

TROUBLESHOOTING HUMAN COMMUNICATIONS

This cheat sheet offers communication tips for technologists, engineers, and information workers.

What if They Just Don't Get It?

They may want to agree, but emotions won't let them. Help them back out without losing face.

Don't assume they don't understand your reasoning; explaining again in the same way often doesn't help.

Empathy is the key. What is your listener's perspective? What's important to him or her?

Acknowledge your differences in perspectives.

Phrase your argument using your listener's terminology, objectives, and world view.

Maybe you're not yelling loudly enough. (Kidding!)

Take a time out. Switch the venue or medium.

Involve an impartial, respected person as a mediator.

Watch out for jargon. If it obfuscates the issue, look for a way to get it rephrased.

Track interaction approaches that work with the person; stick to the method that succeeded earlier.

Maybe you're wrong. It happens to the best of us.

Persuading a More Technical Person

Research technical aspects of the issue beforehand. What objections or new data may arise?

Get solid data to support your argument. Be ready to drill into details.

Practice in front of a friendly more technical person.

Persuading a Less Technical Person

Don't make the other party feel dumb due to the lack of technical insight. Sounding superior backfires.

State your conclusion first, before discussing the details of how you arrived at it.

Research non-technical aspects of the issue beforehand. What objections or new data may arise?

Practice in front of a friendly less technical person.

Tips for Better Email Messages

If haven't persuaded after several back and forth emails, pick up the phone, or speak in-person.

If your message is longer than 2 paragraphs, shorten it or use another medium.

If your email is being ignored, send a follow-up. Don't take it personally—people get too much email.

Note time of day/day of the week when the recipient responds most often. Send your message then.

Lead with the strongest statement to grab attention.

Assume only your first 2 sentences will be read.

Use the Subject line to get your main point across.

Use email to prepare the person for an in-person meeting or a phone conversation.

Don't respond in the heat of the moment. Let your emotions cool off before hitting the Send button.

Don't forget about non-email mediums: phone, postal mail, Twitter, Facebook, billboard, tattoo, etc.

In-Person Conversations

Dress appropriately for the venue, topic, expectations, and social norms.

Consider where to speak: your workplace, his or her workplace, water cooler, lunchroom, etc.

Find the best timing: some are grumpy in the mornings, sleepy after lunch, in a hurry at 5pm, etc.

Come prepared. Impromptu talks on important topics have been known to lead to trouble.

Harness the power of sharing a tasty treat.

When in doubt, use a breath freshener.

If you or the other party are in a foul mood, consider putting the conversation on hold and resuming later.

Mimic the other party's general posture and gestures, but not exactly movement for movement.

Be mindful of cultural differences in gestures and the distance between speaking parties.

Smile. Breathe. Don't avoid eye contact.

Conclude by agreeing on the next steps and timeline.

If sending a thank-you note, send it ASAP.

Presenting to Managers and Executives

Be brief. (E.g., consider "the elevator pitch.")

Make your message business-relevant.

If showing slides, use fewer bullet points. Consider skipping the slides altogether.

In preparation, ask yourself and answer, "So what?" for the facts and conclusions you will discuss.

Find an "executive sponsor" who will offer feedback in before and support you during the presentation.

Use the tools, terminology, and conventions that your audience employs (e.g., the SWOT matrix).

At a Social Networking Reception

Come early—fewer people and attendees are fresh.

Don't stay by your friends' side. Meet new people.

It's OK to come up to groups of strangers and join a conversation. Receptions are public conversations.

Welcome newcomers into your conversations.

Prepare chit-chat topics by reading news, books, etc.

Hold an appropriate prop (e.g., wine glass) in one hand, but have one hand free to shake hands.

Use people's names when speaking with them.

Be enthusiastic. Try to look friendly, approachable.

Improving Communication Skills

Improvisational or stand-up comedy classes help.

Consider joining a local Toastmasters club.

Attend writing workshops (creative, resume, etc.).

Practice on friends and in low-risk environments.

Book: 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to Be Persuasive

Book: How to Win Friends and Influence People

Book: Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive...

Article: How to Be Heard in IT Security and Business