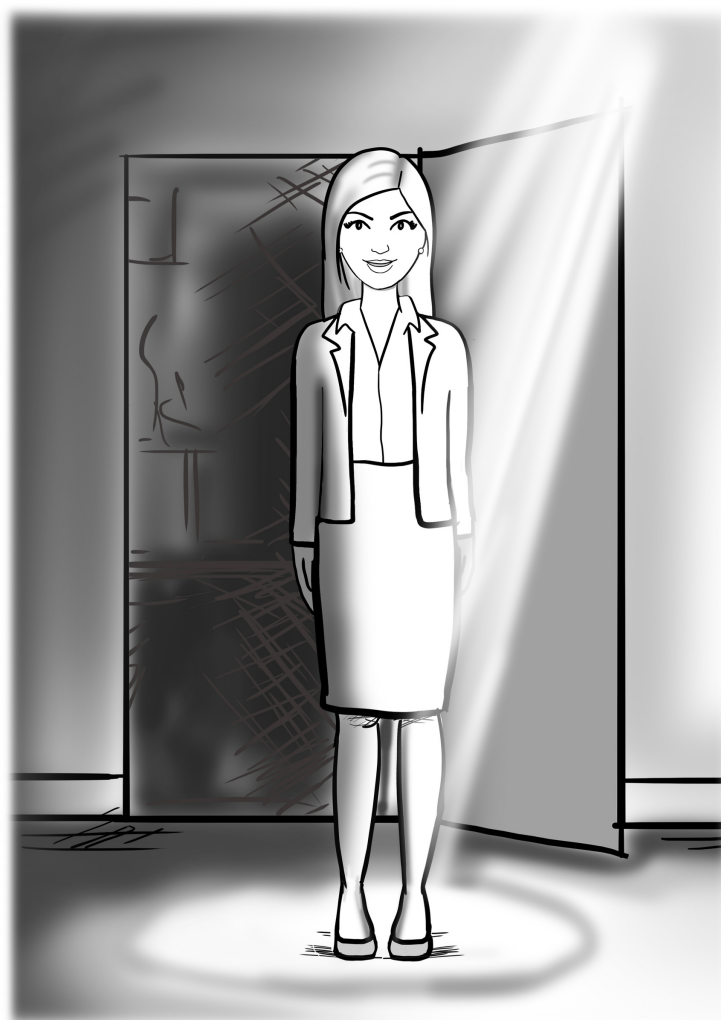


Key Communication Skills

Chapter 8

Step Out From The Shadows
How to be seen and heard at work.



Sally Hindmarch

Thank you!

Thank you for downloading this chapter from my book **Step Out From The Shadows**: How to be seen and heard at work.

I wrote the book having spent the last 20+ years helping people like you to look and sound more confident than you feel.

My team and I have run workshops, mentored and coached thousands of people showing them how they can control their bodies and voices to help to change their minds as well as portray a credible, confident and competent image. If you know some simple to use techniques you really can be the best version of you in those moments when you feel unnatural and uncomfortable ... whatever the reason.

This chapter covers the key communication skills needed to talk on the phone, on video calls, text and emails. I wrote it before March 2020 - I had no idea how important these would become!

The book itself covers the range of communication from what you say to yourself to how to confidently pull off a presentation. Readers comments include:

- *"This book strikes the perfect balance of having just the right amount of content, including examples, anecdotes, and an Actions You Can Take at the end of each chapter."* CS
- *"Really enjoyed this book. Lovely chatty tone, non-preaching and down to earth with really practical top tips and handy hints."*. KB
- *"Of all the books I have read on confidence this is hands down the best one".* AS
- *"A very informative book that is so easy to read. I read it in one sitting"* AM

For more more information about the book and ways you can work with me please go to the [Step Out From The Shadows website](#).

If you enjoy this chapter and would like to buy the book , so long as you use the same email address you used to register for this chapter, the price will be reduced to just £10 as my thank you for your interest.

Key Communication Skills

Do you know the nursery rhyme 'For want of the nail, the shoe was lost'?

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of the shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of the horse, the rider was lost;
For want of the rider, the battle was lost;
For want of the battle, the kingdom was lost;
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail*.

References to the rhyme go back to the 1400's so we have known for a long time the importance of the little things. And this was never truer than when talking about communication.

When texting or emailing, for want of vocal tone the meaning is lost. When on the telephone, for want of facial expression the context is lost and when on a webinar or video call, for want of a clear background the focus is lost.

So, this chapter is about all the ways you communicate when ...

You aren't in the same room as the other person or people. When you are on the telephone, using FaceTime or video, webinars, text or email.

I've divided it into 4 areas - listening skills, on-line or video, telephone and email or text. Many of the things I'm going to mention are relevant when face to face but made worse because of the lack of connection possible according to the tools used. The list isn't exhaustive but if you get your communication right when you are emailing or phoning people you will find it much easier to communicate when you meet them face to face.

Listening skills

Of course, this is important when face to face but it is even more essential when talking over the phone because the other person doesn't get any of the visual cues that you are listening to them.

I know from the exercises we run in our workshops that people don't hear as well when they have no eye contact. This is why eye contact when you are speaking is so important and why it is so easy to stop listening when you don't have any.

I give you some techniques for listening when on the phone later in this chapter but for the time being let's focus on your active listening skills wherever you are.

Make sure you are in the right frame of mind to listen. If you are in the middle of something then ask the other person if you can get back to them at a more convenient time.

If they call, walk into your office or up to your desk, don't carry on typing (or filing or whatever you are doing) while they speak. You won't hear them properly. At best you will miss elements of what they have said, at worst you will end up agreeing to do something you can't or they will leave unsatisfied with the encounter.

If you are doing the interrupting (in person or on the phone) ALWAYS ask if it's convenient. Allow them to opt out of the conversation right now and arrange a more convenient time to call or speak in person.

Once you have agreed that now is convenient ...

Then commit to the conversation. Stop what you are doing and concentrate on what is being said. Watch for any body language you can see, listen for changes in vocal tone, hesitation and the like.

Even if they can't see you, you can show you are concentrating by asking questions and clarifying your understanding. You can reflect back what they are saying to make sure that you have understood them.

Use phrases like ... "So, what you are saying is ..." or "Let me check that I have understood". You don't want to repeat what they have said word for word but you do want to use their word choices and phrases when you paraphrase so that they know that you have really heard them.

For example, if they say “I was really excited to be given the project but I am feeling very overwhelmed” when you paraphrase you don’t want to change “excited” to “thrilled” or “overwhelmed” to “too busy”. They won’t feel as listened to and your choice of words may not mean the same thing to them.

By asking questions, clarifying and reflecting back what is being said to you, you are also less likely to be formulating your thoughts and jumping in with your response. Be patient and let the other person finish speaking before you respond. This way they will feel truly heard.

I like to use this acronym to help me remember what a LUCID conversation should be:

Listen to **U**nderstand, **C**larify and **I**nterpret and only then **D**iscuss.

On-line or video

I once ran a webinar with a speaker who had bags hanging on the door of her shared office and although we could only see her slides, every time someone walked in (which happened quite often) you could hear the bags clanking against each other. It was really distracting!

Video calls are becoming much more common and there are 3 key things to think about.

1. Can they see me?
2. What else can they see?
3. Where are my hands?

1. Can they see me?

What is the lighting like in your office, living room or the venue you are calling from? As I've said before, it is really important that whoever you are speaking to can see your eyes or they won't hear you and that's just as true when you are on a screen. But it's harder through the screen ... if you want to look someone in the eye you need to look directly at the camera lens and not your phone or computer screen.

If you have glasses that transition into sunglasses be wary of facing a window when it is sunny, as the glasses will slowly start to hide your eyes. And remember if you are sitting in front of a window you will be a silhouette to them which means they won't be able to see any of your features!

2. What else can they see?

Think about what's behind you. Do you look like you are in an office or your bedroom? I can't tell you how often I have been looking at a dressing gown, bed, or even (once) a pile of dirty laundry behind the person I am speaking to. Have a quick look at what is behind you before you start your call.

Let others in the house or office know you are on a call. It is really distracting to watch someone walk into the room, realise they are now part of the background and with a look of horror walk backwards. It means I'm so busy watching what is going on behind you that I miss what you are saying!

And one to watch out for when you are in a café is who can see your screen. Recently I was on a call with a colleague in a café and the only seat she could find had a window behind her. Unfortunately, a gentleman in the street found her screen fascinating and that distracted everyone else on the call ... and had we been looking at a document we could have crossed all sorts of privacy barriers.

If you do a lot of video calls then consider using something like Zoom** for your calls as you can create a virtual background with any royalty free picture and a piece of dark cloth or wall.

3. Where are my hands?

Your hands are your trust indicators so don't hide them from view and do use them to aid your speech. If you gesticulate in normal conversation then do so on a video call. Try to set the webcam or phone so your upper body and hands can be seen.

These three areas are particularly important if you have a call with a new prospect, employer or you expect it to be a difficult conversation. If you aren't used to speaking online then get a friend to help you practise a couple of times and give you feedback on how you come across.

Telephone

Telephones seem to work for some people really well and for others much less so. I know in my early career I was always a little frightened of using the telephone ... it always seems so intrusive as you don't know what the other person is doing when you call.

For a time, I didn't like calling people on the phone but with the advent of email and text my solution to overcome this was to text or email and ask when it was convenient for me to call. That allowed the other person to respond with a time that worked, and if they didn't respond; they weren't surprised when I did call. And as I said earlier ... ALWAYS ask if it's convenient once you are through to them!

More importantly, I believe, is once you are on the phone that you stay focussed and don't allow yourself to be distracted.

One technique I learnt years ago was to ...

Focus on an inanimate object when listening to someone talking to me on the phone. I find the best things are a door handle or a light switch. This stops me from getting distracted by looking at something out of the window or across the office.

Another way to stay focussed when on the phone is to write notes or repeat what the other person is saying in your head as you hear them say it. This has the added advantage of ensuring that you don't start thinking about what you are going to say next, rather than listening to the whole question or comment.

There is a video of me explaining this technique in the 'Step Out from The Shadows website'*** providing more information on this. And remember that others can't see you nod or your expression so making the occasional "mmm" or "ah ha" as they speak will mean that they are aware that you are still listening.

Email or text

Email and text are really great tools ... but be careful not to rely on them. Humans are sociable beings and for most people, not having a personal relationship with you will definitely mean the connection is weaker. A weaker connection can mean that when a problem occurs it is harder to fix.

Imagine you have a customer who is complaining about something that you or one of your team has done. If you have met them, chatted about things other than work and know a little about the way they like to communicate it will be much easier to handle the problem than if you have only sent them letters.

You can't be as personal in writing ...

It takes too long so you skip straight from "Hi" to business with rarely time for a, "how are you?" Face to face you wouldn't walk into the room and say "Hello ... let's get down to business". The small talk between the greeting and work is really important to help you build a connection.

If you use text or email for your personal conversations, make sure you don't slip into 'textspeak' at work. Emojis are more acceptable than they were but a note to the MD saying:

"Thanks for the email I will get back to you as soon as possible"

written as:

"Tnx 4 the e-mail I'll tell you l8r"

isn't going to go down well!

This is a particular problem if you are responding on your phone...

I know I have put a "X" at the end of a work email and only realised with embarrassment as I pressed send!

Another thing to consider when writing is that the emphasis you give to a word may not be the emphasis that is read. Try reading the following sentence with the emphasis on the underlined word and see how the meaning changes..

I didn't say she stole my money.
I **didn't** say she stole my money.
I didn't **say** she stole my money.
I didn't say **she** stole my money.
I didn't say she **stole** my money.
I didn't say she stole **my** money.
I didn't say she stole my **money**.

Tone of voice, sarcasm and enthusiasm are just three things that get lost in the written word and you have no way to check the recipients' understanding. If you have a difficult message to deliver, whenever possible, speak to the other person and don't rely on email.

* www.wordsforlife.org.uk/songs/want-nail-shoe-was-lost

** <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/210707503-Virtual-Background>

***www.stepoutfromtheshadows.co.uk

Actions you can take from this chapter:

- When contacting someone by phone or interrupting them ALWAYS ask if it is convenient.
- Stop what you are doing to really listen, focus on the other person or an inanimate object if on the phone.
- Have LUCID conversations - Listen to Understand, Clarify and Interpret and only then Discuss.
- When on-line or video consider if the other person can see you, see anything you don't want them to see and if your hands are visible.
- Go to www.stepoutfromtheshadow.co.uk to see the video on how to really listen.
- Be careful not to use emojis or text-speak in your emails or messages
- Remember that emphasis and vocal tone can't be read. Speak to the other person if you want more than just the words to be understood.

