

# There Ought to Be a Law: Communication Competencies

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For years, scholars have written about communication skills being the key to your business success. Almost every job lists strong communication skills as a requirement, but exactly what does that mean in the whole scheme of things. Companies need to develop competencies that define what skills are needed so that business professionals can work at acquiring them. We have developed a basic list and encourage you and your organization to add to it.

- **Written Skills:** According to Deborah Dumaine in her book, *Write to the Top*, “Skill in writing correlates with the ability to think well, to analyze information, weight alternatives and make decisions.” Her experience with executives confirms that no one gets to the top without being able to write effectively. Competency in writing means the ability to write a business proposal, project update, feasibility study, performance appraisal or an email in a clear, concise, logical manner. The reader is able to quickly decipher meaning and follow the sequence because ideas have been grouped under headings and practically leap off the page. Readers are not confused or groping for meaning. While business writing today is often more informal than formal, sentence structures have a subject and a verb; no partial sentences are permitted, unless bullet points are being used. Long, wordy sentences filled with jargon are out. Also, there is no excuse for a misspelled word or grammar mistake.
- **Verbal Skills:** It’s a sin to bore busy people. What separates winners from losers is the ability to hold the attention of one’s listeners and to do it in a compelling fashion. The best presenters do the following things routinely. They display confidence through their posture and sustain eye contact with each listener in the room for a sentence or thought. They show conviction through inflection in their voice. They speak at an appropriate pace and use

strategic pauses, allowing their listeners to easily digest information. Additionally, strong communicators emphasize points through natural and appropriate gestures. They move purposefully and thus connect with listeners. When asked challenging or tough questions, they listen attentively and affirm the person’s point of view before answering. At all times, they let their true self shine through and show they enjoy sharing their ideas with others.

- **Visual Skills:** PowerPoint or Prezi are often required to support ideas and to aid comprehension. If done well and used correctly, these tools can influence decisions. When using slides, they should follow your company’s format and tell your story in a logical manner. The point of any slide should be immediately clear, not overly busy. Adding a visual component to each slide can aid retention. If using bullets, you should follow the 5X5 rule of no more than 5 bullet points and no more than 5 words to a line. The speaker should know to preview each slide, allow time for their audience to comprehend the meaning and focus on connecting with the listeners, not reading from the screen. Slides should not be one’s speaker notes. They should be aimed at conveying meaning for the listeners.
- **Virtual Skills:** In today’s global world, meeting in person isn’t always possible. Video conferencing—whether on Skype, TelePresence or FaceTime, etc. is often the norm. It is important to know how best to work with the technology. As the facilitator or host, you need to be able to set up a web session and know the platform. You should also eliminate distractions during a session. Typing on a computer or responding to a text will get noticed. Turn off instant messaging, calendar reminders and other auto notifications. Any virtual session should not be marred by background noises such as pen clicking or fidgeting with jewelry. If necessary, put a “Do not disturb” sign on your door to let others know that you are in a meeting.

Successful virtual presenters pre-load the files they want to share so they can access them at the click of one key. You don't want to fumble around searching for needed information. It's a good idea to sign in early to test the technology to avoid any unwanted surprises.

When on camera, clear the clutter around you so you look organized. Aim the camera so you appear to be conversing at eye level.

Keep your listeners tuned in by amplifying your energy. Have a variety of slides and change them frequently. Use annotation tools such as arrows and highlighters to emphasize points. Ask open ended questions to maintain a dialogue. Add stories and examples to keep it real. Avoid reading from a script and definitely don't rush it. Pace and tone are critical.

Communication skills are essential to rising in any organization. Identify what skills you still need to acquire and go about mastering them. Your investment in communicating effectively will make a difference. Strong communicators are always noticed and recommended for other projects or positions.

**Question:** *What additional communication competencies should we add to our list? We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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