Types of Communication

Have you considered your most practiced activity, one that you voluntarily exercise almost as often as your breathing?

If you haven’t guessed it already, it’s “Communicating”. We’re constantly communicating every moment, through various forms, channels, gestures and expressions, all as a natural reflection of our self. But while it is completely voluntary, our communication is not always conscious. We sometimes communicate without our clear awareness, leading to misleading or even conflicting expressions of our self.

And there lies the key to superlative communication: awareness. If we can stay constantly aware of the subtle communication signals we send out every moment, we can align this to reflect what we want to express. Our communication is then no longer accidental, it’s thoroughly incidental!

So let us take a step back and ask you:

Are you aware that you’re communicating every moment? With yourself, with others, with nature?

Are you aware of the various expressions of your communication?

And finally, are you constantly communicating what you want to communicate, in the way you want to do it?

Often, the answers we receive to these thought-provoking questions is mixed, tending towards an unsure, “No”. Through this post, we address this dilemma. We throw light on the various types of communication and their multi-dimensional expressions, so you can develop super-keen awareness around your communication.

Various Types of Communication Strategies

Okay, so this one is especially for you if you’ve been vaguely surprised by the initial section of this post.

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“Communicating every moment? How is that even possible? It’s not like I have my mouth open every minute,” we hear you ask. Ah, but you see, we communicate not just verbally, but also non-verbally, and even informally. The entire gamut of the various types of communication channels and expressions we enjoy is outlined in this chart.

Types of Communication-Chart

As you can see, there are at least 6 distinct types of communication: non-verbal, verbal-oral-face-to-face, verbal-oral-distance, verbal-written, formal and informal types of communication. Add to this the boundless opportunities the internet superhighway offers, and you have an absolute goldmine of communication possibilities!

In successive sections of this post, we highlight the finer nuances of these distinct expressions so your communication is conscious, focused and mighty effective.

Formal Types of Communication Skills

This types of communication is also referred to as “official communication” and covers the gamut of verbal expressions that address a formal need.

It is:

Conducted through a pre-determined channel. For instance, a large number of your interactions within your profession, financial communication (from and to your bank, creditors, debtors, etc.) and legal expressions are examples of formal communication.

More time-consuming that non-formal communication, as it follows a particular communication protocol.

Even in cases of oral expressions (in meetings, seminars, etc.), it is often backed by written communication that can provide documentation evidence of the oral conversation. (This written communication could be as simple as a minutes-of-meeting, to as complex as a detailed recording.)

Considered a reliable source of information. (So when you receive a legal notice from your bank, you better take notice of it!)

Formal communication forms the core of our professional lives (though not all professional communication is formal). Hence becoming an expert in this type of communication is central to professional advancement and success. Below, we provide you simple tips to excel in your expression and profession.

Begin by clarifying the purpose of your communication.

Whether you use an oral or written expression, always follow a well-defined structure that can be easily understood by your audience.

Keep your tone open, professional and friendly.

End by re-iterating what you expect to cause through this communication: clarification on your stance, answers to questions, a call to action, etc. Also clarify any constraints that apply to this communication (like confidentiality, time-limit for response, etc.)

Finally, thank your audience for their listening. (This works well for written communication too.)

Informal Communication

Informal communication is surprisingly popular, and also referred to as “the (unofficial) grapevine”. This is often by word-of-mouth information. In fact, it is this type of communication that opens you up to unofficial yet provocative information.

Informal communication is

Spontaneous and free-flowing, without any formal protocol or structure. Hence this type of information is also less reliable or accurate.

A communication channel that spreads like wildfire, as there are no formal rules to follow.

Mostly oral, with no documentation evidence. Due to this, many undermine the value of informal communication, terming it mere “gossip”.

Despite its drawbacks, informal communication is considered “user-friendly” and hence offers huge advantages when used wisely. For instance, consider this example where a company is served by 3 different caterers. Employees may become aware of the timings of service, rules and regulations through a formal communication sent out by company management. But they will become aware of the preferred caterer of the day through informal communication from friends and colleagues. This type of communication hence serves well when you want to control or encourage positive opinions, ideas and expressions, without making them seem like they’ve been “thrust upon” by senior management.

Note: In modern times, social networks from “unofficial” sources (like your personal Facebook and Twitter feeds, LinkedIn, etc.) are powerful sources of informal communication and are often used to shape public opinion.

Oral Communication (Face-to-face)

Face-to-face oral communication is the most recognized type of communication. Here, what you express comes directly from what you speak. Again, this can be formal or informal: with your friends and family, in a formal meeting or seminar, at work with your colleagues and boss, within your community, during professional presentations, etc.

This types of communication

Gets better with practice. The more you practice with awareness, the more control you will have on your oral expressions.

Is vibrantly a-live! This means that despite all past rehearsals, oral communication offers you a present-moment opportunity to tune, revise, revoke and fix what you express. It is hence the most powerful type of communication and can work for or against you with every expression.

Engages your audience more than other types of communication. The listener (or an audience) often expects to speak-back to you with oral communication, enabling two-way communication more than any other channel.

For superior face-to-face communication,

Always meet the eyes of your audience with confidence, conviction and openness.

Practice before a mirror to perfect your tone and expressions, so they suit the message you want to convey. They two facets often convey more than your words do.

Practice using role-play. This means that even when you rehearse before a mirror, candidly ask yourself, “Am I ready to receive this message with this tone and expression?” If you aren’t convinced, your audience won’t be either. So practice again until you get it right.

Consciously engage your audience’s participation. This is the strength of this type of communication, so never let your oral expression be a one-way rant to yourself. You can do this by asking questions, getting their opinion and encouraging expression of new ideas.

Finally, become an active listener. An effective oral communicator not only speaks, but also actively listens to his audience.

Oral Communication (Distance)

Distance (oral) communication has made the world a smaller and more accessible place. Mobile phones, VOIP, video-conferencing, 2-way webinars, etc. are all modern expansions of distance communication, taking its expression to the next subtle level. And in this type of communication, your tone of voice and pace of delivery take priority over other expressions.

For effective oral communication over distance,

Give higher priority to your listening. When you fail to listen, you will find that multiple people attempt to speak at the same time, undermining the value of this form of communication.

Speak slightly slower than you would in face-to-face communication. This will make sure that you remain aware of the subtle nuances of your tone, and the receiver has time to grasp what you convey.

Always re-iterate what you understand when you listen. This type of communication misses the non-verbal signals that you would receive in face-to-face communication (that can indicate subtle expressions like anger, friendliness, receptivity, sarcasm, etc.) So paraphrase what understand and confirm that this is indeed what the other party also meant to convey.

Where appropriate, wear your friendly face with a smile on your lips and eyes. Feel this friendly face. Your tone will automatically convey your openness and receptivity to the other person. (This may not be appropriate if you expect to convey a warning on the phone, so ensure that your face suits your message.)

Finally, back this up with written communication where possible. The intent is to confirm the take-away from the communication so all parties are on the same page. This makes sense even for an informal call with your friend – perhaps you can send a quick text message to re-iterate how pleasurable it was to speak to him, and then confirm the final call-for-action.

Written Communication

A few decades ago, written communication depended on the trusty old mailman as we wrote to people who were far away. On rare occasions, this also included the formal note or legal notice from the bank, landlord, business client, etc. What a surprise then that this type of communication has now taken over every aspect of our world!

Think about it, if you club the total written communication you engage with in a day – the text messages you send over your fancy mobile, your Facebook and Twitter updates, personal and professional emails, heck, even the blogs you write – it would far surpass any other verbal communication you enjoy. Correct? It makes sense then to be an absolute pro at this type of communication. Listed below are 3 rules that can help you get there.

Follow a clear structure so your communication is not all over the place. This can include a brief introduction, agenda, message body and conclusion. The cleverness and effectiveness of your communication lies in how you’re able to capture this structure in your mode of communication (email, text message, quick status update on social media, etc.).

Clarify the context of your communication where possible. This might seem like overkill for a harmless text message. But you’d be amazed at the amount of seemingly-harmless (written) communication that reaches the wrong eyes and ears. So take care to ensure that your context is reasonably clear, no matter who the recipient.

Always err on the right side of caution. There are very few instances when written communication is purely formal (addressed to professional peers and seniors or third-parties), or purely informal (addressed only to your immediate friend/family circle). More often, if falls between these two modes. Hence, play safe by adapting a semi-formal tone, keeping your communication clean (in language and expression) and open (without offending any group). Believe us when we say that it’s far better to have your friends think of you as a “stiff” communicator, rather than have your boss view as an “offensive” communicator!

Non-verbal Types of Communication

This type of communication is more subtle, yet far more powerful. It includes the entire gamut of physical postures and gestures, tone and pace of voice, and the attitude with which you communicate.

In the past few decades, body language experts have revealed how the posture you adopt, the hand gestures you endorse and other facets of your physical personality affect your communication. It is worthwhile to spend a few hours coming up to speed on basic body-language gestures, so you don’t inadvertently send mixed messages with your gestures and speech. You can also use this to support your message, making it more impactful.

But despite what these experts tell you, there will be times when the body language you are meant to adapt is in complete contrast with how you feel (like using a “friendly” posture when you internally feel threatened or intimidated). Hence, non-verbal communication is most effective when these 3 facets are consistent in your communication.

What you say with your words.

What you share with your postures and gestures. (However, these can be learnt to express the right message).

What you feel inside you, and hence impacts the subtle message you feel compelled to share outside you.

As you can see, (1) and (2) can be learnt with a little bit of practice. But (3) has to be consciously built so you constantly align yourself to what you want to express.

For instance,

When you want your peers to think of you as a friendly person, it is because you genuinely like and care for people.

When you want your team to think of you as a strong Leader, it is because you genuinely take responsibility for yourself and the team.

When you want your peers, seniors and others to listen to you, it is because they are convinced that you will genuinely listen to them and factor their thoughts and opinions.

You get the drift.

Communication is a powerful activity that comes to us as naturally as breathing. With a little bit of awareness, our communication can be flawless so the other person not only receives our message, but is also open to it. We leave you with this powerful quote from Enlightened Master Paramahamsa Nithyananda, revealing a tip so potent that it shows its power in any type of communication (formal, informal, verbal, non-verbal, etc.).

“Communication begins with Listening!”

So the next time you find yourself in the middle of a frustrating conversation, focus on your listening. This will help you grasp what your audience wants to hear from you, so you find a way to tailor your communication for your audience to become receptive to it too. When you listen and your audience too listens, you are engaged in the best form of communication!