

# Get to the Point

## *Exercising Your Communication Skills*

Communication is a large part of any job and IT Asset Management is no exception. IT assets are important to almost everyone in an organization, requiring IT Asset Managers to have a broad repertoire of communication skills.

Communication is required to define, manage, enforce, cajole, educate and problem solve across hierarchy levels, departments and locations. Communication is paramount to overall success.

Business professionals like IT Asset Managers typically have natural ability, training and experience as the basis of their communication skills. However, continuing education, webinars and professional conferences rarely focus on it as a topic. The simple explanation is that everyone thinks that they communicate well. They understand how to run a meeting, give a presentation and develop a communication plan for a project. It is a rare individual that analyzes their communication skills, tries new techniques, or is open to revisiting the basics as a refresher.

### **Communication Errors are Easy to Make**

I had a couple of great reminders earlier in my career to awaken my own interest in continued analysis and improvement of communication skills. As a technical support manager at a software company, I gave frequent presentations to a variety of technical audiences. I became known as “Bullet Queen” because my slides were filled with bulleted lists. There was plenty of information on each slide, but some of the audience never seemed to get the message. I wasn’t reaching visual learners who learn best from graphics, resulting in dislike for the new system that I was rolling out. With a few changes to my slides to include different approaches to the presentation of information, fear and doubt about the new system disappeared.

When I was promoted out of the technical ranks to a corporate level position, my brainstorming methodology for problem-solving didn’t work for the contracts management team. With the technical team, I had successfully encouraged spouting ideas regardless of perceived value. Some of the best solutions developed from a silly or unworkable comment because it inspired a different line of thinking. When the meeting was over, everyone was part owner of the solution and not the remarks made during the session.

In contrast, the contracts management team treated every utterance as a position statement. Remarks were restricted to the individual’s conclusions on the best course of action or the

problems with someone else’s position. Brainstorming sessions were the wrong choice for solution development with this audience. I substituted a point by point analysis approach of choices that were identified prior to the meeting. This approach was productive, developing a cohesive and comprehensive solution.

### **Step 1: A Fresh Look at Communication**

If you are open to examining how you communicate, the very least result will be an increased awareness of your own communication styles and that of others. Alternatively, you may uncover new things to try or break a bad habit that is limiting your success.

The best way to get started is to conduct a self-analysis during common work events to gain a fresh perspective on your own SOPs (standard operating procedures). If you are unsure how to analyze communication effectively, consider first how you create an atmosphere of open communication in order to:

- Build common ground
- Gain buy-in
- Inform
- Educate
- Allow and/or defuse dissension
- Create agreement

These tasks are goals to be accomplished through communication. You may wish to augment the list; the list above is based on the common requirements for a status meeting. Grouping your personal analysis by event (such as status meeting, email, presentation, etc.) keeps the exercise focused and practical. Evaluate your communication performance after an event or keep a past experience and audience in mind when you evaluate yourself.

### **Step 2: Gather New Ideas**

Coming up with new strategies to enhance our communication is easy. Everyone has their favorite piece of advice to share. Here is a list of some of the remarks I have read about communication during meetings:

- Run the conversation, don’t just let it happen



### Step 3: Put them into Action

Depending on the results of your own analysis, use your project planning skills to develop a communication improvement plan. The plan may be as simple as a list of new techniques to try, reorganization of how information is presented, or attempting new communication tactics for a specific situation. However, if the delivery of ideas through speech or writing are below your desired ability, it may be necessary to take classes or join a speech organization such as Toastmasters International. I highly recommend Toastmasters as an easily accessible option if you wish to increase your ability to

- Send out an agenda in advance that looks like a mission statement
- If you ask for ideas, don't say no to all of them or the ideas will stop
- Keep communication on topic
- Be aware of what is not communicated
- Restatement can be a great way to keep control over emotional or complex topics

In addition to anecdotal advice, many good ideas can be found in business or communication books. For instance, Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die by Chip Heath and Dan Heath is a book full of ideas about effective communication. According to the authors, ideas “stick” based on the key principles of simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, emotions and stories. Adapting story-telling techniques to the work setting is a common theme in communications and business literature and is a good source of new ideas. For instance, I have adapted the way I present in webinars to follow the outline of a story, insuring a flow of information that follows the listener’s expectations.

In the book A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future, Daniel Pink addresses the changes of our digital age, placing emphasis on design for communicating the story. I feel justified in removing bullets from my slides and exercising the right brain to develop charts and other graphical representations!

give speeches, improve your listening capabilities, and assume a leadership role. A Toastmasters International Club was instrumental in helping me win my first promotion into a management position and I use the skills I learned there every day.

There is no substitute for practice. A presenter who gives a speech once per year is not going to be comfortable at the podium. Without practice, old habits return and your efforts to improve will be lost. Also, busy professional people can easily become immersed in the message and not how they are delivering that message. Think of the project that failed due to lack of communication. I’m sure hundreds of emails were sent out which went unread.

As a final note, consider the amount of energy you put into communication. Put yourself in the audience and think about the speakers that you have enjoyed. Is it the information in the presentation or the energy with which they presented that really made the difference? In a meeting, have you found the energy level catching? Generating enthusiasm for a project can be the difference between failure and success. Communicating effectively includes sharing yourself with the audience, especially enthusiasm and the enjoyment of working together.

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