

Does Better Technology = Better Communication? *Not Necessarily: Author*

Our smartphones, tablets, and other devices are technological marvels, but unfortunately, they've diverted our attention away from what people can accomplish in conversations. Geoffrey Tumlin shares five unrealistic expectations we have for how our digital devices boost communication and provides advice to help us improve our communication with each other.

Advertisements promise that the latest smartphones, tablets, laptops, and other gadgets will put blazing speed at our fingertips, enable us to multi-task like an octopus, and ensure that we never miss a thing. Because new technology promises — and does — a lot for us, it's no surprise that we've fallen in love with it.

But in our enthusiasm for our new digital communication tools, we've lost sight of the people behind the tools. It's time to turn that around. And to do so, Geoffrey Tumlin offers an important reality check. He says our devices are great, but they can't do quite as much as we think they can. And in fact, when it comes to communication, *people* can do much better.

"A tech-centered view of communication encourages us to expect too much from our devices and too little from each other," says Tumlin, author of the book *Stop Talking, Start Communicating: Counterintuitive Secrets to Success in Business and in Life* (McGraw-Hill, www.tumlin.com).

"Until we restore a more people-centered approach, we will continue to feel unsatisfied and largely unfulfilled by our interactions — despite having the most powerful connection and transmission devices in human history in the palms of our hands.

"In truth, because of the incredible opportunities our devices offer for connecting with others, today really could begin a golden age of communication," Tumlin adds. "But that will happen only if we stop romanticizing the technology and start improving our communication. We need to lower our hopes for our 'smart' devices and raise our expectations of each other."

That's where *Stop Talking, Start Communicating* comes in. Full of counterintuitive yet concrete advice, it draws on Tumlin's research background and experience as a communication consultant to show EA professionals, other workshop leaders, managers and employees how to:

- Develop productive communication habits;
- Improve conversations; and to
- Use these powerful digital devices to bring us closer to higher-order aspirations.

Unrealistic Expectations

In this training Tumlin shares five unrealistic expectations that have emerged during the long honeymoon of the digital communication revolution and outlines what we need to do to correct them:

❖ **Unrealistic expectation #1:** *Our devices have made communication easier.*

Just because our new devices enable us to reach out and touch someone with a few simple clicks, that doesn't mean that communication itself has gotten any easier.

"We are caught up in the excitement of the digital revolution," asserts Tumlin. "We've been lulled into believing that communication is becoming easier because technological advances make it easier to send and receive messages. But

because our interactions involve quirky, emotional, and sometimes unpredictable people, we can't eliminate imperfections from communication. Communication is fundamentally imperfect, and no matter how fancy our devices may become, they'll never be able to eliminate the misunderstandings, the confusion, and the errors that occur when people talk.

"Some communication is just plain hard," he adds. "Like, when we have to communicate bad news, tackle a sensitive topic, or have a conversation to address a difficult problem. So yes, it's easier to send and receive messages today, but it's important to remember that communication is as hard, and may be even harder, than it ever was."

❖ **Unrealistic expectation #2:** *We successfully communicate each time we hit the "Send" button.*

Our devices have greatly simplified the sending and receiving of messages, but there's more to communication than that. Communication doesn't occur until the other person understands our message, and that's become the missing link in far too many conversations.

"If you think about how we communicate today," says Tumlin, "you'll realize that we approach the majority of our exchanges with expediency in mind. We want to plow through our inboxes, respond to new text or voice messages as soon as they come in, and get face-to-face conversations over quickly so we can move on to the next thing. The communication tasks that pile up every day make it awfully tempting to fire off quick messages or speak abruptly and think that our work is done.

"But adding an extra step — considering whether or not your message is *understood* — can make you a much more effective communicator," he adds. "The glut of messages we process on any given day encourages us to think of communication as something we do mechanically, when, in fact, communication is how we make our life. Smart communicators slow down when forming a message and consider whether or not the other person is likely to understand

what they're communicating. Without understanding, there's no communication."

❖ **Unrealistic expectation #3:** *Better communication technologies mean better communication.*

Better communication technology doesn't lead to better communication, especially when the new tools encourage speed and convenience over thoughtfulness and deliberation, and when they fragment our communication, scatter our attention, and constantly distract us from the issues at hand.

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"It's ironic that tools designed to improve communication have all too often degraded it instead," says Tumlin. "My smartphone distracts me ten times more often than any 'dumb' phone ever did, and I got a lot more work done when the mail came only once a day. Our daily challenge is to channel the power of our communication devices without being buried by it.

"Our technical capabilities have raced ahead of our actual abilities," he notes. "Smarter phones don't guarantee smarter communicators. Better communication happens only when our communication skills improve."

❖ **Unrealistic expectation #4:** *What I want to say is the most important part of communication.*

With the promise of instant communication whenever we want it and however we want it, self-expression seems to be the king of the Internet age. But meaningful and effective communication is possible only when we consistently place our conversational goals ahead of our conversational impulses.

“What separates average communicators from great ones is that the very best communicators don’t let what they want to say trump what they want to accomplish,” says Tumlin. “The hardest thing in the world is to not say the witty comeback on the tip of our tongues and to restrain ourselves from saying something obviously counterproductive — but immediately gratifying — when a conversation frustrates us.

“Technology has encouraged communication on our terms and led to an explosion of self-expressive, me-first messages. These same messages, unfortunately, are also the ones that torpedo our conversational goals. What you want to say is never more important than what you want to accomplish. That’s a lesson that smart communicators never forget.”

❖ **Unrealistic expectation #5:** *Communicating to an audience doesn’t require any special consideration.*

One of the greatest deceptions of the digital age is that sending a message to dozens of people is just as easy as sending a message to one person. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Having a conversation with your boss is different from addressing the entire staff. A discussion with one friend is different from a discussion with 100 friends. But because all we have to do is click to send an email to all of our contacts or to post a social media message for the world to see, we’ve concluded, incorrectly, that adding people to a message doesn’t require any additional thought or consideration.

“The problem with this thinking,” says Tumlin, “is that communication gets much more difficult as

you increase the number of people. More people mean more perspectives to consider. When we fail to account for these additional viewpoints, we run the risk of talking, texting, or typing right past each other, or worse, upsetting someone with a thoughtless message or a hasty reply.

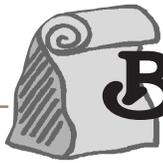
“It’s not practical to think through every possible perspective before posting to Facebook or sending a group email,” he adds. “But we should take the extra step to consider key viewpoints and ask questions like ‘*What’s Uncle Billy going to think about this post?*’ or ‘*I wonder how this email is going to come across to the accounting department?*’ Adding people complicates communication, and when we forget that lesson, conversational trouble is never far behind.”

Summary

“The digital communication revolution has encouraged us to expect way too much from our digital devices and far too little from each other,” says Tumlin. “Our devices can’t handle anywhere near the amount of interpersonal nuance and complexity that human interaction entails. Consciously or not, we’ve quickly downshifted our expectations for our interpersonal conversations and focused too much on our devices. But the good news is that if we recalibrate our expectations, we’ll be in a much better position to take advantage of the unprecedented opportunities for meaningful connection during the digital age.

“We’ve never had so many ways to reach out and connect with each other,” he concludes. “If we put people back at the center of our conversations, this really *could* be the golden age of communication.” ■

Geoffrey Tumlin is the author of “Stop Talking, Start Communicating: Counterintuitive Secrets to Success in Business and in Life.” He is the founder and CEO of Mouthpeace Consulting LLC, a communication consulting company; president of On-Demand Leadership, a leadership development company; and founder and board chair of Critical Skills Nonprofit, a 501(c)(3) public charity dedicated to providing communication and leadership skills training to chronically underserved populations. You can learn more about Geoffrey Tumlin at www.tumlin.com, or reach him by email at geoff@tumlin.com.



How do Your Colleagues & Customers Communicate? *Get to Know the Different Styles of Communication*

Relying *less* on our devices to communicate and *more* on listening and truly communicating with each other includes having a basic understanding of the different styles of communication. Regardless of whether it's with your employer, co-worker or client, getting to know these different styles will help your communication:

❖ **The Analyzer**

Traits: These individuals are meticulous, introverted and task-oriented. They could be considered perfectionists.

Strengths: Detail-oriented, problem solvers, provide team with reality check.

Weaknesses: "Tunnel vision" on projects and look for the perfect solution.

To effectively communicate with an Analyzer:

- Be organized.
- Be logical. Support your position using facts.
- Make sure that each point is understood before proceeding to the next one.
- Recognize that Analyzers are motivated by quality and data.

❖ **The Aggressor-Asserter**

Traits: These individuals are competitive, goal-oriented, and fast-paced. To these people, time is money and money is time.

Strengths: Offering focus and making quick decisions.

Weaknesses: Overstepping their assignments, taking over tasks that have been assigned to others just to get them done.

To effectively communicate with an Aggressor-Asserter:

- Be brief, direct and concise.
- Provide options.

- Avoid providing lots of details.
- Focus on results and return on investment.

❖ **The Socializer**

Traits: Charismatic, enthusiastic, lively, people-oriented.

Strengths: Visual, creative, great motivators.

Weaknesses: They do not keep track of time well; enjoy being the center of attention.

To effectively communicate with a Socializer:

- Allow time for social interaction.
- Put details in writing or email.
- Have a fast pace, positive approach.
- Use a whiteboard in your discussions. (Socializers are quite visual.)

❖ **The Mediator**

Traits: Calm, level-headed, great listeners, introverted. They make decisions in a consensus manner.

Strengths: Hard-working and humble. They make great trainers and mentors due to their calming and supportive nature.

Weaknesses: They dislike conflict so they will internalize it and tolerate it. They are hesitant in their approach, which slows decisions. They are going to try to keep everyone happy.

To effectively communicate with a Mediator:

- Be patient and logical.
- Praise them, but do so privately.
- Allow time for ideas to "simmer." You will not get a quick answer.
- Use a steady, low-key approach. ■

Source: Ted Gorski, a Professional Certified Coach and President of Get Your Edge, LLC.