

HOW TO BECOME A MASTER COMMUNICATOR

Words: Annie Makoff-Clark Illustrations: Blok Magnaye

Accountants need to do much more these days than just crunch numbers and interpret data. While the rise of automation has freed up accountants to concentrate on more client-focused services, soft skills like communication have become “must-haves” for accountancy roles. In fact, the 2018 Reed Finance State of Skills report revealed that communication skills are now more valued than technical skills, while the Sage 2019 Practice of Now report found that relationship building and business advisory skills were two of the top three skills believed “necessary” for the future. So as forward-thinking practices move towards business advisory, the pressure is on for accountants to become masters at communication.

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COMMUNICATION: THE BASICS

According to Alexandra Bond Burnett, a speaking coach for accountancy professionals, effective communication is about awareness of three key themes: intention, interpretation and adaption. Intention is working out what you want to get out of the communication and understanding what your objective may be. Interpretation means making sure the person you are communicating with has understood what you want them to know.

“Interpretation is really key for accountants,” Alexandra says. “Accountants deal with a lot of technical information and a lot of their job is interpreting that. But their clients may not have their level of expertise. Accountants may make assumptions that their clients know what they’re talking about. So interpretation is about what we think it means versus what it actually means.”

Then adaption comes into play. It’s the part where, as Alexandra explains, we really become master communicators. Most of it is already in our subconscious – we already have a “communication toolkit”: our brain, body language, tone of voice and the language we use.

“This is where we understand our audience and what they want. Who are they? Why are they here? What do they already understand? As humans, we’re used to adapting to situations and adjusting our toolkit accordingly, but to do it well, we need to be really aware of it. The intention and the interpretation need to line up.”

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CREATING MEANINGFUL REPORTS

Every report should communicate the outcome from the outset. “It needs to tell the client in human terms whether the outcome is going to cause them pleasure or pain,” Alexandra explains. “Is it going to reward them or cost them?”

There needs to be a clear call-to-action too, along with “clear, tangible information”, which clients can take from the report.

And it needs to be put into context. Behind every one of those numbers, says Alexandra, is a human transaction. The client will need to know what it will cost them down the line if they don’t take action, and how they will benefit if they do. “Interpretation and checking the client really understands what you’ve written is a big part of this,” she says.

CONSTRUCTING BETTER EMAILS

Emails form a major part of written communication in the workplace – research estimates we receive around 121 emails every day and send out 71. Yet they are often misinterpreted. As Alexandra points out, we all know that one person who comes across as abrupt in emails, but there are practical steps to ensure our emails are as effective as possible.

Identify your objective and what you’re trying to achieve. Alexandra recommends jotting down a list of your main objectives before you start writing, then give a clear outcome in the email if action is required and state when you’d like the action done by – don’t be vague.

“Be mindful, too, of your choice of words – is there anything that might be misinterpreted?” Read the email out loud after you’ve finished and then ask someone else to read it, without giving them any context, so they won’t be swayed by your initial intention.

PUTTING COMMUNICATION SKILLS INTO PRACTICE

Former AAT apprentice Emily Nicholson has been working at Leeds-based accountancy practice Garbutt-Elliott since 2014. Now studying for her ACCA Level 7, she says her apprenticeship has helped her gain industry knowledge and confidence as well as develop her communication skills.

“My apprenticeship put me face-to-face with clients right from the start,” she recalls. “I’ve had to construct jargon-free emails to explain technical information to clients and I liaise with HMRC. It’s also taught

me to work to deadlines and work with different team members.”

Learning lessons

Nicholson has also delivered induction presentations to trainees, which involved creating concise PowerPoint presentations covering key themes. “It was important not to overcrowd the screen and just cover the main points,” she explains. “If people are having to write down everything that’s on the slide, they won’t be able to listen to what you’re saying, so it’s important to summarise.”

Her apprenticeship, she says, has been about building her skills and applying her learning directly at work, which has helped more difficult concepts to “sink in” better. “When I had to reflect on my learning at the end of my Level 4 apprenticeship, it made me realise how much I’d actually learned.”

Gaining confidence

Alice Spencer is currently on an apprenticeship at Huddersfield-based Sheards Accountancy. She’s developed many skills since the start, including preparing

accounts, networking, presenting technical information at team meetings and building up industry knowledge.

“Studying alongside my apprenticeship has given me more confidence that I can do the role,” she says. “Clients trust me because they can see I’m confident in what I’m telling them. My apprenticeship has enabled me to interact with colleagues and clients on different levels, and there have been plenty of team building opportunities. I’ve also attended a few industry networking events.”



DELIVERING ENGAGING PRESENTATIONS

We've all attended presentations and conferences where the speaker is less than engaging. We become bored and disengaged. We switch off. As a speaker, your job is first to work out your own intention (what you want to get across) and then the intention of the audience (why they are there). But, says Alexandra, there's often a mismatch between what the speaker wants the audience to learn and what the audience thinks they need to learn. So how can you align these two principles?

"Start at the end," she advises. "Think about how you want them to feel by the end of

the presentation. Motivated? Enthusiastic? Curious? Then work backwards. Then, as you're speaking, respond and adapt to your audience. If they're looking sleepy, maybe because you have the after-lunch slot, you'll have to ramp up the energy a bit."

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Alexandra recommends making eye contact with everyone – but not for too long, which can seem threatening. The sweet spot, she says, is 3.5 seconds. During that time, we will have made an instinctive decision whether someone is a friend or foe. Sussing out your audience before your presentation is important too. "Look around the room and see who is in your audience. Introverts will want a bit of acknowledgement, but not too much. Extroverts will seek you out and feed off your energy. These people will be your friends during the presentation, so find them."

BUILDING RAPPORT

Everyone shows different versions of themselves to different people, but building rapport with clients is about being authentic and genuine.

"The side effects of automation and AI within the accountancy sector means we have more opportunity than ever to flourish in these people-centred roles where we are building client relationships," Alexandra says. "But if you put on a persona that's not authentic, not only will it put clients off, it will also attract the wrong people."

It's about trust, too. If a client can't trust your authenticity, chances are they won't be able to trust your expertise. Alexandra talks about "transactional analysis", a psychoanalytical theory that classifies social transaction as three main ego states: the parent, the child and the adult. Ideally, all business transactions should be carried out in an "adult" state – we are calm and rational, and on an equal level with our client. The "child" state is playful and curious but prone to tantrums, whereas the "parent" state is scolding and intimidating. An accountant may unconsciously enter into a childlike state with a client if they feel intimidated by their expertise or enter parent mode if they feel their client isn't taking "enough" responsibility for their business.

"We instinctively enter into one of these ego-states during any social interaction," Alexandra explains. "But during business transactions it's important to be aware of what state we are in and to bring ourselves back into adult mode, so we're on an even pegging. Be aware of your tone of voice and your language. Be the voice of calm."

Ultimately though, building rapport is about building up your authentic persona and your own personal brand. Who is it you want clients to see? What is the professional version of yourself you want to show?

ALEXANDRA BOND BURNETT'S TOP COMMUNICATION TIPS

- Identify your objective before any communication and think about what your audience's motivations might be.
- Read emails out loud before you send them and check the language you've used. Is there anything in there that could be misinterpreted?
- When presenting to a room, don't fidget or flail your arms about, which can be distracting. Instead, move with purpose. Right to illustrate a point, left to answer a question. Be deliberate.
- Be like Yoda in Star Wars and adopt a "mentor mindset". You're there to guide and mentor, not solve a client's problems.

READING BODY LANGUAGE

Body language is an important skill for accountants, but can easily be misread. Crossed arms can look defensive, yet a person with crossed arms may just be cold. Instead, you can tell a lot about someone's body language by the position of their feet. So claims ex-FBI agent, Joe Navarro in his book *What Every BODY is Saying: An Ex-FBI Agent's Guide to Speed-Reading People*. As Alexandra points out, we don't usually want to be near someone's feet if we don't know them. And if we want to leave a situation, our feet will – usually – be pointed away. "Feet are usually pointed in the direction they want to travel in," she explains.

Shoulders are another way of reading body language. We carry a lot of tension in our shoulders, so hunched shoulders can indicate stress. But there's a caveat – it may not mean the immediate situation is the cause of stress. There might have been a row at home or a bad commute. It's why Alexandra advises accountants to spend more time thinking about their own body language rather than that of their clients. "Be aware of what you put out into the room," she says. "Take the time to notice your own body language and how it might come across."

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