

**PART I**

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# **The Essentials of Successful Communication**

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# CHAPTER 1

## The Scudder Method

*“You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere.”*

*—Lee Iacocca, former CEO of Chrysler*

What is communication?

Most people would give you a pretty quick, standard answer: “Communication is what one person tells another,” or “communication is an exchange between people or groups of people,” or even “communication is an exchange of data of one kind or another.”

Here’s what I think: communication is not what the speaker knows—to a large extent, it’s not even what he or she says. Communication is what the listener takes away and what happens as a result of that takeaway.

You can liken it to teaching. Education is not what the teacher knows; it’s what the student learns. The teacher carefully designs a lesson plan to reach each student with the most important message points on the subject.

The teacher provides us an excellent model for executive communication. Successful communication is based on understanding the listener, tailoring the message to the listener’s interests and knowledge, and delivering the message in such a way that the most important points stick in the mind.

A teacher’s measurement of success is how well the students perform on exams. An executive’s report card is less specific, but no less important—it’s how well he or she can persuade or motivate.

I spent the early part of my career in broadcast news. I interviewed scores of business leaders and witnessed interviews of far more. I also watched a lot of them in public speaking situations.

I often wondered why so many of these executives weren’t better communicators. After all, these were accomplished people who had gone very far in their chosen fields.

Too many got trapped on interview questions that they should have been prepared for. They sometimes stumbled and fumbled around for answers. Many failed to tell an interesting or credible story. In public-speaking situations, it was not uncommon to see them bury their heads in their script and drone on for what seemed like an eternity, slogging through material that was of little interest to the audience.

After I left ABC News and entered the burgeoning media training field, I found out why they weren't better: very few executives made communication a priority. Thus, they dedicated too little time to honing their skills. Many would spend a lot of time improving their golf game but little or none on becoming better communicators. And all too often, they weren't sure where to begin to upgrade their skills.

Almost immediately after I became a media trainer, I found myself assigned to coaching leaders of some of the world's great companies. How could I give them a winning formula for every communication challenge they might encounter?

The answer was a system that became known as The Scudder Method.™

## The Key Elements

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The Scudder Method derives from my background in journalism. Journalists are storytellers. Almost all are good communicators. So I based the system on the way journalists, both print and broadcast, make news stories interesting and meaningful to their audiences.

It involves simplification, clarification, and illustration.

CEOs have to communicate with a lot of constituents and in a lot of ways. But the key to success in all of their venues is based on what I refer to as the four Cs. What is said must be:

1. Clear
2. Concise
3. Credible
4. Delivered with Confidence

I found ready agreement on this point from two CEOs whose communication skills have served them well. Time Warner Cable's Glenn Britt put it this way: "You need to have simple ideas, and consistently stick to them over a period of time." Former Gillette CEO Jim Kilts noted, "You have to be clear on what you're telling people. You've got to tell them over and over again, and make it simple, and illustrate it with pictures."

Pictures are a critical element of good communication because people remember pictures better than words. But Kilts was not referring just to

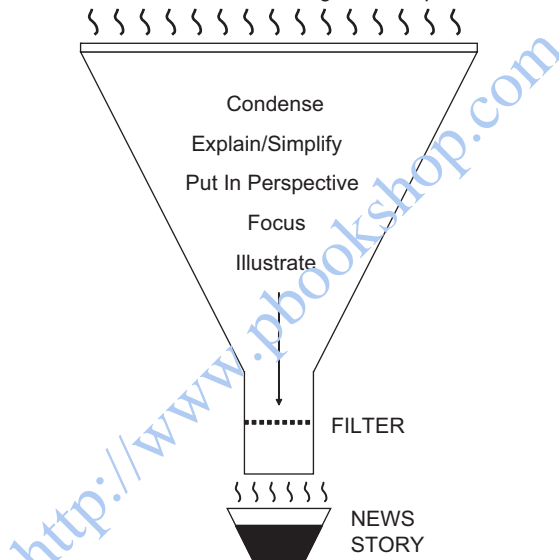
photographs, drawings, or charts. He was also talking about word pictures—examples that stick in the mind and cause people to remember the points being discussed.

Here's where the journalist's model comes in.

## The Communication Funnel

To show executives how to tell a complicated story briefly, as a reporter must often do, my firm created the communication funnel.

Print journalists take a large amount of information and boil it down to a cohesive news story. So do the best newsmakers, using these steps.



**News Funnel Chart**

It's simple, it's effective, and it should be the starting point for all executive communication. The following elements compose the funnel:

- **Condense.** A well-versed person starts with more material than can possibly be included in any one talk or interview. So cutting it down is the first step.
- **Focus.** The best way to trim the excess material is to focus on three headline points that cover the key messages. These should be the three sentences you want the audience to take away. The test is this: if someone who heard your speech or interview was asked, "What did he say," these three sentences are what you want the answer to be.

- **Explain.** This refers to both specifics and generalities. Any technical term or other reference that might be unclear should be briefly explained, and the reason or purpose behind what you are saying should be made clear to the audience. If you are taking an action, you should be able to answer the question “Why?”
- **Simplify.** Don’t assume too much knowledge on the part of your audience, especially about your organization or company. One of the biggest traps CEOs fall into is assuming everyone knows as much about their work as they do. Also, boil complex words and ideas down to simple but still accurate and meaningful concepts.
- **Put points in perspective.** Provide any relevant facts that enable the audience to judge the importance of a point. As with the point about simplification, you cannot assume that your audience knows the surrounding facts or situation for what you’re saying. Tell them why what you are saying is important.
- **Illustrate.** Use word pictures (examples) to make your points memorable.

Here’s how it might work in real life. Let’s say a reporter from *The Los Angeles Times* is sent to cover a speech by the governor of California. The speech might begin with a history of California commerce and transportation and run on for 45 minutes. Worse, it could be full of complexities and detail. But the reporter is allocated only a few paragraphs in the newspaper to tell the story.

Here’s how the journalist would proceed:

The first step is to condense because there are a lot more words and ideas going into the funnel than the newspaper would ever be interested in printing or that people would care to read. Condense how? By focusing on three key points.

The writer will pick the theme, or most important point, to lead the story, and perhaps provide the headline for it (i.e., “Governor Calls High-Speed Rail Essential”).

The next step would be to elaborate on the headline statement with three key points, such as:

1. The state’s highways are choked with traffic.
2. The airports are badly overburdened.
3. The governor believes the new system will have great economic benefits and stimulate growth.

Those are clear points, easily understood by everybody.

But the governor or his engineering or financial experts may have gotten too technical in laying out the proposal for the system. The next step comes under the heading of “explain, simplify, or put in perspective.” This

could involve briefly gleaning key points from a complicated engineer's report or a detailed financial analysis and bottom-lining what they mean to taxpayers and travelers.

The final step is to illustrate. In this instance, that could mean providing visual examples. They could include word pictures about being stuck in traffic jams on Interstate Highway 5 or projected overcrowding conditions at San Francisco International Airport. The reporter could also use pictures of traffic jams, a map of the planned route of the railroad, or a chart showing how California's airports rank against the rest of the country in terms of delayed flights and traffic.

So the reporter has taken a long and perhaps dry speech and turned it into an interesting and clearly understandable article.

You, as a leader, should follow exactly the same process when preparing for a talk, a meeting, or a news interview: condense the facts and data to a few key points on which to focus; be sure they are properly explained, kept simple, and put in perspective; and, where possible, give examples or otherwise illustrate your remarks to solidify your points and make them memorable.

Another problem in telling a company's or industry's story is that some executives have the habit of speaking in sentences that are too long and complex. Many speechwriters fall into the same trap. At the end of such a long, complex sentence, listeners often forget where it began and what the point was.

The traditional 5-minute radio newscast provides a good model for tightening up sentence structure. The writer has to compress 10 to 12 stories into a framework of 3 to 4 minutes (allowing time for commercials), and each must be complete in itself. Because this is oral communication, sentences must be short, direct, and complete. The audience has no chance to go back and revisit material once it's spoken, unlike print where the reader can simply backtrack and read the sentence again.

Here's a good exercise for you: take the last speech you delivered and try to write a news story about it in six short paragraphs, just as the print journalist did in the California example cited earlier. It's a good discipline exercise and a step on the road to clear, succinct, effective communication. If you find you can't do it, the focus of your talk probably wasn't clear enough.

Once you've done that, pull out the three key headline points that you wanted people to take away from that speech. Now you've got the basis for any news interviews or any subsequent conversations on the subject. Did you have any news interviews after that speech and, if so, did your three points come clearly through?

Here's the supreme test: the next time you deliver a speech or do an interview, ask someone who was not familiar with your planning

beforehand what your three key points were. If yours and theirs don't jibe, you have work to do.

To see if you're really at the top of your game as someone who can boil down detailed material to its essence, write a three-sentence radio news story about it.

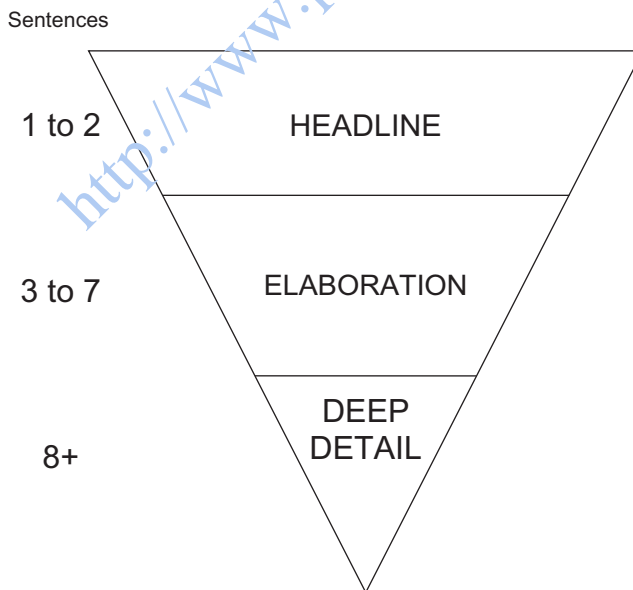
For an example, let's go back to the high-speed rail story. Here's what a short radio report might look like:

*Governor Jerry Brown told the California legislature today that the high-speed rail system is essential to the state's continued economic growth. Citing traffic-clogged highways, heavy air pollution, and overburdened airports, he called for immediate passage of a proposed \$200 billion funding bill. The legislature is expected to vote on the measure next week.*

## Headline-Elaborate-Detail

The Scudder Method also applies to how newsmakers should respond to questions. Our system is called Headline-Elaborate-Detail.

We use a simple inverted pyramid chart to illustrate how this works.



**Satisfaction Chart**

We regard a headline as one sentence, or occasionally two. The elaboration should run roughly three to seven sentences. We consider anything above eight sentences as deep detail.

Here's how the system works. When answering a question, the speaker should go into only the level of detail he or she feels necessary to fully tell the story, and the story should be encapsulated in the first three sentences. That sets the stage for what is to follow.

The headline should be the main point, the line that needs to be remembered if nothing else is. It presents the premise, or argument, on the topic.

This direct-to-the-point system is especially important in media interviews.

Because most television and radio news inserts run under 10 seconds these days, the headline point has to come first, followed with enough elaboration and detail to help the journalist put the story in perspective.

Using the high-speed rail example, when asked why he is calling for the high-speed rail passage now, the governor might respond, "This system is vital to California. It affects our health, well-being, and the continuing growth of our economy. We are choking on an outdated transportation system."

I timed my reading of those words at nine seconds, easily the right length to fit into any newscast.

In addition to providing broadcast journalists with a nice, tight news clip, he has given the print journalist three possible headlines or leads to the story: "Governor Calls Rail System Vital," "Governor Says Rail System Affects Health and Economy," and "We're Choking on Outdated Transportation, Says Governor."

He could go on to provide some detail that would help the journalist in writing the story, but the top line response to the interviewer's question has to be direct, simple, to the point. And, most of all, brief.

While we used a news story as our example, this system is effective in any kind of communication situation. Shareholders want clear, straight, bottom-line first answers and unambiguous comments; so do employees and government officials.

## **The Path to Being a Great Communicator**

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In summary, the Scudder Method is the key to becoming a world-class communicator. Never forget the lesson that began this chapter: communication is not what you know, or what you say; it's what the other person takes away. Tailor all of your oral communication accordingly.

This book alone won't make you a great communicator. That takes time, dedication, a willingness to look objectively at your own skills and abilities,

some outside perspective, and practice, practice, practice. But using the techniques I outline will get you started down the right path. After that, it's up to you.

### Tips

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- If you want to be a world-class communicator, you have to dedicate the time and energy to improve.
- Think like a journalist when you create your messages.
- Be sure everything you say meets the “four Cs” standard.
- Whether a speech or interview is a long one or a short one, build it around a headline theme and three basic supporting points.
- Keep the sentences short and the words simple and understandable by everyone.
- Be sure to focus, explain, simplify, illustrate, and put in perspective.
- Use examples to make your points memorable.

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