

Miscommunication in the Workplace

Sources, Prevention, Response

© David Snowball

December 1, 2011

Miscommunication in the Workplace

Sources, Prevention, Response

Summary

Communication is a guessing game

In this section, we'll look at why miscommunication is so pervasive. You'll come away with an understanding of how ambiguous communication signals and interpretive frameworks conspire to sow confusion.

How to reduce the chances of miscommunication

In this section, we'll draw on 2500 years of communication research to identify the strategies you can use to reduce the chances that you'll be misunderstood. Understanding them will also help you better understand and guide your colleagues' messages. Highlights and recommendations:

1. Give people the benefit of the doubt.
2. Make good first impressions, every day.
 - The first four or five minutes are critical.
 - Not all first impressions are created equal.
 - Five strategies.
3. Be a powerful communicator.
 - Signals of powerless language.
 - Strategies for avoiding it.
 - Expertise.
 - Trustworthiness.
 - Goodwill.
4. Share clear, productive messages
 - Nature and advantages of assertive communication.
 - Seven strategies for the assertive communicator.
 - Five strategies for effective feedback.

How to respond when miscommunication occurs

You'll never eliminate miscommunication altogether. Sometimes you'll still get it wrong, sometimes others will. When that occurs, the key is to break the spiral of errors quickly. Seven strategies for receiving feedback with grace, and for reinforcing a culture of mutual respect, will help you do that.

Miscommunication in the Workplace

Sources, Prevention, Response

Communication is a guessing game and most people play it very poorly. Unnecessary misunderstanding, hurt feelings and missed opportunities are more common than mutual comprehension, affirmation and shared success. That's the bad news.

By understanding a few basic principles, being more aware of your communication environment and consistently applying a handful of best practices, you can dramatically increase your chances for success. It requires effort, but it is possible. That's the good news.

Communication as a Guessing Game

You've said it, you've heard it or you've thought it: "what planet is *he* living on?"

What does it *mean*? It means that someone has misunderstood something important, they've misunderstood it badly and they've been acting foolishly based on the misunderstanding. It's not a misunderstanding about something trivial or passing (for example, where you were going to meet for lunch). It's something big. Big enough that you were paying attention to the situation, thinking about it a lot, putting your reputation on the line. And you still got it wrong.

Why? To answer that question, you need to understand what makes up your communication environment. There are two parts you need to know about: communication signals and interpretive frameworks. "Communication signals" are the words and gestures you use to convey meaning to others. "Interpretive frameworks" are the assumptions that people make about you which help them understand what your signals mean. These interpretive frameworks are incredibly important, because messages have no meaning without interpretation. Everyone processes what they see and hear, then assigns meaning to it. ("She smiled, that means...") A common way of saying this is: "it's not what you say that matters, it's what they hear."

Interpretive frameworks are driven by what they think their experience with you has been or what their experience with people they think you're like has been. Some possible interpretive frameworks might be:

- Another lazy kid here to do as little, and get paid as much, as possible.
- Fashionista, who's looking down on my appearance and my clothes.
- Damned IT geek who's here to laugh at my inability and poke around in my computer.
- Irresponsible ditz.
- Poor, overworked guy trying to do the work of three people.
- Young know-it-all who doesn't think I have anything to say that's worth hearing.
- Quiet guy who always gets it right in the end.

While people will use different frames to interpret your actions at different times ("she's a really nice person until she puts on her 'boss hat'"), there's one dominant frame that they'll use. There's one explanation that they'll fall back on, time and again.

Both of those elements - signals *and* frameworks - pose serious threats to our ability to understand one another.

The first problem is that **your signals can be read in different ways**. What does the statement, “that’s such a good idea,” mean? It could be:

- An affirmation of the idea.
- A sarcastic rejection of it.
- A way of criticizing some other idea (“this idea is a lot better than the other stuff you’ve suggested”)
- A way of warning you about the possible consequences of your actions (“tell the boss that his new strategic plan will drive us to the brink of collapse? That *is* a good idea <voice trailing off>...”).
- An affirmation of your relationship with the other person (“good job” and high fives).
- A way to fill a few seconds of time while you try to figure out what to say (people being interviewed often say “that’s a very good question! I’m glad you asked that and I was talking with my staff about it just this week” to buy themselves time).

You should be able to imagine a similar range of meanings for

- “We’ll get to that as soon as possible.”
- “I’m doing really well today.”
- “As soon as the budget permits.”
- “I’m so hot.”

In summary: words can have many meanings. (Scholars use the term “polysemy,” which is sort of ugly.) The meaning you intend isn’t automatically the meaning that others receive.

The second problem is that **interpretive frameworks can be disastrously wrong**.

The person who hears (or overhears) you may expect that you’re one type of person, and they are then prepared to interpret what you say in light of those expectations. You may have just worked for 20 of the preceding 24 hours. You’re exhausted, but proud of having done so much. But when you announce, “I’m incredibly tired,” the listener who has labeled you “a slacker,” hears “I’m looking for an excuse to avoid doing my job again.” The fact that the interpretation bears no resemblance to the reality that you’ve experienced - and the reality that you tried to express with your words - doesn’t change the fact that it is the reality your listener constructs.

In summary: people may misinterpret your words based on their decision to use the wrong interpretive framework.

The misery of it is this: they don’t know what you intended to mean and you don’t know how they’re interpreting your words. As a result, you go forward thinking that you’re saying one thing while your listener proceeds, absolutely sure that you’re saying something entirely different. And neither of you knows.

It’s common. It’s crippling.

But it’s also manageable. And so, in the sections ahead, we’ll look at simple strategies which will help you avoid conflict (by communicating clearly and by guiding your listeners’ choice of interpretive frameworks) and will help manage those misunderstandings which do occur so that they don’t spiral out of control.

Let’s get to it!

How to reduce the chances of miscommunication

Miscommunication is less frequent, and less destructive, in environments where people view one another positively and where they exchange, rather than withhold, their observations, ideas and concerns. It's not possible to create a perfect communication environment, but four strategies will get you a long way:

1. Give people the benefit of the doubt.
2. Make good first impressions, every day.
3. Be a powerful communicator.
4. Share clear, productive messages.

1. Give people the benefit of the doubt

It's so tempting to start with the assumption that "those others" are lazy or stupid or irresponsible or don't care or – worse – want you to fail. People often *do* stupid things but that doesn't mean they're stupid people. Sometimes they've done something that looks smart to them (saves much needed cash) but stupid to you (makes it hard to keep the store clean). Sometimes they've done things that are legitimately stupid, but they acted without a chance to think through the consequences and now they're afraid to back down.

And sometimes they do things that are hurtful to you, but that doesn't mean they're cruel. Often, they just didn't think or didn't think broadly enough and now they're stuck. Often they really want to do the right thing but don't know how and they're afraid (to ask, to change, to look stupid).

A lot of good communication is putting yourself in another person's place. Asking questions like "what's important to her" or "if I assume he's a good man, how can I make sense out of the gibberish he's spewing?"

This is where most people cause themselves the most problems. We spend too much time thinking about our side of the exchange. We think about what interests us, what's important to us, what we want to say, why we're right and how we feel. If we want to change other people's beliefs or behaviors, we've first got to change our way of thinking about our statements and conversations. If we want to change how "they" view us or act, we need to start by taking their perspective. For example, if I want a budget increase, the question isn't "why do I want more money?" it's "why is it in your best interest to give me more money?" If your supervisors or your clients clench their faces when you approach, the question isn't "what's wrong with them?" The question is, "what might I be doing that they're interpreting negatively?" Put another way: "how might I, without meaning to, be sending negative signals?"

2. Make good first impressions, every day

You *know* first impressions are important. Here are two things you might not know:

1. The first four or five minutes are critical. We make a judgment, positive or negative, about a person within about two minutes of first interacting with them and, in another two minutes, we've reached a conclusion about whether we want to see them again. One early study (1971) found that when a negative impression was created in the first five minutes of an interview, the applicants were not hired 90% of the time. When the impression in the first five minutes was positive, they were hired 75% of the time. That same window works in students' evaluations of their instructors (the judgments made after 30 seconds of interaction carry through to evaluations turned in 14 weeks later) and jurors' evaluations of lawyers. Together, these tell us that it's important to very quickly communicate the message, "I'm a good person, you can trust me." Just after that, the message, "I'm a good professional, I do good work" is important.

2. Not all first impressions are created equal. You might create a negative first impression or a positive one. Negative first impressions are very resistant to change; the things you did to create the negative impression seems burned into memory. Positive first impression can be strengthened or weakened later. Second, you can create impressions about your competence (“he’s the expert”) or your morals (“she’s a good person”). The research is pretty clear that judgments about your morality come first and are far less changeable than judgments about your competence.

Among the strategies that researchers have found to be effective are:

- Offer an opening handshake, with a firm but not crushing grip.
- Look directly at the person you’re working with, make eye contact.
- Smile and gesture often, nod in an affirming way when they’re speaking. These signal your energy and engagement.
- Speak at a moderate pace to signal honesty and trustworthiness.
- Speak with a fair degree of fluency, avoid fillers such as “um,” “uh,” “you know.” You’ll be more fluent if you think in advance about what you’ll need to say and then practice saying it.

There’s also a lot of evidence on **the importance of personal appearance** and grooming. Dirty hair or nails, ill-fitting or badly wrinkled clothing, and garish styles all seem to signal, “I’m clueless” rather than “I’m casual.” Reasonable attention to personal appearance, rather than outright stylishness, seems to be the key.

While there’s no guarantee that you can change an existing negative judgment, your best opportunity for doing so occurs at the very beginning of a new interaction. Start each new interaction as if it’s a first meeting, with eye contact, a smile and an open, attentive air.

3. Be a powerful communicator

We have a conflicted relationship with power and control. We respect power, and resent it. We know someone needs to be in control, but worry that they’re more interested in controlling us than controlling themselves. We fear its abuse and its corrupting effect, from Lord Acton’s great dictum “power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely” to the everyday observation, “being in charge goes to his head.” Every blustering manager whose dictates are justified with “because I’m in charge” and enforced with intimidation, reinforces our reservations and feeds our resentments. They make us bitter, closed, and unproductive.

Nonetheless, an impression of legitimate power creates a strongly positive “halo effect.” We judge powerful communicators to be more competent, credible, empathetic, persuasive, effective, attractive, and trustworthy than others. Even more important, though, than the judgment of being powerful is the judgment of being powerless. The judgment that someone is powerless is, in the workplace, fatal. If an individual signals the fact that she knows that her opinions routinely do not matter, that she expects to be ignored, dismissed, or ridiculed, a powerful negative halo effect is invoked. Thirty years of very good research identifies five signals of powerlessness:

- tag questions (“that’s how it happened, isn’t it?”).
- hedges (“I guess,” “sort of”).

- verbal hesitations (“you know,” “I mean,” “like”).
- nonverbal hesitations (e.g., “umm,” “ehh,”).
- unwarranted apologies (“I’m so sorry that your car wouldn’t start”).

The use of such cues quickly draws attention to us, and supports an enduring judgment that this person is insignificant, incompetent, unattractive and unreliable. The combined effects of drawing attention and encouraging a negative halo make it a powerful force in the workplace, particularly in situations where our judgment of the speaker (in training, sales presentations, interviews, public speeches) is directly related to our judgment of the experience. Its influence in guiding attention means that it overwhelms otherwise persuasive elements of an interaction. One researcher reports, “an acknowledged expert with excellent reasons for advocating a position already accepted by an audience may, nevertheless, fail to be persuasive if he or she uses powerless language.”

If you recognize yourself here, **one simple change can make an enormous improvement**. Stop using the five signals of powerlessness. That’s easier than it seems if you realize that you can do it and you take it one small step at a time. Before dealing with powerless language, start by training yourself to hear and correct a different speech habit. You might decide, for example, not to use contractions (“can’t”) in your spoken speech for a week. For that week, each time you use a contraction, stop, back up, and repeat the sentence using the full words: “Sorry, I can’t help with . . . That is, I cannot help with” That simple exercise will give you both the training and the confidence to address the next issue.

Once you’re comfortable with not using contractions, pick **just one** of the powerless speech habits and do the same thing. Listen for “you know,” stop when you hear it, back up and repeat the sentence without it. The practice and confidence you gained in the preceding week will help you hear and quickly squelch those signals of powerlessness.

The key to effectiveness becomes balancing our resentment of the powerful with our dismissal of the powerless. If you can become a powerful communicator who is also seen as a good person, you win. If others label you as a winner, they’re going to interpret your words and actions positively. If they do that, they’re likely to listen more openly, misunderstand less and grant you the benefit of the doubt whenever they can. So, what qualifies as a winner and how do I get to be one? We’ll look at those in order.

There are several decades of very good research on how we judge communicators. That research shows three judgments which override all others. They are:

1. Expertise (also called competence or qualification): you must convince folks you know your stuff.
2. Trustworthiness (also called character, safety or personal integrity): you must convince people that they can believe what you say, and they can believe your explanations for what you do.
3. Goodwill (also called caring): you must convince listeners that you are acting out of a concern for them and their needs. If people think you’re just going through the motions, that you are scheming or that you’re treating them as a problem to be solved rather than a person to be helped, they will react with hostility or indifference to everything you try to say or do. It’s sometimes called “the lost dimension” of credibility because, for a very long time, researchers did not grasp its importance.

Aristotle identified these exact characteristics in *The Rhetoric*. A good speaker must demonstrate, he said, good judgment, good morals and goodwill. It took guys with PhDs another 2300 years to notice that he was

exactly right. The scientists have identified three other sources of credibility (dynamism or personal energy, composure, and sociability) which are worth knowing about but less critical to the Big Three primary sources. Here are some ways to demonstrate your possession of them.

Expertise

Technical knowledge and skills alone don't define "expertise." Technicians, a type of skilled worker, also possess such knowledge and skills. The difference is that technicians can find an answer to a problem; they've learned the list of questions to ask, have memorized the right responses and can apply them. Experts know what questions to ask. They give evidence of technical knowledge but also a sort of excited discontent with their knowledge. They're thinking constantly, pressing their limits and playing with new possibilities.

There's a difference between *being* an expert and *being seen as* an expert. If people aren't given signs of your expertise, they won't react properly to you. What sorts of signs?

Western Carolina University leadership professor Marie-Line Germain has developed a 16-point "Generalized Expertise Measure" which reliably measures our perceptions of whether someone is an expert. Beyond just "knowing your stuff," experts are

- Passionate about their work: they show drive, energy and ambition.
- Good at understanding, almost intuitively: they listen more than they talk, they ask good questions, they notice things that others miss.
- Constantly getting better: experts are not afraid of admitting the limits of their knowledge. They have a strong sense of their own fallibility, but they like to press those limits.
- Charismatic and confident: they speak with assurance and precision, they're organized, and they can explain things.

Trustworthiness

Trust is the cornerstone when dealing with people. When trust exists in an organization or in a relationship, almost everything else is easier and more comfortable to achieve.

- Keep your promises. If you can't keep one, explain what is happening in the situation without delay.
- Confront hard issues in a timely fashion. If someone misses work a lot or spends work time wandering around, it is important to address your concerns directly and promptly. Don't let things fester.
- Protect the interest of all your coworkers. Do not talk about people who are absent, nor allow others to place blame, call names, or point fingers.
- Know what you are talking about, and if you don't know—admit it.
- Listen with respect and full attention. Exhibit empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others. When you're talking with someone, to the extent possible, put everything else aside. Multi-tasking is a myth (humans cannot effectively focus on two or more issues at once; the research here is absolutely clear regardless of people's common delusions) and a signal of disrespect (the implied message is, "you're really not worth all that much, so I'll staple papers or play video poker or answer email while you're telling me something that you mistakenly think is important").

- Set high expectations and act as if you believe you and your coworkers are capable of living up to them.

Goodwill

You can demonstrate your goodwill, or caring for other people, by showing appreciation every day when dealing with them. You can tell your colleagues and coworkers how much you value them and their contribution any day of the year. No occasion is necessary. Small surprises and tokens of your appreciation spread throughout the year help the people in your work life feel valued all year long. Something as small as buying someone a can of Coke when you get one for yourself, or splitting the treat that you brought for your lunch, would work. Don't wait for Administrative Professionals Day to express gratitude for the care and competence of those around you; being thankful only on command is nearly pointless. The key is consistency: you don't want to be seen as a person who only cares about other people when he or she needs something from them.

These demonstrations are called "immediacy behaviors." ("Immediate" literally means "there's nothing in the way between us.")

- Praise folks, quietly, when they do something well. Be prompt, specific and private. Even in cultures where receiving compliments is problematic, a quiet word of recognition will do a lot of good.
- Say "thank you" – and mean it. Stop what you're doing, look at the person, smile and say it (or something like it). The occasional "thanks" as you dash off is okay, but it's not effective as a routine.
- Learn enough about your coworkers that you know what's important to them. Then keep track. A child's birthday, mom's MRI, a new ring . . . noticing any of that stuff says "you're important to me."

4. Share clear, productive messages

Here we'll talk about two simple strategies. First, you need to develop the habit of being assertive. That is, of saying what you know and what you believe to be important in a clear and respectful way. Second, you need to practice the art of providing useful feedback. That is, you need respond in a way that helps people accept your judgment and modify their behaviors.

Learn to be Assertive

Being assertive is a way of caring, for yourself and for others. Assertiveness is the ability to express your expectations or preferences when they matter. It's not aggressiveness (trying to force your opinions by force) or even dominance (trying to force your opinions by virtue of your status in a relationship). It's the simple understanding that what you're thinking can help, *really help*, other people.

So you're trying to figure out where to go after work.

Assertive: "I'd really like to try either the Thai or the Vietnamese place, but if it's really important to go somewhere else today, I'm open."

Aggressive: "It's my turn. We went to Mya's place last week. I say Thai."

Non-assertive: (thinks "Thai, please please pick Thai" but says) "whatever you guys want."

The research on assertiveness is pretty consistently positive. If you're appropriately assertive it

- Provides energy, often to you. When we think we don't matter or when think "I backed down again," it often leaves us feeling weak and sad and tired.

- Improves relationships. It gives you and your friends a chance to work together on reaching a solution, which tends to make everyone feel better about themselves and others. And the more you act like a great person, the more people will treat you that way.
- Allows you to get things done. Instead of keeping quiet and fretting (or pretending there's no problem), you open up the topic that everyone probably knows needs discussion, you listen with the idea of other people might be right, you suggest a solution, revise it, ratify it, share high fives and feel quite good about it.

What sort of tips might help you assert yourself?

- Avoid emotional presentations. Crying, pouting, turning red in the face, setting things down rather too firmly or even refusing to speak all cloud communication rather than clear it up.
- Deal with just one issue at a time. That means being focused and concrete. "I need you to put your trash in the trash and your dinner plate in the sink" is *much* more productive than "quit being such a pig" or "I need you to start acting like you care about the house."
- Don't insist on getting your way every time. Even the most effective communicators lose a lot of battles, with grace and good humor, but end up winning a lot of wars as a result. If people know that you're *not* a bully, they don't immediately get defensive when you express yourself and later "wins" become more likely.
- But don't give in immediately. Surrender to the better insight or the better plan, not just to the existence of disagreement. Remember, the fact that someone disagrees with you doesn't make them either right or wrong. The ideas determine that, so react to them.
- Admit when you're wrong. This is hard. Most of us *hate* being wrong and I especially hate being wrong around people who matter. It's hard not to shift from assertive to aggressive, just to avoid "losing face." The phrase, "wow, that's really a good idea, thanks for saving me from myself," goes a long way.
- But only when you're wrong. If you're convinced you're right but you're going to lose anyway, state your preference and then help make the alternative as good as it can possibly be. "I still think we'd be better with a color laser printer, but we could manage with a good black-and-white one if we pay OfficeMax to do the color copies for us."
- Focus on what you know, rather than what you suspect. People recommend making "I" statements because those reflect things you can be sure of. "I felt foolish when..." is a lot safer than "you tried to make me look foolish when..."

Provide Feedback That Has an Impact

Feedback is communication to a person regarding the effect their behavior is having on others. You need to find a way to share concerns without making the person you're talking to feel threatened.

- Offer positive feedback at least as regularly as negative. Folks will understand that you're not engaging in mean-spirited criticism of them, but that you're trying to help create a place where everyone gets a chance to thrive. Knowing that you've done something well and that it's made a difference is a really powerful tool that way.
- Be specific, not general. (Say, "The display you built for the new Dragon's Eggs is really attractive and eye-catching when someone first walks in the shop," not "nice display.")

- Focus on a specific behavior, not on a person or their intentions. ("When I was speaking with Natalie and you started calling me from across the shop, it was very hard to focus on what she was saying" rather than "it was sort of rude of you to...")
- Focus on actions they can actually do something about. Complaining about a person's nature ("you're so confused") isn't nearly as useful as focusing on how they can address a concern.
- Hesitate to give advice. It's always best if you're able to offer an observation about an issue that arose and the other person requests advice. At most, you might say "I have a couple ideas if you'd like to talk about them."

Repairing the damage caused by miscommunication

Despite your best efforts, things are going to go wrong. There's no system which prevents misunderstanding and hurt feelings in 100% of cases. When misunderstanding occurs, you need to act immediately and productively to stop the damage from spiraling and, if possible, to undo it.

Receive Feedback with Grace and Dignity

Are you interested in how other people view your work? Make it easy for them to tell you. If they think you'll appreciatively consider their feedback, you'll get lots more. And, that is good, really. In dealing with people, objective feedback from people who care about you can help you keep getting better or confirm that you are on the right track. Especially when the feedback stings, you need to be careful in processing it fairly.

- Try to control your defensiveness. If people are afraid that they're going to hurt you with their words or that you're going to reject their attempt to help, they're more likely to let you fail on your own.
- Listen to understand and not to judge. If you're thinking "what crap" after about 10 seconds, it'll show, you'll start looking for reasons that they're wrong and they'll look for reasons not to talk with you again.
- Summarize and reflect what you hear. Often we don't quite get another person's point, so it helps to repeat their message before responding to it. Say, "I sometimes get a little unfocused, so let me double check this with you. When there are a lot of people in the store, it looks like I'm paying attention only to younger customers because I'm more active in asking them questions and showing them other products. Is that about right?"
- Ask questions to clarify. Focus on questions to make sure you understand the feedback.
- Ask for examples and stories that illustrate the feedback, so you know you share meaning with the person providing the example. Aim to understand their concerns, not just to refute them.
- Confirm solutions. Once you understand a concern, propose a change and ask whether that change would address the concern.
- Remember: Just because someone gives you feedback, it doesn't mean they're right exactly. They interpret your actions through their own life experiences and expectations. Check with other folks you trust to see how close it is to right.

Demonstrate Respect at Work

There's nothing more vital after an internal problem at work, than re-establishing the atmosphere of mutual respect and support. Albert Maslow, whose insights on psychological needs dominated generations of scholarship, identifies respect as one of the four most vital human needs. "All people in our society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need ... for self-respect or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others ... thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness, and of helplessness. These feelings, in turn, give rise to either basic discouragement or else compensatory neurotic trends." Regardless of your role in the miscommunication - as manager, worker or bystander - your best interest going forward is to reestablish a culture of acknowledgement and respect. Therefore:

- Treat people with courtesy and kindness. It is critical that you signal courtesy with your actions, as well as your words. People give more weight to our non-verbal than to our verbal content because they believe that we fake our words more easily than our expressions. If you mix verbal and non-verbal signals ("I'm glad to see you" mixed with a flat facial expression and "closed" body language), the non-verbal wins - and any gap between the two might convince people to trust you less.
- Listen with respect and full attention. I'm repeating myself because this point bears repeating. When you're talking with someone, to the extent possible, put everything else aside. Multi-tasking is a myth (humans cannot effectively focus on two or more issues at once; the research here is absolutely clear regardless of people's common delusions) and a signal of disrespect (the implied message is, "you're really not worth all that much, so I'll staple papers or play video poker or answer email while you're telling me something that you mistakenly think is important").
- Listen actively. Lean a bit forward, nod and smile. Listen for what's right in a statement rather than searching for what's wrong. Ask questions to clarify your understanding, paraphrase what you've heard to demonstrate it. Attend to nonverbal cues that might offer clues on what's *not* being said.
- Respect the pressures on others. As people gain responsibilities (professional or familial), their time becomes more tightly packed with events. If they give you some of their time and attention, treat it with great respect. Come prepared. Focus on what you need to learn. Repeat and record their advice, so you don't need to come back. Thank them and then go. Don't draw it out, unless the person you're speaking with invites you to.
- Encourage coworkers to express opinions and ideas. When they do, especially if you're in a formal meeting or training, write it down with their name attached. If you talk about the idea with others, remember to give credit for it.
- Include all coworkers in meetings, discussions, and events. If you're talking with folks and you notice someone hovering just outside the circle, invite them in.

In conclusion: Effective communication is a critical competency that you gain only through thoughtful reflection on your own and other's behavior, conscious practice and a willingness to learn. The words you speak and the words you choose to hear define you, direct and confine you. In a real sense, they create the world in which you act. If you listen to understand the speaker and his needs, you'll lay the foundation for a powerful relationship. If you speak clearly and thoughtfully, you will create a more functional, more positive environment. I hope this guide provides valuable support as you undertake these essential, challenging tasks.

About the author

David Snowball is a Professor of Communication Studies at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. Augustana is a nationally-recognized college of the liberal arts and sciences, founded in 1860. David's teaching portfolio at the college includes:

- Advertising and Social Influence
- Propaganda in the 20th Century and Beyond
- Rhetorical Theory
- Communication and Emerging Technologies
- Business and Professional Communication
- Persuasion Theory

For a quarter century, David competed in academic debate and coached college debate teams to over 1500 individual victories and 50 tournament championships. When he retired from that research-intensive endeavor, his interest turned to researching fund investing and fund communication strategies.

David served as the closing moderator of Brill's Mutual Funds Interactive (a Forbes "Best of the Web" site). From 2006-2011, he was the Senior Fund Analyst at FundAlarm and author of over 120 fund profiles. His monthly column was read by around 5000 people. His work has been cited in *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Barron's*, *Business Week* and, on the web, at Motley Fool, MSN Money, CBS Marketwatch and elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the dozens of unnamed scholars whose careful, ongoing research projects provide the basis for my observations and recommendations. More immediately, I benefited from the sharp insights and careful reading of two talented friends. Junior Yearwood of Port of Spain, Trinidad, reviewed several earlier drafts of this work, helped craft its conclusion and offered a wealth of insights on how to provide a cleaner, more compelling argument. Nicholas Burnett of California State University, Sacramento, brought 20 years' experience teaching business communication, a keen understanding of the research and an old friend's willingness to poke at me. Their generosity substantially improved this report.