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| **How Good Are Your Communication Skills?**  **Mind Tools Newsletter 111 - October 14th, 2008**  You have received this newsletter because you have subscribed to it using our double opt-in sign-up process. To unsubscribe, just click the link at the bottom of this email.  http://www.mindtools.com/media/rws/spacer.gif  http://www.mindtools.com/media/mtlogo_small_new1.gif  **Contents:**   * **What's New?** * **How Good Are Your Communication Skills?** * **A Final Note**   **Welcome to our October 14th Newsletter!**  Throughout the history of humankind, communication skills have always been important. After all, they are among the very skills that differentiate us from other species!   Similarly, in today's competitive world, we need to develop exceptional communication skills as a way of differentiating ourselves from our competitors.   So whether you are presenting, negotiating, persuading or simply trying to get the most out of everyday meetings, you'll surely benefit from extra effort spent honing these skills. Today's newsletter helps you do this with our latest self-test, entitled "How Good Are Your Communication Skills?"   Take the quiz to find out the answer and, more importantly, to identify the resources that will help you improve your ability to communicate. [Click here](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCS_99.htm) to take the quiz online, or read on below, and score yourself manually.   As well as today's quiz, our second article this week looks at [post-implementation reviews](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_74.htm). Your project may be all done and delivered, but it's good practice - and common sense - to make sure that what you've delivered is working, that it has delivered the greatest possible business benefit, and that you've learned all the lessons that you need to learn for the next time you run a similar project. Our article helps you do this, and provides a step-by-step approach for running post-implementation reviews - just click [here](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_74.htm) to read the article in full.  We hope you enjoy the Mind Tools newsletter and articles. If you do, please do recommend us to other people who might benefit too! (Why not email them a link to today's newsletter? Click [here](mailto:?subject=An%2520article%2520you%2520might%2520be%2520interested%2520in&body=Hi%2520there%250A%250AI%2520thought%2520you%2520might%2520be%2520interested%2520in%2520this%2520week's%2520article%2520in%2520the%2520Mind%2520Tools%2520newsletter%2520which%2520I%2520get.%2520Just%2520follow%2520this%2520link%2520to%2520read%2520the%2520newsletter%2520online%2520%253Chttp://www.mindtools.com/pages/Newsletters/14Oct08.htm%253E.%250A%250AYou%2520can%2520subscribe%2520to%2520the%2520newsletter%2520at%2520http://www.mindtools.com/subscribe.htm.%250A) for a pre-formatted email, ready for you to send.)  Our very best wishes!  James Rachel  James Manktelow   Rachel Thompson    To find out about new tools on the Mind Tools site the moment they're uploaded, click [here to subscribe](http://www.mindtools.com/import.rss) to the Mind Tools RSS feed (you'll need an RSS newsreader installed), or here to find out more [about RSS](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/AboutRSS.htm).   Subscribe with RSS and find out the moment new tools are posted  http://www.mindtools.com/media/rws/spacer.gif  Editors' Choice Article: How Good Are Your Communication Skills? Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Reading Effectively  Spacer http://www.mindtools.com/media/HomePage/communication226x154.png    Are you sending and receiving accurately?  Communication skills are some of the most important skills that you need to succeed in the workplace.  We talk to people face to face, and we listen when people talk to us. We write emails and reports, and we read the documents that are sent to us. Communication, therefore, is a process that involves at least two people - a sender and a receiver. For it to be successful, the receiver must understand the message in the way that the sender intended.   This sounds quite simple. But have you ever been in a situation where this hasn't happened? Misunderstanding and confusion often occur, and they can cause enormous problems.   If you want to be an expert communicator, you need to be effective at all points in the communication process - and you must be comfortable with the different channels of communication. When you communicate well, you can be very successful. On the other hand, poor communicators struggle to develop their careers beyond a certain point.   So are you communicating effectively? Take this short quiz to find out.  **The Communication Quiz**  ***Instructions:*** *For each question, circle the number in the column that most applies.*  **Statement Not at all Rarely Some times Often Very Often**  **1** I try to anticipate and predict possible causes of confusion, and I deal with them up front. 1 2 3 4 5  **2** When I write a memo, email, or other document, I give all of the background information and detail I can to make sure that my message is understood. 5 4 3 2 1  **3** If I don't understand something, I tend to keep this to myself and figure it out later. 5 4 3 2 1  **4** I'm sometimes surprised to find that people haven't understood what I've said. 5 4 3 2 1  **5** I tend to say what I think, without worrying about how the other person perceives it. I assume that we'll be able to work things out later. 5 4 3 2 1  **6** When people talk to me, I try to see their perspectives. 1 2 3 4 5  **7** I use email to communicate complex issues with people. It's quick and efficient. 5 4 3 2 1  **8** When I finish writing a report, memo, or email, I scan it quickly for typos and so forth, and then send it off right away. 5 4 3 2 1  **9** When talking to people, I pay attention to their body language. 1 2 3 4 5  **10** I use diagrams and charts to help express my ideas. 1 2 3 4 5  **11** Before I communicate, I think about what the person needs to know, and how best to convey it. 1 2 3 4 5  **12** When someone's talking to me, I think about what I'm going to say next to make sure I get my point across correctly. 5 4 3 2 1  **13** Before I send a message, I think about the best way to communicate it (in person, over the phone, in a newsletter, via memo, and so on). 1 2 3 4 5  **14** I try to help people understand the underlying concepts behind the point I'm discussing. This reduces misconceptions and increases understanding. 1 2 3 4 5  **15** I consider cultural barriers when planning my communications. 1 2 3 4 5    **Score Interpretation**  Now add up the scores you've circled.  **My score overall is: out of 75**    **Score Comment**  56-75 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 right ways of communicating. People respect you for your ability to communicate clearly, and they appreciate your listening skills.  36-55 You're a capable communicator, but you sometimes experience communication problems. Take the time to think about your approach to communication, and focus on receiving messages effectively, as much as on sending them. This will help you improve.  15-35 You need to keep working on your communication skills. You are not expressing yourself clearly, and you may not be receiving messages correctly either. The good news is that, by paying attention to communication, you can be much more effective at work, and enjoy much better working relationships! The rest of this article will direct you to some great tools for improving your communication skills.  **Detailed Interpretation**  Whenever you communicate effectively with someone else, you and the other person follow the steps of the communication process shown below.  http://www.mindtools.com/media/Diagrams/CommunicationsProcess.GIF  Here, the person who is the source of the communication encodes it into a message, and transmits it through a channel. The receiver decodes the message, and, in one way or another, feeds back understanding or a lack of understanding to the source.  By understanding the steps in the process, you can become more aware of your role in it, recognize what you need to do to communicate effectively, anticipate problems before they happen, and improve your overall ability to communicate effectively.  The sections below help you do this, and help you improve the way you communicate at each stage of the process. **The Source: Planning Your Message** (Questions 1, 2, 11)  For questions in this category, fill in your scored answers in the table below, and then calculate your total.  **Score**  Question 1  Question 2  Question 11  **Total Out of 15**  Before you start communicating, take a moment to figure out what you want to say, and why. Don't waste your time conveying information that isn't necessary - and don't waste the listener or reader's time either. Too often, people just keep talking or keep writing - because they think that by saying more, they'll surely cover all the points. Often, however, all they do is confuse the people they're talking to.  To [plan your communication (Premium Members)](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/CommunicationsPlanning.htm):   * Understand your objective. Why are you communicating? * Understand your audience. With whom are you communicating? What do they need to know? * Plan what you want to say, and how you'll send the message. * Seek feedback on how well your message was received.   When you do this, you'll be able to craft a message that will be received positively by your audience.  Good communicators use the [KISS (Premium Members)](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/KeepItSimple.htm) ("Keep It Simple and Straightforward") principle. They know that less is often more, and that good communication should be efficient as well as effective.  **Encoding: Creating a Clear, Well-Crafted Message**  (Questions 1, 5, 8, 10, 15)  For questions in this category, fill in your scored answers in the table below, and then calculate your total.  **Score**  Question 1  Question 5  Question 8  Question 10  Question 15  **Total Out of 25**  When you know what you want to say, decide exactly how you'll say it. You're responsible for sending a message that's clear and concise. To achieve this, you need to consider not only what you'll say, but also how you think the recipient will perceive it.   We often focus on the message that we want to send, and the way in which we'll send it. But if our message is delivered without considering the other person's perspective, it's likely that part of that message will be lost. To communicate more effectively:   * Understand what you truly need to say. * Anticipate the other person's reaction to your message. * Choose words and, if appropriate, use body language that helps the other person really hear what you're saying.   With [written communication](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/WritingSkills.htm), make sure that what you write will be perceived the way you intend. Words on a page generally have no emotion - they don't "smile" or "frown" at you while you're reading them (unless you're a very talented writer, of course!)  When writing, take time to do the following:   * Review your style. * Avoid [jargon](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/JargonBusting.htm) or slang. * Check your grammar and punctuation. * Check also for tone, attitude, nuance, and other subtleties. If you think the message may be misunderstood, it probably will. Take the time to clarify it! * Familiarize yourself with your company's writing policies.   Another important consideration is to use pictures, charts, and diagrams wherever possible. As the saying goes, "a picture speaks a thousand words." Our article on [charts and graphs](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Charts_and_Diagrams.htm) has some great tips that help you to use these to communicate clearly.   Also, whether you speak or write your message, consider the [cultural context](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_66.htm). If there's potential for miscommunication or misunderstanding due to cultural or language barriers, address these issues in advance. Consult with people who are familiar with these, and do your research so that you're aware of problems you may face. See our articles on [Communicating Internationally (Premium Members)](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/CommunicatingInternationally.htm) and [Effective Cross-Culture Communication (Premium Members)](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/Cross-Cultural-communication.htm) for more help.  **Choosing the Right Channel** (Questions 7, 11, 13)  For questions in this category, fill in your scored answers in the table below, and then calculate your total.  **Score**  Question 7  Question 11  Question 13  **Total Out of 15**  Along with encoding the message, you need to choose the best communication channel to use to send it. You want to be efficient, and yet make the most of your communication opportunity.   Using email to send simple directions is practical. However, if you want to delegate a complex task, an email will probably just lead to more questions, so it may be best to arrange a time to speak in person. And if your communication has any negative emotional content, stay well away from email! Make sure that you communicate face to face or by phone, so that you can judge the impact of your words and adjust these appropriately.  When you determine the best way to send a message, consider the following:   * The sensitivity and emotional content of the subject. * How easy it is to communicate detail. * The receiver's preferences. * Time constraints. * The need to ask and answer questions.   **Decoding: Receiving and Interpreting a Message** (Questions 3, 6, 12, 14)  For questions in this category, fill in your scored answers in the table below, and then calculate your total.  **Score**  Question 3  Question 6  Question 12  Question 14  **Total Out of 20**  It can be easy to focus on speaking: we want to get our points out there, because we usually have lots to say. However, to be a great communicator, you also need to step back, let the other person talk, and just listen.   This doesn't mean that you should be passive. Listening is hard work, which is why effective listening is called [active listening](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm). To listen actively, give your undivided attention to the speaker:   * Look at the person. * Pay attention to his or her body language. * Avoid distractions. * Nod and smile to acknowledge points. * Occasionally think back about what the person has said. * Allow the person to speak, without thinking about what you'll say next. * Don't interrupt.   [Empathic listening (Premium Members)](http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/EmphaticListening.htm) also helps you decode a message accurately. To understand a message fully, you have to understand the emotions and underlying feelings the speaker is expressing. This is where an understanding of [body language](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Body_Language.htm) can also be useful. **Feedback** (Questions 3, 4, 9)   For questions in this category, fill in your scored answers in the table below, and then calculate your total.  **Score**  Question 3  Question 4  Question 9  **Total Out of 15**  You need feedback, because without it, you can't be sure that people have understood your message. Sometimes feedback is verbal, and sometimes it's not. We've looked at the importance of asking questions and listening carefully. However, feedback through [body language](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Body_Language.htm) is perhaps the most important source of clues to the effectiveness of your communication. By watching the facial expressions, gestures, and posture of the person you're communicating with, you can spot:   * Confidence levels. * Defensiveness. * Agreement. * Comprehension (or lack of understanding). * Level of interest. * Level of engagement with the message. * Truthfulness (or lying/dishonesty).   As a speaker, understanding your listener's body language can give you an opportunity to adjust your message and make it more understandable, appealing, or interesting. As a listener, body language can show you more about what the other person is saying. You can then ask questions to ensure that you have, indeed, understood each other. In both situations, you can better avoid miscommunication if it happens.   Feedback can also be formal. If you're communicating something really important, it can often be worth asking questions of the person you're talking to to make sure that they've understood fully. And if you're receiving this sort of communication, repeat it in your own words to check your understanding.  **Key Points:**  It can take a lot of effort to communicate effectively. However, you need to be able to communicate well if you're going to make the most of the opportunities that life has to offer.  By learning the skills you need to communicate effectively, you can learn how to communicate your ideas clearly and effectively, and understand much more of the information that's conveyed to you.   As either a speaker or a listener, or as a writer or a reader, you’re responsible for making sure that the message is communicated accurately. Pay attention to words and actions, ask questions, and watch body language. These will all help you ensure that you say what you mean, and hear what is intended.  *Our quiz "How Good Are Your Communication Skills?" is a great place to start to enhance your communication skills and get ahead in your career. If you'd like to take your skills further, you can do this with all of the resources of the Mind Tools Career Excellence Club, and with the support of the Mind Tools team. Membership for the first month is just US$1. Find out more by* [*clicking here*](http://www.mindtools.com/rs/CXC/)*.*  **The Career Excellence Club: The Next Step In Your Excellent Career?**  Communication skills are just some of the core skills you'll develop when you join the Career Excellence Club, our unique career development community. You'll gain access to a wealth of personal development resources, as well as getting the support of Mind Tools trainers and like-minded members too.   The first month's membership of the Club costs just US$1 and you can cancel your membership at any time. What's more, you'll receive three valuable bonuses to keep, even if you do cancel!   So, why not take one next step today, and try the Club out for yourself? Take our [club tour](http://www.mindtools.com/CXCtour/index.htm) to find out more.  **A Final Note from James**  Whilst you're working on your communications skills, don't forget to look out for other new and featured articles at the Mind Tools site. Did you know that we feature a fresh selection of our best career-building resources on the [Mind Tools](http://www.mindtools.com) home page, and that it now highlights a **different set of featured tools every day**? This makes it a great place to browse!  We'll be back with another newsletter in two weeks' time too. Look out then for new articles about strategic alliances and rewarding you team.  Until then, have an excellent two weeks!  *James*  James Manktelow  [email us](http://www.mindtools.com/php/eprocess.php?e=rdqnewsletter)  Mind Tools Essential Skills for an Excellent Career!  **Privacy Policy:** Mind Tools will treat your email address with complete respect and will not circulate it to any third party.  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