



By Ryan Crosby

Effective communication is a learned behavior and professional skill, requiring deliberate practice, commitment, and consistency to master. At the mid-career level, the ability to communicate effectively is one of the strongest differentiators of success. Multiple senior officers have stated (publicly and privately) that communication is a fundamental aspect of officership, particularly amongst field grade officers. Furthermore, communication is important enough that the Army Talent Management Task Force (ATMTF) included it as a core grading factor in selection for those attending the Battalion/Colonels Command Assessment Program (BCAP/CCAP).

When you invest time and effort to develop specific communication habits and behaviors, you help form positive perceptions about you and your organization, improving your ability to accomplish your mission, build coalitions, and extend influence outside of your organization. I was fortunate to be formally taught how to communicate effectively by a senior leader who later became my Brigade Commander- Colonel James K. Dooghan.<sup>1</sup> These

lessons were impressed upon me (sometimes painfully) during the two years I worked with him, and from observing the outcomes he achieved through these techniques. What follows is a distillation of his sage advice, which I believe is the most important skill rising military leaders must master to achieve their professional and personal goals.

## **Non-verbal communication**

I'll begin with non-verbal communication, which includes tone, facial expression, gestures, and body language, as it is self-evident to most of us now, after a pandemic full of online meetings and conferences. We've recognized how background, posture, and body language on the other end of a webcam can convey enthusiasm, boredom, frustration, or apathy. As we return to an unmasked, in-person reality this year, non-verbal communication remains important. This means sit up, uncross your arms, and demonstrate a positive, humble demeanor and body language, free of distracting sounds and gestures (clicking pens, tapping fingers, frantically bouncing knees, etc.). The opposite behavior can convey disdain, lack of support, lack of loyalty, or a variety of perceived-but-unspoken negatives.

Consider your audience, which includes everyone, not just the senior leaders in the room, and realize they are watching your non-verbal communication in every engagement, whether you realize it or not. Get comfortable being quiet, attentive, and respectful.

## **Verbal communication**

Verbal communication is of equal importance, whether it is face-to-face, via video (Facetime, Skype, Zoom, Teams, etc.), or phone calls. Keep your tone neutral but pleasant and friendly; if you're energized or passionate about the topic, that's fine, but avoid coming across as emotional or over-zealous. Make eye contact; it builds confidence and makes people believe you (and your words).

Words have meanings, so choose them carefully, both to convey your message deliberately and to demonstrate wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Know how to disarm your audience, when required; this could be displayed by taking the higher ground, apologizing (if required), or tactfully offering an alternative approach.

Steer away from false humility or the classic "humblebrag," but some gentle self-deprecation is permitted as it shows good humor. Give the other person the opportunity to provide their concerns, and state your respect for their position. Listen; don't just reload for your next volley of ideas.

Avoid amorphous, ambiguous, generalized responses when communicating ideas or facts. “Division said...” is less precise than “COL Menéndez, the Division G3, said...”. The best communication styles combine all elements of effective non-verbal communication (posture, body language, demeanor) with a precise, tactful, emotionally intelligent manner of speech, and come across as energetic and confident without arrogance. Genuine, sincere speech (both real and perceived) is essential, so don’t play games, politics, or try to flatter your audience.

Practice de-escalation, deference, and deliberation, before things get contentious. If tensions arise or tempers flare, never raise your voice, offer insult, or yell- unless there is an immediate safety issue, or you have carefully and thoughtfully decided on a deliberate effect you desire which can only be achieved that way- and even then, think twice before you speak. Assume noble intent in everyone- most people don’t wake up in the morning intent on ruining your day.

## **Written communication**

In an email-centric world, much of this advice applies to written communication, as well. Use words precisely and correctly, with proper grammar and syntax;<sup>3</sup> your writing must display critical thinking, logic, and reason. Use the fewest possible words to effectively convey your ideas. “If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.”<sup>4</sup>

Arrange your ideas with coherency so your points flow, compliment, and amplify those which precede and follow. Consider the point of view or argument from your boss’ or higher headquarters’ perspective, because perspective is everything: “Where you stand is where you sit.”<sup>5</sup> Ensure your work is free of anything self-serving.

Before you hit send, read your product out loud to yourself, or, for really important documents (CCIR, SIR, SITREP, USR bullets, mission statements, Commander’s intent, etc.), have a trusted agent (rank agnostic) look at your product and read it out loud, as well- this both refines the product and helps others develop their communication. This technique is especially true for review of mission and intent for long-term and critical missions (deployments, CTC, etc.). In these cases, mid-level NCOs and junior Warrant Officers are a great resource, as they will tell you where your document lacks clarity or perspective.

If you have time, sleep on your ideas and come back to them in the morning, especially if contentious, controversial, or problematic. You’ll appreciate the clarity and perspective of a good night’s sleep when you reread your draft in the morning.

## Relationships matter

“Relationships are a pacing item,”<sup>6</sup> my boss often said. You will make first impressions with new people as you navigate new duties and responsibilities, so prepare for these as deliberate engagements- you have one shot! From there onward, take responsibility for relationship maintenance. Since relationships are a pacing item, when they go down, fix them quickly, before a broken relationship degrades your ability to complete the mission.

Speak to people before issues arise, and quickly rebuild bridges when they do. Be the one to spread oil on the waters, be the bigger person, carry the olive branch...pick your metaphor, but do the right thing to repair the relationship. No one will remember what you said but they will remember how they felt when you said it.

## Communicate effectively across echelons

Effective military communicators adeptly answer questions and skillfully prepare their leaders to answer similar questions from higher echelons. One of the most challenging mental tasks leaders face is the need to think through problems for the boss before they need to make a decision, and develop a creative solution their boss (or peers) had not thought of already. As long as it falls into the better half of a solution (one that might work vs. one that won't work), it's a good start. No matter the format in which these questions arise (RFIs, SIRs, Congressional Inquiries, CG's Hotline, etc.), the first rule is always the same: answer the question you were asked, not the one you wish they'd asked.<sup>7</sup> Don't be defensive; explain the matter, present solutions, and admit to errors on your part, if founded, as this often disarms the reader as well.

You've probably heard of the infamous “5Ws” in reporting but experience shows the “7Ws” work better. The additional two Ws are: what are you (or the unit) doing about the situation; and what assistance do you need, and from whom are you requesting the resource(s)? Consider and reference other relevant components as appropriate: previous commander's guidance or information requirements, decisions that may be required later, impact to priority missions and your assessments (“Are we on glide path?”), or risks of which your boss may not be aware, but will need to underwrite. Consider talking points your boss could include in their guidance or discussions with others. When appropriate, show a linkage to your boss's priorities and intent, without seeming cheesy or sycophantic.<sup>8</sup>

## Shaping operations in communication

Deliberately shaping discussions is one of the best ways to get others to buy into or “bless off” on your efforts. Find opportunities to iterate your ideas with your audience whenever possible, especially if you know certain members disagree with you. Present options early enough to leave time for them to think and make decisions. Otherwise, chances are good that you will not achieve your desired outcome.

Remind your audience why you are bringing up the topic (i.e. you asked for us to look into this; you mentioned in your guidance; your # priority is; etc.). Assume no one is as familiar with your project as you are. No matter how you’re conveying relevant information to your audience, operate in a “bottom line up front” mode; showing your “homework” is by specific request only. Be mindful of their time, in person and in writing. Finally, consider who should deliver the message; sometimes, “the message is the man.” Are you the right person to send this email, give this presentation, or introduce this topic?

Learning how to communicate effectively increases the likelihood of positive professional outcomes and helps ensure your efforts bear fruit. Like all professional skills, it requires practice, commitment, and consistency to master. The payoff for these efforts is a professional reputation as a polished professional, a smooth operator. Your hustle, worth ethic, and years of experience will be much more impactful if you are also a skilled and highly effective communicator. Putting it another way, those attributes which you most want to display as an Army leader- communication, confidence, interpersonal tact, building trust, extending influence beyond the chain of command, creating a positive environment, and most importantly, *getting results*— are all yours to own, if you first master the art and science of effective communication.

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## Endnotes

1. COL Doohan is the current Commander of 4SFAB at Fort Carson, and I am forever indebted to him for his leadership, friendship, patience, and kindness. Send Me, sir!
2. “Wisdom: The quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment.” - Oxford
3. “Syntax: the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language.” - Oxford

4. The debate about the origins of this quote rages on, but most scholars point to Blaise Pascal in 1657: “Je n’ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n’ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte.”
5. Attributed to Rufus E. Miles, Jr.
6. “Pacing item”: a mission critical piece of equipment, e.g. M1 tank, Apache helicopter, M2 machine gun.
7. N.B.: This is true in effective communication from led to leader, but not in responding to media inquiries. That’s a whole separate article. Consult your PAO.
8. You should be able to easily access your boss’s priorities from where you have them written down in a frequently-referenced part of your leader’s book.
9. *He once wrote three articles like this with a pencil. A f-ing pencil!*

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