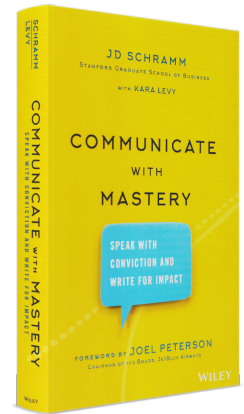


Communicate with Mastery

How to Speak with Conviction and Write for Impact

by **JD Schramm, Ed.D. with Kara Levy**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Projects often fail not because of the vision but the articulation of that vision. In *Communicate with Mastery*, JD Schramm and Kara Levy show how to get the results you desire as a leader and communicator. The authors provide a treasure trove of frameworks and tools for leadership communication as developed and taught over the past decade at Stanford's Graduate School of Business.

Designed for the business leader on the go, *Communicate with Mastery* provides helpful approaches to vexing communication problems leaders face today in speaking and writing to various audiences. With the help of this book, you'll learn how to get the results you need, such as speaking with conviction and writing with impact; tailoring your communication to any goal, setting, or audience; scaling your leadership through effective coaching, and more.

Every time you write or speak, you need to make your words count. *Communicate with Mastery* shows you how.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The “secret sauce” for working toward communication mastery.
- To adopt the right communication mindset.
- Tips and strategies to tailor your communication expertly.
- The importance of coaching, both for yourself and others, for communication mastery.

Introduction

Mastery in communication is an unattainable aspiration. There is no such thing as a perfect email, talk, book, or presentation. Each aspect of leadership communication can always be improved. With each successive iteration, leaders will improve their ability to communicate, knowing that perfect never comes. There is, however, a five-fold secret sauce to empowering leaders:

- 1. Individuality:** Communication development is an individual sport. No two leaders communicate in exactly the same way. Good communication development means doubling down on your strengths as well as adding extra tools to your communication toolbox.
- 2. Relevance:** When leaders write or speak, they should choose topics that matter to them (to the extent possible). The more that passion, interest, or applicability drive the message, the better it will be.
- 3. Iteration:** Continual iteration (with feedback) is the key to improvement. Practice means failing, succeeding, trying new approaches, soliciting and integrating feedback, and then repeating.
- 4. Feedback:** Leaders learn on both sides of the microscope. It's as valuable to give feedback as to receive it—and both of these sides of the coin are a skill you can learn.
- 5. Stakes:** When you increase the visibility and reach of a piece, you increase commitment to making it great. Raise the stakes to encourage the best from yourself.

The foundation of individuality, relevance, iteration, feedback, and stakes provide a remarkable container for leaders to travel from uncertainty, to competence, to expertise, to mastery. You, too, can travel the same continuum using the lessons and activities this book provides. But you cannot learn to swim by watching swim practice from the bleachers—you gotta get in the water.

PART I: SPEAKING WITH CONVICTION AND WRITING FOR IMPACT

Adopting a Communication Mindset

Consider your communication mindset as a platform—every time you deliver a message, whether it's verbal or non-verbal, written or spoken, you'll stand on your communication mindset as the basis for all you do. Your commu-

nication mindset will ask you to think strategically, analytically, and empathetically about your audience and what matters to them. It will ask you to clarify the work that your communication is meant to do.

And it will invite you to make choices about the words, channels, visuals, and multimedia assets that will comprise your message. It is not only a starting place but the foundation for all effective communication.

Know Your AIM

Professors Lynn Russell and Mary Munter co-created the AIM model, which stands for audience, intent, and message.

Audience: the starting point for all communication.

How can you get to know your readers before they open the email or pick up the pitch book? How can you learn about an audience before you are in front of them? LinkedIn and Google searches top the online examples; finding information about individuals, groups, or firms with whom you plan to communicate has never been easier. It's relatively simple to find company bio pages, recent conference presentations, or public blog sites. Further, if you can find somebody who has recently spoken to this group who's willing to share that experience, all the better.

Audience-centric communication provides the foundation for everything else. It's not simply the first part of the AIM model; it's the place all leaders must begin their work to inform, influence, or inspire others.

Intent: your reason for communication. Intent is both the intention in your mind as a speaker or writer and the action in the minds of the audience. It's not simply what you want the audience to think, say, or do. It's what they choose to do as a result of the communication. Set a single clear intent for every communication you have—something from the audience's viewpoint that the speaker intends to bring forward. For example, “embrace our company's technology,” or “endorse my candidacy publicly.”

Message: delivering on your intent with words that matter.

If audience is the “who” and intent is the “why,” message is the “how.” So consider how you will structure and channel your message. The channel for your message is the medium you choose for your communication. If you need to scale your communication to a broad audience, maybe you'll choose to prepare a talk that can be filmed and shared on YouTube; or you might choose to write a blog post that you can publish broadly, such as on Medium or LinkedIn. Once you've chosen your channel, it's time to

Writing matters more than ever now in business, and yet it's one of the hardest things to get people to focus on.

get down to the business of structuring your message.

Consider using an outline to generate some structure. What are the main points you wish to make in your communication? What are the key reasons and examples you can offer in support of those points? Once you've assembled a robust scaffold for your communication, you're ready to write, speak, chat, text, parlay, meet, or communicate in whatever other channel you've selected. Let your information about your audience inform your tone and word choice.

Speaking with Conviction

When it comes to speaking with conviction, the good news is that we're all starting at an advantage. Every one of us has spoken successfully, meaningfully, and authentically before, and every one of us has—at one time or another—felt fully convicted of our ideas and convinced others to feel the same. The magic happens when we can investigate this process enough that we're able to repeat it consistently and, particularly, in high-stakes moments.

Once we open our mouths, we're actually communicating in three important ways: verbal (what we say), vocal (how we say it), and visual (what they see).

Verbal: what you say. This is what most of us think of first when we're crafting a message. These are the words we use to make our ideas known. As you prepare your communication, be intentional about the first words you're going to say. Will you begin with the problem you're solving? The solution you're offering? How will you open to capture (and keep!) your audience's attention?

Then, be equally intentional about the final words you'll speak. What are the last words you'll leave with the audience to make them act, think, or feel differently? And finally, how will you transition between the different sections of your presentation so that there's a sense of cohesion?

Vocal: how you say it. Be intentional about how you use the instrument of your voice—how loud, how soft, how quickly you speak to create excitement, and how slowly you

speak for impact. Without a doubt, the best way to assess your own vocal communication is to record yourself speaking. It's easy to make a quick audio or video recording of yourself on a smartphone or a computer. Try speaking about your ideas, your goals, your company, your projects, or your challenges. Then evaluate your vocal success against five important metrics: pace, volume, clarity, filler words, animation.

Visual: what they see. More than half of what we communicate is non-verbal—neither in what we say or how we say it but in what we are not saying: through our body language, our mannerisms, and the way we use the space and items around us. This includes your eye contact, your facial expressions, your gestures, the way you sit, stand, or move, or even the way you're dressed.

Focus on five core aspects of visual communication that all great presenters should master: eye contact, posture, gestures, physical movement, and speaking space. More important than any other element is sustained, direct eye contact with the people you are addressing. It's important that speakers arrive at a place where they can feel comfortable holding four to seven seconds of direct eye contact with the audience.

Writing for Impact: Active, Brief, and Clear

Writing matters more than ever now in business, and yet it's one of the hardest things to get people to focus on. Why is that? In a world of quick communication, we often forget that one of the most powerful tools for scaling our leadership is the written word. The best writing represents you in a way that feels as authentic as a conversation and connects you to an audience beyond your immediate circle.

The building blocks of business writing are the ABCs. All business writing should be Active, Brief, and Clear.

Active. Adjust your writing to the active voice whenever and wherever possible. This usually requires two steps: First, we have to be able to identify the passive voice in our writing. Second, we have to replace the passive voice with something more energetic and engaging.

The active sentence puts the protagonist at the beginning of the sentence. For example, “Tim kicked the ball,” rather than “The ball was kicked by Tim.” It more immediately answers the question “Who did what?” Not only is that sentence more concise and engaging, but it gives credit to Tim. When we write in the passive voice, we downgrade the human element of our communication—and it’s the human element to which our audiences most strongly connect.

Brief. The attention spans of our readers are likely not what we would hope them to be. At best, they are unpredictable. As a leader, each of us wants to be known as someone whose message is clear, concise, and unambiguous, and it takes time to write that way. But if we invest the time, our readers won’t have to. And it’s far more likely that they will make it through our document, grasp our message, and remember it.

Try eliminating weak verbs like “is,” “was,” “were,” “has,” “have,” and “had.” Using a more powerful verb creates a more engaging sentence that requires fewer words. You might also try reducing a phrase to a single word. “Made a decision” could become “decided.” “Came into the room” could be “arrived.”

Clear. If you’ve succeeded in writing actively and briefly, your writing should now be clear. To make sure, think back to the AIM framework. Ask yourself, “After reading this document, will the audience take the action I want them to take? Is it clear what I’m asking them to do? Is there any thought, phrase, or sentence that will cause the reader to stumble?” If there’s a point in an email where a reader has to re-read a paragraph for clarity, it’s not the reader’s failing—it’s the writer’s.

PART II: TAILORING YOUR COMMUNICATION TO GOAL, SETTING, OR IDENTITY

Tailoring Your Communication to Your Goal

Though you should always consider your intent when you’re crafting a communication, sometimes you can build on that exercise by using specific media, formatting, language, or information ordering to meet specific goals. The more measurable and specific your goal, the better you’ll be able to customize your communication to meet the needs of your audience. Here are some of the most frequent use cases.

Pitching

Let’s focus on the type of pitching that challenges entrepreneurs every day: pitching your business venture or collaboration. Entrepreneurs should start with content when creating an engaging, memorable pitch. Chris Lipp’s *The Startup Pitch* offers a very simple four-part structure to an effective pitch:

- 1. Problem.** As you begin by describing the problem, it’s important to describe it clearly, making sure that your audience understands the pain of the problem. Why is this such an issue? What are the repercussions of this problem and why do they matter? Raise the stakes by noting any trends you see for this problem. Is it getting worse as the population ages? Do environmental, economic, or time-based factors increase its impact over time? If that’s true, then you can make the point that the need for your solution will only increase over time. Be sure that your audience understands the immediacy of the problem before you move on to phase two: your solution.
- 2. Solution.** Chris Lipp opens his conversation of solution by addressing the importance of your USP, or unique selling proposition. Why are you able to solve this issue in a way that others haven’t been able to yet? What’s going to set your startup apart from anyone else who’s trying to work in that space? In other words: why you, why this, why now? Think of Steve Jobs introducing the iPod Nano: He didn’t tell us it had 16GB of memory or that it was two inches wide by three inches deep. Instead, he said, “Imagine a thousand songs in your pocket.”
- 3. Market.** As you move your focus to market concerns, you’ll want to talk about the initial target market you’ve identified as well as any expansions you anticipate beyond that initial market. Share an estimate of the market size. Here’s where you demonstrate that you’ve done your research—not only about what the market is but what potential it holds. As you discuss the market, you’ll want to effectively capture the advantages of serving this market of consumers that you’re targeting.
- 4. Business.** Last, you’ll want to cover the details of the business itself. What is your go-to-market strategy? Specifically, you’ll want to share when and how you’re planning to bring this product or service to the market. It’s important to share your model for earning revenue and to offer some clarity around when you think that revenue model will begin to be profitable for you.

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Tailoring Your Communication to Your Setting

Just as you'll think carefully about your specific audience before crafting your communication, you should also think carefully about the setting in which you'll operate. Your communication strategy will be very different if you are presenting on the TED stage than if you are leading a team meeting.

Meetings. Before you even send out the invitation for the meeting, think about who needs to be there. Is everyone essential? Next, choose the location and the medium for the meeting. If you can bring everyone together in one place, do that. Tone will be easier to read, flow will be faster, and you won't have to deal with the vagaries of technology. But if you can't do that, you can and should still have a clear agenda and intent for your meeting.

Once you're in the meeting, stick to the guidelines you've set for yourself. If you're leading the meeting, get there early. Start on time, and end on time. Make your deck easy for your audience to follow by guiding them directly to each slide. Use highlights or sticky notes to emphasize important sections.

You'll also want to think about how to balance the voices in the room. Too often, meetings become the domain of extroverts. Look for opportunities to include voices that aren't as forthcoming.

Virtual meetings. Virtual meetings come with their own unique set of challenges and opportunities. On the plus side, virtual meetings make last-minute communication possible, are a low-cost alternative to pricey travel, and can allow you to include leaders who would otherwise not be able to collaborate with you.

But technology, while always progressing, can sink you if you're having connection, audio, or video problems. People tend to be less interactive virtually, so it's harder to gauge the tone of the group and how they're feeling. Time zone differences can make virtual meetings hard to schedule. Suggest that your audio calls be conducted over video. This will give you the all-important advantage of some visual connection with your colleagues and make you feel more present.

If you can't create a video opportunity, add as much dynamism as you can into your experience of an audio call. Use a headset rather than speaker phone, and walk around your room. Gesture as you would in person. Focus on vocal variety, energy, and confidence. You'll need to compensate for the lack of these visual cues with your voice and your word choice.

On stage (TED Talks, LOWKeynotes, and the like). Without question, TED has changed the game for what's expected of presentations. To succeed in an onstage setting, work first has to be done on the content, the idea itself. Only after the idea, the argument, the stories, and their supports are crystallized should you focus on delivery. Divide your lead time in half, and spend the first half on content, then the second half on delivery.

When it comes time for delivery, familiarize yourself with the space in which you'll be presenting. The stakes are higher for this sort of a presentation, so don't let your environment be the factor that derails you—particularly when you can do the work to make it familiar ahead of time.

Tailoring Your Communication to Your Identity

Our personal identities are not just an accessory to our communication; they inform our unique perspectives, leadership styles, and goals. We may perceive elements of our identities that we don't think twice about when communicating as leaders, but often we will need to reconcile core elements of who we are with best practices for how to communicate the ideas that matter to us.

Our identities exist in constant conversation with our environments, so use these suggestions as a starting point for how to navigate your personal identity within the context where you lead.

Leading in your second (or third, or fourth) language. In our increasingly global world, many of us may find ourselves presenting, speaking, negotiating, writing, studying, or working in a language that is not our native tongue. When you are leading in a language that is not

PART III: SCALING YOUR LEADERSHIP: THE COMMUNICATION COACHING PROCESS

your own, it's important to remember that except where it impedes clarity, your identity—your accent, your traditions, your values—are central to the leadership you offer.

Your accent tells part of your story. It informs the path you took to arrive at your current leadership moment. And it offers useful context to your peers. Claim your international identity and own it proudly.

The only reason you might want to approach your leadership differently than a native speaker is if others have difficulty understanding your ideas. Clarity is key—be sure you can be understood in the dominant language of the group. If you are writing, seek out a coach who can encourage you to clarify unwieldy word choices or awkward constructions.

Leading as a woman. All of us operate with a mix of strength and warmth. As we become more skilled on each of these axes, we gain admiration from our audience. This is often more of a continuum stretching from warmth at one end to strength at the other.

Women may wish to try to read their audience and engage with more warmth or more strength based on what the situation requires.

Professor Allison Kluger offers these tips to enable women to be more effective communicators. Here are a few:

- **Grasp the landscape.** This is something Allison suggests women seem to do intuitively better than men; consider this your superpower. Take note of the setting, players, and issues, and use your knowledge of the terrain to navigate the meeting.
- **Reduce the apologies.** Too often women apologize unnecessarily. Don't apologize as a way to start or end a conversation. Be accountable for your mistakes, but don't overcorrect.
- **Accept compliments.** Accept and respond to a compliment so that you can own your own power.
- **Use humor.** Often the warmest way to diffuse a tough situation is through humor. Allison suggests comments like, "John, that sounded really good when I said it 10 minutes ago" to remind people of your efforts.
- **Manage the interruptions.** Research shows that men are more likely to interrupt women than the other way around; prepare for that, preempt it when you can, and call it out gently and firmly when it still occurs.

You cannot improve your communication skills simply by reading a book. Communication mastery is about getting better and better at speaking and writing each time you communicate.

Without a coach, you may simply be reinforcing bad habits, creating even more to unlearn when you really need to step up as leader with a larger span of influence. First, let's focus on how to be coached, then how to coach others, and finally how to create a culture that embraces communication coaching.

When Being Coached

Each coaching engagement differs, but one thing that all successful coaching relationships share is an active and engaged participant. Here are some ways to maximize your effective engagement with your communication coach so you can meet your goals effectively.

Establishing your goals. You've got to know what you want to accomplish before you engage a coach, even though you will likely have to refine those goals once you begin work with a coach. As you consider your coaching goals, remember to stay flexible.

Set a few specific goals you wish to achieve through coaching—perhaps three. Then you might begin to look for a coach with expertise aligned with those goals, but don't be too rigidly attached. Your goals may change once you begin working with a coach who has a different perspective on your challenges and knows more about how to approach them than you do.

Selecting your coach. In some metropolitan areas there may be a network like the International Association of Business Communicators, which may allow you to find suitable possibilities. You may also want to contact local colleges or universities to see whether they have adjunct faculty who do this work as well.

You might reference the directories of two well-regarded coach training and accreditation organizations, ICF (International Coach Federation) found at coachfederation.org, and IAC (International Association of Coaching).

The best way to find suitable coaches can be word of mouth. Ask colleagues if they have suggestions, or see

Remember that what is obvious to you may not be obvious to the people you are coaching.

whether your HR office maintains a list of approved vendors for coaching. If it doesn't feel too risky to you, put a note out on LinkedIn or your company's Slack channel.

Adopting a coaching mindset. When you're being coached on writing, speaking, or a combination of both, it's important to keep an open mind, to take risks, and to try the techniques your coach recommends before disregarding them. A talented coach may have you engage in activities or exercises focused on helping you develop, but they may not be directly tied to the final product you are working on. Trust your coach.

For the best results, you'll want to develop a relationship with a coach over a period of time. That period may be a few weeks or a few months or even a few years, depending on your bandwidth and on the scope of the skill you're building. This allows your coach to know your strengths and opportunity areas more intimately, and allows you to build increasing trust in your coach.

Reiteration will be central to your successful coaching engagement. It's the virtuous cycle of feedback and practice, feedback and practice that will allow a leader to get the greatest benefit from coaching.

Simply put: The more you put in, the more you'll get out. If you practice repeatedly, you'll be able to refine your technique, hone your muscle memory so that the effort is less difficult, and feel confident that you've done all you can to ensure your best performance.

When Coaching Others

Let's explore some of the behaviors, attitudes, and tools that make a coach truly effective. To coach others effectively, you need to exhibit

- **Patience.** Remember that what is obvious to you may not be obvious to the people you are coaching. Not only are they gaining familiarity with a new skill, but they will likely be reconciling their previous way of communicating with a new approach. Be patient and meet the

people you're coaching where they are.

- **A focus on process over product.** A good writing coach will invest in asking leading questions to help the writer recognize opportunities for change, rather than editing the document.
- **Flexibility and creativity.** While you should always have a confident vision of where the coaching engagement and each coaching session are headed, a great coach will demonstrate full willingness to scrap the plan and address the issues that are top of mind for the leader. If one technique doesn't appear to be a good fit, try another.
- **Focus on the person you're coaching, not on yourself.** You will be better at the skills you are offering to the leaders you work with, and it will be valuable to model their use for clarity. But then, step back. Let them practice. Let the work be theirs. Let the words be theirs. Empower them to use the new skill partly your way and partly their way so that it feels authentic, repeatable, and effective.
- **Empathy.** Your coaching relationship is just one small chapter in the leader's experience. It may bring up issues of identity, worthiness, purpose, or fear. Be as empathetic as you can in recognition that the coaching process is personal and that what is personal can be sensitive.

Slow down, listen, and let the leaders you're coaching engage in the material in the way they need. It's also helpful to define what a good coach is not. Ideally, as a coach you should not be an editor, a ghost writer, a content creator, a philosopher, or a psychologist (although you may have moments of dipping lightly into each of these areas occasionally, depending on your experience). You are there to guide leaders with new tools, new approaches, and new skills that they can use to communicate effectively.

Together you may decide that you have a particular finish line, but your focus should not be on completing the goal for the leaders as much as outfitting them to do the work themselves, with your guidance.

Creating a Coaching Culture

No great coaching relationship can exist in a vacuum. As with any endeavor we undertake, we excel when we operate within a culture that's conducive to our success. So what kind of culture promotes coaching success? We can promote radical candor in our organizations, model and mirror the behaviors we hope others will try, and ensure that the right coaching is coming from (and to!) the right people.

Everyone can coach (but not everyone should).

Even the smartest, most motivated leaders need dedicated practice, feedback, and iteration to approach mastery of a new skill. Maintaining a clear distinction between skills coaching and offering a performance review can go a long way toward creating a culture open to coaching.

As a leader, it's important to avoid saying, "May I offer you some coaching on this?" when you mean, "I need to give you feedback on your performance." Effective coaching must be divorced from performance evaluations, and should be offered in a non-threatening, risk-embracing setting. That's why, for the most part, leaders seek outside consultants or coaches to coach their teams.

Embracing radical candor. In Kim Scott's best-selling *Radical Candor*, she believes that there are two intersecting axes that provide the framework for effective feedback. We must both "care personally" and "challenge directly." Only when you are strong in both of these dimensions is radical candor possible. If you can interact with your team with both "caring directly" and "challenging personally" in mind, you can model the type of feedback they should offer to you and to each other. Kim Scott's book is one of the most important titles for leaders to read.

Mirroring and modeling best practices. As you consider the creation of your organization's coaching culture, think about your personal communication. What are you offering others, verbally or nonverbally, as a suggestion for how they might share their ideas and interact? The more you can embody the style that works best for you, the more passive coaching you will offer to your community.

The next step is in your hands. You can only reap the dividends of your reading if you take action. Commit to writing and speaking with greater mastery, but also inspire others on your team to do the same.

When it comes to leadership communication, it's not the presentation you give, the report you write, or the message your audiences receive that matters; what matters is the message they both recall and retell.

We can only approach mastery in communication; we cannot achieve it. With every email we write and every talk we deliver, we get incrementally better and better. That's what mastery is all about. Approach mastery in your own distinct way. Perfection is impossible, but growth is always attainable.

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- *Conversational Intelligence: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results* by Judith Glaser



JD Schramm founded and led the Mastery in Communication Initiative at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, where he's served as lecturer in Organizational Behavior since 2007. He has spoken at TED and TEDx events and has coached scores of others to do the same. His writing has appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Huffington Post*, and *HBR Online*. Kara Levy is an executive communication and leadership coach based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her collaborations in Silicon Valley range from household names like Facebook and Salesforce to unique startups just beginning to craft their company cultures.

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