

# **Are You Communicating?**

**You Can't Manage Without It**

**Donald Walton**

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# Preface

## The Skill That Can Make or Break Your Career

Countless times throughout my business career I've noticed a paradox. Perhaps you've noticed it too. A person who has everything (or almost everything) needed for success—intelligence, education, ambition, stamina, integrity, outstanding technical skills—is passed by consistently at promotion time or, if given responsibility over a larger staff, fails to perform as well as expected.

What's missing? It's not the ability to handle the technical aspects of a job, and not the willingness to work hard, but *the ability to handle people*. It's knowing how to listen, talk, write, and establish rapport with others—how to guide and motivate them to perform desired actions. It's *communication*, the skill essential for people who must constantly interact with others. It's not the only ability you need in business, of course, but you can't manage without it!

As David P. Reynolds, the chairman of Reynolds Aluminum, expressed it to me, "The ability to communicate and listen effectively is probably the most important skill at a manager's command, because all other management skills depend on it."

Alvin Toffler, author of *The Third Wave*, has estimated that 80 percent of a manager's day is spent in 150 to 300 information transactions. This doesn't leave time for much else. The paradox is that although you may spend three-fourths or more of your business day in meetings and in listening, talking, and writing to people, supervisors typically receive less training for these activities than for any others. Often no training at all.

## Ideas from Leading Executives

How widespread is the feeling that poor communication is causing endless management problems? To find out, I wrote to the heads of dozens of leading firms. The answers poured in. They came from the top executives of American Express, AT&T, Coca-Cola, Goodyear, W. R. Grace, H&R Block, ITT, Mobil, Prudential, State Farm, United Airlines, Wal-Mart, Whirlpool, and others.

Not only did these executives write me long letters, but many agreed to personal interviews so that I could explore their views in detail. They all agreed, often vehemently, that communication must improve. And they spelled out for me many practical ideas that have worked in their companies.

This book presents their ideas and some of my own.

I've been a professional communicator most of my life, starting as a writer and then as a creative director in major national advertising agencies. I've written books (including a best-seller), developed people skills as the vice president of a large advertising department, and honed these skills in corporate marketing and new-product development that required dealing with people in many countries. As part of a fast-growing, innovative marketing company, I've seen communication come directly from the top: "That sounds good. Do it!" And for 10 years in the General Motors building in Detroit, I've seen just the opposite in a giant corporate client, whose decisions filtered down slowly from the gods on the plush-and-mahogany fourteenth floor. Finally, as a professional speaker at conventions and seminars, I understand how to use words, voice, and personality to warm people up and win them over.

In short, I know what does and doesn't work in communication. *I've been there.*

"So," I reasoned, "let's combine other executives' ideas with mine and tell people what I wish I'd known when I was younger—how to progress faster in business through better communicating."

You won't take my word for everything, of course. But perhaps you'll accept a tip or two from those who've climbed to the pinnacles of the biggest corporations in this country. And I bet you'll listen to advice from such famous communicators as Art Linkletter, Andy Rooney, and Barbara Walters.

## A Distillation of the Key Elements

Instead of writing a comprehensive text on the multitudinous facets of communication, I've sifted out for you the important, practical things

that experienced business managers and I have discovered to be the *keys* to successful communication—what worked for us and what can work for you.

I've aimed to create a book that would have helped me, both in my career and personal life. Sure, I managed to get by, even achieving more than most people. But I bumped my nose often while learning too many things the hard way.

Perhaps you can avoid some of the scars and disappointments and can do more climbing with less stumbling as you move through life. If some of the hundreds of *proven ideas* in these pages can show you useful shortcuts to effective communication and enable you to become a winner, I'll be happy.

And so will you.

*Donald Walton*

# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>1. Where Do You Stand in the Information Age?</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Your Special Gifts</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Part 1. Listening</b>	
<b>3. Your First Step toward Success</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>4. Listen with Your Eyes</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>5. Companies That Listen</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Part 2. Speaking</b>	
<b>6. Conversation, the Ping-Pong Game</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>7. Without the Yeast, the Beer Won't Bubble</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>8. How to Cope with Meetings</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>9. Presentations That Sparkle</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>10. Our Speaker Today . . .</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>11. Your Interview on TV or Radio</b>	<b>140</b>

**Part 3. Writing**

<b>12. Think It Through</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>13. Vigorous Words Have Bite and Power</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>14. Skip the Spaghetti</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>15. Be Brief, Specific, and Accurate</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>16. How to Make Writing Look Inviting</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>17. Your Critical Role as Editor</b>	<b>198</b>

**Part 4. Priceless Ingredients of  
Communication**

<b>18. Personal Chemistry Is the Catalyst</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>19. Remember Whatsizname?</b>	<b>218</b>
<b>20. Your Telephone Personality</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>21. Never Stop Questioning</b>	<b>236</b>
<b>Summary: The Story of the Wise Man</b>	<b>236</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>241</b>



# 1

## Where Do You Stand in the Information Age?

*We can lick gravity, but sometimes the paperwork is overwhelming.*

WERNHER VON BRAUN

This is not a textbook concerned with grammar or vocabulary. It's not a handbook full of standardized sales and collection letters, memos, etc., to be copied. It doesn't try to teach you what you should have learned in high school or college English classes.

**What you'll find here is what you were never taught in any classroom. It focuses on the people skills that are crucial to success in today's information age—on communication and the practical things that really make it work. They are among the most important things in your life.**

To succeed in business today, and in your social and family life too, you need all the skill you can master in every type of communication. This involves language, of course, both spoken and written. It also includes nonverbal expression, such as smiles, gestures, and body language, which can be equally important in communicating your ideas and feelings to people.

Listening is another critical facet of communication. It can do more to help you win friends and score points than any amount of slick talk. Establishing rapport with others is also a crucial skill. Unless you can establish it, you'll find that no matter what you say, people won't pay attention to you and will simply ignore your suggestions.



### You and Abe Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was criticized (usually by the opponents he beat) as lacking a sophisticated style of speaking and writing. "A crude backwoods orator," they scoffed. But could he communicate! That's because he listened to people, understood them, and used simple, clear words to touch them deep inside. No one did it better.

You should be so lucky as to possess some part of the charm that enabled Honest Abe to reach people and motivate them. And you can. Like anything else, the ability to communicate clearly and persuasively is a skill that can be learned.

It's not just in government that this ability is admired. In the politics of today's corporations (and don't be so naive as to believe that business life is not political), those who become leaders are the ones who can best *transmit* their views, ideas, and enthusiasms to others. That's what being a leader is.

## The Qualities of Leadership

Look around you. At the start of a career, ability in a professional specialty tends to be the overwhelming factor in success. The young engineer, accountant, chemist, editor, banker, or whatever, wins respect and a rising income by personally using the techniques peculiar to his or her craft. But as these individual accomplishments are rewarded with an assistant or two, the emphasis begins to shift. The need for communication, always present in any group human activity, multiplies with each addition to the staff. By the time the upwardly mobile manager wins promotion to department head, everything becomes heavily dependent on communicating.

As you approach that situation, you still need superior knowledge of your industry and your specialty within it so that you can aim your helpers in the right directions and then evaluate and polish their work as necessary. But now your chief activities become sharing your knowledge with subordinates, making clear to them what needs to be done, keeping them convinced and enthused about each job, hammering heads

when occasion demands (without crushing spirits), pushing your people beyond what they think they can do, and building pride in themselves and the group.

*All these essentials of management are mostly communication.*

### **You Can't Manage Without It**

The higher you go, the wider spreads the network of communication that will make or break you. It extends not only to more people below, but to new levels above. And it extends all around, to endless other departments and interests interacting with yours. You'll be communicating constantly with a multitude of individuals helping you and demanding help, questioning, calling for reports and meetings, showering you with memos and suggestions, evaluating, criticizing, and always competing for attention, budgets, and plaudits.

At the end of some days you may wish that all the people wired into your communications network would tune out and go away. But they won't. And you shouldn't want them to, because the problems they present are your greatest opportunities for demonstrating your worth. Lick the challenges and you become the Golden Knight, beloved by the troops you lead and treasured by the great leaders at the top. It's your route to the top.

Here's what the head of one of the world's largest companies has to say about that:

*A key element in determining a manager's potential for advancement is skill in communication...the ability to present ideas and information concisely and effectively, orally and in writing.*

RAWLEIGH WARNER, JR., CHAIRMAN  
Mobil Corporation

This attitude is shared by the heads of many other major corporations. Of all the senior executives I've been able to observe closely, I can't recall a single one who wasn't a good communicator and who didn't seem partial to others with similar qualities.

### **How Managers Rate Their Own Skills**

When Dr. Harold T. Smith of Brigham Young University wanted to rate the various skills required for efficient management, he decided to go to a group of professional managers for the answers. The Academy of Certified Administrative Managers (CAMs) agreed to cooperate with him in this research.

First, Dr. Smith made a list of all the managerial activities he could think of. The academy helped him whittle down his all-inclusive list to activities it regarded as most critical to good management. All members of the academy were then asked to rate these key competencies according to importance in their jobs. In decreasing order, here are the 12 they chose as the most essential to them:<sup>1</sup>

- \*1. Listen actively.
- \*2. Give clear, effective instructions.
3. Accept your share of responsibility for problems.
4. Identify real problems.
5. Manage time and set priorities.
- \*6. Give recognition for excellent performance.
- \*7. Communicate decisions to employees.
- \*8. Be effective in oral communication.
9. Shift priorities if necessary.
- \*10. Explain work.
- \*11. Obtain and provide feedback in two-way communication sessions.
- \*12. Write effectively.

Note that the two top vote getters in the CAM poll are language skills. In fact, as indicated by the asterisks, 8 of the 12 are essentially forms of communication.

### **Does the Story Fit?**

Humorist Art Buchwald told the story of the little girl who visited her father's office. On her return home, a friend asked, "What does your daddy do all day?"

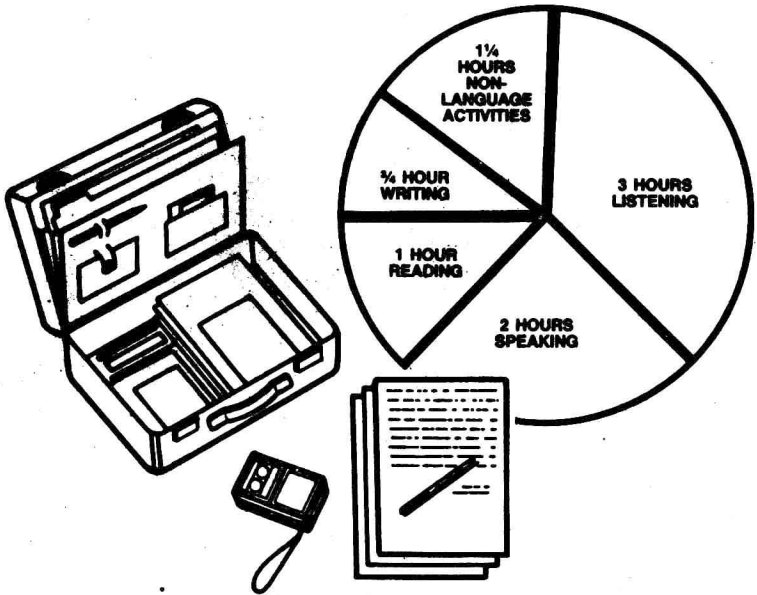
"He sends pieces of paper to other people," she replied, "and they send pieces of paper to him."

That line got a laugh from those working in offices because there's so much truth in it. Would it sound even more like your place of work if the child had added, "And when my daddy puts down the pieces of paper, he hurries to a meeting room where he talks to people for hours and hours"?

That story was told years ago; today it would apply equally to mothers and fathers since present-day offices are staffed about evenly with both sexes. If it presents an all-too-true (and not so funny) picture of your

<sup>1</sup>Based on data published in *Management World*, January 1978.

typical day, you're a bona fide member of the modern business world. Efficiency experts who've done many studies of office operations come up with a profile of the modern manager's workday that looks something like the pie chart in this illustration.



The activities in this pie chart, concentrated almost exclusively on communicating with people, would not have been typical of managers a generation ago. But they certainly are a part of the Third Wave and the overwhelming mass of information transfers that Alvin Toffler describes as revolutionizing the office of today. Similarly, when John Naisbitt writes of the 10 directions transforming our lives, the number one megatrend he lists is the dramatic shift from an industrial society to an information society where the game is "*people interacting with people.*"

### How Do You Spend Your Day?

How much a part of that game are you? Maybe it's time to ask yourself, "Exactly how *do* I spend my day?"

The easiest way to find out is to clock your activities throughout a day or two. Put a memo pad on the center of your desk, where you can't forget it, and keep a time record of everything you do. This needn't be fancy or onerous; if you just record 15-minute intervals, that'll be close enough. At the end of each day, break down your activities into the five

categories shown in the accompanying chart. (You can pencil in the results directly on this chart.)

Listening*	Talking*	Reading	Writing	Other
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Total hours	Total hours	Total hours	Total hours	Total hours

\*Divide the time you spent in *conversation* by 2, putting half under listening and half under talking. Divide the time you spent in *meetings* between listening and talking; if there were five people in a meeting, you might have spent four-fifths listening and one-fifth talking.

Once that analysis is completed, it may alter your perspective on the relative importance of various managerial skills. If you discover that big chunks of your day are spent in listening, talking, reading, and writing (maybe far more time than you devote to other activities you've always considered paramount), you may need to do some reassessing. Common sense dictates that whatever you do most often deserves major attention to make sure you're doing it as well as possible.

Any skills in which you don't feel particularly strong will need to be sharpened. *Average won't do.* If you're not the type to settle for a mediocre career and lifestyle, you need to be damned good at whatever is going to play a major role in your future. And you can be.

### A Common Complaint

In general, many intelligent career people, skilled in most of their daily activities, fall far short of what they could be when it comes to communication. Both *The Wall Street Journal* and *Business Week* have reported that one of the commonest complaints they hear from top executives about their newer managers is "Many recently graduated MBAs don't know how to write understandably." Richard West, dean of the prestigious Amos Tuck school, echoed this with "The vast majority of MBA students need to improve their skills in oral and written communication." And remember, this is supposedly the cream of the crop these experts are talking about.

### **What Employers Don't Like**

All too many businesspeople who start out as weak communicators don't improve much; therefore, they fail to reach their full potential as they try to climb the ladder. Companies don't like this, for trying to correct the problem uses up a great deal of time, energy, and money. In fact, the American Society for Training and Development estimates that U.S. employers spend \$40 billion annually for employee education, much of it directed toward helping managers in "*writing clearly, reading better, being able to speak before audiences, and working harmoniously in groups.*"

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching believes that the expense for trying to improve these people skills is far higher. Charles L. Brown, when he was chairman of AT&T, informed me that the Bell System spent more than \$1 billion a year on education and training—more than it devoted to its famed research and development.

### **Why People Get Fired**

Inadequate people skills can cause as much trouble for a manager as any other factor—maybe more. Personnel managers agree almost unanimously that terminations result not from a lack of technical ability or industriousness, but most often from difficulties in relating to and dealing with people.

A Harvard University study of people fired showed that for every dismissal based on a failure to do work properly, there were two for personality factors. Poor communication is generally an integral part of this.

### **Computers Are Not the Solution**

In general, the advent of the computer has not solved communications problems as some hoped it would. The top executive at the Bell System made this observation:

Even in the age of the computer, we must have some reasonable degree of competence in the English language. It is still the principal language in which business is conducted in this country.

The issues we in business confront do not come in the form of true-false or multiple-choice quizzes. "None of the above" is the most likely answer to the questions we confront, and usually that answer requires original—and precise—articulation.

CHARLES L. BROWN, CHAIRMAN  
AT&T

The new electronic machines can spew out more words and data at an amazing rate, but this may merely exacerbate the difficulties. As John Naisbitt has so aptly pointed out, we can be “drowning in information but starved for knowledge.” Companies that have invested millions in new electronic office systems, hoping to find the magic solution, discover instead that employees may latch onto the new marvels as a means of amplifying the avalanche of words and data to build ever greater mountains of garbage. Always, it gets back to *people* who must know how to put the right *language* into the machines.

### Meeting the New Challenges

When I asked Robert Anderson for his views on the latest developments in management, this was his reply:

Careful listening and clear writing are important ingredients of effective communications, but these days managers face a new and important communications challenge—assuring maximum productivity through proper use of office information systems.

The tools now readily available range from briefcase-size communications terminals to large systems for word processing, electronic mail, and information retrieval. These marvelous devices are worthless investments, however, if they are improperly or inadequately utilized.

The most successful managers will be those who not only embrace the new technology, but also learn to obtain every advantage it can provide in creating and delivering carefully crafted messages.

ROBERT ANDERSON, CHAIRMAN & CEO  
*Rockwell International Corporation*

The very fact that the number one executive skill is so often the weak spot of otherwise efficient managers presents *you* with an opportunity. The generally poor performance of others gives you that much more chance to shine by comparison. For every loser, there's a winner. You simply have to make up your mind which you want to be.

### You Have What It Takes

Probably more than you realize, you're well-equipped to learn the people skills required to make your way upward in the business world. (You'll find some interesting facts about your inherent language ability in the next chapter.) What you need to do is sharpen your God-given



abilities to communicate. Because all humans have them, more or less, they're often taken for granted and allowed to atrophy. Don't you make that mistake. Strengthen your inherent skills; build on them. If you do, you can move ahead of your peers—maybe even ahead of those who've had a head start in technical training or educational background.

To succeed in your career, you don't have to be a genius or to graduate cum laude from a prestigious school. If you happen to be so lucky as to enjoy that sort of fast start, congratulations. But wherever you stand on the ladder now, the amount of climbing you're apt to do depends heavily on whether you apply yourself and how willing you are to learn. You can take the word of one of America's most respected business leaders for that:

*Despite all the educational and analytical infrastructure built up around the alleged science of management, it still reduces itself simply to homework, common sense, and good communication.*

DONN B. TATUM, CHAIRMAN  
Walt Disney Productions