



Ten communication mistakes to avoid

Description

Never just assume that your message has been understood

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It can be embarrassing to make mistakes with communication. For example, if you send an email without checking it, and later realize that it contained an error, you can end up looking sloppy and unprofessional. But other communication mistakes can have more serious consequences. They can tarnish your reputation, upset clients or even lead to lost revenue.

In this article, we'll look at ten common communication mistakes, and we'll discuss what you can do to avoid them.

Mistake 1: Not editing your work

Spelling, tone and grammatical mistakes can make you look careless. That's why it's essential to check all of your communications before you send them.

Don't rely on spell-checkers: they won't pick up words that are used incorrectly. Instead, proofread your work, and use a dictionary to look up any words that you're unsure about.

It can be difficult to see errors in your own work, so consider asking a colleague to look over key documents before you distribute them.

You may find it helpful to make a list of words and phrases that you find it hard to get right (such as "your/you're", "its/it's", or "affect/effect"). Store this close to hand.

It can be difficult to see errors in your own work, so consider asking a colleague to look over key documents before you distribute them. Alternatively, read your work aloud – this makes it easier to catch typos and tone errors. Then, give yourself time to reflect on your document, and to make any final changes.



Mistake 2: Delivering bad news by email

Would you announce layoffs to your team by email or IM? If you did, you could upset everyone!

Written communication channels don't allow you to soften difficult messages with nonverbal cues (such as body language), and they don't allow you to deal immediately with intense emotions.

If you need to deliver bad news, do this in person, and think carefully about how you can do it sensitively, so that you can convey your message but minimize long-term upset at the same time.

When you deliver a difficult message in person, it's easier to pick up on signs that people have misunderstood key parts of your message, or that they've taken the information particularly badly. You can then take steps to clarify your message, or help people deal with the difficult news.

Mistake 3: Avoiding difficult conversations

At some point, you will need to give negative feedback. It's tempting to try to avoid these conversations, but this can cause further problems – for instance, you may find that a small problem you “let go” soon grows into big one.

Preparation is the key to handling difficult conversations. Learn to give clear, actionable feedback, and use tools such as the assessing the situation, understanding the behaviour and assessing impact – these techniques encourage your people to reflect on their behaviour.

‘Preparation is the key to handling difficult conversations.’

You may also want to role play your conversation first, so that you feel confident in both your words and your body language.

Mistake 4: Not being assertive

Assertiveness is about stating what you need, while considering the wants and needs of others.

You may not always get your way when you're assertive, but you stand a better chance of doing so, or of reaching a compromise, because you've been clear about your needs.

Assertiveness also means saying “no” when you need to. Understand what and who to turn down gently but assertively, while maintaining good relationships.

NOTE

Assertiveness is not the same as aggression. When you're aggressive, you push to get your own way without thinking about other people's rights, wants, and needs.

Mistake 5: Reacting, not responding

Have you ever shouted at a colleague in frustration, or sent a terse reply to an email, without thinking your point through? If so, you're likely to have reacted emotionally, instead of responding calmly.

This kind of emotional reaction can damage your reputation. You may upset people with your strong emotions,



and give the impression that you lack self-control and emotional intelligence.

Mistake 6: Not preparing thoroughly

Poorly prepared presentations, reports, or emails frustrate your audience and can, over time, damage your reputation. This is why it's essential to prepare and plan your communications carefully.

First, set aside time to plan your communication thoroughly. You need to create credible, intelligent, and compelling messages that appeal to your audience's emotions, as well as to their intellects.

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Leave time to proofread, to find images, and to check that documents are compatible with your audience's software. Then, if you are delivering a speech or a presentation, rehearse thoroughly, so that you are fluent and inspiring.

Mistake 7: Using a "one-size-fits-all" approach to communication

If you use a "one-size-fits-all" approach to communication, you may overlook people's different personalities, needs and expectations. In fact, your communications need to address those differences as much as possible.

If you're preparing a presentation, make sure that you appreciate that people have different learning styles, and that you cater for these. This means that everyone – from those who learn best by reading to those who prefer a more hands-on approach – can benefit from your session.

Mistake 8: Not keeping an open mind when meeting new people

Today's workplace is a melting pot of ethnicities, religions, ages, sexual orientations, abilities, and viewpoints. These differences create a rich tapestry of experiences and opinions that can greatly enhance our lives.

However, it can be tempting to stereotype new colleagues or clients, or to make assumptions about them based on just a few pieces of information. This is especially true if you haven't had much time to get to know them well.

Assumptions inhibit open communication, because you don't consider the other person's own unique background, personality and experience. Over time, this can jeopardize your relationship with them.

So, set time aside to listen when you meet someone new. Give them space to talk about their viewpoints and take time to absorb these.

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Then, learn how to manage cultural differences, so that you take each person's needs and expectations into consideration. If you often work with people from overseas, explore the idea of cultural intelligence – a cross between psychology, cognitive science and cultural anthropology, popularised by Christopher Early and Soon Ang in their bestseller book: *Cultural Intelligence : Individual interactions across cultures* – so that you can start to adapt your behaviour when you come across people from different cultures.

Mistake 9: Assuming that your message has been understood



Always take time to check that people have understood your message. For example, when you send out an email, you could encourage people to respond with questions or to reply, if they haven't understood part of your message.

Or, if you've given a presentation, build in time for people to discuss your main points or leave time for questions at the end.

TIP

To check that you've been understood correctly, use open questions that start with "how", "why" or "what". These encourage reflection and will help your audience members to explain what they, personally, have taken from your communication.

Mistake 10: Accidentally violating others' privacy

Have you ever forwarded a sensitive email to the wrong person, or sent an incorrect attachment? These kinds of errors can cause serious commercial problems, violate people's privacy, and lead to embarrassment and confusion.

To avoid these problems, write sensitive messages before you select the recipient, and then double check their email address. If your email program automatically fills in email addresses, you could switch this feature off, so that you can consciously choose the right recipient.

'... write sensitive messages before you select the recipient, and then double check their email address.'

You may find it helpful to draft these emails in a word processing document or blank email, and then to paste the text into a new message. This way you won't accidentally include any information from previous messages.

And, if you're sending a sensitive or confidential attachment, check that no "tracked changes" or comments can be found, and make sure that you're sending the right version.

Key points

Everyone makes communication mistakes from time to time. However, you'll protect your reputation if you avoid the most common errors. These include not editing your work, accidentally violating people's privacy when forwarding emails, and not being assertive.

The key to good communication is to think about your audience's needs. Prepare each email, document, and presentation carefully, and give yourself time to check it.

Above all, remember that communication is a two-way process. Be ready for questions and listen to what your audience has to say.

Over time, you'll find that avoiding these common communication mistakes will greatly enhance the quality of your messages, your reputation, your working relationships, and your job satisfaction.

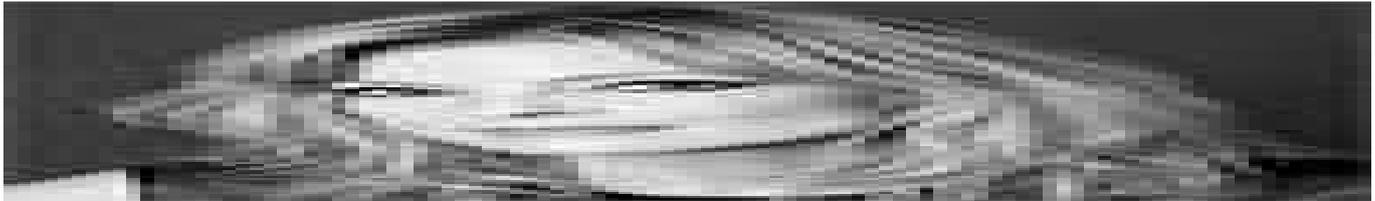


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