



Simply Said

Communicating
Better
at Work
and Beyond

Jay Sullivan

WILEY

Praise for *Simply Said*

“From small talk to presentations to leadership, communications are key. *Simply Said* provides practical advice (or reminders) to ensure your success. Practicing what they preach, it is written in straightforward, simple language that’s about you and your success.”

—**Russell Morris**, *Chief Human Resources Officer,
The Conference Board*

“I wish that everyone would read and absorb the clear and straightforward method of *Simply Said: Communicating Better at Work and Beyond*. Hours upon hours of time would be saved, we would all be spared speeches and talks that do not get to the point, and we would understand each other so much better! I highly recommend Jay Sullivan’s superb techniques.”

—**Matthew Diller**, *Dean, Paul Fuller Professor of Law,
Fordham University School of Law*

“Being an effective communicator is no longer a ‘nice’ skill for some to have, it is absolutely a required skill for everyone to possess. The ability to truly connect with others is the key to building relationships and improving performance. *Simply Said* is a must read for anyone who aspires to lead and influence others.”

—**Michael A. Schweitzer**,
Senior Global Banking Executive

“This book is a must-read for anyone looking to improve their communication skills. As an experienced human resources executive, I have seen individuals’ communication skills make (or break) their career. We can all stand to improve the way in which we connect with our audiences—pick up this book today!”

—**Susan Lovegren**, *Senior Vice President of Human Resources,
Juniper Networks*

“*Simply Said* is a must read! It illustrates how effective communication positively impacts relationships, families and communities. Today’s exemplary leaders can learn what works and what doesn’t when they communicate.”

—**Lily Woo**, *Program Director,
Columbia Teachers College*

“Jay has helped me to improve my communication by focusing on the audience and simplifying my message. Communicating one’s message is the completion of the process and, with my improved communication skills, I find that I am a better strategic thinker and leader. *Simply Said* is a great resource tool for business and life.”

—Kevin J. O’Donnell, *Chief Executive Officer, President,*
RenaissanceRe Holdings Ltd.

“The importance of communications cannot be over-stated. In the development of a strategic assessment of our college, we identified communications as the key area for our attention. Repeatedly, in my work in education and in my roles in other organizations, communication rises to the top as an area requiring improvement. *Simply Said* is a straightforward and very helpful primer for enhancing communication. The author stresses the importance of being intentional and succinct with the message. What will our listeners hear? What do we want them to remember? The deep experiences of the author resulted in a clear and nuanced presentation of recommendations for enhancing communication. A must read!”

—Scott Evenbeck, *President,*
Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, CUNY

“In my more than 25 years in the business world and as a college professor, communication skills have consistently been the most important enabler for success and the skill that I still practice to this day. This book is the perfect communications ‘how to excel’ guide for students and provides well-founded approaches and practical applications. This book will be my communications resource guide and I would recommend that all future leaders take the time to learn these skills and invest in their future.”

—Ken Daly, *President,*
National Grid New York

“*Simply Said: Communicating Better at Work and Beyond* delivers a simple message and a powerful method. Reading this accessible book would permit anyone to vanquish the challenge of connecting with audiences large or small. This is essential reading for students, executives, and, generally, for anyone who wants to be understood by others.”

—David Gautschi, *Joseph Keating, S.J. Professor and Dean emeritus,*
Fordham University

SIMPLY SAID

COMMUNICATING BETTER
AT WORK AND BEYOND

JAY SULLIVAN

WILEY

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Rich and Judy McKay

In 1982, Rich McKay founded Exec|Comm to help business people communicate with more power and presence. “Focus less on yourself, and more on other people” was a central learning principle of all of our courses then, and it remains the key message of the firm today. Judy Thompson McKay, a teacher by trade and expert facilitator for Exec|Comm, urged participants to “get in the game!”

Rich and Judy knew that, like an athlete in “the zone,” when professionals take the attention off themselves and pay attention to the broader picture, their impact in business and in life soars.

*Rich and Judy contributed their many talents to Exec|Comm for over thirty years before turning their considerable energy to philanthropic endeavors. They instilled in the firm a three-part philosophy: Exec|Comm exists to serve clients, to build community, and to foster personal growth. Their passion for client and employee success showed “being others focused” in action. We dedicate **Simply Said: Communicating Better at Work and Beyond** to Rich and Judy. We are confident that their simple messages conveyed in the pages to follow will help you to define, deliver, and declare your message to the world. Enjoy!*



Exec|Comm

What's your message to the world?

Contents

Introduction: Focus on Others xi

SECTION ONE

YOUR CONTENT 1

Chapter 1

What Do You Mean by That?

Conveying a Clear Message 3

Chapter 2

Once Upon a Time . . .

Telling Engaging Stories 17

Chapter 3

A Place for Everything

Organizing Your Content 23

SECTION TWO

YOUR ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS 39

Chapter 4

Stand Up and Stand Out

Making the Most of Your Body Language 41

CONTENTS

Chapter 5

Are You Just “Waiting to Talk”?

Listening to Understand 65

Chapter 6

See It. Save It. Say It.

Delivering from Notes and Visuals 87

Chapter 7

What If They Ask You Something

You Don’t Know?

Responding to Questions 113

SECTION THREE

YOUR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS 125

Chapter 8

Challenge Every Word

Editing for Clarity 129

Chapter 9

Form Follows Function

Structuring Your Documents 146

Chapter 10

Make It Easy

Creating Reader-Friendly Documents 154

Chapter 11

Hit Send with Confidence

Writing Emails That Resonate 160

CONTENTS

SECTION FOUR

YOUR INTERACTIONS 171

Chapter 12

It's a Dialogue, Not a Monologue
Conducting Effective Client Meetings 173

Chapter 13

You Can't Do It All
Delegating Successfully 183

Chapter 14

Do You Have a Minute?
Sharing Meaningful Feedback 192

Chapter 15

Raise Your Glass
Giving Toasts 202

Chapter 16

Pass the Mic
Handling Introductions 206

Chapter 17

The Possibilities Are Endless
Facilitating Brainstorming Meetings 211

SECTION FIVE

YOUR LEADERSHIP 217

Chapter 18

Inspire and Influence
Leading Others 219

CONTENTS

Chapter 19

From Invincibility to Authenticity

Showing Vulnerability 231

About Exec|Comm 241

About the Author 243

Acknowledgments 245

Grammar Guidelines for Personal Pronouns 249

Video Resources 253

Index 255

Introduction: Focus on Others

Twenty-five years ago, I was wandering through a department store in Quincy, Illinois, carrying my five-month-old son, John, on my arm, while my wife was busy shopping. Like all kids, John had been babbling since shortly after birth. But as I carried him through the store his babbling changed. He started to shout in short bursts, and after each outcry he'd stop and look around, searching for the sound. He'd shout again, and grow quiet. Then something clicked, and he smiled. He realized the sound was coming from him, and his world had suddenly changed. He had found his voice. After that, there was no stopping him. For the rest of the time we waited for Mary, John shouted, stopped, giggled, and shouted again, louder and louder each time.

Many of us spend our lives in a struggle to define ourselves and how we relate to our surroundings. We each endeavor to find our voice and our personal “message to the world.” This book can't help you know who you are. But it can help you communicate your message—your talents, your ambitions, your goals, your perceived contribution to your community—to those around you—and to do so simply and clearly.

INTRODUCTION: FOCUS ON OTHERS

If we want to improve our ability to connect with others, to understand them and to be understood more clearly, the easiest and most effective way to do so is to focus less on ourselves and more on the other person.

None of us exists in a vacuum. Human history isn't the story of individuals; it's the story of how individuals have interacted with others. Our identity is determined, to a great extent, by how we see ourselves impacting other people. In short, your simple and clear message is dictated in part by the world around you. Your message *to* the world is, of necessity, your message *connecting you to* the world.

We are all basically self-focused. That's an innate human trait. That's not a bad thing; in fact, it helps us survive. But it is also the leading cause of our miscommunication. Our instinctive approach to communicating is to speak to others from our own perspective rather than from theirs. Conversely, we also listen to others through our personal filters, making assumptions and hearing ideas through the prisms of personal experience. Because each of us has a unique path through life, communicating from that personal experience immediately creates a disconnect between us and others. This disconnect is what leads to miscommunication.

If we want to improve our ability to connect with others, to understand them and to be understood more clearly, the easiest and most effective way to do so is to focus less on ourselves and more on the other person.

This is the single most significant differentiator we can apply to our communication skills to improve our effectiveness. When we communicate, instead of thinking, "What am *I* trying to convey?" we should ask ourselves, "Why is *he* reading my email or attending this meeting? What does *she* hope to get out of this presentation?"

INTRODUCTION: FOCUS ON OTHERS

If we put the focus on what the other person is trying to gain from the exchange, we will do a better job communicating, because we will select more pertinent information, drill down to the desired level of detail, and make the information we are sharing more accessible to our audience.

It's easy to *say*, "Focus on your audience." But it's hard to put that concept into practice.

At Exec|Comm, we have spent more than 35 years helping people clarify, simplify, and deliver their ideas to those around them. In this book, we'll give you straightforward tactical steps you can implement immediately to communicate more effectively by focusing less on yourself and more on other people. By putting simple steps into practice, over time you will intuitively start to communicate from outside your personal framework and apply the concepts in settings beyond those covered in this book. That's the bigger win—for you and for those with whom you connect.

We have organized this book into five main sections:

1. **Your Content:** the substance of what you want to convey.
2. **Your Oral Communication Skills:** the way you convey your substance.
3. **Your Written Communication Skills:** the way you represent yourself when you're not physically present.
4. **Your Interactions:** the settings in which you engage your audience, whether it's an audience of one or one hundred.
5. **Your Leadership:** the way you set the tone and relate to others.

INTRODUCTION: FOCUS ON OTHERS

In each section, you'll learn to ensure that what you say and how you say it help you connect with your audience.

Overall, when you communicate with people, you can talk about *one* of three things:

- You can talk about yourself.
- You can talk about your content.
- You can talk **to** the audience **about** the audience.

News flash: Your audiences don't care about you. Nothing personal, but they don't. In fact, they don't really care about your content. They care about *how* your content *impacts them*, which is different from your content itself.

If you want to connect with your audience, minimize how much you talk about yourself or your content, and only talk about those things to the extent that they impact your audience's needs.

What does this mean in execution? Listen carefully to speakers at the next meeting you attend. I guarantee that almost every speaker will start with the words, "What I want to talk about today is. . . ." Think about that line. "*What I want. . . .*" Almost every speaker starts talking by telling his or her audience that this meeting is all about the speaker and what he or she wants. You can't get more self-centered than that. Think about the subtle but impactful change in tone if instead of starting with, "What I want . . ." you start with:

"You're all here today because you're concerned about X. I thought *it would be helpful to you* if we spent a few minutes talking about. . . ."

The minute we start with "helpful to you," we have told our listeners very directly that we have put all of our energy into serving them. We're focused on *them*, not on *ourselves*.

INTRODUCTION: FOCUS ON OTHERS

More importantly, as we plan what we are going to say, structuring our notes or putting together our PowerPoint slides, if we keep thinking, “helpful to you . . .” we challenge *what we share* and the *way we share it*. Am I sharing this information because I know it and find it interesting? Am I sharing it because I did all this work, and I’m too busy to change it for this audience? Or am I sharing this information because I genuinely think it’s helpful to this audience?

Being helpful to the audience is the only legitimate reason for sharing the information.

If you think of what you have to share in terms of how it impacts others, your message about yourself changes. Your *message to the world* is not about yourself, but about *how you impact the world*.

The weighty ideas are done. The rest of this book is about how to put this very basic concept of focusing on others into practice in your daily business life.

Let’s get started.

SECTION ONE

Your Content

In this section, you'll learn how to structure your thoughts. You'll learn to start with a key message, based on what the audience needs to hear, tell engaging stories that reinforce your key points, and organize your content for the greatest impact, depending on your objective. Throughout, you'll learn to keep the focus on your audience—your listeners or your readers.

- Chapter 1** *What Do You Mean by That?*
Conveying a Clear Message
- Chapter 2** *Once Upon a Time . . .*
Telling Engaging Stories
- Chapter 3** *A Place for Everything:*
Organizing Your Content

CHAPTER 1

What Do You Mean by That?

Conveying a Clear Message

We communicate in a professional context to accomplish one of two goals: we either want to convey a specific point, or we want to build rapport with someone. Both involve focusing on the needs of the person or people with whom we are communicating.

I recently attended a conference on current economic conditions in New York City. The speaker was a senior leader of a global banking institution. He clearly had taken a great deal of time putting together his slide deck, which included complex graphs and charts. He spoke with a booming voice and had a strong presence in front of the room. He was clearly very intelligent, and he knew his content. The audience of 150 people included banking professionals with a wide range of experience. I was picking up occasional interesting data points, but was having difficulty following any themes. It turns out I wasn't alone. At the end of the talk, the speaker

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asked for questions. A 40-something audience member raised his hand and asked, “This is all very interesting, but what do you want us to know?” The speaker seemed baffled.

“Do you want me to repeat my whole presentation?” he asked.

“Not at all,” the audience member said. “I just don’t know what you want us to know from all this. Are you hopeful for the economy? Are you concerned? Is there some specific action or approach you think we should adopt? What do you want us to know?”

“Oh,” the speaker said. He paused, looked at the screen where his last complicated slide was still projected, and said, “I guess I want you to think about the following.” He then gave a two-sentence statement that summed up what he wanted the audience to know. It gave context to all of the data he had been sharing. Without that statement, attendees would have left the room with their own ideas of what the talk was about, or worse, befuddled by what they had heard.

At Exec | Comm, over our 35 years of experience, we have helped tens of thousands of people hone their presentation skills, often in one-on-one coaching settings. When coaching someone, I usually start by having him run through what he plans to say to his audience, whether the person is meeting individually with an important client or speaking at his company’s quarterly “town hall” meeting. The person often arrives with a complete set of notes or slides he has spent hours preparing. After he has delivered his content, I’ll start by asking, “What’s the key take-away for your audience? What is the one sentence you want resonating in everyone’s head when you are done talking?” I’m surprised by how often the presenter says, “Hmm. That’s a good question. Let me think about it for a minute,” which means he hasn’t

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

verbalized it for himself and therefore didn't tell his audience his main point. Think about that. If the *speaker himself* doesn't express his main point very clearly, his listeners don't know what they are supposed to hear. Since we all take in information through our own filters, each person in the audience may have picked up on a different point in the speaker's talk, and each person leaves with a different impression of the speaker's intent. As a result, the speaker has no ability to control the message his audience hears.

Most of the time, we only have impact if the person to whom we are speaking can convey our message to someone else. If you are a lawyer and you're speaking to the Assistant General Counsel for your client, that person has to convey your point to the General Counsel. She has to convey your message to the company president. He has to convey it to the chairman, who has to tell the board. There is a better chance that your message will be conveyed consistently if you are clear about the message yourself. If you aren't clear about what you want them to know, there is no hope the message will get through.

Now think about it from the audience's perspective.

We all make snap decisions. The "we" applies to everyone: to us as professionals, to our clients, to our teams, to our colleagues. Many issues we decide on the fly *should be* decided that way. Fax the document or email it? Delegate the assignment to a junior person or just do it myself? Mustard or mayo?

Unfortunately, we also make snap decisions about important matters. "Which client's work is a priority?" "Is Jack the best associate for this assignment?" "Should I recommend 'buy' or 'sell'?" We make snap decisions because we have so many things to decide in a given day. Since everyone makes snap decisions, each of us has a better chance of influencing

SIMPLY SAID

others if we have clear, strong messages that can be easily understood. Honing your message therefore becomes crucial to your success.

Whenever you are participating in a discussion with clients or colleagues, craft a clear message. A clear message:

- Is short
- Uses simple language
- Is focused on the needs of audience

KEEP IT SHORT

Limit your key message to one sentence, preferably fewer than 10 words long. Because so many complex business documents are written in long, complex sentences, we have trained ourselves to think in large chunks of information. While that is arguably necessary in written documents, it isn't helpful or effective when conveying messages orally. Consider breaking the content into smaller sentences to help your listeners.

If we talk for 20 minutes in a meeting, our audience will remember only a few essential comments. The audience needs to be able to grasp your message quickly and efficiently. The key question is: "Will my audience be able to repeat this message to someone else after this meeting?" If it's unlikely that listeners will be able to do so because the message is too long, too vague, or too difficult, it is unlikely you will have the impact you desire.

Read the following aloud:

Everyone's active participation in the bank's events is crucial to helping us develop a conscious and cohesive firm culture that we can all be proud of and that will help us attract high-quality associates.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

Now, turn your head away from the paper and repeat the statement you just read.

You can't do it, right? It's too long. You have to translate what it means to you.

Now try the same with the next sentence:

We hope to see you at as many firm functions as possible.

You are probably able to repeat that sentence easily because the message stands on its own. Save the “why” and the details for separate sentences. Those sentences help me buy into your idea, but they are separate from the idea itself. Give your audience a simple concept to grasp and convey to others.

You may want to consider bringing closure to this issue in the near future before the economic situation changes drastically enough that the fundamental reasons for structuring the deal as we have envisioned it no longer exist.

By the time the speaker finishes that sentence, the audience has forgotten the key message. It's simply too much for a listener to digest in one gulp.

We need to close the deal soon.

That statement is clear and direct.

USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE

Sophisticated professionals fall into two traps. First, we try to show how smart we are. Second, we fail to recognize our industry jargon.

Big words do not impress anyone. Big ideas do. Exec | Comm recently surveyed more than 1,800 business professionals,

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asking what impresses them about other people's communication skills. When asked to rank the top three communication skills from a list of dozens of items, not a single person ranked "Using sophisticated vocabulary" as a top-three choice. In a professional setting, you're not graded on smarts. People *assume* you are smart. You're graded on having impact. That means getting people to take action based on your ideas.

Get to your point. Your goal when communicating is not to be cute or clever. Your goal is to be clear.

Messages That Resonate

During the time of Sarbanes Oxley, when risk and regulation were very hot topics in business, I was working with the leadership of a large professional services firm as it prepared for an internal annual meeting.

The partner in charge of the firm's risk management group was very worried about his message to his partners. He knew they were concerned about their own risk, but also worried about the restrictions that the new regulations would impose on them.

He originally thought the message should be something like: "We must have a strong risk management system in place so that we stay out of jail." Clearly, this message did not fit our suggested message criteria in that it was:

- Too long and not easily repeatable (17 words)
- More negative than upbeat (albeit somewhat "listener directed")

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

After applying our message criteria, his revised message for the meeting became “Let’s actively manage risk so it doesn’t manage us.” His partners heard the message loud and clear but also jumped on board to support risk management’s new policies and procedures.

Lisa Bennis, Former Managing Partner, Exec | Comm

Avoid Jargon

We all spend most of our time interacting with other people who do what we do. As a result, we start to think that our internal dialogue, understood intuitively by our colleagues, is understood by everyone. We forget how much jargon has crept into our vocabulary. Jargon promotes efficiency when used with our colleagues, but it becomes problematic when we fail to *recognize it as jargon* and use it in inappropriate settings. Challenge yourself—first, to always recognize jargon, and second, to eliminate it when it will get in the way.

Every industry and every discrete function within a company develops its unique jargon. Accountants, lawyers, IT professionals, and HR generalists all use phrases that mean something specific to them and their colleagues. Jargon allows us to be efficient when speaking with others in our field. However, jargon is misconstrued by, or completely unintelligible to, the general population.

Most of the time, we don’t realize we are using jargon. A few years after joining Exec | Comm, I was in Washington, D.C., working with a small group of partners at a law firm. At the start of the day I chatted with a few of the partners to get to know them better. One of them, a litigator, mentioned that he had three grown children. When I asked where they

SIMPLY SAID

all lived, he responded, “They live in three different *venues*,” using a legal term that impacts the jurisdiction for a case. Anyone else would have said, “They live in three different cities” or “They live all over the place.” Only a litigator would mention where his kids live based on the county in which he would have to file a lawsuit against them. He didn’t realize how steeped he was in his own jargon.

FOCUS ON THE AUDIENCE

As we mentioned in the introduction to this book, your message is never about you, and it is rarely about your content. It is always about *how your audience*—your listener or reader—*needs to use your content*. To craft an audience-focused message, ask yourself: “What does this audience need to learn by attending this meeting?” Let’s say a financial analyst is delivering a “morning call” announcement about a key stock he is covering. His audience includes a large number of bankers who would like helpful information for potential calls to their clients.

An analyst-focused version:

I have revised my thesis about Acme. Months ago we advised that Acme’s fundamentals were sound and that adjustments to the company’s structure being implemented by management would reverse certain adverse decisions made previously. We have revisited this issue and now believe. . . .

If I’m the financial advisor listening to this call, I’m already bored. The analyst has used the first 15 seconds of a three-minute call to talk about himself and his thought process. I have yet to hear anything I can use on a call to my client.

An audience-focused version:

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

Call your clients today and recommend that they sell Acme. Our “buy” recommendation a few months ago was the right decision at the time, and now it’s time to change tack.

In the first two sentences the analyst has given the advisors their key message for their phone calls to clients. He has focused not on his content, but on *how his audience needs to use his content*.

You won’t know how quickly certain members of your audience will form an opinion. Give your audience the bottom-line information so if they make a snap decision, that decision is based on the proper content. Your audience will rarely take the appropriate time to consider fundamental issues about their situation. Therefore, for your sake, and for the sake of your audience, keep your key message short, easy to understand, and focused on the audience’s needs. You will improve your ability to have impact.

When Building Rapport

Sometimes we communicate in a professional context simply to build rapport. While many business decisions are based on analytics and credentials, just as many are based on the personal connections people feel with one another.

You should be proud of what you offer your clients and customers. It’s unique. It’s based on your intellect, your experience, and the weight of your firm or company standing behind you. What you offer your clients is, in fact, special. Unfortunately, from our clients’ perspective, what most of us offer is a fungible good. They can get great quality products or services from us, and if they aren’t getting the right level of service or the right price point, they can cross the street and get equally great products or services from someone else.