
The Practical Local Government Manager

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This article deals with a major self-management skill—communication. Everything we do and say is communication. A message is given and received with every action and utterance we make. There is an old adage that says, “You cannot NOT communicate,” and this is true in management as well as in social situations.

We communicate with words, actions, posture, facial expressions, choice of words or inflection, with silence, reactions to others, with everything we do.

The essential skills necessary for effective management communication are:

1. Understanding the six elements of communication, knowing personal strengths and weaknesses in these six elements, and developing strategies for improving weaknesses,
2. Using skills in delegating, and
3. Presenting messages effectively.

1. The Six Elements of Communication

Communication is made up of six elements that are constantly interacting.

1. **Syntax:** The grammar that we use, including the choice of nouns, verbs, tenses, etc., and their interrelationships.
2. **Articulation:** The way we produce sounds, such as m, p, t, sh, k, etc. and the vowels used. Vowels are also what give people accents. Common articulation problems include lisping, w/r substitutions (wabbit), etc.
3. **Voice:** The way we produce and manage air stream and vocal cords to produce the vibration and resonance that is shaped by the mouth into sounds. The variation of

loudness and pitch (high, squeaky, low, rumbling, etc.) are variations of voice quality.

4. **Fluency:** Our choice of fast or slow rate, hesitant, or repetitive modes of speech.
5. **Non-Verbal:** How we use gestures, posture, facial expressions or any means for communicating that does not use the voice.
6. **Conversational:** Providing specific and sufficient information, accuracy of message, topic maintenance, choice of responses or questions, turn taking, eye contact, etc.

The most important activity the practical local government manager can undertake in this area is to complete a personal communication skills audit, looking at strengths and weaknesses of all the above areas. Figure 1 on page 24 provides the outline for such an audit.

2. Delegation

The second most important skill necessary for effective communication is the skill of delegation. This is a communication skill that is directly linked to management efficiency. Delegation can be defined as the skill of knowing when to delegate, and communicating clearly your objectives, the task to be completed, the time frame, and the expected outcome.

Every activity you undertake should be preceded by the following mental checklist:

1. Can I do it right now?
2. If I can't do it now, when can I do it? (Note the action date in your diary.)
3. Do I have to do it? (Delegation)
4. What is a better way of doing it?
5. Why do it at all? (What are the results of not doing it, and can I live with the consequences?)

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If you decide that you do not have to do the task, then you immediately shift into delegation mode. This includes noting, either mentally or on paper, what your objectives for the task are, exactly what the task entails, when the task is to be completed, and what you expect the outcome to be.

You then decide who to delegate the task to, and communicate the above information.

You should cultivate the attitude that, if a delegated task does not have the expected outcome, then it is YOUR fault, not [the fault of] the person who was given the task.

This forces you to investigate what you did that caused the breakdown in communication.

3. Executive Presentation Skills

The third most important communication skill for local government managers is the use of presentation skills.

Presentations are the single event most likely to turn a strong individual into a quivering mass of nerves. There are two phrases that should be mentally rehearsed constantly before and during any presentation.

"The worst enemy you have is in your own mind."

We have an enormous capacity for believing bad things are about to happen, without investigating what the worst outcome of a situation could be. The best attitude to cultivate is, "What is the worst that will happen if...?" What if you forget your years of experience and knowledge in the subject? (Impossible, unless you have a stroke on stage.) If you stumble over a word or two? (The audience will never notice.) If you are boring? (Your own fault; analyze the audience more and tailor the presentation to their needs.) If you forget where you are in the presentation or produce a long awkward silence? (The audience will think you are consciously choosing the best words and sequence for them. This enhances the audience's listening.)

Our nervousness is a direct result of anticipation of events and their consequences. These consequences either never occur or are so minimal that they should not produce fear. The worst critic in an audience is yourself. Mentally go through these "What if..." scenarios, and you will lessen anxiety immediately.

The second phrase to rehearse is: *"You are the only one to know if you mess up, UNLESS YOU TELL THE AUDIENCE."*

There is nothing worse than to tell the audience, "Sorry, I've lost my place," or "I've forgotten what I was to say," or "I apologize for..." Don't give the audience a running summary of your mental blocks, stammers, missing pages, or areas you can't

cover because you ran out of time. The audience is not interested!

If you bring their attention to these facts, they will remember that you were disorganized, rather than remembering you were in total control (they couldn't see your sweaty palms), took your time to choose carefully the exact wording of your statements (because you forgot your next point), chose the most appropriate points for that audience by flipping pages of prepared text to winnow out the unnecessary (whilst you actually were looking for page 14 that had disappeared). The most important aspect of presentation is the audience's perception, not the reality of what goes on in the presenter's mind or behind the podium.

The sequence for preparing and giving a quality presentation is exactly the same sequence for any activity that has a quality control component. The sequence for any presentation should be:

- a. *Activity analysis:* Who is the audience? What do they want from the presentation? How can I use examples that mean something to them? What are the three things I want them to go away with?
- b. *Activity design:* What is the sequence of topics? Have I planned a variety of presentation techniques? How long will each section take? Does this mesh with total time for the presentation.
- c. *Activity implementation:* Does all equipment work? What cues am I getting from the audience about interest level? Am I using effective gestures.
- d. *Activity evaluation:* Did the audience go away with the three things I wanted them to remember? How did they rate this presentation?
- e. *Activity validation:* Did my presentation have a lasting effect on their attitude or knowledge? Are they implementing my recommendations three months after they attended the presentation?

This quality control sequence is the key to impressive presentations, and every local government manager should be familiar with and practice these activities.

Communication is the most important of the three self-management skills needed for effective management. Complete the communication skills audit, have staff or colleagues complete one for you, practice the skills of delegating, and use your skills of presentation to get your message across. Only after achieving these skills, are you ready to fine tune your people management and organizational management skills. **PM**

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Communication Skills Audit

Behavior	Situation	Response
1. Syntax Do I have any problems with grammar?	_____	_____
2. Articulation Do I have any problems with sounds?	_____	_____
3. Voice Do I have any problems with quality? (breathy, harsh, strained, etc.) Any problems with pitch? (too high, low, variable) Any problems with loudness?	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
4. Fluency Do I have any problems with speed? Any problems with hesitations?	_____ _____	_____ _____
5. Non-verbal Do I get negative reactions from others that seem to have nothing to do with what I say? Do I use gestures, posture appropriately?	_____ _____	_____ _____
6. Conversational Quality Do I have problems with message inaccuracy? Do others often misunderstand me? Quantity Do I often give insufficient information? Do I often give irrelevant information? Do I use nonspecific words often? (e.g., it, that, those, things, etc.) Relevance Do I lose track of a topic and go off at a tangent? Do I give inappropriate responses? Do I ask relevant questions for clarification? Do I respond appropriately in different situations? Do I match my language to my listeners? Manner Do I self-interrupt or have false-starts? Do I present a cohesive story when necessary? Do I interrupt others often? Do I give and take turns in conversation? Do I use eye contact effectively?	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

The key to this communication audit is to understand your weaknesses, and to either modify them yourself or seek assistance. The profession of speech pathology is particularly skilled in providing strategies to improve skills in these areas. One illuminating practice that would benefit every local government manager is to ask colleagues to complete the audit on your behalf. This allows you to ascertain others' perceptions of your communication skills. You might be in for some surprises!

Figure 1