clumsy ways because it's easier than communicating expertly.

If straight talk were easy, there'd be no need to write a book about it. But straight talk is hard. Most people are lazy communicators even in the simplest situations — managing their time, laying out a task, setting goals.

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2. In the situations where straight talk is most needed, it is most likely to be elusive.

If we communicate ineffectively in normal situations, imagine how we behave in a challenging situation. Imagine what we do when the topic is "Where is my business going?" or "What is happening to our industry?" In those situations, we're very likely to respond in ways that are exactly contrary to what is needed.

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3. There are four different ways of seeing the world, and most people only use one or two.

We each have a unique style that influences communication and decision making. Without understanding all four, your ability to communicate is compromised. Armed with this understanding, people can improve their interactions very quickly.

So, competence in communication really means *challenging* and changing the ways we listen and talk to one another.

It means turning some of our traditional ideas about communication upside down. At the heart of this concept is the idea that competency in communicating is *different from competency in any other field or endeavor*. That's why it's so hard.

We've all experienced what happens when two unskilled communicators get in a room and fling assertions back and forth like Ping-Pong balls.

> **Ping**: That's how we do things at XYZ Corp.
> **Pong**: Well, that's not how we did things at ABC Corp.
> **Ping**: Well, that's how we do them here.
> **Pong**: That's not the way it should be done.

Asking questions – especially good questions – is a sign of competence in communicating. Flatly stating your opinions is a sign of incompetence. Curiosity is a reflection of competence. Certainty is a reflection of incompetence. Good communicators realize that knowing all the answers isn't a sign of competence. It's most often a sign of incompetence.

Think of the costs of **inexpert communication**.

Think of the opportunities, misdirected resources, and underutilized human capital. One CEO totaled up the bill for his organization's ineffectiveness and put it at 15 percent of total revenues. In his case, that means $45 million in lost revenues each year because his company didn't communicate about key issues head on.

The **tools** of straight talk promote a new way of working together.

Where we've succeeded in introducing the tools of straight talk, we've seen surprising results. Management teams become more adept at thinking and managing in innovative ways. Companies become more skilled in managing difficult projects. One organization experienced a 20 percent increase in profits the year after we introduced these tools — and its managers attributed the increase entirely to their new way of working together.

Video: How has Straight Talk helped you improve your understanding of communication?

Conclusion

At the heart of straight talk lies a willingness to accept ***change*** is the only thing we can count on. As you start to learn the tools and principles of straight talk, discuss them with your colleagues. Try them out in your meetings. This may mean changing your way or thinking. Above all, trust these tools to work for you.

I have spent much of my career searching out the tools to help people engage in this kind of straight talk – tools that help bridge differences in style, tools to mediate conflicts, tools to help people understand one another, tools that enable change. Straight Talk is designed to put all these tools in one place, to help anyone in an organization become a skilled, competent communicator. The spirit of Straight Talk is embodied, oddly enough, in a sign I once saw hanging in the customer service office at the Amtrak station in Los Angeles:

A Short Course in Productive Communication

The six most important words: "I admit I made a mistake."
The five most important words: "You did a good job."
The four most important words: "What is your opinion?"
The three most important words: "If you please."
The two most important words: "Thank you."
The one most important word: "We."
The least important word: "I"