

Second Edition



BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Rethinking your professional
practice for the post-digital age

Peter Hartley and Peter Chatterton



Business Communication

Second edition

Effective communication in business and commercial organisations is critical, as organisations have to become more competitive and effective to sustain commercial success.

This thoroughly revamped new edition distils the principles of effective communication and applies them to organisations operating in the digital world. Techniques and processes detailed in the book include planning and preparing written communication, effective structures in documents, diverse writing styles, managing face-to-face interactions, using visual aids, delivering presentations and organising effective meetings. In every case the authors consider the potential of new technology to improve and support communication.

With helpful pedagogical features designed to aid international students, this new edition of a popular text will continue to aid business and management students for years to come.

Peter Hartley is an independent consultant and visiting professor at Edge Hill University, UK.

Peter Chatterton is an independent consultant and academic who works with universities, government departments/agencies and businesses on programmes of innovation and change.



A range of further resources for this book is available at
www.routledge.com/cw/9780415640282

Much more than a book, this is an interactive guide to allow you not only to enhance your practice as a communicator in the digital age, it also enables you to assess the impact that new communication technologies, such as videoconferencing and texting, can have on your organisation and its culture. As such, it opens up a whole set of new possibilities for all leaders to update and improve their effectiveness in an increasingly crucial area.

*Phil Radcliff, Associate Fellow,
Henley Business School, UK*

The authors successfully provide practical ideas and advice on improving business communications, emphasising the importance of context in an environment of rapid technological change. Its structure and content reflect a deep understanding of communications and of the potential of 'new' technologies. It will be of great benefit to multiple audiences seeking to develop their careers.

*Peter Bullen, Emeritus Professor,
University of Hertfordshire, UK*

I am responsible at the institution I work at for internal communications. Our staff and students say they receive too much communication but then say they don't know about anything. Fundamentally different approaches to getting key information across are needed and this book provides much food for thought that I believe will help in developing practical solutions to making communication in the business context more effective.

*Gunter Saunders, Professor,
The University of Westminster, UK*



Business Communication

Rethinking your
professional practice for
the post-digital age

Second edition

**Peter Hartley and
Peter Chatterton**

First published 2001
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Second edition published 2015

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2015 Peter Hartley and Peter Chatterton

The right of Peter Hartley and Peter Chatterton to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Business communication: rethinking your professional practice for the post-digital age/Peter Hartley and Peter Chatterton. – 2nd Edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Business communication. I. Chatterton, Peter. II. Title.

HF5718.H2915 2015

658.4'5 – dc23

2014029430

ISBN: 978-0-415-64027-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-64028-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-08284-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Perpetua and Bell Gothic
by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK

*This book is dedicated to
the memory of Clive Bruckmann
who co-authored the first edition
of this book.*

This page intentionally left blank



Contents

List of figures	ix
List of tables	x
List of boxes	xii
Acknowledgements	xiv
Introduction	1
1 Developing your communication: deciding where to start	13
2 How should we analyse communication?	36
3 What does communication mean?	54
4 How is communication affected by the organisational context?	72
5 How should we plan and organise professional and business writing?	98
6 What is an effective writing style?	121
7 Effective design and visual aids	139
8 What makes documents effective?	165
9 What is effective interpersonal communication?	189
10 How do interpersonal skills work in practice?	212
11 How can we organise effective meetings?	231
12 How can we plan and deliver effective presentations?	249
13 How can we build effective teams?	265
14 Change, communication and future-gazing	287
References	310
Index	321

This page intentionally left blank



Figures

1.1	Objectives, goals and activities	17
1.2	Revised model of objectives, goals and activities	18
1.3	Using Kaizen in this chapter	21
1.4	Overall model of digital literacy	30
1.5	Detailed model of digital literacy	31
2.1	An integrated approach to analysing communication	40
4.1	Determinants of organisational culture	83
4.2	Simple organisation chart of a manufacturing company	84
4.3	Basic matrix structure of an organisation	87
5.1	Sharples's model of writing as creative design	100
5.2	Sections in a printed document	106
5.3	Pyramid example	111
5.4	Spider diagram	112
7.1	Comparing sales and profits in Departments A and B	151
7.2	Example of line graph	156
7.3	Example of bar chart	157
7.4	Line graph with label to suggest the important conclusion	157
7.5	Line graph with suppressed zero: the effect is to exaggerate the change	160
7.6	Line graph without suppressed zero	160
7.7	Sales data expressed as a chart	160
7.8	Sales data in 3-D cylinders: the effect is to exaggerate the differences	161
7.9	Fitting a line	161
7.10	Example of Wordle	162
8.1	The memo matrix	172
9.1	Hartley's model of interpersonal communication	191
9.2	Hargie's model of social skills	193
9.3	Styles of behaviour	200
11.1	Dimensions of meetings	234
14.1	The twenty-first century communicator	308



Tables

1.1	Key questions to build a causal map	16
1.2	The future of work	19
1.3	Useful objectives	22
1.4	Reviewing your objectives	23
1.5	Approaches to CPD	33
1.6	Taking advantage of new technology	34
3.1	Spoken vs. written language	61
3.2	Key concepts for new communications media	69
4.1	Components of organisational culture	75
4.2	Cultural and structural change at Microsoft	90
5.1	Stages of the writing process	99
5.2	Writing strategies	101
5.3	Characteristics of persuasive messages	109
5.4	Letter using structure which aims to persuade	118
6.1	Agreement on plain English	130
6.2	Feedback from grammar checker	134
7.1	Levels of heading	147
7.2	Sales data	150
7.3	Matching story to visuals	152
7.4	Different forms of visual aid	153
7.5	Simple table to summarise data	153
7.6	Table with simple formatting	153
7.7	Trend table which makes the reader do all the work	155
7.8	Trend table which tries to analyse the data	155
7.9	Trend table which highlights the key statistic	155
8.1	Simple techniques for saving paper	168
8.2	Engaging users	171
8.3	Audience analysis	175
8.4	Variations in report structure	177
8.5	Different report structures	178
9.1	Interpersonal communication as a staged process	209

10.1	The ladder of inference	217
10.2	The interview as planned communication	224
10.3	Stages in the selection interview	225
11.1	Tropman's seven categories of agenda items	237
11.2	Decision-making methods	245
11.3	Comparing face-to-face and virtual meetings	247
12.1	Planning a presentation	253
12.2	Different speaker styles	258
13.1	Tuckman's four-stage model of group development	269
13.2	Wheelan's model of group development	270
13.3	Working through Wheelan's stages of group development	270
13.4	Comparing leadership and management	274
13.5	Belbin's team roles	276



Boxes

1.1	Practical tips on goal-setting	20
1.2	Managing your digital identity: practical suggestions	27
1.3	Creating digital identity	28
1.4	How do you take notes?	32
3.1	A compilation of registers	58
3.2	'Text messages destroying our language'	62
3.3	Corporate-speak: new words or new actions?	68
4.1	Organisation culture from basic principles	76
4.2	The boss wants us to collaborate	77
4.3	The 'McDonaldization' thesis	79
4.4	When culture goes wrong	82
4.5	Communicating with stakeholders	85
4.6	Anyone for re-engineering?	88
4.7	Cultural and structural change at Microsoft	90
4.8	The computer is in charge: nothing can go wrong, go wrong, go wrong . . .	93
5.1	Are you a bricklayer or an oil painter?	101
5.2	Who is your 'model communicator'?	109
5.3	Are you using the 'right' word processor?	114
5.4	Structuring documents to assist 'cognitive ease'	116
6.1	Rules for effective writing	123
6.2	The politics of language style	128
6.3	This organisation has rules	129
6.4	Where plain English disrupted the organisation structure	131
6.5	Microsoft may not know what you mean!	133
6.6	Why doesn't my word processor know I'm English?	137
7.1	The PC is not a typewriter	141
7.2	Typefaces in action	145
7.3	Example of a grid design	149
7.4	Using Ehrenberg's principles	155
7.5	Using graphics: practical guidelines	159
8.1	Hitting the right note in an email	181

8.2	Swamped by email?	182
9.1	Different types of assertive behaviour	201
9.2	Attending to culture	204
9.3	Technologies in support of interpersonal communication	205
10.1	How important are the physical surroundings in the ways we communicate?	216
10.2	How to destroy a relationship in one easy sentence	218
10.3	Selection practices vary across cultures	221
10.4	Fair treatment or incompetent practice?	222
10.5	360-degree feedback	228
11.1	When Machiavelli comes to the meeting	235
11.2	And there's an app for it	239
11.3	Software for virtual meetings	246
12.1	Why don't the trainers agree?	251
12.2	Strategies for opening and closing	256
12.3	How to shoot your presentation in the foot in the first few minutes	259
13.1	How not to move to teams	267
13.2	Groups can develop differently	270
13.3	Diverse views of leadership	271
13.4	The leader as communicator	275
13.5	Belbin's recipe for success	277
13.6	Alternative recipes for group or team success	280
13.7	Multiple views of reality	282
14.1	Who do you consult about change?	290



Acknowledgements

FROM PETER HARTLEY

To Jasmine, Jenson and Jackson; to Alexander and Gregor; and to Phoebe – the next generation of communicators. Hopefully, they will all do it better than I ever could.

FROM PETER CHATTERTON

To Tim Berners-Lee for creating the World Wide Web that has given us so many new opportunities to support open communications – long may he succeed in his mission to keep the Internet open and neutral.

FROM BOTH OF US

We would like to thank *all* our former and current colleagues and students, too numerous to mention individually, who have inspired our thinking.

We thank the staff at Routledge for their considerable patience and unqualified support.



Introduction

Our book is designed to help you to reflect on and improve the way you communicate in modern business and professional settings.

We are confident it will help you if you can tick at least one of the following boxes:

- undergraduate or postgraduate student aiming for a career in business or a professional context;
- undergraduate or postgraduate student with ambitions to work for yourself and/or assemble a portfolio career;
- working in an organisation in the early stages of your career;
- have been working in organisations for some years and wanting to refresh your ideas on ‘good communication’;
- managing a team in an organisation;
- wondering how new technology is reshaping business communication and thinking about how you need to respond.

We have also developed a website to give you:

- updated comments and suggestions on the use of specific technologies for communication;
- further comments, links and sources for each chapter, organised under the same subheadings as this printed text;
- the opportunity to engage directly with us and with other readers.

Technology is changing so fast that no book can guarantee to be completely up to date. So make sure you check the website if you are following up specific ideas from the book.

DO WE NEED ANOTHER BOOK ON BUSINESS COMMUNICATION?

Yes, for five reasons:

- 1 *The increasing pace of change.* Although the bookshelves in many libraries are already groaning with the weight of existing texts, so much has changed in the last five years

that we do need fresh approaches *and* we need to make sure that established principles still apply. In terms of the ways we work as individuals, the most important changes have been in the social and economic climate and in the ways we use computer technology. Analysing the economic changes in detail is beyond the scope of this book but we will pay attention to the economic and social context in which organisations operate as this obviously influences their communication.

- 2 *The impact of new computer technology.* We will emphasise the potential of new technology – e.g. mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets – devices which now contain more processing power and memory than the desktop PCs which we used in our younger days. And these devices are enabling significant changes in our social and economic behaviour. But there are also significant differences in different parts of the world. For example, which country is widely acknowledged as the ‘world leader in high-tech mobile money’? Our answer is on the website.
- 3 *The need to review and revise basic principles.* There are some fundamental principles of communication which you will find in virtually every textbook on communication, but do these need refining or updating in the light of new technology? For example, we emphasise the notion of ‘audience’. This used to be easier to define – nowadays we need to consider that *anything* you say in public or at a meeting could be on the Internet in a matter of minutes thanks to Twitter. You *always* have to operate on the basis that you are talking to multiple audiences, as there will be particular subgroups in any audience, but now you also have to consider that some of these will not be in the room. As a speaker or workshop leader, this gives you both challenges and new opportunities. A number of organisations (and educational institutions) are now capitalising on this by using what is called the ‘back-channel’ to increase the dialogue between speakers and audience. This can be done using specialised systems such as the ‘clickers’ that are now used by many colleges and higher education institutions, but you can also use Internet systems such as Poll Everywhere, which allows anyone in the audience to contribute with a suitable laptop, tablet or mobile phone. Or you can take advantage of the fact that most if not all of your audience in the room will have access to Twitter or other chat media.
- 4 *Information and communication overload.* The notion of information overload is not new but the growth of new communication channels has made this problem much more serious.
- 5 *Online media are not the ‘answer to everything’.* The marketing and retailing of books has changed significantly over the last few years and all publishers are having to review their online presence and activity. We did consider moving this text to online media. In the end, we decided on a combination of book plus online support. This combination still offers some advantages in terms of flexibility and access, although we may not be able to say that with quite the same conviction in a few years’ time. Experts and forecasters agree that ebooks will expand significantly but differ on how much and/or the different rates of expansion across the globe.

OUR AIMS

We will offer you suggestions and techniques to improve the way you communicate.

Communication is complex and always affected by the social context so we *cannot* offer you a definitive approach which will always work (beware any books or courses which do offer this!). We can offer you approaches and techniques which will increase your chances of success.

We will analyse how people communicate within business and professional organisations, and how this communication is changing. We focus on commercial organisations but the main ideas and principles also apply to non-commercial and voluntary sectors, and to small, medium and large enterprises (SMEs).

We focus on communication by individuals and groups within and across the organisation and do not say much about external communication (advertising, public relations, etc.). However, all the principles we discuss can be applied to both internal and external communication. For example, we emphasise the importance of understanding how different audiences may have very different perspectives on the same message; we emphasise the importance of clear language; and we emphasise the importance of careful planning and a clear strategy in formal communication.

WHY 'RETHINKING' BUSINESS COMMUNICATION?

The business world has changed dramatically since we wrote the first version of this book, back in 2000. Apart from the global economic crisis, advances in technology have brought fundamental change in the ways we live and work. Consider the following headlines which we paraphrased from radio and news broadcasts over a couple of days in spring 2014 – none of these headlines would have made sense to early readers of our first edition and most would have probably created confusion only five years ago:

- Man turns experience in social tweeting into professional career.
- Crowd-sourced maps save lives in crisis situations.
- Google offers 'right to forget' form.
- Are 3D printed houses the future?
- How WhatsApp beat Facebook.

All of these stories have important implications for business and professional communication and activity. How many did you recognise? See the website for further details of these stories and their background.

Among the most important trends are the following.

The growth of mobile computing

Industrial experts in 2012 forecasted that Internet traffic would 'grow four-fold over the next four years' with this dramatic expansion fuelled by the growth of mobile computing. Many people in business can and do now work virtually anywhere, given a laptop and an

Internet connection. This means that they can also be contacted through email or text at any time, day or night. And this is having significant impact on office structures and facilities, leading to the claim that younger generations of business workers do not attach the same status or importance to individual office spaces as previous generations.

The rise of social media

Many business organisations are now taking social media like Facebook and Twitter very seriously as they recognise opportunities for new relationships with their customers and their staff. An indication of this change is recent trends in television advertising, especially around major holidays – the focus is not to sell products directly as in previous years but to persuade the audience to go to the relevant website where the ‘real’ promotion of the product is located. The growing sales of televisions with built-in Internet connections is likely to force further changes in approaches to advertising. This is an example of what has been called the ‘Internet of things’ where Internet connections are built into devices to enable data communications and new facilities.

The growth of social media has also seen a corresponding growth in people’s willingness to share much of their lives online. Does this mean that we have to modify our approach to personal relationships?

But not everything has changed

While we have experienced dramatic change, we must also consider important principles which have not changed. To start the debate on this, we will revisit two examples which we used in 2000:

- In a business speech, Gerald Ratner described some of his company’s cheaper jewellery products as ‘crap’ and suggested that others would not last as long as a supermarket sandwich. He did not anticipate reports in the national press the following day. Although the immediate effect on sales was actually positive – customers went looking for cheap bargains – the publicity had created an image which the company could not counteract when the economy dipped – people did not want to buy gifts from a store which now had a reputation for ‘cheap rubbish’. Within months, the sales had slumped and the company never recovered. The irony was that Ratner had used these remarks before in speeches and had been quoted in the financial press, but this time the comments made the front pages in the popular papers. As he later reflected: ‘Because of one ill-judged joke, 25,000 people lost their jobs’ (quoted in *Tibballs*, 1999, p. 192).

In the next few years, the phrase ‘doing a Ratner’ became a popular description of a chief executive or senior manager making an ill-judged comment with damaging consequences, and other examples were publicised. Ratner did manage to ‘rise again’ through a new company and you will find him on YouTube commenting on his experience and publicising his book on the subject. Needless to say, he now has a website and Facebook page.

- The British railway company claimed that many trains were having trouble in winter with the ‘type of snow’ falling at the time (1991). This was technically true – the weather conditions were very unusual. This became a newspaper headline – ‘British Rail blames the wrong type of snow’ – and this phrase stuck in the media and public consciousness. The company should have realised that this sort of explanation would not be taken seriously by a public already critical of the railways’ poor punctuality and reliability.

Moving on to the present day – this phrase is still used and recognised in the UK as the classic example of a lame excuse.

These examples show the importance of communication and its long-lasting impact. They both show the impact of a careless analogy on public perceptions of image and reputation. They still work as examples of important communication problems and they illustrate important principles of communication, which are independent of technological change, for example:

- If your message can be captured or summarised in a memorable phrase, then this may ‘stick’ with your audience for a long time.
- Messages tend to be simplified and generalised as they are passed on – Ratner made his ‘crap’ comment about only one of his brands but his other brands also suffered the same fate by association in the following years.
- Messages are always interpreted in context, as illustrated by the changing reactions to Ratner’s description and the general dismissal of the ‘wrong snow’ explanation.

If these events had happened today rather than over 15 years ago, we argue that the overall impact and damage to reputation would be similarly memorable. However, it would happen much quicker and initially it would happen through new media. Ratner’s quotes and messages would be on the Internet thanks to Twitter and blogging while he was talking, never mind the next day. And he would not have had the luxury to repeat his remarks and go unnoticed. The same would have happened with the railway example and we would doubtless be able to enjoy YouTube videos of both Ratner and the railway spokesperson as they unwittingly put foot to mouth.

Recent examples which illustrate the power and speed of the new media include:

- The ‘business communicator of the year’ who agreed to return her award after some rather ill-tempered emails she had written were posted online by disgruntled receivers and went viral.
- The university tutor who included a political comment in an email to her class about the postponement of a class and found herself featured on national media and her career under threat. One of the students took offence and used social media to publicise her complaint.
- The New York Police Department set up a Twitter hashtag to ‘communicate effectively with the community’ and invited the public to post photos and examples. This attempt to highlight good practice rebounded when hundreds of examples of police brutality were posted and received national/international publicity.

We said in 2000 that the boundaries between internal and external communication are sometimes difficult to draw and they are obviously related. This is even more complex today. For example, we have both taught in higher education institutions for many years. Thanks to examples such as the bullet points above, we are now very conscious that *anything* we say and do in the classroom could be available for public inspection at any time, thanks to the capability of the modern student's mobile phone and their fluency on text/Twitter, etc. There are some recent cases of serious misuse of these media, as in some examples of staff being bullied online by certain students. While the new media have offered major advantages, they have also offered new opportunities for negative and abusive behaviour.

We also said in 2000 that the most important external communicators in any company are the employees, as they determine the company image in their interactions with customers. This is still true. We focus on these communicators as they work *within and across* their organisation.

So we are not concentrating on what has become known as 'corporate communication', where the main responsibilities for managers include strategic planning, managing company identity and public relations. This perspective tends to concentrate on communications management. We shall obviously refer to these issues but we are concentrating on communication as a process, which *all* employees of an organisation participate in.

COMMUNICATION WORKING WELL?

If good communication is important and can offer tangible benefits, why can we find so many examples where it does not seem to work effectively? Why do so many organisations seem to ignore the research into the practice of leading companies which have a reputation for effective communication?

When we wrote in 2000, we suggested that research consistently highlights factors listed below (based on research summarised by Tourish, 1997, and by Robbins, 1998, pp. 325 ff.).

Management commitment

Senior management must be committed to the importance of communication and must act accordingly. Robbins regarded this as *the* most significant factor: if the senior executive is able and willing to communicate their vision of the organisation and regularly communicates face-to-face with employees, then this will set the expected standard for other managers. Of course, these other levels of management must also share this commitment. Managers must also act in ways which *confirm* their communication and those who proclaim an 'open door' policy to their staff need to make themselves available on a regular basis. This commitment by management must also extend to training. Communication training is given a high priority and is well supported.

Two-way communication

There must be an effective balance between downward and upward communication. Tourish highlighted the importance of regular surveys of employee opinion, which must then lead to action plans and visible results.

Face-to-face communication

Wherever possible, communication is delivered face-to-face. This obviously allows for immediate feedback and discussion.

Messages are well-structured to meet the audience's needs

Management recognise what information their employees need to know and make sure that they receive it in the most appropriate form.

New technology is used to speed up communication

Many companies have made an enormous investment in new technology, which enables them to spread messages very quickly across dispersed sites and offices.

Are these factors still the key ones?

More recent research comes up with similar recipes but would highlight the significance of new technology to both enable and influence the impact of communication. And there is a key development in terms of the degree of interactivity available. Above, we gave a survey as an example of two-way communication, but this has strict boundaries (not least that you can't see other people's responses). Social media allows a much greater degree of two-way/multiple-way communication and this presents challenges to organisations.

Throughout this book we invite you to apply our ideas to your own situation. An obvious exercise arising here is to consider how many of the principles above apply to your organisation, and to what extent. For example, what evidence do you have that your senior management are committed to fostering communication? If not, then what effect does this have on the rest of the organisation?

Organisations may ignore communication because it is time-consuming and sometimes difficult, especially when the organisation is going through a bad time. Again, an example we used in 2000 is still depressingly topical. One of the major British retail chains was responding to a significant drop in profits by dramatic cost-cutting and management redundancies. Staff were quoted as 'furious' at the 'insensitive manner' in which this was done and the process was described by one as 'barbaric'. Assuming that this press coverage was fair comment, what effect would this have on the long-term development of relationships and communication in that company? What if the press coverage was not representative of general staff feelings? Does the company have effective internal communication which could counteract the public criticism?

Although communication is important, we must always recognise that it is not a universal cure. We cannot turn a message about redundancy into good news by changing the words or tone. However, organisations *should* respect their employees and treat them fairly and honestly – communication can either support or destroy these obligations. We shall explore these issues on several occasions.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION – USING EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH

In this book, we try to show how communication can ‘work’, not just by analysing what happens when people communicate within organisations but also by suggesting techniques and strategies which can make communication more effective. This does make two important assumptions:

- that we know enough about what happens in different types of organisations;
- that techniques and strategies which work in one situation can be applied equally well in others.

Both of these assumptions can be questioned. We have tried wherever possible to back up our claims with research evidence, but there is not enough research on everyday events in organisations. Some important processes do seem to be under-researched. For example, it has been suggested that ‘the research literature does not adequately explore the shaping role of political behaviour in organizational change’ (Buchanan and Badham, 2008, p. xviii) and this is still true. This has important implications for communication – the success or failure of a proposal at a business meeting may depend more on political manoeuvring than on how clearly the proposal is expressed.

There are also problems with the balance of research in some areas. For example, Steve Duck (2007) suggests that researchers have been less willing to look at the negative side of (personal) relationships and that we need to know much more about the impact of events such as deception, hurtful messages, gossip, boring communication, and so on. On a broader scale, we can find much more research on large organisations in Western cultures than on, say, small businesses in Asian cultures. These imbalances make it difficult to generalise. The problem of generalisation also applies to techniques and strategies.

Because of these limitations, you should approach all the recommendations in this book as *hypotheses* – as generalisations to be *tested* and not as absolute or binding truths. Even findings which are based on fairly substantial evidence are *never* 100 per cent reliable. For example, John Kirkman researched the reactions of scientists to papers which were rewritten using the plain language principles, and which we summarise and review later in this book. The scientists clearly preferred the rewritten examples, feeling that they were ‘more interesting’ and also that the author had a ‘better organised mind’. Although this positive reaction was strong, it was not universal – nearly 70 per cent agreed that the rewritten examples were better and 75 per cent agreed that the author was better organised (Turk and Kirkman, 1989, pp. 17ff.). In other words, a small but significant minority did *not* agree with the changes. To the best of our knowledge, this specific study has not been repeated, so we do not know how far these percentages may have changed.

So deciding what is appropriate language is not just a simple technical problem – all sorts of social issues and pressures may be relevant. We know one consultant who produced a beautifully written plain language report for a major national organisation. He was asked to revise it to make it look ‘more complicated’ and ‘academic’ so that it would ‘impress’ the

government department who had commissioned it. These issues of context and audience will recur regularly as we look at different types and levels of communication.

This means that you should consider your context and situation carefully before you apply techniques or concepts from this (or from any other) text on business communication. You should also try to check the most recent research – many of the topics we cover in this book are both controversial and subject to social change. For example, suppose you have been invited to a business lunch and one of your colleagues takes out their smartphone to respond to a text. Do you regard this as appropriate behaviour in this context? A recent survey of American business professionals found very different reactions to this, depending on age and gender. Men were much more likely to judge it as ‘OK’ than women; older professionals were more likely to see this behaviour as ‘rude’ or ‘unprofessional’. Again, we suspect that these reactions will change over time.

Apart from changes in expectations and behaviour over time (which we can expect to become more frequent), there is a final very good reason for treating all our statements and suggestions as hypotheses to be tested in your context: ‘the world of business isn’t always what it pretends to be. Things aren’t as rational, well-organised and well-oiled as we’re told they are’ (Vermeulen, 2010, pp. 216–217). You can say the same for other organisational sectors – education, government etc. We may assume that others are behaving openly, sensibly, fairly and honestly, but these are assumptions that we need to check. Discrimination of various sorts can easily be found in many workplaces. For example, Buchanan and Badham cite evidence that ‘sex-role stereotyping, the systematic underestimation of women, and the resultant hostility’ are ‘widespread’ behaviour in organisations (Buchanan and Badham, 2008, p. 151). Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Facebook, observes that when she asks the audience at one of her talks whether they have been called too aggressive at work: ‘I’ve never seen more than 5 per cent of men raise their hands. Every woman I know, particularly the senior ones, has been called aggressive at work’ (quote from an interview in the *Guardian Weekend*, 5 April 2014). Sandberg’s bestselling book, *Lean In*, offered suggestions to women on how to overcome such structural biases in the workplace (Sandberg, 2013). There is now a graduate edition (2014) and campaigning website – <http://leanin.org>.

There is evidence of positive change but we cannot afford to be complacent about this (as in the recent debates in the UK over ‘everyday sexism’ (Bates, 2014) or any other area of social discrimination (as in the recent book by the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of BP, John Browne, reflecting on his experiences as a gay man in a senior management position (Browne, 2014)).

WHAT DOES COMMUNICATION INVOLVE?

As we shall see in [Chapter 1](#), communication can be defined in rather different ways. For example, we can define it as: ‘shared meaning created among two or more people through verbal and non-verbal transaction’ (Daniels and Spiker, 1994, p. 27). This emphasises the sharing of ideas and/or information. Ideally, at the end of the process all parties involved share the same ideas and information. What are the important factors which will either assist or detract from achieving this goal? We emphasise some important factors which are often neglected in practice, including the following, for example.

Purpose and strategy

The ‘art’ of communication is finding the most effective means of sharing ideas and information. We need to study how people choose and develop the strategies and tactics of sharing ideas and information. Implicit in this is the idea of a communicative purpose or objective, such as informing or persuading. Many problems in communication arise from unclear or inappropriate purposes or strategies.

We also need to consider how these purposes are expressed. For example, business objectives may be set out in the organisation’s mission statement. But is a mission statement the best way of expressing objectives in a way that the employees will accept and understand? Some organisations explicitly reject mission statements. One British vice-chancellor suggested that ‘although universities should be run in a business-like way . . . there are some business techniques that we should tear up into shreds. Mission statements, for instance, are an abject waste of time. We were just as effective before we had one’ (*Times Higher*, 24 July 1998). Eden and Ackermann (2013) have found similar concerns with mission/vision statements in the business world:

the last two decades have seen managers being bombarded with vision statements and mission statements and the requirement for vision and mission statements, with many of these statements being regarded as a joke by them and others in the organisation as they provide little in the way of guidance.

Alongside concerns that many mission statements are rather idealized statements which could apply to virtually every organization and that others are hopelessly unrealistic, they found that

a careful analysis of statements of purpose (mission and vision statements)—particularly those more detailed versions—demonstrates incoherency, emanating from unrecognised conflict between aspirations, opaque reasoning, and incompatibility of goals statements—where some are aspirational and others’ statements of what currently exist.

As with any specific example of communication, we need to ‘look behind’ the words on the page to uncover the underlying reality. Think about your own organisation. Does it have a mission or vision statement? What is it and what does it really mean? Does it make a difference? Who is it aimed at?

New technology might offer some opportunities here, enabling an organisation to gain contributions and commitment through a more interactive and collaborative process leading up to a mission statement or policy.

Social and cultural background

A range of important cultural and social differences affect the way we interpret what is meant. Some degree of common background is essential for exchanging messages. Sometimes,

practical problems crop up because the communicators fail to establish early on what that common background might be.

Codes

A code is a coherent set of symbols plus the rules you need to structure a message. Our language is the most important code we use, but gestures, illustrations and mathematics are all codes that have important roles in communication.

Situation and relationships

Situation is the context in which a message is sent and received – it has both physical and relational aspects. For example, communication in a lecture room is influenced both by the layout of the room and by the relationship between the lecturer and the students.

We always interpret communication in terms of the type of relationship we have with the other person. In many business situations, the status relationship is particularly important. For example, consider the message: ‘Please bring me the Smith file.’ What does this mean when said by a manager to an administrator or secretary, and what does it mean when said between two administrators of equal status? In the first case, we hear an instruction or command presented in polite language. Between administrators, we hear a request for help which can be turned down: ‘Sorry, I am busy, you’ll have to find it.’ This could be accepted as a reasonable response in the second case (depending on the style and the relationship), but what about the first case? Would the manager see this as a ‘challenge to authority’? This would depend on the specific relationship and working arrangements. The meaning of a message depends on the relationship between the people involved.

Reviewing these and other factors, this book aims to highlight the different reactions and potential ambiguities which can affect our communication.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANISED

The structure of this book reflects how we think business communication is best understood and how you can approach it to improve the ways you come across to colleagues and bosses.

[Chapter 1](#) suggests that you start by *not* thinking about communication itself – communication is always a means to an end and if you do not have some idea about where you are heading in personal and professional terms, then you are unlikely be able to choose the communication methods and approach which will be effective. So we start by considering more general goals and objectives. You also need to understand your own approach to communication and how you can best develop your capacity and understanding – this is what [Chapter 1](#) is all about.

Then you need to develop a more detailed appreciation of what communication means and what it involves. This is what [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) are about. As well as looking at how we can define communication (and the practical implications of that), we investigate the factors which comprise communication in more detail and suggest overall principles which we feel are critical aspects of communication for people working in twenty-first-century organisations.

Communication always takes place in a specific organisational context. [Chapter 4](#) explores what this means in organisations by looking at different forms and levels of social context.

The dominant form of communication in many organisations is written, whether it ends up as a paper or online message. That is the focus of [Chapters 5–8](#). As well as looking at practice and research on the advantages of plain language, we look at how effective design can influence how documents are understood. We also look at how documents can be best organised and look at the range of printed and online documents which are now used in most organisations.

Communicating face-to-face is as important, if not more important than written communication, and that is the focus of [Chapters 9–13](#). After defining the major interpersonal skills, we look at how these can be used in a range of contexts, including formal presentations. We then look at group dynamics and team development, and how these principles can be applied to improve formal and informal meetings.

The final chapter (14) raises issues of organisational change as they apply to all forms and types of communication, and we wind up the book by offering a few cautionary words about the future of business communication.

AND FINALLY

In the course of this book we make numerous references to websites and Web resources. As many of these change frequently, we have only included Web references in this print copy where we are absolutely confident that the website will have a longer shelf life than this book. All the weblinks quoted in this book were checked at the end of May 2014.

On the website, you will find notes for each chapter, which include all the links and websites, updated and expanded wherever we have found new materials. We look forward to meeting you there to carry on our discussion.

Developing your communication

Deciding where to start

INTRODUCTION

You want to improve your communication – where do you start? We suggest that you do *not* start by focusing on the specific details of communication itself. To make a significant change as far as your communication is concerned, you need to decide on your overall career and personal goals and then work on the following aspects of your professional development:

- Become self-sufficient in terms of your learning and personal development.
- Adopt a sceptical and self-critical approach to your own and your organisation's behaviour. Be proactive in searching for systematic research to analyse human behaviour and communication, and avoid the many myths about our behaviour and organisational life which are propagated by the media. We will try to 'explode' as many of these myths as we can in the course of this book.
- Self-monitor – i.e. understand and manage the ways you behave and present yourself; these days, you need to pay special attention to identifying and managing your digital identity.
- Review and, where necessary, expand the range of communication tools you use on a regular basis.

We cannot give you all the answers to effective communication because (as we illustrate in every chapter) the world is changing too fast and we cannot know the specific circumstances of your organisation. For example, virtually every recent text we have seen on business communication includes some discussion of email. But what if you decide to work for an organisation which has decided to *abandon* this technology?

We cannot give you all the answers but we *can* help you work out how and why you need to change – to become more self-reliant and self-sufficient. Use this book *and* the website as a springboard and starting point. If this sounds too abstract, then an analogy will help.

Suppose you decide to lose weight. You can rush to your local health shop and pick up a 'magic pill' – the latest best-selling diet book. Follow its instructions to the letter and you will probably lose weight. If you stay healthy (some diets have unfortunate side-effects),

you only have a small chance of maintaining that weight loss *unless* you stick to that diet long-term *and* keep monitoring your progress. Effective schemes for weight loss usually mean changes to your lifestyle, not just to the specific food on your plate. So you must be able to accommodate these changes in your preferred lifestyle.

The importance of lifestyle and commitment may explain the success (in the UK at least) of the '5:2 diet', based on fasting two days a week, limiting your calories to 500 or 600 kcal (for women and men respectively). One proclaimed advantage is that you only need to concentrate on your food intake for two days a week. However, can you/we do that on a long-term basis?

Alternatively, another powerful strategy for weight loss is to examine how and why you eat as 'most of us are blissfully unaware of what influences how much we eat'. Then you can make small and achievable adjustments to your habits as 'the best diet is one you don't know you're on' (Wansink, 2010, pp. 1 and 219). Successful weight loss also depends upon social support; commercial enterprises often use the social group as a tool to support and encourage dieters. There is another important aspect of dieting which is relevant here – you need to work out your long-term target, the weight which you will consider as optimum and where you want to stick long-term.

We make the analogy here with improving your communication. This book is not a 'magic pill' which will immediately change your life. To make significant and lasting change to your communication, you can follow the same steps needed for lasting *and* healthy weight loss:

- commitment to a long-term 'ideal';
- commitment to long-term and sustainable change;
- finding and using the best available evidence (ignoring magic quick fixes);
- becoming more self-aware;
- changing your behaviour;
- gaining social support;
- continual review.

Our aim is to provide useful ideas and techniques which you can use as the springboard to personal change. First, you need to step back and reflect on your overall aims and priorities.

This chapter suggests three starting points – three distinct but interrelated aspects of communication and learning:

- reviewing your personal objectives and goals;
- adopting learning strategies to improve your communications, which include learning from others;
- reviewing (and deciding on) the tools and enhanced skills you will need to support your continual professional development.

We suggest that you consider these topics in the order presented here, but this does not imply that you do them in a rigid sequence. One key theme running through this book is the need for constant and continuous review/revision and we give examples of this later on.



OBJECTIVES

This chapter will:

- suggest how you can review your current approaches and perspectives as a first step to improving your communication;
- suggest some of the tools and opportunities you can consider as you review your learning approach and compile your personal development plan.

REVIEWING YOUR OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

Virtually every book on business communication or business skills emphasises the importance of goals and objectives. However, different authors use this terminology differently and also focus on different levels. For example, in the text described on its sleeve as ‘the field’s leading text for more than two decades’, Bovee and Thill (2014) suggest that ‘All business messages have a general purpose: to inform, to persuade, or to collaborate . . . each message also has a specific purpose, which identifies what you hope to accomplish with your message’ (p. 129). They only talk about goals in the sense of ‘career goals’ such as your ‘career specialty’ (p. 33). The problem here is deciding how you move from career goals to specific purposes.

Another common approach is to identify characteristics of goals/objectives which are likely to be achieved – typically SMART goals or, as Cameron (2010, p. 28) suggests, CSMART objectives, standing for:

- Challenging
- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Time-defined.

Cameron also talks about a hierarchy of goals where you need to break down goals into their component parts. This is the approach we favour and use the terminology proposed by John Kay (2011). He distinguishes between high-level objectives, intermediate goals and basic actions. ‘High-level goals are typically loose and unquantifiable – though this does not mean it is not evident whether or not they are being achieved.’ As an example, he uses the high-level objective of ICI to retain their industrial leadership. One intermediate goal was then defined as ‘the responsible commercial application of chemistry’ and the resulting action was the ‘launch of a pharmaceutical division (all quotes from p. 41). Thanks in part to this clear strategic perspective, ICI was ‘Britain’s leading industrial company for seventy years’ (p. 63).

You can translate this hierarchy into personal individual terms and an example is given in [Figure 1.1](#). If you have the high-level objective of ‘being an effective manager’, then this

must be broken down into goals which relate to both productivity and social relationships (where it is useful to use the CSMART criteria) and then specific actions. There are two other important points to highlight from Kay’s analysis:

- Problems are often best solved indirectly or obliquely as we live in unpredictable and fast-changing environments.
- Objectives, goals and actions must be constantly reviewed to ensure that they retain their importance and relevance. Becoming an effective manager is not something which can be defined absolutely as it will change. You will learn what it means by trying to do it, in the same way that skilled athletes understand what they do very differently from novices.

Figure 1.1 also gives us the opportunity to introduce our approach to concept mapping. You will see that concepts are shown in boxes which are linked to make propositions, as in – high-level objectives . . . must be translated into . . . goals . . . which can be achieved through . . . activities. This illustrates how you can ‘read’ the map. The overall structure depends on what we want to demonstrate – in this case, we have included two maps side by side – the abstract approach on the left hand of the page and practical illustrations on the right. The original versions of all the diagrams we use in this book are available for you to download either as image files or in their original format (we use the cmap software available from www.ihmc.us/cmaptools.php). At this website, you will also find links to tutorials and examples so that you can use this software effectively. It is both very useful and very easy to learn.

A particular variant of concept mapping which has been used in business situations is ‘causal mapping’ – ‘a word-and-arrow diagram in which ideas and actions are causally linked’ and ‘the arrows indicate how one idea or action leads to another’ (Bryson *et al.*, 2004, p. xii). Bryson *et al.* claim it is ‘the most helpful way of gaining an important issue areas in such a way that we can figure our effective strategies and actions that will achieve our goals’ (ibid., p. xv). It is worth looking at Bryson’s book for the examples of this approach in action. They use a common structure which underpins all the maps in the book based on the key questions listed in Table 1.1. Applying these questions to your personal development plan would be a useful way of checking or complementing the process we suggest below.

Table 1.1 Key questions to build a causal map (from Bryson *et al.*, 2004, p. 36)

What would be your overall purpose or mission?
What would result from doing that? What would the consequences be of doing that?
What do you want to do?
How would you do that? What would it take to do that?
What are you assuming about the world?

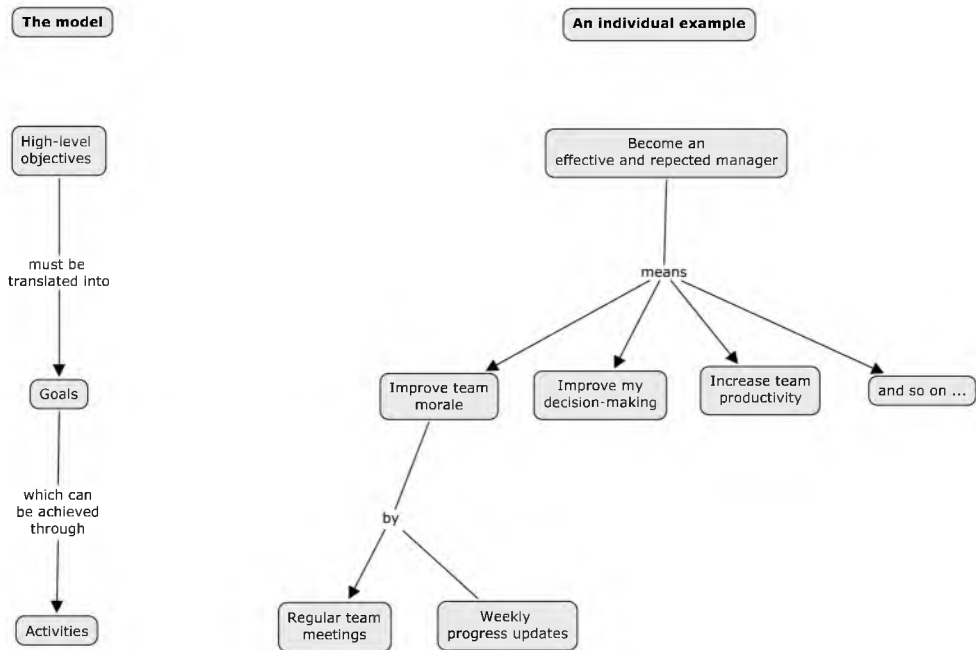


Figure 1.1 Objectives, goals and activities

As well as our own experience of the value of using mapping techniques, we can point to many examples of their value in education at various levels (e.g. Novak, 2010). However, we would hesitate to recommend them unreservedly. One of the main messages of this book is that you need to be flexible and select techniques to suit the situation and your own personal style.

Returning to the issues of goals and objectives, can we accept [Figure 1.1](#) and move on? You may like to consider this question for a few moments.

We think there is one major problem with this analysis so far – it does not include an analysis of the starting point and the broader social context in which you operate. Looking back at the example in [Figure 1.1](#), the activities of regular team meetings and weekly progress summaries seem to reflect the goals. However, they could be counter-productive in some circumstances. For example, if there are deep-seated personal conflicts between members of the group, then regular meetings may simply offer more opportunities to fight. The conflict may need to be resolved or at least weakened *before* meetings can become more amicable and productive. As a result, we want to revise [Figure 1.1](#) to include a review stage.

[Figure 1.2](#) includes several review loops, including reviewing the present situation in relation to the original goals and defining the gap between what is happening now and what you would like to see happen.

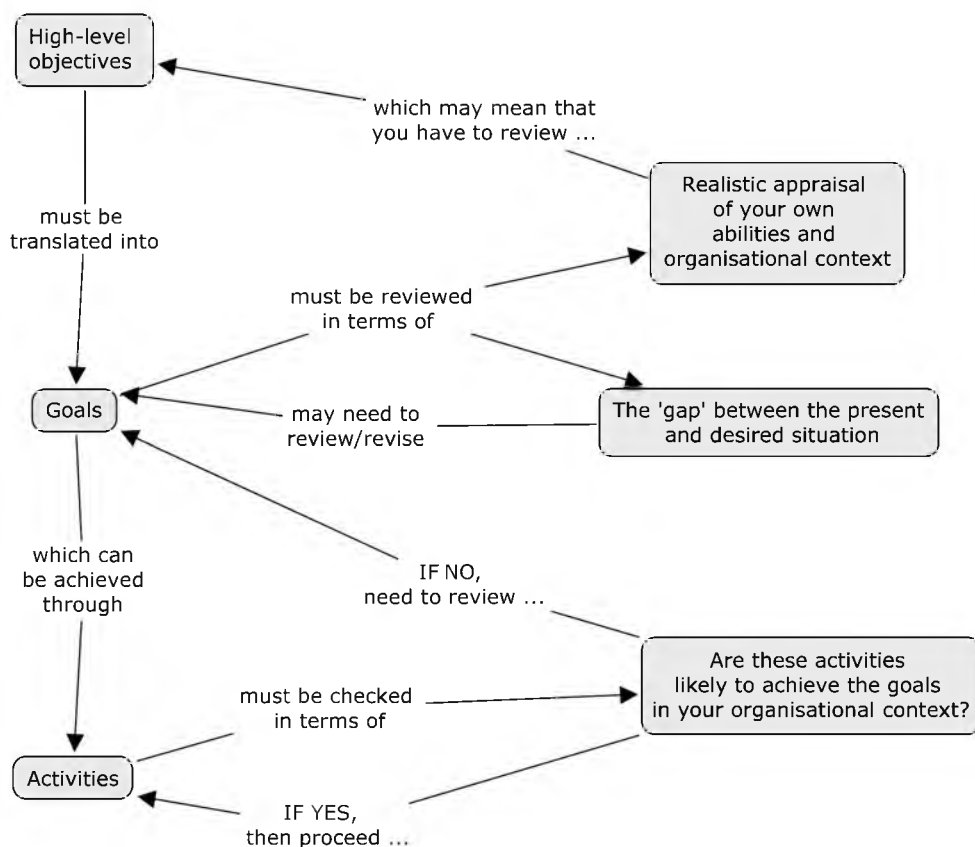


Figure 1.2 Revised model of objectives, goals and activities

REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE OF WORK

As you consider your own future in your own organisation, you should also consider more general trends in the social and political context which may directly affect your long-term future. One of the most useful analyses we can point you to is the work by Professor Lynda Gratton from the London Business School, whose research has suggested five major forces which are changing the way we work and the three shifts she recommends to deal with these (Gratton, 2014). The five forces are: technology; globalisation; demography and longevity; society; and energy resources. The three shifts are summarised in [Table 1.2](#).

Many of the recommendations later in this book reflect the trends shown in [Table 1.2](#).

Ways of setting those long-term improvement goals

There is no one best way of doing this. Here are some suggestions to get you started (and there are more ideas and practical suggestions on the website).

Table 1.2 *The future of work*

<i>You need to shift from ...</i>	<i>You need to shift to ...</i>	<i>Because (rationale)</i>
'shallow generalist'	'serial master'	You will need in-depth knowledge and skills in a number of areas and these areas will change over time. The number of jobs that require very general skills at fairly superficial level will continue to shrink and disappear
'isolated competitor'	'innovative connector'	You will need to develop networks of colleagues who can provide support and expertise when you need it, rather than working as isolated individual
'voracious consumer'	'impassioned producer'	You will have the opportunity to engage with more meaningful work and to find a better 'work-life balance'

- 1 Find approaches that suit your lifestyle and personality. We discuss ways of reviewing important personality characteristics later in this chapter.
- 2 Select evidence-based techniques. For example, Timothy Wilson (2011) uses research evidence to argue that private reflective writing over a period of days can be a more powerful technique for working through difficult experiences than professional counselling. However, some forms of writing have more impact than others. When reflecting on unpleasant or very negative experiences, you need to adopt a perspective which gives you 'some distance from the event' and which enables you to 'analyse why the event occurred' (p. 57) – a 'step-back-and-ask-why strategy' (p. 58).
- 3 Avoid self-help recipes which simply reflect the style or perspective of the author. There is no shortage of books which offer the promise of immediate and dramatic change. There are some which are strongly based on research evidence (e.g. Beattie, 2011; Wiseman, 2012) but many simply seem to offer "remedies" (which) make people feel good but don't cure what ails them' (Wilson, 2011, p. 42).
- 4 Consider a programme which gives you the responsibility but also offer tools and social support. A good recent example of this in the UK is the Lifewide Education initiative – <http://lifewideeducation.co.uk> – and see further discussion on the website.

ADOPTING LEARNING STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS: REVIEW, PLAN AND IMPROVE

The underpinning principle for this chapter (and the rest of this book) is 'communication can always be improved', which might appear obvious, although it is often neglected in practice. We suggest a 'review, plan and improve' philosophy, based on 'continuous improvement' approaches used in many business sectors. The key to this is reviewing the impact of your own behaviour on others (including the influence of your own assumptions



BOX 1.1 PRACTICAL TIPS ON GOAL-SETTING

Be realistic

It will take more than a few weeks to transform your communication skills – there are practical limits in what you can achieve in a short space of time. Be realistic about your goals and recognise that you will need practice, time and repetition.

Prioritise your goals

If you also follow the advice later in this chapter about self-review, getting feedback from others on your communications skills and analysing your personality, you will have a good picture of the skills and attributes you want to develop. It is important to prioritise those that will be of most use to you and work on these first before moving on to the others. To get started, it is a good idea to focus on just one goal.

Phrase your goals to be achievable and practical

Use our model (Figure 1.2) or a similar approach to avoid very open-ended goals such as 'I want to improve my communications in meetings'. Select more focused goals. For example, if colleagues have suggested that you are not the best listener, then you could focus on specific behaviours such as summarising or building, as discussed in Chapters 9 and 10.

Plan 'small steps'

Once you have identified an achievable goal, recognise that achieving it will be the result of taking small steps – aim to create regular, practical and achievable activities that you can undertake to reach the goal.

and possible prejudices/stereotypes), and seeking out feedback to help inform your strategies and plans to improve your communications.

Continuous improvement philosophies are now well established in many sectors. For instance, Kaizen (Japanese for 'improvement' or 'change for the better') philosophy is used in many industries for improving processes and eliminating waste. It is meant to be practised daily among staff at all levels in an organisation and should result in small improvements which can collectively result in significant overall improvements. At the heart of the Kaizen approach is a cyclic process of making improvements and reviewing the results. As well as organisational development (e.g. Miller *et al.*, 2013), this philosophy has also been applied to personal development where people are encouraged to take small steps towards improvement.

This sort of approach is not new and you may think we have simply repeated existing wisdom. However, we want to highlight two aspects which we think have been neglected in previous analyses:

- Do not regard review, plan and improve as separate or discrete stages. We are advocating a *continuous* review – keeping alert at all times for feedback which suggests