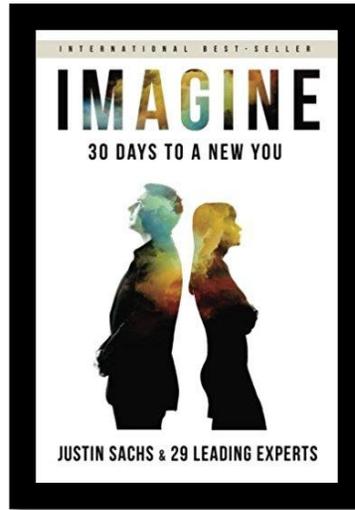


Steps to Superstar Communication



A selected chapter from:

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Superstar: a person widely recognized and sought after for his or her talents

Many of us know one, and if not we've certainly heard about them or seen them through media—Superstar Communicators. They easily handle the routine tasks of communication like getting a message across or quickly and effectively absorbing information. Superstar Communicators are described as great conversationalists, good listeners and masters of the written word. As speakers they inspire and often give listeners a feeling that a speech is “just for me.” Their face-to-face speaking style has just the right amount of energy to be engaging but not frantic, and they listen to others in a way that makes people feel valued and understood. When they write, Superstar Communicators are clear, concise and often quotable. **What's the secret to this magical ability to connect with others? Is it something we regular folk can master? Absolutely.**

While they give the appearance of being natural, confident and relaxed, it's important to realize that Superstar Communicators take communication very seriously, and so should you. In the same way that champion athletes review video and actors get director's notes, accomplished communicators earnestly reflect on feedback as a part of their constant improvement plan. Feedback on communication can be as simple as being asked to repeat something in a conversation or as complex as a file full of editor's comments. The real difference between Superstar Communicators and everyone else is what they do with feedback.

We all have individual styles when it comes to communication. However, sometimes personal preferences can morph into weaknesses or blind spots over time.

Feedback from your audience, whether it's in a one-on-one conversation or in the comments section of a blog can alert you to areas where you need to improve.

- Are you using unnecessary or confusing jargon?
- Do you make hasty assumptions about your audience?
- Is your style very stilted or outdated?

Superstar Communicators carefully digest and apply useful feedback while holding on to their unique flair.

One of the most important steps you can take toward becoming a better and eventually superstar quality communicator is to stop multitasking. Multitasking and wallowing in busyness has become an odd badge of honor in some circles. However, the truth is that just appearing busy doesn't mean you are getting anything done, and juggling a variety of tasks at once only insures that nothing gets the attention needed for excellence.

Multitasking can be a good coping skill, especially during moments when business or life gets out of control, but as a first line strategy for accomplishing goals multitasking is a poor choice. Divided attention lowers performance for all of the jobs you're attempting to balance at once. In communication divided attention translates not only into lackluster results but also as a lack of respect. People can easily tell in telephone or face-to-face conversations when your attention is not truly focused on them.

I recall being on the telephone with a close associate several years ago when I felt this first hand. We were discussing a joint project when I realized I was being multitasked.

Me: "What are you doing?"

Associate: "What are you talking about?"

Me: "I can tell you're doing something else...what is it?"

Associate: "Uh...how can you tell? Never mind. I'm just trying to finish up these emails to customers."

Me: "Well, call me back when you're finished and we can refocus on this."



Despite the fact that I could not see my associate or hear any distracting sounds like keyboard clicks or even background noises, I knew that our communication was suffering from divided attention. The episode has become a long-running joke between us now, and helps us to maintain a better communication dynamic.

Written communication as well can suffer greatly from divided attention. Whether a short text or a full length blog post readers can usually spot half-hearted efforts. Lapsing focus is responsible for countless typos and misunderstandings.

In a culture that now boasts the [tl;dr](#) abbreviation for “too long; didn’t read” it is essential that your written messages be of the highest quality possible.

What this lack of attention born of multitasking says to your audience is, “I have something more interesting or important happening now than my communication with you.” Superstar Communicators never allow their audience to feel second best. Full attention not only shows respect toward others, but it will improve the quality of your communications and allow you to accomplish more of your goals.

One evening, as part of my own desire to improve my communication skills, I attended a panel style discussion on multicultural business communication. The moderator asked some general questions and then turned to each of the experts on the panel for a reply. One gentleman in particular told slightly funny and clearly rehearsed stories every time he was called upon. Unfortunately, his polished responses had nothing to do with the questions presented or the overall topic. He was more concerned about looking good than actually communicating with the rest of us. In the end, his choice of grandstanding and performing instead of connecting with the audience in real dialogue made him look unprofessional and desperate for attention—two qualities I doubt he wanted to be associated with his personal brand.

There are a lot of reasons someone might memorize a few things before a key communication situation: nervousness or shyness, the desire to remember important details, or eagerness to share a special story. Yet, it is important to realize that another way to show respect and take a step toward becoming a Superstar Communicator is to forego the canned speech and participate in the conversation that is actually happening.



The next step to becoming a Superstar Communicator is to blend the old and the new. Language, technology and cultural norms are always changing. Using newer methods to connect with your audience does not mean abandoning the foundation of communication. The key is to embrace technology carefully and in a managed way while holding on to the basics of clear messages and audience knowledge. Make sure your posts, tweets, videos and other public communications are accurate reflections of your personal brand crafted for your particular audience.

The ever-growing sea of electronic devices and social media platforms can be intimidating. Even those who grew up with technology can struggle to get their message across while avoiding social gaffs. Here are some tips to aid you in blending old and new communication features like a Superstar Communicator:

- **Start every communication with an assessment of your audience and their readiness for your message.** This can be as simple as asking, “Is this a good time to talk?” or watching for body language cues. When speaking to a group, ask for some background on the group ahead of time and when you arrive “read the room” for energy level and tension. Before you click “send” or “post” double-check that your written messages match the audience and platform where you plan to place them.
- **Manners still matter.** One of the ways Superstar Communicators make others feel heard and valued is by employing good old-fashioned politeness. Even with the brevity of social media there is still time enough to thank others and acknowledge their comments gracefully. The same rules that apply in face-to-face interactions extend into the virtual world: don’t ask brand new contacts for huge favors, keep your language clean and professional, and resist the urge to engage in nasty arguments.
- **Global exposure means understanding diversity is no longer optional.** Superstar Communicators realize the world is a diverse place and in order to connect they need to continually expand their knowledge and understanding of others. Spend time learning about people outside your inner circle. When posting worldwide messages pay special attention to language that implies racial or cultural insensitivity.



Superstar Communicators never hesitate to directly address their personal shortcomings. One way to combine the steps of utilizing feedback and building your understanding of diversity is to ask colleagues from other cultures questions designed to improve your communication with those who don't share your background. Improve your multicultural business communication by asking:

How can I show you respect when we first meet?

What would you prefer I call you when we speak professionally?

How important is it to you that we have a firm schedule and stick to planned topics?

Can you share some tips with me for communicating with professionals from your country?

As a budding Superstar Communicator never try to bluff your way through, but work toward a genuine understanding of your audience. Most professionals are willing to give you honest and kind feedback when you demonstrate a true desire to improve your ability to communicate across cultures.

Once you've committed to taking the steps to becoming a Superstar Communicator, it's important that you don't forget the basics. Dazzling conversationalists, talented copywriters, and inspiring public speakers build their panache on a foundation of solid techniques. Advice to use humor with caution, practice and proofread, and stick to the truth has been around for a long time, because it works. A key part to excellent communication is the often forgotten foundational skill of listening.

Listening is the frequently neglected side of the communication cycle. Many times we become so involved in crafting and delivering our own message that we forget to pay attention to the information coming in from others. Superstar Communicators are accomplished listeners. When applying the paraphrasing and clarification of "active listening" they are subtle and natural and avoid sounding like amateur therapists simply parroting back words. You can do this as well by listening deeply for the emotions and messages behind words, and by asking out right for clarification when needed. Asking someone to expand upon their ideas or to provide you with more details is a good way to convey genuine interest and respect for them. Listening extends beyond paying attention to the words and feelings in a conversation; it includes patiently absorbing silence. A good listener and Superstar Communicator does not rush to fill every empty space in a conversation. They allow silence to happen, and in doing so, make room for others to complete their thoughts or consider new information.

Being comfortable with silence is one of the many ways to convey confidence. An aura of confidence, comfort in your own skin, is a key quality for Superstar Communicators. Thankfully, those not born with charisma and an air of confidence can learn the behaviors necessary to broadcast self-assurance. The first step is to incorporate preparation, rehearsal, and a backup plan into your high stakes communications. Nothing enables you to relax and enjoy communication

like the knowledge that you are well prepared. This is especially true with formal communications tasks like presentations, speeches or facilitating meetings. Experienced communicators research and rehearse and also have a *Plan B* for the unexpected like Teleprompters that fail, mics that pop, and other technology that refuses to cooperate.

Assurance, born in part from great preparation, shows in many ways. To move toward Superstar Communicator status you need to practice and master a few techniques. For face-to-face communication and especially occasions where you will be broadcast or recorded pay special attention to your tone of voice and body language. Listeners respond best to strong and sure speech spoken slowly enough to be understood and with natural inflections. Don't use a questioning tone, rising at the end of sentences, when you mean to make a statement. Keep your body language open and relaxed. Whether speaking or writing, purge your messages of qualifying language to reinforce your confident tone. Words like perhaps, just, only, or maybe suck the strength out of your statements. Use them with caution.

As a final step make sure your communication always has "*ah quality*." No, I don't mean the relaxing feeling of slipping into a hot bath. Superstar Communicators fill their messages with *ah*:

- A-accuracy
- H-honesty

One of the main reasons readers, listeners and viewers return repeatedly to Superstar Communicators is because they believe in the quality of the message. No amount of slick delivery can substitute for a genuine message. Even if an audience is fooled once, they seldom return to take in messages from communicators who have treated them with a lack of respect or who violated their trust. You can certainly take your time developing into a Superstar Communicator. It might take a while to learn to focus and listen with intention or to write messages that cross cultural boundaries. However, you cannot wait to make the commitment to filling your communications with accurate information and honest motives.

Superstar Communicators are mere mortals like the rest of us. However, they have decided to augment their natural talents with a dedication similar to that of other virtuosos. By giving high quality communication a place of importance in their lives, and doing the necessary work, Superstar Communicators make insightful and impactful communication look natural and easy. Follow these steps with perseverance and it's possible for anyone to transform from everyday conversationalist, speaker or writer into a Superstar Communicator.

About the author: Karen Southall Watts is a "professional encourager" as well as trainer, coach and author focusing on entrepreneurship and management topics. Her book, *Messenger: The Entrepreneur's Guide to Communication* came out through Motivational Press in the summer of 2015. The fastest, and easiest to spell, way to find her is @askkaren on Twitter.