

# Communication Is the Most Important Asset On Your Balance Sheet

By Dianna Booher

“There’s just no communication around here!” You hear this frequent complaint after foul-ups occur—whether a start-up or a multinational corporation. Yet bosses insist they’re giving explicit instructions to their employees. Coworkers think they’re sharing all necessary information with their colleagues. Businesses believe they are communicating well with their customers.

The problem? Information is not communication. Posting announcements on the intranet, holding teleconferences, or scheduling half a dozen meetings is the not same as substantive communication. The following strategies will help you construct and deliver a message that informs and encourages others while gaining buy-in for your decision—whether relaying good news or bad news.

## Be Correct

Tell it like it is—no clichés that are often expected, but seldom respected. From the C-suite to the mailroom, truth-telling is key to productivity. If you missed your numbers, say so. If you made a mistake, admit it. There’s tremendous power in being known as a person who speaks the truth. Every day we interact with bosses, customers, kids, spouses, or neighbors in sensitive situations with difficult questions. There are easy answers. And then there are truthful, more difficult answers. Your power as a communicator often depends on the choice between the two.

## Be Complete

Leaders often get so busy analyzing, problem solving, questioning, coordinating, deciding, and delegating that they fail to communicate what’s going on to those standing on the sidelines. But to make good decisions and take appropriate action, people need complete information—whether in everyday situations, in addressing employees in the midst of a takeover, or while appeasing consumers during a product recall. Good communicators can’t be cavalier about giving complete information—the whys, whats, and hows.

## Be Clear

Be specific. Verify assumptions. Separate facts from opinions. Vague generalities create confusion. Speak and write in simple, plain English. Muddling information creates a sense of phoniness and insincerity, and in some cases, intimidation. Some people send unclear messages with the best of intentions. “How did I do on the presentation?” often elicits a response of “great job” when “mediocre” would have been more appropriate. Results: Poor performers never improve.

## Avoid Being Purposefully Unclear

To some extent, tact and evasion make civilization and camaraderie possible. But purposeful evasion as a rule, over time—where harmony is valued above honest communication—destroys trust, erodes morale, and lowers productivity. Purposefully unclear communication can be devastating for both individuals and organizations. In such cultures, everyone gets along, goes along—and sinks together. Face-saving is rarely a good substitute for problem solving. Open communication and emotional maturity, rather than defensiveness, foster trust and excellence.

## **Be Consistent**

A manager hears, “The company’s not doing well. Freeze wages in your area.” Then she sees construction crews remodeling the executive dining room. Customers, colleagues, and employees experience disenchantment when they see inconsistencies in the workplace. As the old saying goes, you can’t *not* communicate—by words, action, or silence. You communicate by the policies you enforce and the ones you ignore, by the behavior you reward and the behavior you penalize, and by the quality of the products and services you advertise and those you actually deliver.

## **Be Credible**

Consider the look, the language, the likeability factor, character, and competence. People often judge your credibility by your appearance (dress, grooming, movement, gestures, facial expression, posture, walk). And when you open your mouth, they judge your ability to think on your feet and express yourself coherently. People tend to trust people they like.

## **Be Concerned and Connected**

Concern connects people. In whatever situation—from product recall to layoffs to employee illness to accident victims to stressed colleagues—there’s tremendous power in communicating your concern. When logic causes a lapse in the relationship, emotion closes the gap. Leaders who show they care about people as individuals—not as employees, suppliers, or customers—make a connection. Those who don’t not only fail to communicate, but also lose employees and customers over time.

## **Be Current**

Speed is the new measure of quality. With one-hour dry-cleaning, thirty-minute pizza delivery, and two-minute Lasik surgery, no one wants to wait until tomorrow to find out the latest big news. Speed of communication is essential in bringing scattered work groups up-to-date on new projects, diffusing rumors, and helping to maintain morale company-wide. When workers get the latest scoop about their company from the morning paper, that’s proof-positive that they are out of the loop on late-breaking corporate news.

## **Be Sure Your Communication Demonstrates Competence**

People can’t always follow you around to watch you fire a rocket, manage a research team, handle stubborn suppliers, or correct product-design flaws. But they do hear what you *say* or see what you *write* about that work. And often they judge your competence by what you communicate about your job—not necessarily by what they see firsthand. Your reputation with customers or colleagues often rests on a single interaction.

## **Be Circular**

Make it your motto to ask, “Who else needs to know?” when there’s a change of plans or when a new idea surfaces. In most organizations, downward communication dominates. Upward communication needs nudging. And lateral communication is almost non-existent. Publicizing your point,

encouraging feedback, facilitating compelling conversations across department lines—as a leader, these are just a few of the best ways to institute circular communication.

Communication makes the “top five” in many lists today:

- The most important ingredient in happy marriages.
- The most essential element in raising well-adjusted teens.
- The most vital skill in job-interviewing success.
- The greatest problem voiced by political parties in gaining support for their candidate.
- The most critical component of great customer service.
- The biggest challenge leaders experience in times of change and upheaval.
- The most frequent reason top talent joins a new team.
- The most frequent complaint employees cite as their reason for leaving an organization.

Communication may be the most important asset on your balance sheet. Nothing gets done until someone communicates an idea, a need, a problem, or a solution and then fosters open communication to develop a strategy and execute a plan. It’s all about communication.

Whether it’s writing or speaking, how well we communicate dictates how well we do business.

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### **1,033 words**

*Dianna Booher works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of “21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century.” Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its “Top 100 Thought Leaders” and “Top 100 Minds on Personal Development.” Visit [www.booher.com](http://www.booher.com) or call 800.342.6621.*