



Improving Your Communication Skills: AMA'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

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How important are business communication and interpersonal skills in companies that must thrive in a knowledge-based economy?

The facts speak for themselves:

- In a 2017 National Association of Colleges and Employers survey, the top attributes employers sought on a resume included written communication skills and verbal communication skills.
- According to a 2016 PayScale report, 44% of managers said writing proficiency was the hard skill most commonly lacking among college graduates. Among the soft skills found lacking were communication (46% of managers) and interpersonal skills/teamwork (36%).

As these studies suggest, business leaders must be effective communicators to carry out their essential roles, whether they're communicating a vision, guiding others in achieving goals, or building a high-performance team. Communication and interpersonal skills are the drivers of relationship management—one of four skill sets identified by American Management Association as critical to success in the workplace and to career growth. (The other three skill sets, part of AMA's Total Professional model, are professional effectiveness, business acumen, and analytical intelligence.)

Regardless of the goals you set as a manager, your ability to communicate and connect with others will help make those goals a reality. You must be able to craft effective messages, engage others through techniques such as storytelling, write in a clear and credible way, and make the most of everyday communication through your email messages.

In the pages that follow, you'll find advice on all of these topics—selected in part from AMA courses that teach must-have competencies to business professionals.





Framing Your Messages for Improved Business Communication

A frame is a lens through which people interpret the information they receive. As it relates to [improving business communication](#), framing a message is about positioning it so that both the intention and the content are interpreted as they were meant. The way information is framed, first by the message sender, and then by the receiver, will determine whether it is perceived as good, bad, or something in between.

4 STEPS to frame messages for business communications

When we frame a message, our understanding of how the information is likely to be received by others should inform our choice of framing strategies. In AMA's *Communicating Up, Down and Across the Organization* course, we outline this process for framing messages to obtain the desired results:

Frame the message to achieve a clear purpose/result. If your own thoughts about the message goals are unclear, your audience will walk away with a vague understanding as well. To ensure listeners have clarity, be clear in your own mind about what your specific goals are for the message.

One of the best ways to improve business communication is to type out your ideas. Construct a one- to two-paragraph intention statement explaining what you want to communicate with your message, including how you want the audience to interpret and feel about it. Rewrite the statement until it resonates with you and accurately reflects all that you want to accomplish. Doing so will give you the clarity you need to craft and frame the message.

Frame the message to the audience and situation. As you frame your message, think of the reasons you can provide to justify the time and attention you want your audience to give the message. Determine how the content affects your audience and how it compares with what your audience already knows, believes, and values—and address these points in your message as needed.

Also, consider the circumstances to determine the best way to deliver your message. Ask questions such as: Should it be delivered now, or are there advantages to delivering it at a later time? Do you need to collect feedback? Should you deliver the message via email, or is a meeting required?

Frame the message to build content understandings. Help your listeners logically understand the issue(s) by communicating important details and putting them in context. Somebody needs to fill in the blanks, and if you're not supplying the answers, then your audience members will make assumptions about what the answers are. Consider all the elements that contribute to having your listeners best understand and use the information you are presenting, and include those elements in the way you frame your message.

Let's say you are announcing a change at your organization. Questions that you could answer include:

- What is my goal in communicating this change?
- What information is essential to share about the change?

In a LinkedIn analysis, the 10 most in-demand soft skills included communication (at No. 1), teamwork, social skills, and interpersonal communication. Source: LinkedIn data analysis

- Who will be affected by the change?
- Why are we making the change?
- How will we implement the change?
- What are the challenges associated with implementing the change?
- What are the consequences of not making the change?
- What nonessential information would be helpful or interesting to know about the change?

Frame the message for a desired emotional response. The most beneficial aspect of framing is to influence the emotional response of listeners. One way to do this is to learn and appeal to the values of your audience. For example, if your message is about the need for everyone to take on new responsibilities, and you know that your audience values career advancement, you could frame the new responsibilities requirement as an opportunity to learn something new and grow their careers.

By taking a thoughtful approach to framing your message, you'll signal to your audience that you care about how they feel about the issue. This approach will help create the emotional response needed to move ahead successfully and achieve your desired results.



Storytelling as a Business Communication Skill

Business leaders must exhibit the interpersonal and business communication skills that allow them to form positive relationships with others. And when it comes to establishing and maintaining those relationships at work and elsewhere, [one communication technique really shines—storytelling.](#)

Storytelling is one of the earliest forms of communication. Before humans could read and write, they relied on storytelling to connect and share information with others. Over time, we expanded on how we transfer information to others by using written text and graphical representations. We worked to be more precise and concise, making use of models, graphs, charts, and bulleted lists. Storytelling took a backseat for a long time, recognized as a skill that only writers or performers needed to possess.

Having come full circle, we're back to acknowledging storytelling as one of the best methods for getting a message across and connecting with others. Now everyone who understands the value of storytelling wants to be able to tell great stories.

The unconventional power of business storytelling

One reason storytelling has reclaimed its elevated status is that we now have greater insight into how our brains process information. We see how humans are affected by stories. As explained in the AMA seminar *Storytelling Power: Secrets for Exceptional Communication*, our brains don't distinguish between stories and reality, which enables us to experience events that don't actually happen in our own lives simply by having them explained to us through words and/or images. The sadness, anxiety, excitement, or joy that is communicated through a story can be internalized and felt rather than merely contemplated philosophically—something that isn't likely to be accomplished with even the fanciest of pie charts.

Storytelling translates into new and improved relationships by encouraging something that great relationships are built upon: empathy. Indeed, the ability to empathize is a base requirement for developing authentic relationships with others, and the act of vicariously experiencing the feelings of another person—such as through a story—is the very definition of empathy itself.

When we believe that we genuinely understand, or empathize with, another person, we tend to judge that person less harshly and appreciate him or her more. This understanding further develops and strengthens a relationship, long after a great story has been told.

The importance of improving business communication skills

Business storytelling is a great way to build rapport. Humans are social creatures, and as such, maintaining healthy relationships is an essential part of our well-being. Also, having positive business relationships enables us to be more collaborative and ultimately more productive at work, meaning these relationships have a desirable effect on the bottom line. It's for this reason that successful [companies place such a high value on interpersonal employee communication skills](#), and why the ability to tell a great story is recognized more and more as an invaluable business communication skill.



Business Communication Skills: The Stories We Tell Ourselves

We know that storytelling is a great way to enhance our [business communication skills](#) and develop relationships with others. In the same way that storytelling influences how others perceive us, it also influences how we see ourselves. Indeed, your very identity could be thought of as the result of years of stories you've told yourself about yourself and the

world around you, and your interpretation of the stories others have told you too.

Also known as "self-talk," the constant internal narrative about our experiences determines our ongoing perception of ourselves, including our self-confidence. According to AMA's course *Developing Effective Business Conversation Skills*, a lack of self-confidence can manifest itself in different ways that influence how we are perceived by others. We may struggle to find the right words, speak too softly, or come across as uncomfortable or defensive. Other people may pull away from us as a result, which may continue to affect our self-image.

How negative self-talk influences communications

In short, there is a certain interdependence between your outlook and the outlook of those with whom you engage. The continual exchange of information between you and other people begins with the communication that takes place with one person—yourself.

Each of us has opinions about our individual gender, race, class, title, values, interpersonal skills, and intellectual abilities. Our internal monologue that encourages these opinions can range from self-aggrandizing to self-deprecating—with positive, good-for-you points in between. Consider:

- At the one extreme, we might self-talk ourselves into thinking we are superior to others: "I am the best at this task; everyone likes me; nobody else knows what I know."
- At the other extreme, we might convince ourselves that we are lacking in some major way: "I am just not cut out for this; I don't get along with people; I can't do anything right."

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Positive self-talk is key in business communications

One good or bad thought does not necessarily have any obvious effect, but you can imagine how a few years of certain thoughts might influence your self-confidence and sense of well-being—and the impact that your resulting self-image and outlook can have on important decisions and relationships.

Even when it's not in our best interest, we may give a lot of credence to our thoughts simply because of the way our brains work. Every time we encounter a new situation, our brains evaluate how similar it is to situations we've encountered in the past. Our past reactions inform our present ones, and every time we react in a similar way or reach a similar conclusion, the likelihood of reacting this same way in the future increases. This is why that one good or bad thought usually isn't just one, and why past behavior is such a good indicator of future behavior.

But it doesn't have to be that way. If I failed at some previous endeavor, it doesn't mean I need to let myself be bullied by my own mind into thinking I will fail at a future one, and then act accordingly. I can choose the option of telling myself that I will succeed instead.

By acknowledging how easy it is to reinforce our own negative thinking, we can recognize negative self-talk when we think it and replace it with a more favorable narrative—forever changing our story, communication skills, and relationships for the better.

Interpersonal Skills: The Stories We Tell Ourselves About Others

Our self-confidence, communication skills, and interpersonal skills at work are largely influenced by our self-talk, or the constant internal narrative we have about our experiences. Self-talk informs our perceptions of ourselves and the values and beliefs that make up our identities.

But identity-building is just one of the tasks that self-talk serves to complete. In addition to telling the story of oneself, self-talk also accounts for how we interpret *everyone else's stories*. And in the same way that faulty self-talk about ourselves can sabotage our self-esteem, faulty self-talk about other people damages our perceptions of them and prevents us from developing relationships that may otherwise be meaningful and rewarding.

The impact of self-talk on interpersonal skills

Suppose that I see Dave from digital media walking down the hall. I smile and say "hi," and he responds with an odd look. My initial thought might be, "That guy is rude." Because of the "threat" Dave presents—in the form of socially rejecting me by not saying hello—I instinctively label and file him neatly in my mind as someone who is "dangerous to my well-being," and therefore someone I should avoid.

In addition to keeping myself "safe" by labeling Dave as someone to avoid, I do not need to devote any more time to him than the mere seconds I just spent forming my opinion about him. Dismissing Dave in this way is a lot easier than the alternative of spending who knows how much time getting to know him.

Among the top attributes employers seek on a resume are written communication skills (75% of employers), verbal communication skills (71%), and interpersonal skills (58%). Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers' "Job Outlook 2017" report



Self-talk and relationship building

Avoiding problem people is a survival instinct that we shouldn't ignore in situations where our survival really is at risk. But we should think twice about applying safe-and-easy "survival thinking" at work, lest we chase away opportunities to develop good relationships with co-workers.

If I give it a little more thought, I can attribute Dave's behavior to any number of things that are more benign. Maybe he was lost in thought and simply didn't hear me, or maybe he didn't intend to look at me in an odd way at all. Then again, maybe the look was deliberate, but merely an attempt to connect with me on some visceral level as a show of camaraderie and respect. I think of the interesting looks I've exchanged with family and friends when we each *just knew* what the other was thinking. Could it be that Dave "gets me" in a similar way?

Being able to come up with these other interpretations of Dave's body language casts doubt on the 100% reliability of my knee-jerk reaction to label him "rude."

Using self-talk to support interpersonal skills

When we think of what it means to have good interpersonal skills, we tend to think about our own body language and choice of words—the importance of projecting the right image to make a good impression on others. But being a good communicator is about more than making a good impression. It is also about being able to develop an impression of someone else without mentally dissecting that person at the slightest hint of a perceived offense.

Dismissing a person out of hand and refusing to engage are opposites of good communication, which involves keeping a conversation going rather than ending it abruptly. To this end, skilled communicators know to monitor the stories they tell themselves about others. They show the same consideration in their thinking about others that they would want shown to them, and they don't assume the worst about someone just because it's the easiest thing to do.

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7 Simple Rules for Writing Simply in Your Business Communications

Just as interpersonal skills contribute to positive relationships, skillful writing helps business leaders accomplish goals and develop their personal brand. In fact, a person's writing says a lot about him or her. [With effective business writing skills,](#) you can convey your credibility as a business professional.

As a team leader, you want your writing to be simple and clear. This writing style will showcase your professionalism and help you to achieve results in a quick, effective manner. The problem occurs when your thoughts become jumbled and lead to ineffective writing.

A checklist for improving your business writing skills

Here are some rules for effective writing from AMA's *Business Writing Made Simple* seminar. This checklist can help you to communicate simply and get the right results:



AT THE DOCUMENT LEVEL

1. Write short documents (or make long ones seem short).

- Keep most of the writing to one page. Remember, the more we write, the less readers read.
- If you must write longer documents, create an executive summary and break up the full content into short enclosures.

2. Put the main point up front (to make the key idea of the document quickly visible).

- Write a precise subject line previewing the main point. Example: Update Due by May 1
- Put the main idea in the first paragraph.
- Delay the main point if delivering bad news or making difficult requests that will be resisted.

AT THE PARAGRAPH LEVEL

3. Write short paragraphs (to make them easy to read and scan).

- Keep paragraphs to one inch deep (five lines of type maximum).
- Make them look like outlines when possible.

4. Use visual cues to highlight key points (to make documents and paragraphs easy to scan).

- Create eye-catching headings, headlines, bulleted lists, and numbered lists.
- Use underlining, bold, italics, font sizes, font types, and font colors, but don't overdo them.

AT THE SENTENCE LEVEL

5. Write short sentences (to make the writing easy to read and easy to understand).

- Keep sentences short (20 words maximum) and in the active voice.
- For a smooth flow, aim for an average length of 15 words (roughly one line of type).
- Cut long, wordy phrases.

AT THE WORD LEVEL

6. Use mostly short, precise words (to make ideas clear and easy to understand).

- Use the short words of one or two syllables that people speak every day.

- Keep long words (three or more syllables) to 15% maximum of the total word count.
- Avoid legalese, jargon, acronyms, and technical terms that readers may not understand.
- Use words that create the desired tone: direct, spirited, collaborative, or technical.

AT EVERY LEVEL

7. Use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

- Proofread for mistakes that harm your credibility, confuse readers, or distract them.
- Check for typos and missing words.

Take the time to improve your business writing skills by following these rules, and you'll enhance your image as a credible, skilled individual who can get results. Business writing is an opportunity not only to influence others but also to display your professionalism, so don't miss out on this chance.

“With effective business writing skills, you can convey your credibility as a business professional.”

12 Tips for Improving Your Business Emails



In today's workplace, writing effective business emails is an essential component of successful communication.

Throughout the workday, people receive more emails than they know what to do with. They don't have time to read every message in detail. To get your point across, you must write professional emails effectively and capture the reader's attention long enough for him to read the message. After working hard to compose a business email, you don't want it to go unread and end up in the trash bin.

Writing professional emails [differs from other types of business communication](#) because of the conversational, informal tone used in email messages. Despite this informality, you need to follow certain guidelines for effective business writing when composing your emails.

A few tips to guide you when writing business emails

Use the following tips from *AMA's 2-Day Business Writing Workshop* to compose your messages:

1. Define your purpose for writing the email.
2. Consider your audience's needs and expectations and what they may know about a topic.
3. Provide a precise subject line.
4. Limit each message to one subject.
5. Use an opening sentence that orients the reader to your reason for writing.
6. Include all essential supporting details.
7. Organize your ideas into short, three- to five-sentence ideas or topics.

8. Don't use all uppercase or lowercase letters in your sentences. USING ALL CAPS IS SOMETIMES CONFUSED WITH SHOUTING!
9. Do not send messages composed in anger or in direct response to insulting messages. Always maintain a professional tone.
10. Do not use humor that can be misinterpreted as inappropriate.
11. Always proofread and edit for correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage.
12. Be sure to attach the attachments mentioned in your message (it happens to everyone!).

Professional email writing and your brand

It's important to remember how much people will connect you and your communication style to your email writing. You want your business emails to reflect your brand, so understanding when to use a formal or informal tone is important. Keep professional emails short and to the point to help ensure clarity. And don't forget, always read over your message before hitting Send.

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