



# THE OTHER HALF OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: knowing your subject matter

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IN THE LAST ISSUE OF **MASTERCAST™ CONNECTION**, we addressed “The Art of Business Communication” from the perspective of learning to listen—an art that must be perfected before you can go on to the second half of communication—talking. Most of us have an easier time with this second half of the equation. In fact, too many of us find it hard not to flap our gums. But message sending is just as vital as message receiving, so let’s address how to be effective with our outward communications.

At a two-day business meeting a few months ago, I began compiling a list of expressions under the title “Clichés I Hate.” To make the list, the clichés must have been used in the meeting more than one time. Many were used multiple times. Over the two days, I ended up with these winners:

- “At the end of the day.”
- “Having said that” with one variation “with that said.”
- “As we speak.”
- “Consider it done” with the variations: “It’s all but done.” and “When it’s all said and done.”
- “You better believe it.”
- “In your opinion.”
- “Playing phone tag.”

Now let me show you my reasons for hating them by putting them in one sentence:

“At the end of the day and having said that, as we speak, I consider it done at the end of the day ... unless we play phone tag.”



Well, "you better believe it," I just said exactly ... nothing. And that's the problem with most of us; we talk excessively without imparting much meaning.

As with listening styles, there are four speaking styles: aggressive speaking, nonassertive speaking, passive-aggressive speaking and assertive speaking. Three of those styles I would classify as problems while assertive speaking can serve as a benchmark.

## The styles

The **Aggressive Speaker** is a person that loves to use harsh language and intimidating body language. They show no respect for the receiver's personal space. If you work for an aggressive speaker, that speaker seldom asks you to do an assignment; instead you are told or commanded to obey. This style of speaker likes to use expressions such as "you must," "you always," and "because I said so." They believe a loud, demanding voice is an effective tool and yet, many times, aggressive speakers are unaware of their behavior and wonder why people try to avoid them.

At the other end of the spectrum is the **Nonassertive Speaker**, who uses a soft voice and is overly agreeable to your point of view. You never know where the person stands regarding the issue or topic under discussion, and he or she avoids conflict at all cost. Such speakers' body language is withdrawn, giving no eye contact to the receiver, and they are likely to keep their distance. This style uses expressions such as, "Uh...I guess," "If that's the way you want to do it," "Maybe," and when offering a suggestion, they preface their statement with "I don't know if this idea will help, but..."

The **Passive-Aggressive Speaker** uses the rumor mill to get his or her point across. If such speakers have a problem with you, they will tell others but not you, the source. Passive-aggressive speakers will use subtle digs or sarcastic remarks as a way to disagree, but when confronted about the remark, they blame you for misunderstanding. The passive-aggressive speaker will appear to agree, but in reality does not, and nonverbal messages often contradict verbal messages. They are critical; they keep score; and they hold back assistance. This style uses expressions such as, "I knew that wouldn't work," "How could you even think of that," or "The problem with Joe is..."

The **Assertive Speaker** always thinks before he or she speaks. Such speakers are active listeners. They take responsibility for their actions; they strive to solve problems and conflicts in a constructive manner; and they follow the principle of "speaking the truth in love." Their body language is positive; eyes are focused; and their voice is clear and confi-

dent, not bossy. For the assertive speaker, the rumor mill is not a source for either sending or receiving information. Concerns are addressed directly to the source, and conflicts are seen as a way of resolving issues so they are never avoided. An assertive speaker fixes the problem instead of affixing the blame. Such speakers use phrases such as, "Yes that was my fault," "I understand your point," "Let me explain why I disagree with you," and "Let's define this issue and then explore some options to help resolve our problems."

The reason the assertive speaker should be the benchmark is the same reason why attentive and active listening (as opposed to selective or passive listening) works better to get the message across. It shows that the person on the other end of the message is important. It's the reason why the very best public speakers are the most effective: They have done their research on who their audience will be and they tie the message directly to the recipient.

In other words, you don't get up in front of an audience of cast polymer companies and extol the virtues of engineered stone or discuss how you feel cast polymer products are on their way out.

You wouldn't go into a job interview and ramble on and on about your qualities without interspersing comments and questions that gear your qualities to that particular company.

You don't go into a sales meeting and give a speech that doesn't allow interruptions for questions.

If you're smart, you don't talk about your golf game when your wife is concerned about one of the kid's grades.

Remember the 80/20 rule: Listen 80% of the time and talk 20% of the time? The best way to effectively use that 20% is by knowing your topic inside and out and caring who is doing the 80%.

We need to be "mindful" of our words and understand the impact they can have on someone else. Solomon, who has been called the wisest man ever, said, "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." We can use our words to heal or hurt—it's up to us.

In conclusion, it takes work, dedication and practice to become an active listener and an assertive speaker. But as you progress in the art of communication, you'll find your business and personal relationships improve with fewer misunderstandings, less stress and more enjoyment in day-to-day activities. ■

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