

Communication Toolbox for a 2.0 World: Essential Actions for Effective Virtual Collaboration

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Abstract: In the words of Tom Freedman, "The World is Flat." Globalization of business, the movement toward distributed teams and the increasing number of people working from home is a fact of life. The way people interact, produce and collaborate has dramatically changed. The frequency and availability of face to face communication has been dramatically curtailed. These physical changes in the way a work force is organized requires a greater level of consciousness about our communication acts in light of the fact that so much of our messages are delivered non-verbally. Taking away the visual, tone and energy of interactions demands a new communications consciousness. This article will examine the challenges and techniques we can chose as we function in this new world.

Collaboration is a key driver of overall performance of companies around the world. Its impact is twice as significant as a company's aggressiveness in pursuing new market opportunities (strategic orientation) and five times as significant as the external market environment (market turbulence). Collaboration can positively impact each of the gold standards of performance: profitability, profit growth and sales growth to determine a company overall performance in the marketplace.

Impact of Collaboration on Business Performance
Frost & Sullivan (2007)
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Becoming a good communicator is hard, detailed, analytical work. But it is the most important muscle you can develop for being more effective in both your personal and professional life. Coordinating the work of many, developing teamship and fostering collaboration is the work of effective leadership and management. It is a skill you can learn. In terms of communication in a virtual environment paying attention to the details and nuances is the essential work.

2.0 Special Challenges and Opportunities

We are all navigating in uncharted territory. PC's and the internet are a relatively new phenomenon. Real virtual collaboration in a world of distributed teams is even newer. And most people working in this area have

little, if any, experience of working in this way. This fact presents an environment in which people are free to sink or swim that is based mainly on their own instincts and their ability to pay attention to the continuously available feedback loop as they Braille their way along. I believe that paying attention to the following seven areas will make your virtual communications more effective.

- 1. Being a Conscious Leader*
- 2. Focusing Engagement & Invitation – Building Trust*
- 3. Leading Demands Creativity*
- 4. Honoring Formality & Process Design*
- 5. Using 3 V's – Visual, Vocal, Verbal*
- 6. Choosing the Communication Channel*
- 7. Recognizing Cultural Differences*

1. Becoming a Conscious Communicator

It is always important to be a conscious communicator. Through each verbal and non-verbal communication we make others develop a sense of who we are. The perception and resultant image others have of us reflects the communications that emanate from each individual. The key things you need to stay conscious of include:

Building Trust & Setting Expectations: No one can do this for you. You must create an environment in which people give and receive trust from people they are working with. One of the key ways to do this is by making sure clear expectations are set at the beginning of every project.

Formality of Process & Communication: When we work virtually it is important to develop, agree on and use more formal communication processes. If you do not things can get out of hand very quickly because you do not have immediate access to a receiver's unfiltered responses that in a face to face world you would can adjust to or push back against. The buffer of time enables both sober reflection and festering anger.

Metrics for both Process & Productivity: Every project needs to develop objective metrics for determining success of the project in terms of desired outcome and in terms of the process used. The objective is to have

measurable criteria to which you can say “yes or no” in terms of results achieved and efficacy of the process.

Checking In As Way of Being: Since people are working at a distance it becomes essential to reach out and connect with others to make sure they remain engaged, committed, connected, motivated and inspired. The manner of reaching out is your choice – but staying connected is essential to build a high performance team.

Take 100% Responsibility: Everyone on the team is responsible for results and everyone needs to take total responsibility for the project and it’s execution. It’s all too easy to blame challenges on others when you are at a distance.

Creativity Reigns: Given that the territory is new there is no off the shelf manual that will tell people exactly what to do and what will work. We are only limited by our own creativity and thoughtfulness.

Doable Tasks: Begin with small tasks that provide the empowering experience of accomplishment people can be successful at. It is important to acknowledge those triumphs.

Technology & Communication Training: Since you are working at a distance people may be challenged by both the technology and communication skills. It’s important for everyone to have the resources for the education and learning they need.

2. Invitation, Engagement & Building Trust: People need to be graciously invited into the project, welcomed by the leader and introduced to the rest of the team. A facebook like virtual team space can be most helpful. The special skills and natural genius each person has should be communicated to the entire group. Part of forming the team involves articulating Mission, Vision and Values as an element of setting team norms. A team also needs a detailed agreement that will serve as a charter for their activity. If you find yourself on the edges of a group it is important to be accountable for teaching others HOW to include you.

3. Leading Demands Creativity: I believe that a guiding principle for the virtual world is to use your creativity to interpolate and approximate the best practices that parallel what works in the physical, face to face (f2f) world.

Designing such things as virtual happy hours, lunches, walks, outings, celebrations, games and contests have and will continue to work. Admittedly this takes expansive vision and a willingness to play along, but everyone is in the same context.

4. Honoring Formality and Process Design: It is important to pay attention to formality and detail when building trust and setting expectations. This includes such things as clear Agreements for Action and Results, maintaining Beginners Mind and the perspective of having learning experiences. Remember that function drives form and what is essential is the establishment of an ongoing feedback loop for stewarding results in this new territory.

5. Three V's: Visual, Voice & Verbal: Although it is sometimes hard to believe when we deliver messages in the f2f world that what we convey is transmitted in the following approximate proportions: 55 % visual appearance; 38% tone or mood and 7% word content. To say that differently more than 90% of what we "say" is communicated non-verbally. Given that virtual world communication is often text based it becomes critical to begin to become like a novelist, adding description, feeling tone to our voices. That means it becomes critical to edit and add layers of visual and auditory cues to our communications. Equally important is the need to quickly switch communication channels depending on the kind of conversation you want to have. It becomes critical to "listen" very carefully to what is written. Emoticons (funny faces) are a tool that add non-verbal's if used mindfully.

6. The Communication Channel: Higher Touch = Higher Tech
Text message, Email, Voicemail, Telephone, Video Conference are all options that are available. You must make deliberate choices about the channel you use which depends on what's available and at what cost. It is important to think about the nature of the interaction, importance, participants, objectives and user sophistication. What I have learned is that the more personal and intimate the broader the bandwidth, unless things are so hot between people that the buffer of a narrower channel is useful.

7. Recognizing Cultural Differences: On the surface there are unique characteristics about different cultural groups be they race, religion, national origin, gender, age, values, work habits, and communication patterns to name a few. Although these appear to create vast differences between

people, which are very real, they are not the entire story. It is critical to remember that beneath these surface differences we are all more similar than different when we dig a bit deeper. What is important, I think, is to become “Multi-Lingual” and maintain awareness of cultural differences.

The following key principles seem to be universal, applying in both the F2F and virtual worlds, though applying them virtually will take some thought and intention.

Moving Through Roadblocks
No Difficult People – Only Different People
Instruments Demonstrate Differences
Developing Emotional Intelligence
Responding and Reacting
Anger and Aggression
"I" statements
Know / Do / Feel
S O F T E N
Mirroring / Identifying
Don' t Bark Back at Barking Dogs
Listening Skills
Object / Subject
Goal "Agreements for Results”
Non-Verbal
Automatic Writing
Providing Effective Feedback
Delegating Effectively

Moving Through Roadblocks

The context in which we communicate is filled with the potential for miscommunication. Let’s say you want to get a message to your colleague in Germany (fluent English, but it is a second language) about a new person who will join your team on a very large consulting project. You both know this person for many years and have your own perceptions of them. Although they have the reputation of “technical genius,” they have some quirky personal characteristics.

When you are about to share your perceptions of this person you begin by coding the message through your own filters, then you deliver the message. When they receive the message they decode it through their perceptual filters. Add to this the use of asynchronous email and you begin to understand the filters and the medium present natural roadblocks to creating shared meaning, the goal of effective communication. All of these vectors have made me realize how artful communication is, and how difficulties are usually more structural than intentional.

The most effective communicators work at it. They have the ability and persistence to both anticipate and move through roadblocks until shared meaning is created.

Ann Marcus (c) 1998 -...., 8/30/07 3:58 AM
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No Difficult People – Only Different People

Many of us have the tendency to give up too quickly and abandon our goal of building the bridge to the other. We make the assessment that the other will not or cannot understand the message we are trying to deliver because they are too difficult. We believe that a critical distinction is realizing the difference between “difficult behavior,” and “being difficult.” One is about character, the other about action. I always assume it is behavioral, and that the behavior can be improved through learning and feedback that is given in the spirit of generating improved effectiveness and delivered without revealing personal judgments. The section on delivering feedback below incorporates the details of how to do that.

Instruments Demonstrate Differences

There are many different instruments that reveal style differences in different aspects of communication. They include:

- PSI - Personal Styles Inventory
- DISC-
- MBTI - Myers Briggs
- Influence Inventory
- Relationship Strategies
- Thomas Killian Conflict Style

These instruments serve a few very useful purposes. They make us aware of the different way people receive and deliver information. That usually

explains why we are challenged communicating with particular individuals. That enables us to use what we learn about our audiences so we can communicate more effectively. Using an instrument for a team or work-group and making people aware of the styles of others is a very useful tool for developing effectiveness in communicating to particular individuals. The instruments reveal preferences along a continuum of opposite styles. They shed light on why you may be having difficulty communicating with particular individuals. They provide information and strategies on the best way to communicate with people of the opposite or the same styles. They deliver the message that although we tend to have preferences because of our experience, how we developed or our genetic inclination we have the capacity to consciously chose to “flex” our style so we can be more effective in dealing with people who have different preferences. “Flexing” is the way we develop our communication muscles!

Developing Emotional Intelligence

Traditionally intelligence was measured in terms IQ or intelligence quotient which measures cognitive ability. Of course that is a valuable measure of capacity. But it’s not the only critical factor. There are a number of different kinds of intelligence that have value in working with others. One of the most important ones for working with others is “Emotional Intelligence” because communication involves the nuances of human interaction. This serves us well for a few reasons that track the five basic tenants of emotional intelligence as conceived by Daniel Goleman and expressed in his book, “Emotional Intelligence” that popularized the field.

1. Self-Awareness: This is the foundational skill that enables us to separate self from behavior through observation and reflection. It enables you to make more discerning assessments about yourself and your verbal and non-verbal communication.

2. Self-Regulation: The ability to control what you do or say and how you react in the face of communication coming at you.

3. Empathy: Your ability to stand in their shoes and understand their perspective. The following quote sums up empathy and compassion:

If you knew the secret history of those you would like to punish you would see a sorrow and suffering enough

to disarm all your hostility.

4. Self-Motivation: The ability to be proactive and not wait for things to come at you.

5. Social Skills: Your capacity for navigating in groups of people and recognizing the impacts of your words and deeds on others.

Responding and Reacting

| How you engage with others is a critical part of the communication process. Weather you respond or react goes a long way in determining the outcome of the interaction. Responding has a much greater chance of getting you what you want while reacting is likely to engender push-back.

REACTION: Reply or behavior prompted by external influences that stimulate thought or behavior. The behavior is usually automatic or immediate. The critical factor is remembering what my mentor told me many years ago:

YOU CANNOT UNPUNCH SOMEONE!

RESPONSE: A reply or behavior stemming from internal knowledge based on values, ethics and standards that have been personally developed. The response is based on a choice after reflection about the specific outcome you want. Self-editing is the critical skill

Anger and Aggression

Anger is the emotion engendered by an expectation of or unacceptable behavior on the part of others. Aggression is the behavior to which you are driven to by unpleasant negative emotions including anger. These will always get in the way. It's not unusual to feel anger as a result of someone's words or actions. The skill is to manage what you do in response.

Passive / Aggressive / Assertive

One way of looking at what we do after someone communicates to us is to chose how you respond. The choice might be characterized by one of the following modes:

PASSIVE

ASSERTIVE

AGGRESSIVE

PASSIVE		AGGRESSIVE
Failure to care for self	Courage	Violate other's rights
Violation of your rights	Connection	Failure to care for them
	Caring	

Passive Aggressive Assertive

Assertive behavior respects everyone's needs!

The chart sums it up beautifully! Following it is guaranteed to improve your effectiveness.

"I" statements

This is one of the most critical and most underutilized techniques for effective communication. In my experience the great mistake we make is to criticize the words or deeds of another by judging them. A classic example is

“You make me so angry when you are late.”

That is a double whammy – blaming them for your negative emotion and judging their behavior “late.” This type of communication is guaranteed to generate the push-back of a defensive response. A much more effective message would be:

“I was very angry when you arrived at 9 when you promised to be here at 8.”

Let them assess their behavior and you will likely get an apology and a promise to do better. The formula is

“I was (your emotion) when you (describe their behavior)”

Know / Do / Feel

One of the key failures of the communication process is the failure to think carefully of the message you want to deliver before composing and delivering your words. I frame this kind of communicating as “thinking out loud.” It is the antithesis of the way the prolific Ernest Hemingway described his process: “I think a lot and write very little.” For me a simple formula for avoiding this pitfall is the

“KNOW / DO / FEEL”

mantra. Before you deliver any communication it is imperative to ask yourself

“What do you want them to know?”
“How do you want them to feel?”
“What do you want them to do?”

If you do not have a clear answer to at least one of the questions then you have nothing to say and you might refrain from speaking.

S O F T E N

This is a very useful acronym for real time, F2F communication. Although the commands for that kind of communication are not exactly the same they have great value for any kind of exchange. Here’s the acronym and my translation for the world of virtual communication:

Smile – Be pleasant in what you have to say. Communicate with diplomacy and tact even when delivering bad news. Be mindful of word choice

Open- Do not hold back. Share the feelings behind your words when appropriate. Be available for the response

Forward Lean – Engage with them, show you are interested

Territory – Be aware by the response of when you have pushed too hard

Eye Contact – Meet them and engage. Five to seven seconds

Nod – Always acknowledge what they say to show you are listening

Mirroring / Identifying

Communicating is about building a bridge between you and the other. It is always a give and take process. A critical act is the need to establish rapport before delivering your message. One of the best techniques for doing that is to mirror and identify. You want to send a message back with a similar mood or tone to establish connection. You can demonstrate your connection by showing you understand what they are saying by using an example from your own life. Once you are synchronized then you can deliver your message.

This technique takes a page from neuro linguistic programming (NLP.) This powerful body of communication tools from the 1980's was so popular in the world of sales and influencing others that some people were concerned it was unethical because of the inherent power of manipulation. The premise was that once you mirrored and established rapport you could then lead the conversation where you wanted it to go and others would follow at an unconscious level. Essentially it puts people at ease which fosters open communication.

Don't Bark Back at Barking Dogs

The worst mistake you can make with people who are speaking louder to make their point is to try and “out louder” them. All that does is add fuel to the fire and generates an even louder response. When they are gripped in this kind of emotion the best thing to do to de-escalate a situation is to speak about the facts that have made them so emotional. This return to reason will usually calm people down. This applies equally to purely verbal communication. Suggestion: If you can pick up the phone!

Listening Skills

Effective communication is a two-way, give and take, interactive, iterative process. It is essential to spend as much time hearing their message as

composing yours. The best way I know to fully understand and appreciate the value of listening is to spend some time only listening. I often suggest to people that they wear a sign saying

“I’m not speaking today, only listening”

then move through their ordinary day. You can then be amazed at how much you miss because you are focused on your own voice and what you will say in response to what you hear, never fully giving yourself to the listening process because you are already focused on responding before they have finished, and before you have fully digested the message. I am usually amazed at how different a message is when I become an observer and read it for the second time. Here are some tips that will help:

1. Active Listening: This means whole being listening. Realizing what is behind the words, observing with your eyes, ears and heart and thinking about what is not being said. It requires using your thinking speed wisely to interpret and fill in the blank spaces that their words do not fill because your mind is much quicker processing information than their ability to speak.
2. Paraphrasing: This is the best way to make sure the bridge is connected – feed the message back in your words and see if you are connected by the shared meaning that is established.
3. Engage Fully: Give the all of your ATTENTION and PRESENCE
4. Environment / Distractions: Make sure nothing gets in the way of you and them. Sorry, multi-tasking may be great in theory but when your attention is diluted you miss critical parts of the message and you distance the speaker.
5. Do not interrupt: One of our biggest mistakes is cutting people off after they deliver part of their message. We begin asking questions based on what we think is important and their complete message gets lost.
6. Hold Judgments: Our minds function like judgment machines making relative comparisons about what we see, hear and think...

Hair is too long,
Poor choice of words,

That will never work,
Terrible idea
???

I find it is better to observe your judgments, hold them in abeyance and not think you have the truth and must act upon what crosses your mind at a point in time. That way you can listen all the way through and make a more considered response.

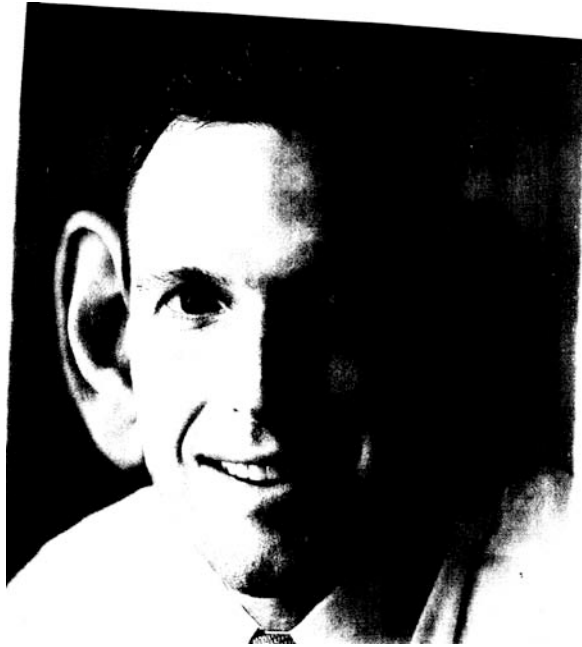
7. Ask questions: This demonstrates you are interested and provides a more complete explication and understanding of what is said.

8. Take notes: Rather than interrupt save your questions by taking notes

9. Do not anticipate what they are saying or focus on your response: Wait until they are done, digest and then respond to the message.

10. The Best Tool





Listening Role Model

COMMUNICATION



Listening is when you use Eyes, Ears and Heart

Remember: Listening Builds Relationships !!!

Object / Subject

Martin Buber makes the very important distinction of

“I / It “ and “I / Thou”

relationships. I / “It” relationships are object oriented – we think of others as objects to be used and manipulated for our own purposes. I / “Thou” relationships are subjective – you care about the person.

I believe that one of the tragedy’s of the global corporate culture we have become part of is that we reduce others to objects we see as instruments for our own advancement. People become tools to use to accomplish this or that and we often suffer the lack of not knowing them as individuals. If you can step beyond that cultural tendency and relate to others as compassionate human beings your connection and communication will be much more effective. The “I / Though” context will generate a much deeper level of concern and respect and they will listen more attentively to your messages.

Goal "Agreements for Results”

The best and most effective communication has a purpose in mind – action. Otherwise our talk is mere banter. What can we agree TO DO together? The goal is joint action. Everything else is often frustrating idle chit-chat. The purpose of collaborative communication is to construct a shared vision in terms of desired accomplishment and a road-map to it. You can think in terms of an “arranged marriage” with no divorce when it comes to working with virtual teammates. You can spend your life in agonizing rebellion, or you can chose to love it.

Non-Verbal

Communication is composed of three parts:

Visual - Appearance of the Deliverer

Vocal - Tone or Mood of our Message

Verbal - Content of the Words

About ninety percent of what we “say” is non-verbal! We communicate by the way we look and the tone, mood and affect of what we say. This is critical to remember. I say you can deliver any kind of news and minimize the “push-back” depending on your appearance and the tone of your message. This takes on a huge amount of importance when delivering bad news electronically. It is essential to use words or other symbolic visual and tonality representations when dealing in a verbal medium. The art of narrative becomes a critical skill as you do your best to add visual and tonal components to verbal communication.

Automatic Writing

When you are triggered with emotion and want to dash off a letter of rage please do compose it and just let the rage ramble through the page. Do not send it. ALWAYS ADDRESS IT TO YOURSELF OR PUT IT IN A WORD FILE. Come back in twenty-four hours and think about the RESPONSE you really want to send in terms of the end result you are looking for. You can also use this technique if you are unsure of HOW you want to respond. Write for ten minutes to discover the response inside you.

Providing Effective Feedback

When you are providing feedback you are usually responding to another persons product or service or opinions. In doing so, especially when it's negative feedback, we must take care of the person and provide actionable information. The tips for doing it well include:

- Comment on the behavior, not the person
- Timeliness is essential
- For negative feedback consider telephone as a better channel
- Remember you're in a long term relationship
- Be constructive, not judgmental – tell them what they can do and by when
- Be specific
- Ask if it would be valuable for them
- Remember, it's about growth and learning

Delegating Effectively

When giving someone something to do it is critical to provide clear directions that are:

- Specific
- Measurable,
- Have a “by when”
- Part of an ongoing conversation
- Negotiable

Summary and Conclusion

Thoughtfulness, emotional intelligence, consciousness – if we can communicate in a manner consistent with those principles we will navigate the virtual world in a more effective manner! Remember:

- Show Up
- Pay Attention
- Tell Your Truth
- Don't Be Attached to the Outcome

Angelis Arrien, Ph.D.
The Four Fold Way

And my translation:

- Presence is essential
- Listen
- Be cautious when thinking you have THE truth.
- Hold communication as a teaching and learning process