



## Navigating the Gray: 4 Tactics for Better Communications

Jan 30, 2015 Vivian Ciampi, Principal, Professional Coaching LLC

Globalization, technology, rampant regulation and fierce competition at every turn have made today's workplace more complicated than ever. This is causing professionals at all levels to flounder as they attempt to navigate the "Gray Area" of a company—the environment and culture that manifests from the multi-faceted challenges and forces that organizations face.

While an intangible, the Gray Area is a very real phenomenon driven by human nature, internal and external politics, industry guidelines, company protocols and market pressures. The importance of learning how to effectively communicate within this ambiguous environment cannot be understated. Too many in our nation's workforce are ill-equipped to engage an audience with ease and intention, which is keeping them from realizing their full potential and attain a maximum measure of success.



Ciampi: "The most valued and successful person in any business is the one who can translate facts, figures, and concepts into actionable ideas."

With this in mind, here are four tactical tips to help professionals at every level become more effective communicators and gain better control of their career trajectory:

**1. Become the “Universal Translator.”** The most valued and successful person in any business is the one who can translate facts, figures, and concepts into actionable ideas that will make sense and resonate with the appropriate parties.

The Universal Translator:

- Steps out of their comfort zone or discipline;
- Avoids insider department lingo or technical terms and focuses on the audience at hand;
- Suggests specific ways others can move forward;
- Presents the vision, plan or theory in a way that is clear, crisp, confident and above all, ACTIONABLE.

This person is so successful because of their ability to translate complex or technical concepts into strategic steps that will impact the bottom line. If others can understand, relate to and rally around what you are presenting, it is sure to yield winning results.

**2. Meet before you meet.** There are few things more painful and embarrassing than getting completely derailed in a meeting by a barrage of questions. The best way to avoid being pulled off track is:

- Determine who your key constituents are and set up one-on-one meetings with all of them a few days ahead of time;
- Socialize the topic with each of the constituents individually, making sure you understand their perspective and answer any questions or concerns they have.

By doing this, you will undoubtedly gain valuable information that will not only help you refine your presentation, but also be poised and prepared to actually present in the real meeting.

**3. Stop, ask and listen!** Today’s fast-paced workplace makes it easy to end up plowing through important conversations. Instead of yielding a productive outcome, it often produces more work and headaches.

- The best way to approach key conversations that need a little extra finesse or persuasion is:
- Stop and take a breath so you don’t rush into your agenda in the first five minutes of the conversation;
- Ask open ended questions, such as “What’s going on in your department?” or “How has this system helped you?”
- Once the person you’re engaged with has the opportunity to respond, make 200% sure you are *actively* listening—not just hearing them—and that you give them ample time to convey their thoughts without your interjection, direction or interruption.
- When you do finally have the chance to speak, stay focused on who your audience is and what they care about to ensure that your dialogue and key points are streamlined and succinct.

The majority of the time, you will gain key insights from these conversations and will be able to craft a more informed response that better resonates with the person(s) you're speaking with.

**. Converse with clarity.** The use of insider jargon and industry terminology as well as rushing through important details acts as conversation crushers that can leave others feeling intimidated, out of the loop and unable to effectively contribute.

A better approach is to pick the right setting and ask clarifying questions. If you're not sure where to start, the basic who, what, where, when, why and how is a sensible approach. For example, "Why are we doing this?"; "How will that work?" or "Where will this help the organization?" This strategy fosters clear dialogue, makes people accountable and often uncovers problems that need to be addressed but would otherwise have been overlooked.

Throughout my more than two decade tenure as an executive coach and vice president inside Corporate America, I have seen millions of dollars senselessly lost merely due to ineffective communication. It's imperative for achievement-oriented professionals to communicate well in all aspects of their job. Doing so can be the key to cutting through the bureaucracy of an organization and taking control of one's career as opposed to feeling like a victim of circumstance. Mastering even a handful of skills, such as those cited above, can help professionals better negotiate their way through the proverbial career maze with speed, dexterity and accuracy.

*Vivian Ciampi is an executive coach, Harvard Business School Executive Education department coach and facilitator, and a principal at [Professional Coaching, LLC](#), a business navigational coaching firm that helps universities, small to mid-size businesses and large organizations accelerate the growth and success of their top talent.*