

5 Communication Skills Every Executive Needs

By Dianna Booher

Looking back, many failed executives and managers recognize that their organizations first hired them for their technical skills—and dismissed them for their people skills. Perhaps their résumé promised proficiency in finance, business management, or sales and marketing. But as they win promotions, they need broader, core skills—the ability to interact with and influence more and more groups of people inside and outside the organization.

The basic business act is communication. Successful people continue to focus on mastery of these core skills both personally and throughout their organization. Communication is not a to-do list; it's an outcome, produced by these core skills:

Speaking

No longer is effective speaking a “plus” in the business world—it is now *expected*. And the higher you go in an organization, the more crucial this skill becomes. Today, public speaking is the norm for successful executives.

On those days when you're not explaining a crisis to a group of line managers or investors, you often will find yourself speaking before peers in your day-to-day responsibilities. And as a small business owner, you may speak for a living; that is, you may talk to customers and clients daily to sell your products or services. Your speaking success relates directly to your bottom-line.

We all know that it is not necessarily the brightest or most capable who get ahead. Often it is those who make a strong impact on people who end up in positions to buy from them. People who speak well generally are considered more intelligent, forceful, and respectable than their quieter counterparts.

Outside the business world, you will continue to find chances to put your speaking skills to use—at club fund-raisers, on political issues, at farewell gatherings for departing colleagues and friends, and on behalf of nonprofit organizations and causes.

Speaking well is no longer just a nice-to-have skill—it is a *must* for the successful individual and particularly for the successful executive.

Listening

Listening means the difference between making or losing a sale, gaining or losing a client, motivating or discouraging a team, mending or destroying an employee relationship. Not a passive state of mind, listening is the precursor to all successful business activity as an owner and manager. As Plutarch observed: “Know how to listen, and you will profit even from those who talk badly.”

Writing

Everything official sooner or later gets written down. Unfortunately, as a senior executive, most of the difficult writing—or at least reviewing of others’ drafts—ends up on your desk: Large customer proposals. Important supplier agreements. Strategic partnerships. Policy statements. Press releases to the public. Letters to investors. What you say is what you get. It has to be clear, concise, correct.

Leading a Meeting

Meetings can bring the world to peace—or kill 15 hours a week for even the best time manager. Executives meet with clients to sign the big contract, meet with suppliers to negotiate better terms, brainstorm with their own teams to set strategy for the quarter or year, and lead staff meetings to tackle day-to-day issues. How well you lead determines who follows and what they achieve—time wasted or valuable outcomes.

Resolving Conflict

Executives and business owners, unfortunately, have plenty of conflict. If not with clients, then among internal divisions and teams. If not with internal teams, then with governmental agencies and regulators. If not with agencies and regulators, then with warring divisions and stakeholders about expectations and means to the desired outcomes. As senior executive, you serve as referee, replete with all the boo’s, minus the benefits.

Finding your toolkit short of any of these skills can hinder your overall effectiveness to achieve results and reach your business goals. To improve results on all fronts, sharpen these skills in your own tool chest and then begin to improve this same skill set in your key employees.

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