



Anchors, Signposts, Echoes, & Loops: Four Essential Tools to Make Messages Stickier

Use these clever aids to make sure people hear and remember what you say.

By Kate Zabriskie

Too often, you may think others understand what you're saying when, in truth, they've misheard, drawn incorrect conclusions, taken mental vacations to the Bahamas, or worse.

Fortunately, fixing those problems isn't as tough as it may initially seem. There are four tools that, when used consistently, will improve the clarity and stickiness of a message. These four devices help people hear key messages and recall them later.

Anchors

Anchors ground people. They include such aids as agendas, navigation slides, page number references, and instructions to focus attention on something specific – for example, a line on a spreadsheet.

"We have five topics to discuss today. We'll begin with an update from marketing. John, the stage is yours."

"We're looking at the table on the top of page 23. Let me draw your eyes to the second line."

"We're moving to part three on our agenda, the annual budget. We're on slide 34."

“Signposts are clues about what's coming.”

When a meeting, training class, or presentation goes virtual, anchors become more important. With a virtual audience, the question usually isn't *whether* people will get distracted, it's *when*. Solid use of anchors can help those who have checked out check back in with greater ease.

Signposts

"Mark, what do you think about that? Mark, are you with us? Mark?"

Poor Mark. If he'd known a question was coming his way, chances are he'd be alert and ready to answer. The facilitator could have used a signpost and solved this problem before it happened. Signposts are clues about what's coming.

"Mark, I'm going to talk to the numbers on this next slide, and then I'd like you to weigh in." When people know they're

next on deck, they're better focused and more likely to say something of value.

Answer stacking is another way to signpost. For example:

"I see three hands. Let's hear from Keisha, Charles, and then Eduardo."

When you "stack" people in order, it's less likely that they'll talk over each other.

In addition to using signposts to warn people and stack answers, you should signpost when people need to do something now to be successful later.

"I'm going to call out a few places where you'll want to take some notes as I talk through this next slide. You'll need them when we break into small group discussions."

Anyone who has ever facilitated a room full of confused people attempting group work knows how much fun that isn't. Careful signposting can reduce the problem or even eliminate it.

Echos

Echos are a second chance to hear a message. You can echo using the same channel or a different one. You can repeat important sentences verbally. You might also have a slide or two that echoes what you've said. For example, an instruction slide you show after you've explained an activity can go a long way toward ensuring people understand a task.

If you're working virtually, you can use the chat to echo. When you ask a question, do so verbally, and then type it in the chat. Typing the question gives you something to do while you're waiting for responses. The typed question also gives people another chance to process what you've asked.

Guided notes are another way to create echos.

"You might want to make a note of this next point."

Even if they're not regular note takers, most people will take notes if you make room for note taking and suggest what they should write.

Loops

While echos reinforce what's communicated in the short term, loops call back to earlier points. Loops remind people about what they've heard, seen, or learned. A few loops through the same content can dramatically reinforce its stickiness.

“Loops remind people about what they've heard, seen, or learned.”

“Echos are a second chance to hear a message.”


"As Bob pointed out earlier, we don't have an aggressive risk appetite for this project."

"Let's revisit what Cara shared this morning and confirm we're still on the same page."

"We've reviewed the turnover numbers, we've identified some root causes, now it's time to map out a plan and a timeline for addressing the problem."

When used in conjunction with anchors, loops keep people on the same page.

Make it a habit

Whether you're speaking at a conference, running a workshop, conducting a meeting, or having an important conversation, remember the four tools that improve stickiness. Anchors, signposts, echos, and loops will go a long way toward making the experience memorable. At first, use these devices deliberately. Over time, they'll become second nature. 

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Your Communication Checklist

Assure that people understand and remember your messages, using the tips in these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

The Weight of Words in the Workplace (Vol. 42, No. 2)

Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication (Vol. 24, No. 6)

Seven Kinds of Listeners & How to Approach Them (Vol. 39, No. 2)

Powerful New Communication Tools for Your Meetings: Engaging Both Sides of the Brain (Vol. 26, No. 3)

Are Your Messages Repeatable & Retweetable? (Vol. 42, No. 1)

Assess Your Work Style for Better Communication (Vol. 37, No. 4)

Not Connecting with All Your Audiences? Maybe You're Not Speaking Their Language (Vol. 39, No. 1)

How to Fix Communication Breakdowns (Vol. 29, No. 1)