

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.¹ Professionalism encompasses multiple soft skills, including (but not limited to) communication, time management, self-management, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork skills.

The *Soft Skills Solutions* program will help you learn about and practice soft skills that will make you stand apart from others in your field. The *Soft Skills Solutions* 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 *Soft Skills Solutions* 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 stand-alone pieces and can be used in any sequence.

1. Meghan Casserly, "Top Five Personality Traits Employers Hire Most," *Forbes*, October 4, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/meghancasserly/2012/10/04/top-five-personality-traits-employers-hire-most>.

Program Features

Each *Soft Skills Solutions* 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. In addition, the text includes margin tips and informative sidebars to point out key information.

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.

Additional Resources

You will find additional resources on the *Soft Skills Solutions* Internet Resource Center (IRC) at www.JIST.com/irc/softskills.

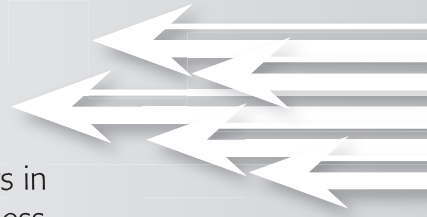
Make Yourself Heard!

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 <i>always</i> or <i>never</i> ?		
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.

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 <i>not</i> 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 <i>not</i> 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	<input style="width: 150px; height: 60px;" type="text"/>
Sometimes = 3 points	
Rarely = 1 point	
Total Score:	
<p>50 to 75 points: 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>31 to 49 points: 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>30 or fewer points: You have <i>very poor</i> 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.

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.

TIP Like a computer decoding information, the receiver must “decode” the speaker's message using a combination of verbal and nonverbal cues to interpret the true meaning of the message.

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.

