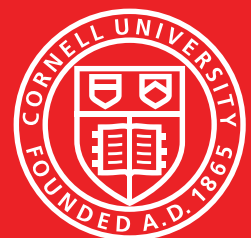




# *The Seven Essential Strategies of Highly Effective Communicators*

A Guide by eCornell



Humans are born communicators. Before we become verbal, we're very effective at sending nonverbal messages and cues. Inside organizations, we still communicate with words and gestures—in person, via video, online, or over the phone. Regardless of its form, effective communication is the grease that lubricates our business relationships, employee interactions, and performance management efforts.

In this guide, we'll explore the most critical components of effective communication to help build your skills on two fronts. First, learn basic principles of communication to increase awareness of your personal communication style and role. Second, learn and practice seven simple strategies for participating more effectively and powerfully in the communication process.

### *The Basics: Principles of Communication*

#### **We all have a role to play**

First, all communicators—no matter what they say or how they say it—play a role. We are either senders or receivers. The sender is the person (or people) who "sends out" a message. This message could be written or verbal, electronic or paper-based, formal or informal. The receiver is the person (or people) to whom a message is communicated and who, in many cases, provides feedback concerning the message.

Remember that communication can happen whether or not a sender intends it to. Once the receiver receives a message, that's it; the sender can't "un-communicate" a message. This fact underscores the importance of cultivating a greater awareness of your personal style and communication tendencies.

#### **Good communication is a shared responsibility**

Responsibility for clear and effective communication is shared by senders and receivers. On one hand, senders must do their best to communicate using clear and concise direction. By listening carefully to the receiver's feedback, the sender also can confirm that the receiver understood or "decoded" the message the way in which it was intended to be.

On the other hand, receivers should seek to confirm their understanding of the information senders have shared with them by paraphrasing or asking questions. It's important for receivers to understand that their role in the communication process is an active one. As such, receivers should remain actively focused on, and engaged in, whatever communication is being directed towards them. They must conduct themselves as active participants, not as passive recipients.

### *Strategies for Effective, Powerful Communication*

#### **1. Use "I" Statements**

Using "I" statements is an effective technique that allows senders to take responsibility for what they want to communicate—especially when the message addresses another employee's behavior. By using "I" statements, you emphasize the content of the message you're sending and make it clear that you're not trying to shift responsibility or blame to someone else, particularly the receiver.

In addition to creating a sense of ownership, "I" statements help you communicate more powerfully. "I" statements can significantly enhance your effectiveness as a sender, and also can increase receivers' receptivity to statements that might otherwise evoke defensiveness. Below are examples of "You" statements reframed as "I" statements.

<i><b>This "You" statement becomes...</b></i>	<i><b>This "I" statement</b></i>
You make me so angry!	I get angry when I call you and you don't respond.
You're not listening to me.	I feel like I'm not being heard.
You never follow up.	I need you to follow up [give specific expectation and example].
You don't care about the team.	I'd like to see you do more for and with the team. For example...

## 2. No More Sandwich: Eliminate "But" Statements

Another technique that supports these objectives is eliminating the use of the word "but" to join together two ideas that, in practice, are often contradictory.

For example, a manager begins a conversation by providing a direct report with positive feedback, but then immediately follows that statement with one that offers constructive feedback, connecting the two statements with the word "but." This technique, sometimes referred to as the "sandwich" approach to feedback, is intended to make the direct report more open to receiving constructive feedback. Its impact, however, can be just the opposite. A person connects two different ideas with the word "but," the use of that conjunction tends to eliminate or erase the first part of the message. This can lead to defensiveness, confusion, or even mistrust. The direct report might even avoid future communication, worried that bad news is always coming even though a conversation starts out well.

## 3. The Great Connector: Break It Up with "And"

There are several ways to avoid using the "sandwich" technique. One is for the manager to provide constructive or positive feedback, but not both at the same time. Yet, during coaching conversations with direct reports, this is likely difficult to do. A second option is to break the ideas into two separate sentences, thereby separating the messages as much as possible. But some managers feel this technique doesn't meaningfully connect what should be two related ideas.

We recommend a third alternative: substituting the word "and" for "but." As we mentioned, when a manager begins a message with positive feedback, its impact is negated if the last half of the sentence begins with the word "but." However, by replacing "but" with "and" in these statements (as in the chart below), it forces the speaker to rethink the message and its impact. "And" is the great connector. "But" is the great eraser.

<i>This "But" statement becomes...</i>	<i>This "And" statement</i>
You're doing a great job, but I'd like you to do better.	You're doing a great job, and I'd like to discuss some ways in which you can do even better.
The other department is friendly, but their reports are always late.	The other department is friendly, and getting their reports on time would help me do my job better.
I like my new job, but I don't like the hours.	I like my new job, and I hope the hours change soon.
I like your suit, but the tie doesn't work with it.	I like your suit, and another tie would make it look great.

## 4. Take Your Cue: Nonverbal Tips

Here are a few key points to remember about body language, and ways senders and receivers can use nonverbal communication cues to reinforce and support their verbal strategies:

- A person's body language should be observed holistically, rather than in isolated actions—It's more meaningful and reliable to look for changes in a person's overall pattern of nonverbal communication cues, than it is to ascribe one universal definition to a particular nonverbal cue (e.g., crossing one's arms).
- Watch for patterns, clusters, or changes in body language to determine whether the person is listening or reacting to the message being delivered.
- Display positive listening cues to convey you're receiving the message—Maintain eye contact when appropriate, and demonstrate body language that reflects engagement, such as leaning in and facing toward the other person.



### 5. Message Received: Positive Listening Techniques

Senders and receivers can engage more fully and responsibly in the communication process—and thereby enhance the quality of communication—by practicing a few key listening techniques:

- Asking questions enables the listener to probe for more information, can help keep the dialogue open and moving, and can be used to confirm what the other person said.
- Paraphrasing is a reflection technique, in which the receiver restates what he or she believes the sender has said. This enables the sender both to know the receiver is listening and to hear how the receiver understands the message.
- Display nonverbal positive listening cues, as mentioned above.

### 6. Don't Fill in the Blanks: Ask Probing Questions

Another technique senders and receivers can use to communicate more effectively is to ask probing questions. As receivers, we often assume that we understand what someone else means, even if we haven't yet received all necessary information. Using that partial information, we sometimes draw conclusions about other things, which may or may not be accurate. Resist this temptation by asking probing questions related to the messages you're receiving. This technique helps ensure that you draw conclusions based only on factual information not on assumptions.

### 7. Eliminate the Negatives: Problematic Behaviors

While you're practicing these positive communication behaviors and strategies, don't forget to be aware of the negative ones. Below are some of the most problematic behaviors senders and receivers should work to eliminate from their interactions:

- Looking away
- Interrupting
- Formulating an answer while the other person is still speaking
- Leaning or turning away
- Shaking your head in disagreement or disbelief
- Inappropriate laughter

## Conclusion

As we mentioned in our introduction, effective communication is a critical facilitator of your and your organization's success. Positive communication strategies enhance your ability to evaluate and resolve employee issues, strengthen employee relations, and counsel and coach employees to meet goals.

To become highly effective communicators, senders and receivers need to take active ownership of their roles in the communication process. They also need to cultivate a greater awareness of their communication styles, and use the positive techniques described in this guide while avoiding the negative ones. These strategies will allow you to impact your organization by improving trust, transparency, and building a strong rapport through effective communication.

