

Are You a Good Communicator?

Think you're getting your message across to staffers and customers? Take our quiz and find out

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Have you ever felt like you're talking to your sales team or customers and they just aren't getting the message you're trying to convey? That can be frustrating, but it may not be their fault: It may be that you aren't effectively communicating with them. As fundamental as they may seem, communication skills are the most valuable tools an executive can possess—especially in this economic climate, where employees and new business get scooped up by the competition. According to a

study conducted by consulting firm Gatto Associates of 1,700 managers over the course of 10 years, 95 percent of low-performing executives are unable to communicate effectively. "We've found in the course of this study that for technical work skills, high- and low-performers were similar," says Rex Gatto, president of Gatto Associates LLC, in Pittsburgh, and author of *The Smart Manager's FAQ Guide: A Survival Handbook for Today's Workplace*. "But the critical difference between the two was in communication—it is the number-one correlator to success

as a leader. Eighty-nine percent of high-performers had these characteristics." Gatto also notes that while executives are hired for their technical skills, when they are fired, it is almost always because they were unable to communicate.

Think you're a communications pro? Take our quiz and find out. We've enlisted the help of business psychologist Debra Condren, president of HumanInvestment.com, in New York, to formulate a quiz to help you determine whether you are effectively getting your message across. (The answers are on page 46.)

Answer the following questions by choosing which statement best applies to you. For the most accurate results, go with your initial, gut choice—not what you think would be the right answer.

1. In meetings that you lead, it is more important to:

- a. Stay on track to cover key agenda points and respect people's time.
- b. Listen to and connect with people.
- c. Make certain your message gets across.
- d. Let everyone have a turn speaking.

2. In your role as manager, it is acceptable to interrupt someone you're speaking with when:

- a. The discussion has derailed on a nonproductive topic and you have limited time.
- b. The person is a fast-paced, dynamic talker and you anticipate where he is going before he's said it.
- c. The person has become angry and emotional.
- d. It is never productive to interrupt.

3. When you're trying to explain a team objective requiring a quick response to a direct report, it is more important to:

- a. Plan ahead and have no more than three talking points to keep your message succinct and easy to grasp.
- b. Periodically check in with the person during the discussion to ask, "Am I making sense?"
- c. Ask him if he is clear on his role and assignments at the end of the discussion.
- d. Focus first on what he's already done right, before moving on to what now needs to be accomplished.

4. During sales calls in which you are trying to communicate why the potential customer should select your product or services, it is most important to:

- a. Quickly qualify the prospect so that you can efficiently determine and communicate whether or not you can help him.
- b. Focus primarily on relationship building by listening to his needs and reasons for speaking with you.
- c. Ask questions that quickly get you to the close, to communicate that you respect the prospect's time.
- d. Establish credibility up front by first talking about why your product or service is a market leader to pique his interest and



compel him to spend more time speaking with you about his needs and how you can help.

5. When talking about a charged conflict with a direct report where hindsight tells you that you could have handled the situation better, the most important factor in communicating that you want to move forward is:

- a. Focus on getting to a resolution as quickly as possible.
- b. Agree to disagree on points where you see things differently.
- c. Apologize if you feel you messed up, and suggest how to make the situation right again.
- d. Assess if this is a problem

employee who continually gets into high-conflict situations before you decide how to confront the situation.

6. The most important factor in being a good communicator is:

- a. Relationship building.
- b. Having and using a sense of humor.
- c. Being clear, concise, and compelling.
- d. Being generous with giving advice.

7. The most effective way to communicate that you appreciate the way a direct report has handled a project is:

- a. Trusting the person with increased responsibilities on the next project.
- b. Keeping notes so that you can be certain to document his performance on upcoming quarterly reviews.
- c. Giving a simple "thank you" acknowledging his efforts and saying that you want to offer praise where it is due.
- d. Remembering to request a raise for the person next year.

8. The best and most effective communicators:

- a. Focus on solving problems simply and efficiently.
- b. Probe for clarification, ask questions to help them better understand, succinctly sum up their understanding of the situation when the person has finished speaking, and then ask how they can help.
- c. Offer editorial comments and freely share expertise to help solve the communicator's problem or need (even if the person hasn't directly asked for feedback).
- d. Use the person's name when sharing a perspective on the situation, in order to convey empathy.

How to be a Better Communicator

Good communication skills often don't come naturally. Debra Condren, a business psychologist and president of HumanInvestment.com, in New York, offers seven tips to become an effective communicator:



1 FOCUS ON LISTENING Use comments like, "I'm wondering where you are on this issue." Or, "It sounds as if you're concerned about this aspect of the project." Or, "Do you mind filling me in on your take on this situation?" This lets the other person know you are paying attention to her thoughts and expertise. In turn, she will be more open to hearing what you have to say.

2 ASK FOR CLARIFICATION

Making sure you've heard the person correctly goes a long way toward keeping communication clear. "So it sounds as if you're saying that we need to take another look at this quarter's marketing communications budget." Or "Just so I'm clear, are you saying that you think we need to change course to meet this deadline?" Using this technique gives the person you are speaking with a chance to confirm exactly what he's said, or refine what he was trying to convey.

3 BE BRIEF Deliver your message in as few words as possible. The less you say, the more likely you are to be heard.

4 DON'T REPEAT YOURSELF Even if you don't get an acknowledgment that someone agrees, don't try to drive your point home by saying it again a different way. Say it once and move on.

5 PERIODICALLY ASK, "AM I MAKING SENSE?" Asking for feedback as you are speaking lets others know you are more interested in their reaction and creative input than in being right.

6 HAVE AN OPEN DOOR POLICY When people feel that you are approachable, they are more likely to keep the lines of communication flowing. Managers who table every request to talk with, "Let's schedule a meeting for this Thursday at four," give the impression that they aren't interested in staying connected to their team members' concerns, insights, and ideas. People shut down communication under rigid guidelines. On the other hand, when managers are available, people rarely take advantage of this policy. A good manager who always communicates effectively may not even require an open door policy as his employees will always know what is expected of them.

7 USE SELF-DEPRECATING HUMOR Research shows that the ability to laugh at oneself is a key indicator of emotional intelligence, or the ability to connect well with other people. Connecting and listening are the two key skills of good communicators.

Calculating Your Communication Score

For each question, give yourself the corresponding number of points:

- | | | | | |
|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. | A=2 | B=4 | C=1 | D=3 |
| 2. | A=3 | B=2 | C=1 | D=4 |
| 3. | A=2 | B=4 | C=1 | D=3 |
| 4. | A=1 | B=4 | C=3 | D=2 |
| 5. | A=3 | B=2 | C=4 | D=1 |
| 6. | A=4 | B=2 | C=3 | D=1 |
| 7. | A=3 | B=2 | C=4 | D=1 |
| 8. | A=3 | B=4 | C=2 | D=1 |

Interpreting Your Communication Score

If your score is 23 – 32:

You are an excellent communicator. You have a listening presence. People feel heard when communicating with you. You fill up a room, even when you are doing more listening than talking. This is a top leadership skill to further build upon and leverage. Take advantage of opportunities to develop this talent, including seeking out high-level speaking engagements, meeting facilitation, and cross-departmental and global communication challenges. Share your knowledge. In addition to modeling what it means to be a great communicator, actively coach and mentor direct reports with specific, practical feedback and strategies for becoming more skilled in their interchanges with those on their team and across departments.

If your score is 15 – 22:

You have average-to-good communication skills. Some things are working, other areas can use some improvement. To sharpen your competitive edge, focus on hearing what others are trying to communicate to you versus what you want to say to them. Try paraphrasing what you've understood the other person has said before moving on, agreeing, or disagreeing. Pay more attention to nonverbal cues, such as body language and voice tone, to get a better sense of what people with whom you are communicating are thinking and feeling. Feel free to use humor to connect with others, and don't be afraid to laugh at yourself sometimes to demonstrate your willingness to be down-to-earth.

If your score is 8 – 14:

Your communication skills need a fair amount of work in order for you to be more effective in your professional role and to improve how coworkers perceive you. Look for blind spots, patterns and common ways that you step into old traps that repeatedly trip you up when you're trying to communicate with others. Do you find yourself interrupting? Raising your voice? Focusing more on your rebuttal than on listening to what the person is saying? Being impatient to move forward quickly rather than wasting time talking? Switch from criticism to encouragement and suggestions; patience takes more energy, but will pay off over time. Sign up for a one-day intensive workshop on improving your communication skills through your local university's continuing education program. Consider hiring a coach to give you objective feedback and strategies for improvement. Commit to reading one book per quarter on how to be a better communicator. Put your mind to it, patiently practice, and over time you'll be successful at breaking down barriers to good communication.