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# HBR's 10 Must Reads On Communication



## Synopsis

The best leaders know how to communicate clearly and persuasively. How do you stack up? If you listen to nothing else on communicating effectively, you should at least hear these 10 articles. We've combed through hundreds of articles in the Harvard Business Review archive and selected the most important ones to help you express your ideas with clarity and impact - no matter what the situation. Leading experts such as Deborah Tannen, Jay Conger, and Nick Morgan provide the insights and advice you need to:

- Pitch your brilliant idea - successfully
- Connect with your audience
- Establish credibility
- Inspire others to carry out your vision
- Adapt to stakeholders' decision-making styles
- Frame goals around common interests
- Build consensus and win support

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Harvard Business Review's 10 Must Reads On Communication gives readers compelling data and practical information on the many important factors involved in helping leaders communicate. The articles were professionally written for leaders to pull out useful and real-world principles that everyday leaders would encounter as they strive to present and express mission, vision, plans, projects or any other message they may desire to others they lead. The compilation of articles in this book spends about half of its entirety on the topic of persuasion. Williams and Miller in *Change the Way You Persuade*, challenge presenters to understand the decision-making styles of their audience and plan accordingly. "Knowing the general characteristics of the different styles can help you better tailor your presentations and arguments to your audience."

(Williams & Miller, 2002, p. 4). The five decision-making styles they propose are charismatic, thinker, skeptic, follower and controller. Curbing each presentation to these styles will promote better success for leaders who are trying to persuade others. Cialdini adds in his article *Harnessing the Science of Persuasion* that the ability to persuade is one of a leader's most critical tools. He gives and explains six principles that when mastered can "bring scientific rigor to the business of securing consensus, cutting deals and winning concessions" (Cialdini, 2001, p.26). The six principles are liking, reciprocity, social proof, consistency, authority, and scarcity. By engaging in these principles leaders can begin understanding how others analyze information and make their decisions. Tannen takes a linguistic perspective on the idea of persuasion in her article, *The Power of Talk*. She states, "Everything that is said must be said in a certain way – in a certain tone of voice, at a certain rate of speed, and with a certain degree of loudness" (1995, p. 44). This article shows how powerful the way an individual speaks can impact not just an audience but individual relationships in association with persuasive communication. Finally, Conger's article, *The Necessary Art of Persuasion* lays out four essential elements that help a leader to prepare a strategy of persuasion. 1) Establish credibility, 2) Frame goals for common ground, 3) Provide evidence, 4) Connect emotionally. Conger is convincing in the way he explains persuasion as more of an art than how Cialdini views it, more scientific. As the reader moves further into this book they come to *Is Silence Killing Your Company?*, an article by Perlow and Williams. The authors in this article clearly explain how silence can be detrimental to a company in many circumstances. If employees don't feel empowered to speak up conflict can stay bottled up and creativity will be stifled. They speak to three ways an individual can break the silence; recognize your power, act deviantly, and build a coalition. Each of these are important steps to take but the author does not address the importance of how the business culture affects whether these steps will be successful. Each step here can be stopped in its tracks if the culture of your company doesn't encourage communication or doesn't have an intentional process for it. However, if the company culture does encourage speaking up these steps can help an individual thrive. The next two articles, *How to Become an Authentic Speaker* by Nick Morgan and *Telling Tales* by Stephen Denning encourage speakers to be intentionally authentic in their speaking and utilize storytelling strategically in a message or presentation. Morgan's focus is to help the reader see how "your intent is crucial when you plan to be open with your audience, connect with your audience, passionate about your topic, and how you listen to your audience. These

Intentions assist a communicator and will help them come across as authentic. Denning's article helps to guide a leader to use the power of narrative in a business setting. He cautions an individual to avoid using lengthy details that will make executives eye glaze over. The author takes an approach that storytelling can help bring alive certain situations and bring a creative flare to what might be otherwise boring data. Denning states, "Storytelling can translate those dry and abstract numbers into compelling picture of a leader's goals" (2004, p. 118). Elsbach's article, How to Pitch a Brilliant Idea tends to focus more on the "catcher" than the "pitcher." She suggests the catcher, those receiving the presentation, categorizes pitchers into showrunners (smooth and professional), artists (quirky and unpolished), and neophytes (inexperienced and naive). The author suggests that each pitcher should encompass one of these three categories when they pitch something to their executives. It is hard to imagine that an executive would want, as this author titles, a neophyte pitching an idea. Inexperienced, naive and ignorant are not necessarily the best quality traits for someone pitching a brilliant idea. In The Five Messages Leaders Must Manage, Hamm challenges leaders with five messages that leaders should portray in order to avoid miscommunication. Hamm articulates how important a clear, focused vision can be. It will be communicated from a leader to those he/she manages who will be impacted by; the organizational hierarchy, financial results, the leader's understanding of his or her job, time management, and the corporate culture. When these messages can be communicated throughout the organization it forces top to bottom employees to unify and communicate the same thing together. In the final article of the book, Taking the Stress Out of Stressful Conversations, Weeks persuasively boils down stressful conversations to taking on three different forms; "I have bad news for you," "What's going on here," "Your attacking me." Weeks' article acknowledges there are times, especially in conflict or stressful times, that how we react, what and how we speak, and our preparation will determine successful communication. Overall, HBR's 10 Must Reads On Communication is very beneficial in helping leaders to communicate with more clarity and passion. I would recommend this book to not just business leaders but for anyone that is looking to better communication in their specific area. The principles in this book can be used and achieved in many different environments. One critique on this book would be to limit the articles on persuasion. The topic of communication is extremely important and widely written on. I would like to see topics in the

ten articles be different from the each other.

An inevitable fact is that there will always be conversations which will bring about stress, the key is figuring out how to deal with these dialogues when they come up. Weeks's (2001) article highlighted in HBR's 10 Must Reads on Communication speaks to the three main communication errors individuals face in the workplace and also addresses three ways to counteract possible aversions that this stress brings about. Weeks (2001) examines the types of stressful conversations one could have. She sums them up as the following introductions into a potential altercation: "I have bad news for you," "What's going on here?," and "You are attacking me!" She suggests that these are three of the phrases that lead to individuals feeling offended, confused and frustrated. She goes on to give three examples, one for each of these scenarios, which help frame her position. I believe she does a great job at making her points in an easy to understand and intriguing way. We all know how important communication is whether in a marriage, between friends and especially within the workplace. I've often heard the phrase uttered, "Communication is key," to which I would have to agree. In order to effectively communicate Weeks suggests three ways in which we can prepare ourselves for a stressful conversation. "A good start is to become aware of your own weaknesses to people and situations" (Weeks, 2001). Understanding your vulnerabilities is an important way to know how you will react to a certain situation. "Once you know what your danger zones are, you can anticipate your vulnerability and improve your response" (Weeks, 2001, p. 173). The second suggestion to prepare would be to rehearse with a neutral friend, someone who is not going to judge you and someone who does not have the same communication style, this way it ensures impartiality (Weeks, 2001, p. 173). One quote that I really appreciated that brought the point home was "when your friend says 'Tell me how you want to say this,' an interesting thing happens: your phrasing is often much better, much more temperate, usable" (Weeks, 2001, p. 174). Then thirdly, be aware of body language. Nearly half of what is said can be interpreted through what you aren't saying. After preparations for the conversation have been established Weeks proposes three additional ways to manage the actual conversation. She recommends honoring thy partner, disarming by restating intent and fighting the tactics not the people (Weeks, 2001). Observing these theories while having a conversation can keep the stress to a minimum. "People

think stressful conversations are inevitable. And they are. But that doesn't mean they have to have bad resolutions" (Weeks, 2001, p. 179). Weeks' (2001) article is comprehensible in terms of taking away easy, tangible points that can be implemented immediately. I really valued her statement that "We need to learn communication skills, in the same way that we learn CPR: well in advance, knowing that when we need to use them, the situation will be critical and tense" (Weeks, 2001, p. 176). In order to implement these new skills within my life I have come up with a heuristic approach that I could incorporate whenever I face a stressful conversation. Always remember to alleviate stress by:

- Speaking honorably to your partner
- Tuning the phrasing
- Rehearsing with a friend
- Evaluating how you would react
- Stating your intentions
- Separating tactics from people

With these ideas in mind and developing a greater self-awareness of vulnerabilities anyone can walk away from a stressful conversation feeling confident that they didn't explode and kept it professional.

"The advice and tools described in this article can be helpful in unilaterally reducing the strain in stressful conversations" (Weeks, 2001, p. 180). If you want an easy to grasp read on how to manage a stressful conversation I would highly recommend giving this your attention.

**References**

Weeks, H., (2001). Taking the Stress Out of Stressful Conversations. In Harvard Business Review Press (Eds.), *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Communication* (pp. 165-180). Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

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