

SUCCESSFUL SOFT SKILLS STRATEGIES



REENTRY  
ESSENTIALS, INC.

# MAKE YOURSELF HEARD!

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

**CAREER**   
**COMPASS**  
Success in all Directions



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# Preface

Today's job seekers face tough challenges. New technology, high unemployment, and fewer jobs make it essential for job seekers to set themselves apart from other applicants. That is, to grab the attention of an employer, a job seeker must stand out!

Employers today want more than someone with the necessary job-related skills. They want an employee who exhibits what many refer to as soft skills. **Soft skills** are the personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people. Simply put, they are the skills an employee needs to get along and work well with others.

A recent survey found that the number one characteristic employers want to see in their workers is professionalism.<sup>1</sup> Professionalism encompasses multiple soft skills, including (but not limited to) communication, time management, self-management, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork skills.

The *Successful Soft Skills Strategies* program will help you learn about and practice soft skills that will make you stand apart from others in your field. The *Successful Soft Skills Strategies* program includes the following books:

- *Stepping Stones to Success! Goals & Attitude*
- *Make Yourself Heard! Professional Communication Skills*
- *How You Act & Dress Matters! Professional Etiquette & Image*
- *Wake Up & Work! Keys to Self-Management*
- *Demonstrate Your Value through Collaboration! Teamwork & Motivation*
- *Play Nice & Stay Employed! Workplace Relationships & Conflict Negotiations*
- *Lead with Integrity! Leadership & Ethics*

Each title concentrates on specific soft skills to help you attain skill mastery. Whether you are a new job seeker, a person re-entering the business world, a recent college graduate, or a longtime employee, completing these exercises to master these important soft skills will help you now and for the rest of your life. Even the most seasoned professionals will benefit from refreshing their skills from time to time.

Try to complete one book from the *Successful Soft Skills Strategies* program per week. Although it may be helpful to begin with *Stepping Stones to Success! Goals & Attitude* followed by the other titles in the program, these books are standalone pieces and can be used in any sequence.

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<sup>1</sup> Meghan Casserly, "Top Five Personality Traits Employers Hire Most," *Forbes*, October 4, 2012.

## Program Features

Each *Successful Soft Skills Strategies* book introduces skills necessary for success in business and explains their role in employment success. The program provides self-assessment activities to identify and address your individual needs and application activities to challenge you and to allow you to practice your skills.

You will encounter these interactive features:

- Thinking Breaks
- Self-Assessment activities
- Apply the Skills activities



**Thinking Breaks** - Part of learning a new skill is being able to apply it to your own experiences. These thought-provoking questions require reflection and honesty that, when applied, will help you identify your own opinions and beliefs relating to a specific aspect of employment success.



**Self-Assessment activities** - The self-assessment activities help you assess your current soft skill level and provide a brief snapshot of your strengths and weaknesses. The more honest your answers, the more accurately you will be able to identify areas for improvement.

If the assessment section indicates that your skill level is high, you should still practice the daily workout but make it more challenging by trying to mentor or teach another person that skill. Attempting to teach others how to successfully master a skill is the ultimate test of your knowledge.

The self-assessment tool is for your own personal use. After you have identified areas in which you would like to improve, practice these exercises and continue to seek out ways to strengthen your competencies in your daily life.



**Apply the Skills activities** - After skills are introduced and explained, Apply the Skills activities challenge you to use these skills. Complete these exercises daily until you've achieved mastery of the professionalism skill you are studying. Some of the activities require working with a partner or mentor. For others, working with a partner or mentor is simply recommended.

When choosing a partner or study buddy, seek out someone who supports you and wants to see you succeed and who can, above all, be honest with you about your current skill level. Your ability to reciprocate this effort is essential to your partner's success as well; you will equally share in your progress and take an active role in each other's individual success, so choose wisely.

Having a mentor is ideal. Your mentor should be someone with whom you have a positive relationship and someone who is a professional in a position of authority. For example, you might seek out a teacher, boss, friend who is a manager or executive at a company, career services advisor, student advisor, human resources manager, current employer, or parent.

Employment success largely depends on your ability to identify and address areas in which you need to improve. To accomplish this, be willing to receive feedback from others. If you are not able to receive this kind of feedback easily - and if you get upset, angry, or defensive - then seek the help of a trusted expert who can help you learn to give and receive constructive feedback prior to beginning the program.



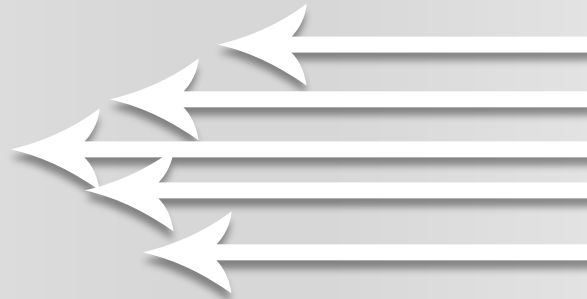
# Make Yourself Heard!

## *Professional Communication Skills*

### OBJECTIVES

Completing this book will allow you to

- Understand the role communication plays in achieving a high level of success in business
- Learn and practice the six steps of communication
- Understand and practice active listening
- Learn how to reflect back what you are hearing
- Understand barriers that inhibit effective communication
- Learn the skills necessary for powerful communication



## Communication Skills: So What?

On a scale of one to ten (with ten being the best), how good do you feel you are at communicating?

\_\_\_ out of ten

During your career, you will inevitably encounter difficult situations and hard-to-please coworkers, customers or clients, and bosses. But communicating is more than just possessing "the gift of gab" or an expansive vocabulary. No, in fact, it can be quite the opposite, especially when dealing with these difficult encounters. You will need to use effective communication skills to arrive at a positive outcome. Communication is a process by which information is exchanged between individuals. There are three types of communication:

- **Verbal:** Spoken words (what you say and hear)
- **Nonverbal:** Body language, facial expression, hand gestures, and so on (how you deliver or receive messages)
- **Written:** Email, text, and letters (the words you write)



Why are communication skills so important? Good communication skills have a variety of benefits:

- They can balance a lack of technical or clinical skills (when you are starting at a new job).
- They can improve results, save time, and increase productivity.
- They can improve cooperation, making for a stronger team.
- They can reduce stress and increase job satisfaction.

In addition to these benefits, taking care to communicate well will prove to your coworkers and employers that you care about their feedback. It also will prove that you will take time to listen and discover the person's true objection or uncover the "real problem." Good communicators often emerge as leaders within an organization. Poor communication, in contrast, will lead to mistakes, loss of productivity, and even damaged professional relationships.

Communication can make all the difference. This book walks you through everything you need to know about professional communication and how to become an effective communicator. Using the information and activities provided, you will develop communication skills that are necessary for your career success. First, let's see how well you currently communicate!



## *Self-Assessment - Communication Mistakes*


For each question below, check the box in the column that best describes you. Answer questions as you actually are (rather than how you think you should be).

Have You Ever ...	Yes	No
1. Thought about what you wanted to say next while others were talking?		
2. Attacked people and not problems when you spoke?		
3. Overused absolutes such as always or never?		
4. Rolled your eyes when someone said something you disagreed with?		
5. Blamed others when conversations took a wrong turn?		

Have You Ever ...	Yes	No
6. Repeated instructions or concepts over and over?		
7. Assumed you knew what the speaker was going to say before he or she said it?		

If you answered "Yes" to any of the preceding questions, congratulations! You are human!

You may be guilty of at least a few of these actions, which is why the practice of professional communication should be a lifelong exercise.

 ***In the space below, identify a type of communication mistake you are most guilty of making.***

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## Assessing Your Communication Skills

Earlier you answered on a scale of one to ten how good are you at communicating. Herein lies part of the problem: the most challenging part of developing strong communication skills is that most people feel they are already quite good at communicating. Often, the people you would describe as the most adept communicators are simply good speakers. But communication is much more than the ability to eloquently state a case or make a point. Good communication requires the ability to, well, be quiet and *listen!*

Listening should be *active*. Active listening helps to minimize misunderstandings and miscommunication. Although misunderstandings are a part of life, your ability to recognize and correct these misunderstandings will elevate you from a good communicator to a superior communicator.



## Self-Assessment - Communication "Pro" or "Doh!"

For each statement, check the box in the column that best describes you. Answer questions as you actually are (rather than how you think you should be).

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
1. I try to anticipate and deal with problems and confusion when communicating with others.			
2. If I do not understand something, I ask for clarification, even if I think others might view my question as "stupid."			
3. I regularly find that people understand what I tell them.			
4. When engaging in a conversation, I give the speaker my full attention.			
5. I consider how my words will be perceived by others and sometimes change the way I say something so that it is better received.			
6. I give careful consideration to the feeling of others when speaking, and I sometimes don't speak my mind.			
7. When people tell me something I don't agree with, I try to first see it from their perspective before responding with how I feel.			
8. I do not use email to communicate complex issues with people.			
9. When I finish writing a report, memo, or email, I review it thoroughly for misspellings and missed words before I send it.			

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
10. When talking to people, I pay attention to their body language.			
11. I use diagrams and charts to help express my ideas.			
12. Before I send a message, I think about the best way to communicate it (in person, over the phone, in an email or memo, and so on).			
13. I slow my rate of speech when providing or verifying information.			
14. I consider cultural barriers when planning my communications.			
15. Before I communicate, I think about what the person needs to know and how best to convey that information.			

Use the following scale to add up the points for each of your answers and record your total in the box that follows.

Tally Your Score	
Always = 5 points Sometimes = 3 points Rarely = 1 point	Total Score:
<p><b>50 to 75 points:</b> Excellent! You understand your role as a communicator, both when you send messages and when you receive them. You anticipate problems, and you choose the most effective ways of communicating.</p> <p><b>31 to 49 points:</b> You need to keep working on your communication skills. You may not be expressing yourself clearly, and you may not be receiving messages correctly. By paying attention to communication, you can be much more effective at work and enjoy much better working relationships!</p> <p><b>30 or fewer points:</b> You have very poor communication skills, and you should work quickly and diligently to improve these skills.</p>	

## Communication "Pro" or "Doh!" Self-Analysis

In the space below, identify the area(s) of communication that you would like to improve and why. Support your analysis with examples from your own experiences.

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## Keys to Effective Communication: Active Listening

 *Take a moment and write down the names of at least three people you would classify as great listeners:*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Of the people on your list, is there anyone that you don't like? (Probably not.) Of the people you identified, are they all people whom you either like, love, or respect a great deal? (Likely, "yes.")

Most likely, the people whose influence on your life has been the most profound are the people you would also classify as great listeners.

It's no coincidence that good listeners are well liked and respected. Therefore, if one of your goals at work is to be liked, loved, or respected, then you must become a good listener!

The act of listening requires a sender (the person who sends the information) and a receiver (the person who hears and interprets the information).

The sender (or speaker) delivers information to the receiver that should be clear, concise, and to the point. That is, it must be "catchable." The receiver is the recipient of the message. The receiver's task is to interpret the sender's message, both verbal and nonverbal, with as little distortion as possible.

## Why Listening Is Steeped in Problems

Listening is so problematic because everything you say is processed (or filtered) through the recipient's personal experiences (communication filters) or, as discussed later, the communication barriers. These filters begin developing as soon as you are born and are derived from life experiences and both verbal and nonverbal cues. Communication obstacles specific to listening include the following:

**Perceptions.** Words and actions can be easily misconstrued or taken out of context. An effective communicator is always aware of how the audience perceives him or her and is conscious of tone and body language. Often a speaker who communicates in a condescending or arrogant manner will cause the audience to disengage from the conversation.

**Misconceptions.** A person's life experience forms his or her opinions. Therefore, it will affect how that person receives your message. Asking questions to better understand where a person is coming from or what facts she or he is using to form an opinion is known as the process of "discovery." This notion of understanding a person's life experience emphasizes the importance of the discovery portion of every conversation because it helps you avoid misinterpreting or misreading a person's message based on your own life experiences.

For example, say you grew up in an environment where people who speak loudly are also prone to anger. In that case, when you encounter someone who loudly says, "I WANT TO ASK YOU A QUESTION," you may assume the underlying message is that the person is mad about something you did.

You'll know you've misunderstood a person's meaning when that person becomes emotional or upset or says things like, "That's not what I meant!" or "Why are you getting so defensive?" Knowing as much as possible about how the person thinks and feels may affect the words you choose when communicating with different audiences.

**Facts versus opinions.** When you are engaged in active listening, listen for whether people state an opinion as a fact. Stating an opinion as a fact is misleading. This is why it is important to include facts (and their sources) whenever possible when you shift from the listener role to the speaking role. Don't state your opinion as fact because the listener may ask you to substantiate the information. Or the listener may have factual information that is in conflict with what you've said or may decide (based on her or his perceptions) that you are lying. This step is crucial in achieving effective outcomes from any conversation in which you engage because facts are required to support opinions and decisions.

You can address and manage these obstacles effectively, but first you must identify your own views on listening and how your views apply to effective communication.

### *Self-Assessment - Listening Quiz*

Take the following quiz to determine your own ideas about listening. When you are finished, read through the answers and explanations of each item that follows.

Statement	True	False
1. Hearing and listening are the same.		
2. There is only one true meaning for a word.		
3. Knowing the reason for listening in every conversation is necessary to be a good listener.		
4. Letting people know you've heard them is part of listening.		

**1. Hearing and listening are the same.** False. Hearing and listening are different because they literally require the use of two different mechanisms in your brain:

- **Hearing:** To apprehend sound.
- **Listening:** To pay attention to the sound or words with thoughtful intention.

Ideally, you need to both hear and listen to fully understand what is being said. When you hear, you are listening to the speaker's pitch and tone, which can help you learn about the speaker's emotional state. When you listen, you have the intention to understand the speaker. Doing so requires you to interpret what he or she is saying and provide feedback to the speaker based on how you interpret the message.

**2. There is only one true meaning for a word.** False. The meaning of the word is not actually in the word itself, but in the context of the statement. Consider, for example, the word *cool*. The listener will interpret the meaning of the word cool depending on several factors, such as the context in which it is used, the speaker's tone, the recipient's own filters, and even geographical location. No two people perceive a message in the same way, even though the same words are being used.

**3. Knowing the reason for listening in every conversation is necessary to be a good listener.** True. Regardless of the situation, it is important to know the reason for listening. For example, let's say you enter into a conversation in which the speaker hopes the outcome is for you both to have fun, but you believe that you are about to be reprimanded. In that case, every statement the speaker makes is subject to serious misinterpretation. If the speaker starts to tease you about a mistake and you believe he or she is serious, well ... you can see how things can turn ugly quickly.

**4. Letting people know you've heard them is part of listening.** True. Letting the speaker know you've understood what she or he has said by providing feedback is an important step in good listening. It will keep the conversation moving as well as ensure that you have, in fact, fully understood the message. Providing feedback is even more important when you're talking on the phone because it is impossible for the speaker to pick up on your nonverbal cues.

## Reduce Background Noise

Although some people work better with background noise, most people are distracted by any sort of background noise. If you are in an open office without doors,

try to find a quiet space to have important conversations. Ideally, whenever possible, close your door and turn off any background noises such as radios.



# Six Actions for Effective Communication

To be an effective listener, you can take some simple actions that will let the speaker know that you are engaged, receptive, and interested in what he or she has to say—all without ever saying a word! These behaviors are particularly important in a job interview, during a difficult conversation, or in a team meeting.

There is more to active listening than just hearing and listening with intent. You have to become an active participant in the communication process to ensure that the message you're hearing is the one the speaker intends to send. Being an active participant may require that you ask questions to further your understanding of the situation. And, perhaps most important, you need to reflect back to the sender what you heard him or her tell you in your own words. Only then should you respond with a solution to the problem presented or with your own feelings about the situation.

## 1. Pay Attention

Give the speaker your undivided attention by looking him or her directly in the eye. Focus on what the person is saying without thinking how you might respond. As you listen, acknowledge the speaker's message. Acknowledging the message can be as simple as nodding your head or saying "uh-huh" or "yes." If appropriate, taking notes is a nonverbal way of acknowledging the speaker.

### Turn Off the Electronics

Maintaining eye contact is crucial in communication. Therefore, the most inconsiderate action people commit in today's world is using electronics during conversations. Reading emails, checking text messages, and working on a computer are signs to others that you don't have time for them. Or worse, they're signs that you find little value in what they are saying. The

temptation to use electronics is even greater if you are on a conference call where the speaker cannot see you. But unless you hit the "mute" button, the speaker can hear you typing. If you're using an electronic device during a meeting, let the speaker know in advance that you'll be taking notes. This way, the person will not misinterpret the sounds he or she hears.

## 2. Consider Your Posture

Maintain a relaxed and open posture. If possible, squarely face the speaker. Avoid slouching because this pose may indicate to the speaker that you're bored. Instead, lean toward the speaker, which is a nonverbal indicator that you are interested in what the speaker has to say.

Having an open and relaxed posture will not only help the speaker remain calm but will show that you are open to the speaker's message.

## *Apply the Skills - Practice Active Listening: Part I*

Complete the following activities to apply what you have learned about active listening. This exercise has five parts. One part will help you notice how often you want to interrupt or let your mind drift. Another will help you listen with real intent on understanding the speaker's message. The third part will help you reflect back to the speaker what you heard him or her say. The fourth examines whether you are responding with empathy. And the fifth part focuses on providing feedback to the speaker.

First, find a partner or study buddy. Your study buddy should be anyone with whom you have a positive relationship. This person also should be interested in improving his or her skills as a listener. Most important, this person should be someone from whom you receive feedback without getting upset or defensive.

Second, determine who will be the speaker first. Ideally, you will use your cell phone or a watch to time the sections of this exercise.

### **Workout 1**

**Speaker.** Talk about a problem you have or have had in the past. It can be something unimportant, such as how to pick the right line at the grocery store, or something more important, such as what car to purchase. The aim is to talk about a real challenge you have faced or are facing.

**Listener Just listen.** Do not talk, ask questions, or problem solve. However, each time that you want to say something, make a check mark ✓ in the box below or on a separate piece of paper.

At the end of the exercise, count up the number of check marks the listener had and then switch roles. Practice this workout at least once a day until you receive fewer than ten check marks. When you are under ten, this indicates that you were truly focused on what the speaker was telling you and not on what you wanted to say.

## Workout 2

**Speaker.** Talk for five minutes about a subject in which you have great interest (for example, cooking, hiking, or children). As you talk, pay attention to verbal and nonverbal cues the listener is sending, which indicates his or her level of interest in what you have to say.

**Listener.** As the speaker is talking, work on your verbal acknowledgments such as saying "yes, I see" or "uh-huh." Also, practice maintaining eye contact, sitting forward, and providing any other nonverbal cues you can send that show the speaker you are interested in what he or she has to say.

Switch roles. You may also practice this workout on the phone with one another. Verbal cues become even more important when you are not speaking face to face.

After you complete the exercise, provide feedback on how well the listener appeared to be engaged and whether he or she appeared to be listening. Provide examples whenever possible.

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### 3. Ask for Clarification

Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" response. They require the speaker to provide more detail and elaborate on his or her message. Questions beginning with *what*, *why*, or *how* are open-ended questions. Asking open-ended questions demonstrates to the speaker that you are genuine in your desire to fully understand the message he or she is trying to convey.



#### *Apply the Skills - Practice Active Listening: Part II*

Complete the following activities to apply what you have learned about active listening. This part (Part II) will help you listen with a real intention of understanding the speaker's message.

#### **Workout 3**

**Speaker.** Describe a dream vacation, but don't tell your partner the destination.

**Listener.** Ask open-ended questions to get the speaker to elaborate the details of his or her destination, but don't guess the destination.

This exercise should last about five minutes. At the end of the conversation, the listener should try to guess the destination based on the information provided. Switch roles when you are done.

#### **Workout 4**

**Speaker.** Think of a specific problem you are having (or have had) with a piece of equipment you use or a service you receive (such as your mobile phone or Internet carrier). Explain to your partner in broad, vague terms the problem you experienced. Then see whether you and your partner can uncover the main problem and come up with a solution. For example, perhaps you tell your partner that your new computer isn't working. It's not only causing you a high level of frustration but also preventing you from being productive. As you communicate, see whether you can uncover the real problem. For example, you don't know how to organize your files on the new system because you can't organize your files the way you like. Therefore, you've made a blanket statement that the computer just "isn't working."

**Listener.** Ask questions to help identify the main problem the speaker is having. After you determine what the real problem is, you can end the exercise.

Switch roles multiple times, using different problems, until you find that asking questions becomes natural to you and you don't have to think as much about what to ask.

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## 4. Reflect What the Speaker Says

Paraphrasing or restating what the speaker has said in your own words lets the speaker know that you are interested. It also gives that person the opportunity to clarify his or her message. To be clear, reflecting is not repeating what the speaker said word for word. It is restating what he or she said in your own words.

For example, the speaker says, "I am really upset because one minute I'm told to do a job one way by one person, and the next minute I'm told to do something totally different by someone else." You might paraphrase by saying, "It sounds as though you're saying there is a lack of communication between the staff." This allows the speaker a chance to restate himself or herself if you did not hear the intended message.

For some people, reflection is the most difficult part of the communication process because it involves real thought on the listener's part.

However, it can become a natural part of your communication process if you are continually asking yourself throughout a conversation:

- "What did I just hear the speaker say?"
- "What does that mean to me?"
- "Does what the speaker just conveyed make sense to me?"

After you ask yourself these questions, simply state them out loud by using lead-in statements such as these:

- "What I hear you saying is ... "
- "I believe that means ... "
- "I want to be clear about what you are saying because I'm not sure I fully understand... "

Reflection takes practice a lot of practice. If it is not something you currently do naturally, find a person to work with (a spouse, parent, or friend). Disclose to this person that you are trying to develop this skill and ask for help.

There is another way to recognize that you've failed to reflect during a conversation. You have failed if you respond to someone during a conversation or provide a solution, opinion, or advice, and that person says one of the following:

- "That's not what I meant."
- "You're missing the point."
- "That won't work."
- "You aren't listening!"

These types of statements indicate that you need to go back and start over to better understand what the speaker is trying to say.

### **Getting It “Wrong” - Restating the Message**

After restating what you have heard, don't worry if the speaker says, "No, that's not what I'm saying." This is another opportunity for the speaker to further clarify the message and the listener to gain a better understanding. Often, people will jump into a conversation before they are

even clear about what they want to say or what the problem really is. One approach is to say, "I'm sorry. I'm not sure I understood you well enough. Can you explain that in another way? I really want to understand what you are trying to tell me."

If the message still isn't clear after several attempts to understand, offer to "table" the conversation if possible. This means moving on to another topic and continuing the conversation at a later time.



## *Apply the Skills - Practice Active Listening: Part III*

Complete the following activity to apply what you have learned about active listening. This part (Part III) will help you reflect back to the speaker what you heard him or her say.

### **Workout 5**

**Speaker.** Share a real or made-up problem you are experiencing at work, home, or school. As you describe what is happening, allow the listener to ask you questions and reflect back to you what he or she understands you to be saying. If the listener misunderstands, redirect and restate in other terms what you are saying.

**Listener.** Take notes, ask questions, and reflect back to the speaker to ensure that you fully understand. After each reflection, move forward or ask for more clarity if you are "off base."

At the end of this exercise, switch roles. Then discuss with one another the following questions and record your observations in the space provided:

1. How well did I reflect back what you were saying?

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2. Did I restate in my own words what I understood or just repeat what you said?

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3. How did this help move the conversation forward?

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4. How did this process of reflection make you feel?

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Repeat this exercise often.

### **Frustrations**

In some instances, the speaker may become frustrated by the reflection process because he or she is failing to effectively communicate his or her feelings, needs, or situation. This is a common experience because often you (the speaker) aren't entirely clear in expressing what you are trying to say. This is an excellent chance to

avoid going down a path that may ultimately lead to problems and mistakes! It is the speaker's responsibility to be clear about what he or she wants. Until the speaker is able to clearly communicate his or her desires, solutions or progress cannot really be made.

### **5. Show Empathy**

Empathy is understanding and sharing another person's experiences and emotions or having the ability to imagine someone else's feelings. Showing empathy is how powerful communicators come to be recognized, not because they agree with everyone all the time. Rather, they empathize with how the person is feeling. This ability to make others feel understood (and calm) allows powerful communicators to redirect others toward a more positive feeling or refocus others on finding solutions rather than finger-pointing or blame.





## Providing Feedback

If you're gone through the communication process effectively, by listening and asking questions, the speaker will arrive at his or her own conclusions. Therefore, when you provide feedback, it is more often in the form of positive reinforcement of the conclusion or solution the speaker has

arrived at on his or her own. This kind of "exploring" and "guiding" the conversation takes many years of conscious practice and work. After you've developed and improved the communication basics discussed, you may want to continue practicing and learning more about communication.



## *Apply the Skills - Practice Active Listening: Part V*

Complete the following activity to apply what you have learned about active listening. This part (Part V) will help you reflect on how a listener can provide feedback to a speaker.

### Workout 7

**Speaker.** Imagine that you and your partner are coworkers. You are constantly complaining about how you never get asked to participate in all the "important" work and "big decisions" that are being made every day in the department. You tell your coworker that you believe the boss has a personal grudge against you. The reason is that you once showed her up in a meeting by sharing a brilliant idea that made her look bad for not thinking of such an obvious solution herself.

**Listener.** Your coworker is complaining that he or she never gets invited to help in problem solving within the department. You know your coworker isn't asked to participate because he or she dominates every conversation and has an attitude of "it's my way or the highway." You want to help your coworker come to realize that this habit is holding him or her back. Before you begin, write down some questions you might ask to lead your coworker to the conclusion that the problem isn't with the boss, but lies in his or her own behavior. Then, as you listen to the speaker, ask clarifying questions to make sure you fully understand the problem. Empathize with your coworker and provide feedback by rephrasing what the speaker said. Then, after you feel you fully understand the problem, help the speaker come to a solution by either giving some suggestions or working to solve the problem together.

At the end of the exercise, discuss the following questions and record your observations in the space provided:

1. What did the listener do that helped you better understand the situation?

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2. What did the listener do that made you feel that he or she understood your problem?

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3. What did the listener do that helped you most?

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4. What could the listener have done that would have helped you come to a solution on your own more quickly?

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# Communication Barriers

Communication fails for many reasons. In most failed communication, the message was not received exactly the way the sender intended. This is why it is important that the person speaking continually seeks feedback to check that the message is clearly understood. When you are the listener, acknowledging what you've heard to ensure you fully understand what is said is equally important.

The skills of *active listening*, *clarification*, and *feedback* help, but skilled communicators also need to be aware of any existing communication barriers to be truly successful.

Common communication barriers include the following:

- **Poor organization:** Companies can create communication barriers when they lack clear communication channels or when the roles and responsibilities of each employee are not defined.
- **Negative attitudes:** Negativity is a barrier because it is easily communicated with both verbal and nonverbal cues (such as folding one's arms or rolling one's eyes).
- **Lack of attention, interest, and respect:** If a listener is not actively engaged in a conversation (for whatever reason), then that person often misses important details.
- **Prejudices and stereotypes:** Personal opinions and prejudices often lead to false assumptions about what is being communicated.
- **Preconceived notions:** Assumptions based on what one expects to hear prevent a person from listening actively.
- **Jargon or overly complicated terms:** Not everyone will understand jargon or industry-specific words and phrases.
- **Differing viewpoints:** Some people choose not to listen to different perspectives or viewpoints.
- **Cultural barriers:** Cultures may differ in their communication styles.
- **Language:** Non-native speakers and native speakers may have difficulty understanding one another.
- **Physical restrictions:** Hearing and/ or visual impairment may need to be accommodated to allow effective communication.
- **Emotional responses:** Emotions such as frustration, anger, joy, and sadness can affect how a person communicates.

**?** *Brainstorm instances when a communication barrier caused a problem in your own life. Write a brief summary of what happened in the space below. Then identify steps you could take to avoid making (or encountering) this communication error in the future.*

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## Keys to Effective Communication: Active Speaking

You have just identified how to be an active listener and how to avoid obstacles of listening by asking clarifying questions and reflecting back what you've heard. The next skill that you should learn is how to be an active speaker. Recall that there are three types of communication: verbal, nonverbal, and written communication. The following sections address different principles of effectively delivering a message (as the sender/speaker). All the principles that follow apply to all three of the communication types (verbal, nonverbal, and written).

### Embrace Criticism

Criticism, whether warranted or not, is a part of life. Your ability to control how you react and respond appropriately can affect the direction a conversation takes in many positive ways.

It is best, and most productive, to assume that all criticism is meant to be constructive (regardless of the delivery) and respond accordingly. It's best to respond with appreciation and thanks.

Or, if you disagree, you should respond with thanks for opening up the discussion around the topic followed with facts about why you disagree.



- 1. Think about a time when a parent, teacher, supervisor, or friend criticized you. Describe the situation and the criticism.**

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- 2. How did the criticism make you feel? How did you respond?**

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- 3. Are you proud of the way you handled the criticism? What might you do differently if something like this happens in the future?**

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**4. Did this experience change the way you offer feedback to others? If so, how?**

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## Be Tactful

Tact or tactfulness is having sensitivity to what is proper and appropriate in dealing with others, including the ability to speak or act without offending others. Use tact in all situations. If you ask yourself, "I wonder whether I should say /write that?" then the automatic answer is "NO!" If you have any doubt about how a message might be received, don't state/write it.

### *Apply the Skills - Respond with Tact*

Imagine that a coworker has written a long email to the entire department to express her unhappiness with the way people use "reply all" when responding to emails. She feels that using "reply all" to say "thank you" or "good job" is inappropriate. She has brought up this issue at team meetings in the past, but because of the culture of the office, everyone else decided that using "reply all" was acceptable.

Think about the most tactful way to address the sender of the email. Ask yourself: Should I send an email to respond? Why or why not?

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What is the most tactful way to address this situation? What should you say or write? (Write down your response in the area below.)

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## Be Honest

Answer questions with honesty (but also remember to use tact). This means that you should not be "brutally honest" with people; just be sincere. For example, if the person responsible for designing a website asks what you think of it, be honest. But also consider that the question is one of personal taste/opinion, and it's more important to protect your working relationship than to criticize a design you may not appreciate. You might say, "I like the new interactive feature and the images you chose! The color scheme isn't what I prefer, but that is really just a matter of personal preference." Don't elaborate on or embellish criticism. If the person is really interested in your feedback, she or he will question you further about the features you do not appreciate.



- 1. Have you ever given or heard given "brutally honest" feedback? If so, what happened and how might the feedback have been restated in a more tactful way?**

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2. *Has anyone ever given you unhelpful or overly critical feedback? If so, how did you respond?*

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### *Apply the Skills - Give Honest Feedback*

A new coworker wants to organize a "Secret Santa" exchange for your department. This issue has come up before, and the team decided that the exchange wasn't a good fit for the culture of your small department. You don't want to make this coworker feel that her ideas aren't appreciated, but you want to be honest that it's not going to happen. What could you say? Write your response in the area below.

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## **Be Positive**

Be cheerful and smile whenever dealing with others. This includes emails. Start off your email with a brief "I hope you are well" or other warm greeting. This simple statement will go a long way in opening the door for the recipient's willingness to listen to the message you are about to deliver.

For example, if you saw a coworker stay late to allow another person to leave in time to see his children's holiday show, jot down this information. Then, the next time you send that coworker an email, you can start off the email by noting what you observed and how much you appreciate having her or him on the team.

### *Apply the Skills - Keep a Positivity Journal*

Practice, practice, practice! Being positive takes daily practice. Keep a "positivity journal" by your computer, workstation, or nightstand at home. Jot down things you experienced for which you felt appreciation as you go about your day. Refer back to this list whenever you need to be reminded of reasons to be positive throughout the day.

## **Respect Confidentiality**

Assume that all conversations are to be kept confidential unless you know for certain that the topic is public knowledge. Even topics that seem insignificant to you may be considered highly personal or private to another person. Keeping this information private will establish you as a trustworthy person.

### *Apply the Skills - Avoid Gossip Guys and Girls*

Establishing yourself as a trustworthy person is important, and one way to do this is to refuse to further engage the discussion when someone appears to betray a confidence. One idea is to simply state that you would prefer not to hear information that you were not meant to hear.

Imagine that your coworker, with whom you have a friendship outside work, begins to tell you something that was shared with her or him in confidence. Using tact and honesty, write out what you could say to your friend to let this person know that confidentiality is critical to relationships and therefore shouldn't be betrayed.

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## Be Patient

The ability to remain calm is especially important when dealing with a personality type that is different from your own or when dealing with someone who is angry or upset. People who are upset typically want to know that they are allowed to express themselves. Shortcutting that process or interrupting speakers almost always makes them more upset. Take time to hear them out, and you'll often find that they are able to calm themselves down by expressing their frustration.



**1. What situations make you the most impatient?**

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**2. How do you act or behave when you are impatient?**

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**3. When was the last time you saw someone lose their temper? What happened? Would more patience have helped in the situation?**

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## Use a "We" Mentality

Use "I" or "we" statements rather than "you" statements to avoid insulting the person with whom you're communicating. Using "you" statements places blame on others and implies that they are at fault or don't understand. For example, say you work with a person who likes to get straight to the point and you prefer detailed explanations. Instead of saying, "You talk really fast, and I am afraid it's going to cause me to make a mistake," you could say, "I am concerned that I may make a mistake if I don't get more details about what you are sharing with me. Could you please explain it again, slowly, so I can better understand what you need me to do?"



### *Apply the Skills - Identify the Words You Use*

For the next week, before sending an email, go back and reread the email and replace every use of the word *I* with *we* or *our* whenever possible. You'll begin to notice how often you use *I* when you could easily use *we*! In addition, take a look at some of the emails you receive. How many of these use inclusive wording? Record your observations in the space below.

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## Avoid Absolutes

Nothing will escalate a miscommunication faster than the use of words like always and never. The reason is that most people will immediately start processing all the evidence to disprove what has been stated. For example, when you say, "You never empty the trash," the receiver will immediately start thinking about all the times that she or he has emptied the trash, which isn't your point. A more effective way to express the same message would be to say, "I feel that our chores have become unbalanced and that I empty the trash more often than you do." That person may still disagree, but she or he is more likely to focus on finding a solution than trying to mentally count the number of times she or he emptied the trash.



### *Apply the Skills - Track Opinions Stated as Facts*

Think of the last ten conflicts in which you've been engaged. How many of these conflicts started because someone used an absolute to state her or his opinion? As you go through your week, mentally note every time you find yourself using words like always and never. What trends do you see? Do you do this more often with one specific person? If so, why? What needs to happen to change the relationship? Record your thoughts below.

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## Attack Problems Not Ideas

When you are working on a team project where problems will inevitably arise, attacking problems, not ideas, is critical. For example, let's say your boss has asked you to create a new process for delivering interoffice mail. If someone makes a suggestion that you totally disagree with, it would not be appropriate to say, "That is a stupid plan and will never work!" Instead, you could say, "One thing that concerns me with that approach is that it may create some confusion. Let's discuss it some more so I can better understand your thinking." This approach creates an environment of respect for others' opinions while also fostering honesty and collaboration.

When an interaction at work includes personal attacks, challenge yourself to bring the conversation back to addressing the problem, instead of attacking an individual's or group's idea. Ask yourself, "What is the issue? How can I address the issue without attacking the idea?" For personal attacks that have already happened, brainstorm ways you could have addressed the situation without attacking another person's idea. Consider if you have an underlying relationship issue with the person whose idea you attacked. Also consider how the interaction affected the group itself.



### *Apply the Skills - Redirect Ideas*

Imagine that you have been assigned the role of a project leader within your company. You and your team are to brain-storm ideas for improving work conditions. One person on the team keeps throwing out very outlandish ideas such as, "Have an espresso machine in every office" and "Build a hair salon on-site!" Keep in mind that your company isn't Google and that you've been given instructions that no one expenditure can be greater than \$500. Write out how you might redirect the conversation back to reality without insulting the person or attacking her or his ideas.

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 *Apply the Skills - Analyze How Well You Speak and Listen*

Brainstorm five communication interactions in which you experienced some problems and another five interactions in which you helped another person solve a problem or feel better about a situation. Identify the situation or exchange that was the most important or significant and record it in the space below.

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Now answer the questions listed below in relation to the exchange you identified and analyze how you might work on improving your strengths and minimizing your weaknesses.

1. Did I immediately eliminate all distractions so that I could give the speaker my full attention? If so, how did this affect my ability to focus? If not, why not? What will I do differently next time? How did this negatively impact the exchange?

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2. Did I ask enough questions to ensure I understood the situation? If so, what additional information did I learn which helped me? Or, did I jump to conclusions that I already understood the problem and immediately go into problem solving? If so, what happened as a result, and what will I do differently next time?

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3. When I reflected back to the speaker what I understood him or her to be saying, how often did I find out that I misunderstood the message, and how did this affect the outcome of the conversation?

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4. How did I show empathy either verbally or nonverbally for the speaker? In what way did this improve the communication?

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5. Was I able to avoid "you" statements? If so, how did this help? Or, did I use accusatory language when discussing the situation? How did this affect the conversation?

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6. How tactful was I (honestly) when giving feedback or discussing a difficult situation? How can I improve?

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7. Did I articulate my opinion effectively and honestly? If so, how so? If not, why not? What can I do to improve?

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8. Overall, what five things did I do right during this exchange?

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9. Overall, what five things can I improve on next time, and how will I do so?

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# Summary

Being heard is important. Therefore, listening actively and speaking productively are the first two steps to becoming an effective communicator. Communicating effectively can be very difficult and requires alertness and awareness. It also requires empathy for yourself when you miscommunicate and for others when they struggle to be understood. Mastering communication helps you better understand a person or situation and enables you to resolve differences. Thus, you are able to build trust and respect and also create environments where creative ideas, critical thinking, problem solving, and thoughtfulness can flourish. By learning these effective communication skills, you can better connect with your spouse, kids, friends, and coworkers and improve your life by building and maintaining relationships.

# Next Steps

Consider all you have learned and answer the following prompts:

1. From my experience, I consider these to be the three most important takeaways:

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## Practice and master necessary skills to achieve on-the-job success with the *Successful Soft Skills Strategies* program!

Employers today want employees who successfully handle on-the-job situations with a strong set of soft skills. Soft skills are the personal attributes that enable you to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people. Simply put, they are the skills you need to work well with others.

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- Overcome common communication barriers
- Become a powerful communicator

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- *Make Yourself Heard! Professional Communication Skills*
- *How You Act & Dress Matters! Professional Etiquette & Image*
- *Wake Up & Work! Keys to Self-Management*
- *Demonstrate Your Value through Collaboration! Teamwork & Motivation*
- *Play Nice & Stay Employed! Workplace Relationships & Conflict Negotiations*
- *Lead with Integrity! Leadership & Ethics*

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