

PROGRESSIVE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PRESENTS:

*MASTER THE*

**4** LEVELS  
OF  
COMMUNICATION  
*FOR LEADERSHIP*  
*SUCCESS*



PROGRESSIVE  
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

# Master the 4 Levels of Communication for Leadership Success

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# Master the 4 Levels of Communication for Leadership Success

*Open, honest communication is the backbone of any successful leader. The ability to communicate wants, needs and ideas is tantamount to effectively calling others to action.*

## *She Said It:*

### *You Can't Bluff Curiosity*

“ If you're not genuinely curious about what can be discovered, what others can contribute, you can't fake it. ”

*–Bobbie Goheen, CEO of Synthesis and a speaker and author.*

But even successful leaders worry about how their messages are heard. We've all been in situations that seem to spiral out of control, often due to nothing more than a misunderstanding. When miscommunication (which is different from “bad” communication) occurs, it could derail both your success and that of those you lead.

Women leaders often find themselves wondering if we're coming across too “soft.” Or we hesitate before we say something, fearing it will “come out wrong.” We're sometimes unsure about when it's more appropriate to communicate in person or simply in an email – and if that even matters in this tech-driven age.

### **Just say what you mean.**

It sounds so simple. But too often, what we try to communicate gets lost in translation, despite our best intentions. We say one thing, the other person hears something else, and misunderstandings, frustration and conflicts ensue. Not only that, we can also unwittingly use one method of communication when another would be more effective. There seem to be a lot of rules to getting communication right, but not a lot of rules on how to avoid getting it wrong.

*Understanding the 4 Levels of Effective Communication will help you be more confident in how you communicate. Knowing how to use listening skills, approach conversations, prepare to speak to a group and target a message in writing will help us ensure we're always heard.*

## *Exercise: Take This Communication Skills Assessment*

The first step in perfecting communication skills is knowing where you could improve. Take this quiz and rate your answers:

**1 Never / 2 Sometimes / 3 Often / 4 Always**

1. When I write an email or other document, I include as much background information and detail as I can to make sure I'm understood.  1  2  3  4
2. If I don't understand something someone is saying, I tend to keep this to myself and figure it out later.  1  2  3  4
3. I'm surprised to find that people haven't understood something I've said.  1  2  3  4
4. I tend to say what I think, without worrying about how the other person perceives it.  1  2  3  4
5. When I talk with others, my goal is to get them to see my own perspective.  1  2  3  4
6. I tend to rely on emails or written messages to communicate more complex issues with people.  1  2  3  4
7. When speaking in front of a group, I use a lot of gestures to make myself appear less stiff.  1  2  3  4
8. When someone's talking, I concentrate on what I'm going to say next rather than on what they're saying.  1  2  3  4
9. I rewrite a lot of my emails or memos before I send them because I worry about the recipient's response.  1  2  3  4
10. I don't know what to say when someone gets argumentative during a discussion.  1  2  3  4

***Add up the points you gave each statement. The lowest possible score is 10; the highest possible score is 50. The higher your score is, the more likely there are some communication skills you can improve.***

## *Level 1: Self-Communication Skills*

Do you often find yourself misunderstanding others? Do you have difficulty getting your point across clearly?

This is where mastering better self-communication skills factors in. It's the stuff we tell ourselves in our own heads that forms our outward communication. It's the battle in our minds that stalls what we really want to communicate and subtly turns it into something we didn't intend in the first place.

Consider a situation where you've got to be the bearer of bad news: You're meeting with a group of fellow managers about a project you've all been working on. You have to be the person who reveals that the success of the project fell far short of expectations. But everyone else is backslapping – didn't the project turn out great? Now you're figuring out how to say "Hey, all our efforts earned us close to nothing!" without sounding like Negative Nellie. If you don't speak up now, you're concerned another similar (failed) project will be in the works right behind it.

### *What Gets in the Way:*

**Stress and emotions.** When you're stressed or emotionally taxed, you're more likely to misread other people, send confusing signals, and lapse into unhealthy knee-jerk patterns of behavior. Take a moment to calm down before starting the conversation.

**Lack of focus.** You can't communicate effectively when you're multitasking. If you're planning what to say next, daydreaming, checking text messages, or thinking about something else, you're almost certain to miss non-verbal cues in the conversation. It's important to stay focused on the moment-to-moment experience.

**Negative body language.** If you have something to say that you know might cause negative reactions, you may use body language to brace for the impact, such as crossing your arms, avoiding eye contact, or tapping your feet. This defensive stance has others assuming you're upset before you even start talking. When wading into a potentially loaded confrontation, it's hard to assume calm, non-defensive body language – arms unfolded, fists unclenched and mouth drawn up, not down.

## *Authenticity: How 'Genuine' Should Your Communication Be?*

Do we worry too much about being “real?”

Some research suggests that *low self-monitoring* – the tendency to over-express thoughts and feelings – may have harmful effects on women’s career progress, says Adam Grant, a professor of management and psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

“Women are more likely to be low self-monitors than men, perhaps because women face stronger cultural pressures to express their feelings. Sadly, that puts them at risk for being judged as weak or unprofessional,” Grant suggests.

He noted the case of Cynthia Danaher who, when promoted to general manager of a group at Hewlett-Packard, announced to her 5,300 employees that the job was “scary” and that “I need your help.” “She was authentic – and her team lost confidence in her initially,” Grant says.

Women leaders should remember that we’re talking to people who are our peers, not to Dr. Phil. Trying to sound overly sympathetic – apologizing for no reason, admitting fears, being overly self-effacing – doesn’t build others’ confidence.

## *Ways To Master It:*

**Don’t be afraid to sound curious.** Women often fear if we ask a lot of questions, we’ll sound uninformed or (let’s face it) stupid. So we sometimes shush ourselves in our minds to save questions for later or avoid asking anything. But curiosity isn’t just about questions. It also presents a starting point for discussions that involve everyone you’re communicating with.

In the scenario above, showing curiosity about others’ opinions on why the project failed opens communication lines. Everyone (not just you) is thinking, What happened? So get out of your own head and ask. Tips to remember:

- There’s no need to get defensive. “I’m just as confused as you are about why our project failed.”
- If someone has ideas other than yours, incorporate them. You might feel you know exactly what happened, but present an open mind. “I think I know what went wrong, but I’d like to hear your thoughts.”
- Be non-judgmental. If you’re communicating anger or blame, you’re killing the opportunity to tell others that you’re open to their ideas. “There’s no need to point fingers; let’s just figure out how the ball was dropped.”

**Listen, but don’t overdo it.** Being a good listener means keeping quiet even while someone expresses a point of view you disagree with. And it means giving your undivided attention. But don’t allow others’ voices to drown out what you’re trying to communicate. Listening too much can cause you to question your own self-awareness.

**Be openly (but not overly) empathetic:** When communicating, it’s natural to view situations and responses from the other person’s perspective. Remember to stay in tune with your own emotions to avoid going overboard.

## *Exercise: The Listening Self-Test*

The first step to better listening is being honest with ourselves about how we listen. Recognize your listening habits by completing this self-evaluation.

Answer each question as "True" or "False."

1. I interrupt people who say something I don't agree with or don't want to hear. True  False
2. I lose concentration on what's being said if I'm not really interested in the topic. True  False
3. I sometimes find it hard to remember what the talker has just said. True  False
4. I often form a rebuttal in my head while someone else is voicing an argument. True  False
5. I give the appearance of listening when I'm really not. True  False
6. I often catch myself daydreaming while someone else is speaking. True  False
7. I get distracted by people's body language when they're speaking. True  False
8. I try to avoid facial reactions when I'm listening to someone talking. True  False
9. I focus on the speaker's appearance rather than on his or her words. True  False
10. I find it hard not to respond emotionally to certain words or phrases. True  False

## Level 2: One-on-One Communication

Dialogue, the back-and-forth of carrying on a conversation, often seems effortless – when we’re doing it with someone whose thoughts and contributions we can anticipate.

It gets trickier when you’re talking with someone new; naturally, you’re not as sure where they’re coming from. If the conversation veers into a difficult or controversial topic, the communication stakes are even higher.

When we find ourselves in a conversation that starts off even-keeled but ends up combative, our knee-jerk reaction is to blame the other person for “taking it too personally” or some other fault. But if we really analyze what happened, we might find we’re the ones who escalated the dialogue.

Why does it happen, even when we don’t want it to?

### *She Said It:*

#### *Learn the Diplomatic ‘Yes’*

“ Listen to people’s ideas almost like an improv session, and play with the ideas. It doesn’t necessarily mean you’re going to do the idea. It just means you’re going to listen to the idea and work on the idea. ”

–Lisa Gersh, chief executive of wellness company Goop, to The New York Times.

### *What Gets in the Way:*

**Needing to be right.** If your sole goal for the conversation is to have your point come out the winner, you’ll find yourself arguing your case like a lawyer. Think about it – the person you’re talking to probably wants the same outcome! If you have different points of view, and resist getting to common ground for the sake of being “right,” you’ll end up in a verbal sparring match with no end in sight.

**Having too much to say.** This is the gentler cousin to “having the last word.” We know those people; no conversation battle ends without them uttering the last syllable, no matter what. But if you start rambling on to buttress your point, or veer off into side arguments to try and tire the other person out, others will see through this tactic and avoid you altogether.

**Escalating your tone.** Women often do this entirely unintentionally. We start out with our “inside voices” but soon we’re practically screaming at each other – even when we’re not in a heated argument! It happens because we inadvertently shift our focus away from our point, turning a discussion into a debate.



## *Giving Criticism: There's a Right Way*

*"No, really, I value your opinion! Honestly, tell me what I did wrong."*

To many women leaders, these can be two scary sentences to hear. Why? Because there's a fine line to cross when giving criticism. On one hand, you want to be honest and forthright: Telling someone what they did wrong in a key presentation or a failed opportunity could genuinely help the person improve. On the other hand, being too honest can deflate anyone's confidence.

"You were nowhere near the ballpark in targeting on those sales numbers," for example, is no doubt upfront, but sounds a tad harsh.

There are steps to make sure your critiques – even when asked for – come out just right:

1. Avoid name-calling. Not of the person, but of the situation. Using drastic-sounding words like "bungled," "disaster," and/or "horrible," to describe the person's actions or results kills the rest of your criticism, even if it's helpful. All the person hears is the "shock-and-awe," not the constructive points that could boost future performance.
2. Be open about where your criticism comes from. You're concerned, but there's a reason why. "I know how strict our corporate department is on revenue expectations, that's why I'm letting you know why they weren't satisfied."
3. Focus on future action. "You'll want to remember to run the numbers by the project chairman first" gives the person you're critiquing something to focus on for the future, rather than his or her errors.
4. End with something positive. You don't have to spin it, but people receiving criticism need to know that if they fell short, they can redeem themselves. "I think you fared pretty well considering it was your first big project."

## *Ways To Master It:*

**Avoid an argument at all costs.** Before you even go into a one-on-one discussion, mentally prep yourself to avoid a war of words. If you've got "I don't want this to turn into an argument," in your head already, it will be easier to avoid driving into communication potholes.

**Be direct – it's honest.** Say what you mean – and don't be afraid to be frank. As in the previously mentioned bad-news scenario, there's obviously a problem and it has to be solved. So there's nothing wrong with starting with a forceful statement that uses facts (not your own opinion) and is inclusive of whomever you're addressing. "It really doesn't matter who did what wrong; the project flopped. Let's put our heads together so it doesn't happen again." The person you're talking to is probably secretly relieved you had the guts to mention it first.

**Resist the urge to one-up.** "Well you did this, but I did this ..." can go on forever – and it wastes a lot of time and energy. People out to prove something in a one-on-one conversation will likely never end up proving anything. One-ups almost always drag the conversation around in circles until both of you end up fighting over who gets the last word in (see: **Having too much to say**, above).

## *Exercise: Do You “Bulldoze” or “Peace-Keep”?*

How well do you handle difficult conversations? Most people come down to being bulldozers – who don’t mince words and get right to the (usually cutting) point, or peace-keepers – who try to soften even the lightest blows. Take this exercise by circling the most likely response you’d give to these one-on-one bad-news scenarios:

### **You have to tell someone her project/idea/plan wasn’t just bad – it flopped.**

- a. “It’s not really your fault; we gave you poor instructions.”
- b. “Your project started out good, but then it took a bad turn.”
- c. “Well, I almost don’t know where to start ... but it’s bad.”
- d. “I don’t know how you came up with this idea, but it’s totally not what we were looking for.”

### **You’re telling an employee that another worker reported him/her about a perceived insult.**

- a. “I’ve told you what Marie told me, but I’d like to hear your explanation.”
- b. “I don’t like hearing that my department’s team can’t get along.”
- c. “I want to hear what you said and how you said it.”
- d. “If there’s a problem with Marie, you need to tell me right now.”

### **You’re warning an employee about having a “bad attitude.”**

- a. “You seem unhappy working here; can you tell me why?”
- b. “I sense you’re uncomfortable working with your manager, is that true?”
- c. “I get the impression that you’ve got a problem, and I’d like to know why.”
- d. “Your attitude comes off snarky and rude, and I’m not the only one to notice.”

### **You’re questioning whether an employee understands the job he/she was given to do.**

- a. “If you’re unsure about what your tasks are, just tell me and I’ll help.”
- b. “Be honest – do you understand what your job is on this project?”
- c. “It seems to me you don’t get the nature of your position here.”
- d. “If you understand your job, it’s clearly not evident.”

*If you answered mostly “a” or “b”, you’re likely too much of a peacekeeper when it comes to honest one-on-one communication. If you answered mostly “c” or “d”, try not to be such a bulldozer; getting straight to the point is fine, but softening its sharp edge will win you respect in how you communicate.*

## *Level 3: Public and Group Communication*

You've done your fair share of public speaking, and probably have cultivated ways to boost your confidence before you take the floor. But getting up there still makes even the most skilled communicators among us nervous. All of the focus is on you, and it can be intimidating.

Even women who are practiced speakers can get an attack of the jitters when addressing a large group. Your notes are in order, your tech works perfectly and your pep talk is in your head – but you could still get pulled off your message. Learning to swat inner fears away will help you communicate with confidence.

### *She Said It:*

#### *Know Your Audience*

“ A powerful communicator knows [her] audience ... she knows what emotions her words will elicit in the mind of the listener. ”

–Kathy Caprino, former corporate vice president and training professional

### *What Gets in the Way:*

**Fear of sounding robotic.** Women are often coached to moderate our voices so we don't sound shrill, to keep our tone at an even keel. But we run the risk of sounding robotic if we eliminate any voice inflection. Trying too hard to sound like Orator of the Year will make our words sound stiff.

**Unintended body language.** When you're the one everyone's looking at, the message you send with body language – even if unintended – can jeopardize what you want to get across. Nerves can make us pace, shift from foot to foot, or forget to make eye contact with our audience. Involuntary moves like these can distract your audience to the point where they might stop listening to what you say.

**Fear of losing your message.** You've got a lot to say and are eager to say it – which is why even good speakers can veer off-course. As a result, most people think “better safe than sorry” and end up scripting their entire presentation (even down to where they plan a joke). While it's fine to put your speech on paper – even the highest-ranking speakers need a Teleprompter – it's easy to become a slave to it.

## *Charisma: How to Get It (and Do We Need It?)*

Charisma – it’s a trait that’s hard to define, but most people know it when they see it. It’s the ability to rally people to a message, to get people thinking, to uplift and inspire. Many would say it’s also something that can’t be taught – some people have it, and some don’t.

Question is, to be successful public speakers, do we even need charisma? Answer: Yes, sort of. Putting upbeat emphasis in front of our words helps us communicate, even if we don’t have natural-born charisma. There are ways to develop the qualities people with charisma undoubtedly have:

**Master confidence.** Think of something you do really well, even if it’s unrelated to your presentation – a sport, a craft, an artistic hobby – and channel that feeling of “I’ve got this!”

**Exude positivity.** Even if your topic is practical (e.g., research, business, law) or serious (e.g., fixing a critical problem), how you present your facts matters. Be emphatic, but avoid a somber, negative tone.

**Act a little.** Unless we’re politicians or motivational speakers, most of us don’t “speak” for a living. But we can act like we do! Assume the persona of someone whose job is talking (e.g., a life coach, a newscaster, even Oprah). This can help elevate your enthusiasm and make you sound like a “natural.”

**Show interest.** It might be this simple. Enthusiasm for what you’re saying, what others contribute and your overall message is contagious.

## *Ways To Master It:*

**Let go of the idea of the “perfect” speech.** People communicate everything perfectly only in their heads. In real life, you might lose your train of thought or get your outline out of order. Remember – in the end, it doesn’t matter. People will only hear what you tell them, and if you missed a point or jumped ahead, no one (other than you) will know.

**Use humor.** If a mistake happens, it’s OK to be a little self-effacing (“Well everyone, you caught me before my morning caffeine fix!”). The truth is, adding humor to your communication not only puts our listeners at ease, it does the same thing for us. It can also provide a perfect transition between points in our message, which helps us sound less scripted. But don’t overdo it; you don’t need to sound like a repressed comedian to get your audience relaxed.

**Get rid of jargon.** And by “jargon” we also mean clichés (“Think outside the box”), corporate-speak (“our outcome is to synchronize a paradigm shift”), overly-large words (“indefatigable,” “aforementioned”) and modifier phrases (“Having said that...” “For all intents and purposes...”). Follow the KISS principle: “Keep it simple, stupid.” Simple speech makes a bigger impression in the listener’s mind. While it’s tempting to think high-brow language captures an audience, it’s the opposite: Jargon clouds your message.

## *Exercise: What Do You REALLY Want to Say?*

It's not always necessary to write down your entire presentation (you've likely done enough of them to be able to wing it!) But simplifying your message could help. Right before you speak, go over your presentation (or use an old one, just to practice) and randomly replace words that are too large (but are commonly used) with smaller, more pointed ones. Try this exercise: for each of the "corporate-speak" words below, list as many simpler words with the same meaning as you can think of:

***Execute***

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***Strategic***

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***Implement***

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***Optimization***

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***Dichotomy***

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***Synergy***

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***Incorporate***

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***Collaboration***

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***Conceptualize***

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## *Level 4: Written Communication*

Communicating in writing seems like the most straightforward way to get our message across. But because it's seen as safe, it's the mode of communicating we get wrong most often. In today's world of texts, social media and emojis (not to mention that old stand-by, email), we're more unsure than ever of how to say what we want to say in print. We think what we're writing means one thing (and has our intended tone) – but to our recipient, those same words can imply something else entirely.

### *What Gets in the Way:*

**Wondering when it's acceptable and when it isn't.** Rule 1 (and it's really the only rule): Follow your instincts. If you're about to send a message in writing that you wouldn't want to hear in writing, then you probably need to speak your piece in person. Conversely, if you're about to call a meeting with someone over an easily explained issue, your gut will tell you it would be better understood if spelled out in writing.

**Trying too hard for the right tone.** Many women worry first and foremost about how we sound. We worry about how to make our message sound friendly – even when sending a message that doesn't need to be friendly. To soften whatever blow we think we're delivering, we add cutesy phrases ("Just to let you know ...") exclamation points ("Thanks for your help!!") and even smiley faces at the end of requests ("I need your report by end of day today! ☺")

**"Flooding the zone."** After wondering if written communication is acceptable, and if we found the right tone, our next concern is being understood. This is why we turn a two-or three-sentence request into a full chapter. We pile on unnecessary information to back up why we're making the request in the first place.

## *Ways To Master It:*

**Get rid of qualifiers.** We think they're necessary, but they're not: "I don't know if you already got this information..."; "I was going to tell you last week at the meeting but..." No one (except maybe you) needs a setup for what you're about to say. But it can be a hard habit to break. Try this tip: When you put fingers to keyboard (or pen to paper if that's still your thing) make your first statement solely what you want to ask/tell – one statement only. If you feel your message needs more information, only then add it.

## *She Said It:*

### *Words Can Create Feelings*

“ I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. ”

*-Maya Angelou, writer and poet*

**Keep it concise.** There's a reason modern online posts have character limits. Usually our written messages start out straightforward, sticking to the who, what and where details. But in trying to over-explain ourselves, we veer off-course, supplying more information than our recipient really needs. If you're asking for updates on a specific project, for example, there's no need to rehash previous project information unless it's necessary for your new message.

**Be professional (not blunt).** Lead your typed message with "Hello." Remember to say "please" and "thank you." That's all you need to avoid sounding brusque or unprofessional. And those emojis? Unless you're sending a message of a purely personal nature, leave them out. They'll make both you and your message hard to take seriously.

*Exercise: How to Get to the Point When Writing*

Write out the opening line for a memo describing each scenario, while trying to be as succinct as possible.

**You're letting an employee know he/she is being demoted.**

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**Management has decided on a pay freeze, and you want to let your team know.**

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**You've got some improvement ideas on a project your team is working on.**

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**You're letting an employee know he/she has violated a company rule.**

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**You're asking for a brief update on how a team project is progressing.**

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*Exercise: How to Get to the Point When Writing  
(continued)*

**You've got to tell employees about personnel changes that don't involve them.**

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**You've got to tell employees about personnel changes that do involve them.**

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**You're letting your team know of your impending resignation/departure from the company.**

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## *How Understanding the 4 Levels of Communication Helps You Become a Better Leader:*

Even the most effective leaders stumble into common communication pitfalls. Recognizing what causes confusion in our methods of communicating is the first step to developing proven strategies to ensure we're always understood. Knowing the keys to mastering the four levels of communication will boost your audience's confidence in what you say – and your own confidence in how you say it.

*You can discover more ways to enhance your communication methods, as well as develop other leadership skills, through Progressive Women's Leadership.*

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