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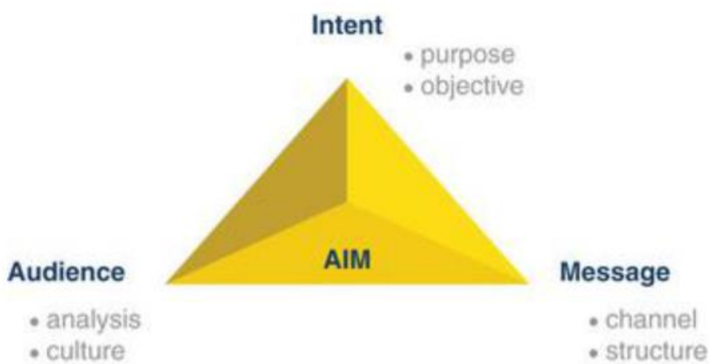
Communicate with Mastery: How to Speak with Conviction and Write for Impact

Authored by: Schramm and Levy (2020)

Adopting a Communication Mindset (adapted for learning purposes)

Know Your AIM

Nearly every class, workshop, or seminar I've led in the past decade at Stanford and beyond has begun with one simple yet elegant framework (Figure 1.1). So, of course, my first book should also begin in the same fashion. It's not just at the heart of all I teach and coach around communication, but I believe it's at the heart of all great leadership communication.



Source: L. Russell and M. Munter, *Guide to Presentations*

While I wish I had developed it, there's nothing that I've seen or created on my own that's a better place for a leader to start. Lynn Russell (then at Columbia Business School) and Mary Munter (then at Dartmouth's Tuck School) co-created this model and included it in their book Guide to Presentations. But I believe it applies equally well to written and interpersonal communication as well as presentations. I've deployed this on ten-foot-high slides behind me at the Qualtrics Summit and sketched it on the back of a napkin at Starbucks while coaching an entrepreneur on her startup. It really does offer a beginning for most of the important communication that we engage in.

Order is important here … crucial, in fact. We must begin first in the shoes (or seats) of our audience. Once we know who we are addressing, we have to clarify our intent; what do we want them to do, think, or feel as a result of this communication? Only by clarifying

Audience and Intent can we move on to Message. Inboxes around the planet are chock full of emails the recipient does not need to see, because too many people "blast out a message" rather than slowing down to tailor the communication to the right audience for the right reason (e.g., Intent).

Let's explore each of these elements in order. Let's begin with Audience.

Audience: The Starting Point for All Communication

I challenge leaders to devise as many methods of audience analysis as possible. "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?" Typically, the responses I get fall into three broad categories: online research, personal contacts, and "creative espionage."

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. Those who dig a little deeper may find their way to Glassdoor to research a firm or leader; this site often offers more subjective information, as its entries are largely provided by former employees—many of whom may have a bit of an ax to grind. Go deeper still, and you may find yourself amid 10-K reports on publicly traded firms, briefs on non-profits, and other forms of disclosure information that's public but not as quickly surfaced. In my reputation management class, we discuss the fact that almost everything online is permanent; once posted, even if taken down, it can still often be discovered.

Leveraging personal contacts makes up the second, often deeper, round of analysis. Can I find somebody in the audience to serve as a "mini focus group" for my message? Can I test out a few phrases or stories with a sample audience before I use them on my actual audience? Further, if I can find somebody who has recently spoken to this group who's willing to share that experience, all the better. The true gold is finding somebody who failed with this group and can share why. They might be able to tell you, "We were pitching a software solution, but they've shifted all their funding to cloud-based startups." Or: "I focused my recommendations on global expansion right when the firm announced layoffs and cost-cutting measures." While LinkedIn provides a great resource in and of itself, it can also yield valuable ideas about who you might contact for a one-on-one conversation. When I'm searching for a personal contact, I look both at who is currently at the firm, and who has recently left the firm or group. Recent employees may be able to be much more candid than current ones.

On that note, here's a tip about your "gatekeeper" when you first approach a new organization: mine your conversation with that person effectively. If someone at the firm is arranging your visit, pepper that person with questions at both a macro and micro level. Everything from "What has marked the success of recent speakers?" to "Do the men in your office wear jackets and ties to work?" is fair game. If you've been invited to submit a column or blog for a publication, likewise, ask them to share two or three examples of successful recent submissions.

Over the years I've enjoyed the strategies my MBA students have provided in the realm of "creative espionage." They have found social media posts on Instagram and Snapchat that mention the firm or individual. Some have gone so far as to apply for a job at a firm they wish to solicit for business to see how the firm represents itself to prospective employees. I've known people who've posed as secret shoppers and attended information sessions or participated in online webinars to better understand a firm and its offerings.

Let me be clear: I don't endorse duplicitous or deceptive measures for audience research; but I do appreciate the lengths that some leaders will go to better understand their audience before they try to write or speak to them. If only more leaders went to this effort.

It's also crucial to emphasize that any time we communicate with others, there is both a primary and secondary audience. Our primary audience is on the "to" line of the email or seated in front of us when we speak. These audience members are the primary reason for the communication to occur. Anybody with whom they choose to share the message would then be a secondary audience. Table 1.1 shows typical primary and secondary audiences with whom a leader may communicate.

Primary Audience Members	Secondary Audience Members
Regional directors	The field managers they supervise
Junior partners at a VC firm	Senior partners who will decide to invest
A journalist	All of those who read her column
Advisors to a senior leader	The senior leader
Sales team members	Customers who will ultimately buy

Thus far our discussion of audience members has been around intentional primary audiences: individuals or groups of people whom we've designated to receive our communication. Yet we cannot end this section without a discussion of unintended secondary audiences. An email we intend "for your eyes only" is forwarded to a wider group. A person who was listed as BCC mistakenly hits "reply all" and comes "out of hiding." A disgruntled employee or customer secretly films an interaction with you and posts it on YouTube for the world to see. As a leader, you need not cower from such communication possibilities, but should simply commit to owning your communication so that if an unintended audience hears or reads it, your words still do the work you intend them to do.

Audience-centric communication provides the foundation for everything else in this book. 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. Occasionally a student will ask me for a letter of recommendation without telling me the name of the recipient. I say I'm willing to write the letter, but that it's going to be much stronger and more effective if I can tailor it to the organization and role to which the student is applying. Without a clear audience in mind, how can a leader provide an impactful message?

Intent: Your Reason for Communication

Now we move to Intent, the second part of the Munter/Russell model. Certainly there are numerous ways to describe the goal, objective, or outcome of a communication. I like their choice of "Intent" not simply because of the great acronym it creates, but because of the clarity of the word. It's both the intention in my mind as a speaker or writer, and the action in the minds of the audience. It's not simply what I want the audience to think, say, or do, it's what they choose to do as a result of the communication.

Take the example of a senior Stanford hospital leader—we'll call him Ken, although that's not really his name. I was coaching Ken to lead a town hall meeting with his staff. Halfway through a rehearsal of his presentation, I interrupted and said, "What's your intent?"

He replied as many of us might: "I want to impress them."

"Okay, great, Ken," I said. "But that's all about you! What do you want the staff to think, say, or do as a result of this town hall?"

After a short pause, he said, "Oh, I see… . I want them to be impressed."

"Fair enough!" I said. "But that's still all about you. What do you want them to do?"

He paused and then said, "Treat patients with dignity."

The room (and the talk) shifted in that insight. We did not have to make sweeping changes, but now we had a north star to which we could align our efforts. Without clarity of intent, we are like a ship without a compass. We might somehow show up at our location, but it's not by design.

We're better able to cause our communication to make an impact we intend, and more importantly, an impact in which we can believe.

I urge my students to set a single clear intent for every communication they have—something from the audience's viewpoint that the speaker intends to bring forward. Here are some examples:

- Embrace our company's technology
- Endorse my candidacy publicly

- Invite me to their office for a longer conversation
- Agree to take on a volunteer commitment to lead this effort
- Eliminate negative references to a former employee

Whether we are designing and creating a web page, delivering a TED talk, proposing marriage to our spouse, or sending a tweet about an upcoming theater production, we need to be crystal clear on our intent before we open our mouths or hit send on our keyboards.

How Communication Intent Has Evolved in Silicon Valley

One of the many colleagues I've come to know at Stanford is Raymond Nasr, a lecturer who specializes in communication. He offers his insights within a popular elective, Entrepreneurship and Venture Capital, which is taught by Eric Schmidt and Peter Wendell. Raymond served as Eric's communication director and speechwriter for decades at Novell and later at Google.

Raymond recalls that in the 1970s and 1980s, communication was largely a "secretarial function," and certainly not strategic. “In the late 1970s and early 1980s, communications as a profession was not what it is today by any stretch of the imagination. It was on the margin. A notch above secretarial, largely administrative—and it really was often a case of an administrative assistant or a secretary taking down notes from a CEO, putting it into a format that would be distributable on paper, and giving it to the members of the press. They would in turn write the story about what the CEO wanted to say. So managing the narrative was dead easy. It would be a press release with the quotes embedded into the San Jose Mercury news article, and that was it.

"But then there was this company called Apple. Their strategic communication was revolutionary. They realized that there was so much power in narrative that they needed to manage every element of it, in-house. See, before, often the chip guys and the hardware guys would hire a PR firm to take that notepaper from the secretary, turn it into a press release, and put it on some fancy letterhead. The PR firms had relationships with the press corps. So companies would hire an agency to do PR work. Instead, Apple said no, we're going to manage every element of our complete experience. From the launch of the products, to the events, the financial industry analysts, product publicity, and packaging to executive communication—everything is going to be integrated under one umbrella."

Raymond sees this evolution as both key to his success at the biggest names in tech (Apple, Novell, and Google) but also as a key ingredient to our success at Stanford. Our community already had the appetite for skills in strong and strategic communication, so we began to provide valuable courses that met this need. The fact that icons Wendell and Schmidt purposefully embed Raymond Nasr into their course speaks volumes about how valued communication is as a discipline within the Silicon Valley ethos, and why it has grown so steadily at Stanford.

Message: Delivering on Your Intent with Words That Matter

We might say that the final element of the Munter/Russell model is where the magic happens. Once you've familiarized yourself with your audience and clarified your intent, you're ready to communicate. You're ready to share your message.

If audience is the "who" and intent is the "why," message is the "how." So now the question I urge students to answer is how they will structure and channel their 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. Consider what medium will be most approachable for your audience: earning your colleague's buy-in right before the big meeting might be a job for a Slack message or a chat in the hallway, whereas a thank-you note for a job interview might be best accomplished through a handwritten note (what can I say: I'm old-fashioned). Some questions to ask yourself before you make this choice: How far do I need my message to go? How long do I want my message to "last"? How formal is my message? What medium is easiest for my audience to access, use, or understand?

Too often we rely on just a few familiar channels instead of considering the wide range of choices we have to deliver our message. One activity I often do with my MBA students is to co-create a list on the board of all the possible channels available to share a message. I draw three long lines across the whiteboard making a row for Oral, Blended, and Written. Across the top I write "highly interactive" in the top left corner, "moderately interactive" in the center, and "minimally interactive" on the right corner. Then, for the next 15 to 20 minutes, we come up with different channels available to share a message: send an email, call a meeting, write a memo, tweet, send a text, deliver a talk. For each medium a student mentions, we discuss how interactive this choice would be. Often that has to do with how many recipients there are for the communication; a meeting with just one other person is highly interactive, but if 1,000 people are in the room not so much. Once enough stickies have made it to the whiteboard, students begin to see the wide array of choices available to them. Leaders committed to inspiring action on the part of their audience may have to be creative in what vehicle they choose to share that message. Further, a complex message may require multiple channels to achieve the desired result. I may need to send a teaser email in advance, deliver a great presentation, follow up with two or three key stakeholders, and send a final email synthesizing the message and reminding people of the action needed.

	Highly Interactive	Moderately Interactive	Minimally Interactive
Oral	1 on 1 Conversation Phone Call	Small Group Meeting	Voicemail Town Hall Podcast
Blended	Video Call	Meeting with Slides Live Webinar	Posted Recording of Webinar
Written	Text Slack Shared Document	Email Facebook Post Blast email	Handwritten Note Snail Mail Printed Bound Document

Figure 1.2: Communication channel choices by interaction level

Figure 1.2 shows an example of just a few.

Yet, we fall back all too often on the two most familiar methods: calling a meeting or writing an email. When students begin to look at this more robust menu of options, they begin to see how becoming a more strategic communicator is possible. It becomes easy to see that a more complex message may require a mix of several different channels, strategically designed in concert with one another.

Once you've chosen your channel, it's time to get down to the business of structuring your message. Many of my students choose to use 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.

Starting with AIM sets you up to speak to the exact audience before you for the reasons that matter to you. This useful pre-work need not be time-consuming or laborious, but those few minutes you devote to investigating your audience, intent, and message will pay dividends when it's time to share your thoughts with the world and inspire others to action.