

How to Fix Communication Breakdowns

A great leader is a great communicator. Here's the place to begin.

By Gini Graham Scott

Communication often breaks down because people don't say something that needs to be said or because they say it the wrong way. Here are some foolproof tactics to overcome such problems in your organization:

Explain yourself if you're in a hurry. If you sound rushed and distracted, people may think you're uninterested. When you're in a rush, explain that you're busy with something now but do want to talk and will get in contact later.

Clarify assumptions. Often breakdowns occur because someone has false assumptions. For example, a boss or co-worker assumes you'll be

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taking on a particular responsibility, but you understand it differently. Check assumptions by confirming your expectations in conversations, memos, or e-mails.

Encourage questions. Sometimes people don't ask for clarification because they're shy or fear they'll appear stupid. Or perhaps they don't want to admit they weren't listening. The approach to use here is to make people feel comfortable and safe to ask questions. Another tip is to invite someone to provide a brief recap of what you just said. Conversely, if you're unclear about something, ask. Or try feeding back what you do understand and invite the other person to clarify any misconceptions. ■

Your Communications Checklist

Brush up your communication skills with these *Nonprofit World* articles (www.snpo.org/members):

- **How Jargon Undermines Communication** (Vol. 27, No. 2)
- **11 Communication Keys that Will Change the Way You Lead** (Vol. 14, No. 2)
- **Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication** (Vol. 24, No. 6)
- **How Do Effective Nonprofit Leaders Communicate?** (Vol. 13, No. 1)
- **Eight Steps to Managing Conflict** (Vol. 20, No. 4)
- **Face to Face** (Vol. 14, No. 1)
- **Be a Better Leader by Becoming a Better Listener** (Vol. 28, No. 2)

Invite someone to provide a brief recap of what you just said.

Sometimes people don't want to admit they weren't listening.

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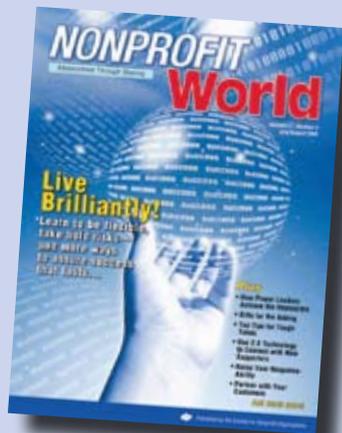
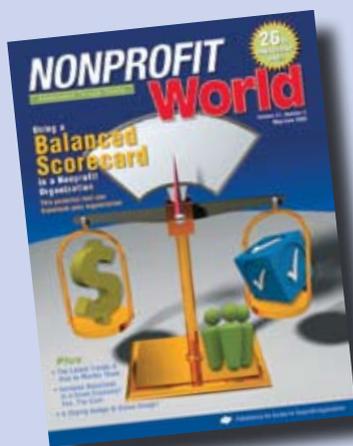
Make people feel comfortable and safe to ask questions.

What's Your Communication Survival Quotient? A Self-Assessment Quiz

Give yourself 0-10 points for each statement (0 = never, 10 = always).

- ___ When someone is speaking, I actively engage my mind so I can fully listen.
- ___ I'm aware of people's differences in personality, values, interests, and cultures, and I adapt the way I relate to them accordingly.
- ___ I avoid jargon and communicate clearly and concisely.
- ___ When other people are being difficult, I try to understand them so I can better communicate with them and work out problems.
- ___ I'm open and honest, which includes admitting my mistakes.
- ___ When a message is truly important, I deliver it by speaking face-to-face.
- ___ I make it a point to listen to what others say, and I ask for clarification to be sure I understand.
- ___ I say what I mean and check that others have gotten my message.
- ___ I look for the facts and seek to understand what's going on before I decide how to take action in a conflict.
- ___ I know nobody's perfect, and I have answered the previous questions as honestly as I can.
- ___ TOTAL SCORE

The Rating System: **90+** = Are you sure? You could be cheating or delusional. If not, great job! **80-89** = You are a superb relationship builder and great to work with. **70-79** = You can expect problems but will usually recover and pull through. **60-69** = Consider reading some books and articles on communication skills. **40-59** = Seek help as soon as possible. **0-39** = Your survival chances are slim to none unless you make some quick corrections now.



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