

4 Expert-Backed Strategies for Improving Your Communication Skills



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It happens to the best of us. We're out at a trendy new restaurant with a friend or colleague we haven't seen in ages when suddenly, we're asked a question twice and realize we've been glued to our phone for most of the conversation.

It's not a pleasant feeling knowing you've unwittingly been ignoring your companion during important quality time.

As entrepreneurs, we often think of communication as the things we say. But our body language also speaks volumes.

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So what's the antidote for improving bad habits like the scenario above? According to *CNBC* contributors Kathy and Ross Petras, it all comes down to this one simple behavioral change: being present. "Engage the speaker – make eye contact, nod and be ready to respond," they write. "In other words, let them see that you're paying attention."

But just like we can unknowingly fail to communicate with our body language, our speech can also pose significant barriers when it comes to our interactions with others.

Below are some subtle yet impactful ways to create more rapport and come across more positively to those around you. As self-development author Brian Tracy puts it, "Communication is a skill that you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing," he explains. "If you're willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life."

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How to communicate more effectively

Making solid connections in and out of the business world has a lot to do with our verbal and non-verbal communication. Let's put it this way: you can have the best ideas imaginable, but if you're not getting them across in an appealing way, you will be losing out on opportunities.

Speech expert John Bowe argues, "Fairly or not, people judge you for how you speak just as much as they do for what you say."

He adds: "Brilliant and hard-working as you may be, if your way of speaking comes across as immature or scattered, then people – especially your bosses and co-workers – will probably have a hard time taking you seriously."

As CEO of my company Jotform for the past 16 years, I've certainly made some hiccups along the way. But I've also

learned valuable skills from researching and practicing better ways of getting my ideas across.

Here are five expert-backed ways that have helped me communicate more effectively:

1. Show engagement (verbally & non-verbally)

In 2020 I picked up a bad habit: chronic phone scrolling. While many of us have been addicted to our devices since before the crisis hit, the pandemic saw cell phone usage reach new heights.

After several incidents of ignoring conversations during dinners, I decided to make a change. No devices at the table and keep focused on the person in front of me. While we're naively unaware of the effect staring at our phones can have, it's a sign of disrespect to someone who has made an effort to spend their valuable time with you.

I'd also like to add that showing engagement isn't just nodding along and agreeing with what your companion is telling you. It means showing interest with your body language, questions and curiosity.

When someone asks you about your day, don't just share the bare minimum – take it as a moment to connect and get more personal. Tell them about your challenges and lessons learned or about new projects that are exciting you.

Above all else, my advice is this: be present. Be there *with* them.

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2. Stop sounding self-centered

It's important to note – being engaged is *no* excuse for making

yourself the center of the universe.

Many entrepreneurs fail to recognize when they're taking up all the air in the room. They drone on about their businesses to no end – their successes, connections and ambitions.

But there are hints to be noted when your communication is becoming a one-way street: people stay silent or just nod along. They hardly interact, and you've barely learned anything new about what's happening with them.

To avoid this hurdle, make it a point to slow down and take pauses. Remember, the world doesn't revolve around you and your business.

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3. Be a master listener

Another way to avoid the sounding-self-centered trap is to practice active listening – the ability to focus on what the other person is saying rather than trying to formulate responses in your head the entire time they're speaking.

“No matter your industry or company mission, as a leader, everything you do ultimately relies on the interpersonal relationships you form with your team, stakeholders, customers and others,” writes *Entrepreneur* contributor Stu Sjouwerman. “Without active listening, these relationships are much harder to develop because you might not understand the problems at hand or be able to acknowledge them in a positive, reassuring way.”

I've found this to be true both in my personal life and in my interactions with my team at my company. Active listening has been an essential tool for harmoniously working together.

As Sjouwerman notes, it's a way for everyone to feel more

“respected, included and valuable.”

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4. Offer genuine appreciation

In a story for *Harvard Business Review*, “The Little Things That Make Employees Feel Appreciated,” the co-authors hit the nail on the head when speaking about the importance of leaders showing genuine appreciation.

There’s a big difference between yelling a thank-you on your way out the door versus sitting down with someone to describe the things you value about their work and its positive effect on the team or organization.

This applies to how we communicate outside of our business, too. Whenever possible, it’s important to show others what we value about them and our relationships. Cultivating this habit of being thankful not only shows our respect but also expresses true understanding.

Perhaps Irish-Indian educationist Margaret Cousins put it best when she noted, “Appreciation can change a day, even a life. Your willingness to put it into words is all that is necessary.”

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