

# *Introduction*

## **Communication Is a Life-or-Death Matter**

**T**hat's not an overstatement. In corporate offices, in courtrooms, in Congress, and in bedrooms and boardrooms around the world, "miscommunication" surfaces as an issue—the cause of economic crises, poor job performance, lost sales, lawsuits, broken relationships, or even death. More than any other skill, communication determines people's success in sales meetings, marriage, or management.

Maybe that's the reason that *Communicate with Confidence®*, our trademarked phrase, continues to crop up everywhere and create headaches for me. Let me explain. When the first edition of this book came out almost 18 years ago, my editor suggested the title.

My response was, "That's too . . . ordinary. It needs to be catchier and have a bigger benefit than just 'confidence.' Most people think they already communicate well. The title needs shock value. With that title, it'll never sell."

My editor promised to take my concerns back to the publishing committee.

She called a week later to say, "The committee doesn't agree. I'm afraid that's going to be the title."

"It'll never sell, then." I hung up the phone, disappointed.

Fortunately, I was wrong. (Hey, I never claimed to be a positive thinker at that point in my life.) Sales took off. Book club sales. Foreign sales. Media coverage galore. We developed our interpersonal skills training course to match and trademarked the title for that purpose. For the past 18 years, my trademarked phrase has popped up repeatedly—on other people's e-books, courses, columns, speeches, and websites. Thanks to Google Alerts and a good intellectual property attorney, we've discovered that people do want to communicate with confidence.

Whether because it's a great title, a great benefit, or a great big gap in the workforce or at home, communication heads the list of reasons for people to do things—reasons that people join an organization, leave an organization, love their boss, hate their boss, find their soul mate, divorce their soul mate, win an election, or lose an election. In survey after survey, from senior executives reminiscing about their career success to recruiters hiring college graduates, communication always tops the list of skills needed for success. Whether it is a valid or invalid measure, the lack of communication skills tags people as being less competent, less attractive, and less qualified as leaders.

Where communication is concerned, some people think they've got it made because they have an extroverted personality. But that's not necessarily the case. An outgoing, life-of-the-party personality doesn't necessarily equate to sensitivity to others, which is the core of goodwill. Both introverts and extroverts need specific skills.

That's not to say, of course, that either personality type doesn't know how to communicate. We all communicate up to a point—up to the point where our habits set in. Until someone makes an insensitive remark. Until someone asks us for our advice and then argues against it. Until we feel that our ideas are routinely being ignored in meetings. Until we're tongue-tied when we have to deal with a group of complainers. Until we feel defensive about how we're handling a current project. Until we fail to persuade our team or our customer to take action. Until a friend tells us that we need to learn to negotiate rather than dictate. Until someone won't accept no for an answer. Until we get a flaming e-mail. Until a trusted friend deletes us on Facebook. Until a spouse wants out of the marriage.

When you find yourself in any of these situations, you may feel the need to change the way you're communicating—to increase your skill with a specific technique that jump-starts you and gets you past a limiting habit and on to progress. You want to stop hoping that you "get through" to the other person and ensure that you do.

That's the "why" of this book.

## **WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?**

Ask lawyers, engineers, or system analysts which creates the most frustration and failure—the technical part of their job or dealing with people? They'll agree on the latter. Samson of biblical fame killed 10,000 Philistines

with the jawbone of an ass. Similar destruction occurs on a daily basis with the same weapon.

Consider these benefits of communicating well. You'll

- Get the correct information more quickly.
- Build credibility with customers and colleagues.
- Develop more intimate relationships.
- Build loyalty in a supportive climate.
- Unleash the creativity within yourself and others by building on each other's ideas.
- Improve your teamwork.
- Facilitate problem solving.
- Build consensus for decisions.
- Motivate others to work more effectively.
- Lead and participate in more effective meetings.
- Save time and energy, reduce rework, and increase productivity through clear instructions and discussions.
- Avoid needless arguments.
- Reduce hurt feelings—yours and those of others.
- Overcome paralyzing anger, fear, or shyness.
- Give constructive feedback and coaching.
- Respond to feedback and criticism appropriately.
- Solicit helpful advice when it's not readily forthcoming.
- Negotiate for what you want without diminishing the other person.
- Win more cooperation when others' response is voluntary.
- Stand firm in your opinions without giving offense.
- Give and accept appropriate praise and compliments.
- Manage your own conflicts without escalating them.
- Mediate others' conflicts without getting burned yourself.
- Exercise more power over decisions that affect you.
- Influence and motivate others without strong-arm tactics.
- Find ways to "work around" difficult personalities.
- Generate enthusiasm for your ideas and proposals.
- Receive more invitations to accept leadership roles—both formally and informally.
- Receive more invitations to speak publicly to influence others.
- Increase your own and others' job satisfaction.

- “Pick other people’s brains” profitably: for ideas, experiences, habits, attitudes, and hard-core facts.
- Broaden your network of friends.
- Build your self-esteem and confidence by learning to be assertive.
- Defend your rights without manipulating or offending others.
- Handle insults, sarcasm, or other verbal assaults with style.
- Reduce your fear of vulnerability and decrease feelings of loneliness.
- Listen better so that others feel understood and valued.
- Generate meaningful or entertaining conversations.
- Reduce cross-gender misunderstandings and conflicts resulting from style differences.
- Understand the meanings and intentions of those of other cultures.
- Improve your physical health by reducing stress caused by misunderstandings and conflicts.
- Improve your mental health by growing as a person and developing more supportive relationships.
- Lead others to mutual benefits and goals.

Are there hard data to back up these “wishful thinking” benefits? Yes. In 2010, Watson Wyatt Worldwide, a global management consulting firm, released a comprehensive study (covering 328 organizations representing five million employees) that reported that companies with effective communicators had 47 percent higher total returns to shareholders over the prior five years than the firms considered to have the least effective communicators.

How *important* are the goals and skills just listed? The American Management Association surveyed more than 2,000 senior managers in 2010 as part of its Critical Skills Survey. Respondents predicted that communication skills would be the top employee development priority for the immediate future; this priority was cited by 41 percent of the managers surveyed. Now, more than ever, you have to be able to

- Use a variety of media and formats to gather information and communicate your message.
- Communicate and build rapport with globally diverse groups.
- Establish your credibility and expertise in a larger context and be accountable to more people for results. That is, you can’t just focus

on welding a widget and going home. You have to understand why that widget meets the customer's needs and continually come up with ways to make it better, faster, and cheaper—or the organization will be looking for somebody who can keep the big picture in mind.

Wherever you work and whatever you do, you have to be able to gather information, analyze it, summarize it, and present it so that others can digest it and use it for decision making.

When it comes to communication and connection, the question isn't, "Who needs help?" The question is, "Who doesn't?"

I coach executives primarily—those with exceptional skills in their areas of expertise and industry. But at some point in their careers, almost all successful professionals either realize that better communication skills can increase their ability to lead more effectively or understand that poor communication habits are limiting their influence and results. I've never had anyone tell me that she couldn't improve her communication; like fitness, better communication is an ongoing process.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Here are some suggestions on how to improve your communication skills in general and use this book specifically:

- *Skip to a chapter that addresses an immediate challenge you're facing.* Review the headings for quick tips on techniques, approaches, or phrasing to address your specific issue. For example, if you've apologized to someone, but the relationship hasn't improved, go to the chapter on apologies and see if your apology came across as insincere for some reason. If you need feedback on your career, but you aren't getting it, turn to that chapter to identify ways to ask for usable feedback and discover why people may be hesitant to give it.
- *Listen to the conversations of others.* Be an eavesdropper. You'll hear hilarious stories and arguments that will make you want to take sides even when you don't know the players. And you'll also learn how tone affects others' reactions and how ambiguous words create confusion. You'll notice what works and what doesn't work for other people. Then compare your observations with the tips given in this book.

- *Consider your options and alternatives for saying things before you speak.* Try to become aware of the various responses open to you when someone accuses you, angers you, praises you, or motivates you. Simply being aware of your options and ways to express those options will expand your communication horizons. No single comment is always appropriate. Aim to develop flexibility in responding to different people on different occasions. Look for the options outlined here.
- *Identify the level at which most of your relationships rest, determine which ones you want to deepen, and consider how to go about creating a stronger connection.* For example, do you recognize or acknowledge others as mere acquaintances, making a perfunctory comment such as, “How are you doing this morning?” or, “How are things going?” Are you a step closer as casual friends in that you know each other well enough to chat about a conflict with a family member or to discuss upcoming events or facts of common interest? Are you close friends who share deeply held opinions, beliefs, and values? Or has your relationship progressed to the intimate friendship stage that permits you to share feelings and thoughts about yourself and others and pass on judgments. In other words, have you as friends granted each other the freedom to say things that will improve your character? With awareness of the levels of intimacy, you’ll develop your sense of what’s better said and left unsaid in spur-of-the-moment situations with others around.
- *Select tips to follow and practice.* If people don’t seem to give you appropriate attention when you’re leading a meeting, for example, review the associated tips in this book and then try them out at your next meeting. The more you practice these guidelines, the more confident you’ll feel and the less mechanical the techniques will seem. Or, if you fear that you’re falling behind in the social media area, turn to that chapter and pick up some pointers to develop your online presence. Within 24 hours, you can make yourself as vocal and vibrant online as you are face to face.
- *Use the book as a refresher.* If you’re attending an upcoming convention, party, family reunion, or industry meeting where you fear you’ll be ill at ease in networking, reread the tips associated with small talk, such as conversation starters or exit lines for leaving a small huddle.

How do you know if you're successful at communicating? Consider the responses you get. Are you having the desired effect on people? In other words, are you making them think, feel, or do something that you want? What seems to be their impression of you? Do others try to dominate you, control you, ignore you, or abuse you? How easily do you connect with others online using Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn groups?

Can you work effectively in groups? Does your team accomplish its goals with a minimum of clashes? Do you weigh others' words and understand and evaluate their messages appropriately? Effective communication involves both the messages you send and those you receive—what you say, what you hear, and what each of you *thinks* the other said and heard. Do others say that you listen to them? Do you feel that others always give your ideas a fair hearing? Can you sell your ideas effectively?

Failure to communicate is the frustration of modern management, the dating scene, and the family dinner table. Over time, all human relationships depend on the sum total of your interactions, stacked end to end. Personally or professionally, communication becomes a life-or-death issue.