

The Quick and Dirty Guide To Communication For Engineers

Why is communication so important for engineers?

You consistently make great designs. The care and passion you put into them makes people stop and take notice. And while they notice, they inevitably have questions. As you answer, you see their eyes glaze over and you've lost them. They feign understanding and move along.

Or, you're working on a project and you ask a colleague for help. They say they know what you're asking for, but when they show you their progress, it's not at all what you wanted. Now you're both frustrated. Were you not clear in your request or were they not listening? Or both?

These are just two examples of how communication is important in engineering. Unfortunately, engineers are often bad at communicating. There's a reason we're often stereotyped as poor, confusing communicators or people who don't communicate at all.

However, effective communication isn't just a skill preferred by companies. It's a mission-critical one—even in engineering. It's not enough to be a great designer and have great technical know-how. You need to be able to communicate tech specs, design intent and business goals to employees, managers, colleagues, clients and key project stakeholders. In short, communicating well makes you stand out at work, opens up doors to new opportunities, and improves your work's quality and efficiency.

If you don't communicate well—or would like to improve—fear not. Communication is a skill that can be learned through smart strategies and regular practice. It's not a magic art or a secret formula. It's a series of relatively easy, perfectly understandable steps you can begin to apply today.

That's where this guide comes in. It will give you the tools you need to start communicating better with both engineer and non-engineer colleagues and clients.

In it, you'll learn the **benefits of great communication**, the three **most common communication methods**, ways to **approach interactions** with your key audiences, additional tips to **take your communication to the next level** and a **communications checklist** to help keep these tips top of mind as you continue on with your daily work.

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The Benefits of Communicating Well

You know communication is important. But do you know all the practical benefits good communication skills offer you and your career in engineering? Here are four major reasons you'll want to start upping your communication skills right now.

1. It Makes Your Work Easier and Better

Better communication means better designs. Clear instructions mean more efficient processes and deliverables. Good conversations lead to great job performance. When you communicate more effectively with colleagues, team members and managers, you improve how everyone works. That improves the quality of your output, making everyone look good. In turn, your job becomes easier, your work is better and life is just more enjoyable (and less full of headaches). What's not to like?

2. It Makes You Look Good

Nobody wants a reputation as the genius everyone dislikes or can't understand. Just because your designs are brilliant doesn't mean that your job is done. Communicating well during and after the design process is the part that really makes you look good. After all, if everyone agrees the final design is amazing, but working with you wasn't, what's the point? Everything from clear instructions, straightforward project specs, detailed instructions and notes, and understandable explanations will make you look like a rockstar and have everyone requesting to work with you.

3. It Creates Better and New Business Opportunities

When you communicate effectively with bosses, teams and clients, you create new opportunities for your business and for yourself. You probably can easily talk through your design with other engineers and your boss. However, clients often want to hear more of a narrative about how the design will work. You'll turn more than a few heads by confidently presenting to different groups. This could easily lead to new projects and clients or recognition from peers and managers.

4. It Grows Your Career

Obviously, stellar design work will keep your career growing. Add to that stellar communication skills and you'll soar to new heights. Let's face it: Engineers are stereotyped as bad communicators for a reason. This offers immense opportunities for those that *are* great communicators. The ability to articulate your design intent and effectively cater to different types of audiences is not seen often. Make it your goal to learn and implement these skills.

The Three Types of Communication—And How To Excel At Each One

There are a number of different ways to communicate and everyone has their own preferred method. Some need information spelled out in email. Some need face-to-face conversations to ask questions. Some even like written notes. The goals of any communication, regardless of the method, are comprehension and retention.

You'll want to practice and master each of the three major types of communication so that you can achieve those goals no matter who you're communicating with. Here's how:

1. Written Communication

Many people like written (or typed) communications so that they have a record of what was said and something to refer back to. **Email** is the most common, but businesses are now implementing **intranet sites, instant message systems and internal social media** platforms (such as [Yammer](#)) that only employees can access.

When using written platforms, use the following communication tips:

- **Be clear:** Make sure your instructions are simple and concise to avoid misinterpretation.
- **Use bullet points, lists or steps:** Our eyes are drawn quickly to bulleted or numbered lists. If we're skimming, this information will stand out as important.
- **Include helpful resources:** If you think that help will be needed, offer resources that may answer questions before they're asked. These can be links to websites, attached documents or guidance on who may have answers for particular queries.

2. Verbal Communication

With the addition of digital methods of communication, it may seem like actual conversations are on the decline. However, plenty of people prefer spoken information. This allows them to ask clarifying questions that may save everyone time in the long run.

Verbal communication mostly happens during **one-on-one conversations, over the phone and in meetings**. While most of us dread meetings, they can be useful for getting information out to a group of people at once. The key to making meetings useful is to create an agenda to keep you on track so you don't waste anyone's time.

The drawback to verbal communication is that we retain the least amount of information from hearing (versus seeing or doing). With that in mind, here are tips on getting the most from verbal communication:

- **Take notes:** Information has a tendency to get distorted or forgotten when only heard. Back it up with good notes.
- **Ask questions:** Never leave (or hang up the phone) without knowing what you need to do. Ask questions until you are clear on your direction.
- **Summarize next steps:** At the end of the meeting or conversation, summarize what you heard and key takeaways to make sure you're on the same page and there are no misunderstandings.

3. Active Listening

Communication is a two-way street. While the first two types were on the “giving” side, active listening is the “receiving” side. And, it may just be the key to successful communication. There are distractions everywhere so it takes hard work to actively listen to what is being said. Plus, we think faster than people speak, which makes it even harder to keep our attention. In order to tune in to what people are telling us, we need to practice active listening.

Active listening is making a concerted effort to truly understand the message that is being conveyed. The team at [MindTools](#), a company that offers tools to help you excel in your career, offers the following [active listening tips](#):

- **Pay attention:** Put your phone away. Shut off the TV. Give your full attention and eye contact to the speaker. And, don't think ahead to how you're going to answer.
- **Encourage the speaker to continue:** Your body language should be letting the speaker know you are listening. Lean in, nod and guide them along with verbal cues.
- **Clarify what you've heard:** Make sure you're understanding key points of the story by summarizing or rephrasing what you've heard and asking if you've summarized it correctly.
- **Don't interrupt:** Although your inclination might be to ask a question or make a statement right when you hear something, hold off until the other party is done making a point or there's a natural pause.
- **Be candid, but respectful:** When it comes time to give your feedback, be sure to do so respectfully. Be open, but don't attack the speaker.

How To Communicate With Different Audiences

Regardless of your position, you have multiple audiences that need information from you. There are managers, subordinates, colleagues and clients. Each requires a different approach and considerations. Below are tips to optimize your communication with each.

- **Managers:** Make their lives easier with these communications skills.
 - **Keep it concise:** Be respectful of their time. Whether it's face-to-face or email, keep your message brief and to the point.
 - **Offer a solution:** There will be times when issues come up (a nice way of saying you screwed something up). When this happens, offer a brief summary of the situation that includes a recommended solution. Your manager will appreciate that you've thought the problem through and have found ways to deal with it.
 - **Tell them what you need them to do:** If you need help with something, make it clear what you're asking them to do. If you're just informing them of a situation, but don't need them to do anything, tell them that, too.
- **Subordinates/Direct Reports:** Be clear and direct to successfully communicate with those who report to you.
 - **Ask for a summary:** Make sure your message or directive is understood by asking for a summary. Also, ask if there are any questions you can clarify to help them get started.
 - **Ask for feedback:** On a regular basis, ask for feedback on your communication style. Is there a way to resonate better with your workers? Are you slipping into bad habits that you don't realize? Give them the chance to tell you and ask them to be candid.
 - **Think before you speak:** As a manager, it's important that you're professional at all times. If you're giving feedback, make sure that your remarks are aimed at an outcome, not at the workers themselves. It only takes one slip to damage the morale of your coworkers for a long time.
 - **Watch your tone and body language:** Make sure your tone and body language match the message you're sending.
- **Colleagues:** Communicate well with your colleagues for better collaboration and a more productive team.
 - **Adapt to your office:** Companies tend to have agreed-upon communication styles and preferences (sometimes unspoken). Figure out what works best in your office and adapt your approach to fit.
 - **Ask for advice:** If you find it hard to approach some of your colleagues or have trouble relating to them, try asking for their advice. Most people are happy to give advice and feel flattered that you asked. This gives you a chance to see their thought process and also may give you perspectives you can use.

- o **Be direct:** When asking for help, be direct about what you need colleagues to do. Make sure your request isn't misunderstood and allow them to ask questions.
- o **Offer to help:** By helping others, they're more likely to want to help you in return. Check with your co-workers to see if you can lend a hand or take anything off their plate. It can be a small thing, but will be very much appreciated.
- **Clients:** Speak the same language as your clients.
 - o **Be easy to understand:** Clients don't want to hear technical jargon and definitions. Adapt your presentation to explain things in the language they use and understand.
 - o **Results-focused, not process-focused:** Concentrate on explaining the results of projects you're working on, not necessarily the technical details of how you got there. Tell clients how your work helped reach their business goals, not the processes or how you set it up (unless they ask).
 - o **More than facts:** While you clearly know your facts and figures, let your guard down and let your personality show through. Clients like to work with people they feel comfortable around. Get to know them and let them get to know you.
 - o **Show your passion:** Your client will be impressed by your passion in your work, especially as it relates to them.

Communication Tips Reference Sheet

Building communications skills takes a lot of practice—and reminders. However, other than your boss (if you're doing something wrong), your co-workers aren't likely to give you those reminders. So, we've included this checklist that you can print and refer back to every so often to keep these tips close at hand. These are a quick summary of what we've recommended throughout this guide.

<p>The Three Types of Communication—And How To Excel At Each One</p> <p>Written Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Be clear.● Use bullet points, lists or steps.● Include help resources. <p>Verbal Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Take notes.● Ask questions.● Summarize next steps. <p>Active Listening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Pay attention.● Encourage the speaker to continue.● Clarify what you've heard.● Don't interrupt.● Be candid, but respectful.	<p>How To Communicate With Different Audiences</p> <p>Managers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Keep it concise.● Offer a solution.● Tell them what you need them to do. <p>Subordinates/Direct Reports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ask for a summary.● Ask for feedback.● Think before you speak.● Watch your tone and body language. <p>Colleagues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Adapt to your office.● Ask for advice.● Be direct.● Offer to help. <p>Clients</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Be easy to understand.● Results-focused, not process-focused● More than facts.● Show your passion.
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Looking For Even More Resources To Further Your Career?

Look no further than [The CAD Professional's Guide to Faster R&D](#), our free ebook on increasing CAD productivity through smart habits, tools and tips. [Download it today](#) if you want to speed up and improve your CAD work.

