

# Listen. Write. Present.

**The Elements for Communicating  
Science and Technology**

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## Foreword

For scientists, communication should be about getting through to people, helping them understand the importance of the concept, and putting the idea in terms that are scientifically correct but also, and equally important, comprehensible to a variety of audiences.

Communication is one of the most complex processes that happen among human beings. Taking it for granted or not paying enough attention to its intricacies is one of the most frequent mistakes that scientists make. There is a whole field on communication theory devoted to unlock, expose, and improve the way we communicate. From the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure about signs and signifiers to the developments of Umberto Eco in the field of linguistics, evidence and theory reinforce the importance of using the correct tools to communicate our thoughts to other people.

Good leaders must learn to communicate not only within their field of expertise but also to reach people outside their field of

authority, influence, and passion. A good scientist should be able to defend a theory in an oral presentation at a key scientific congress as well as put together a strong business case for that same idea in front of a corporate board of directors. Many of us trained in science did not learn these skills in school. *Listen. Write. Present.* is aimed at closing that gap. This book takes the scientist beyond the classroom and beyond the bench into the real world. This book is not about getting a few writing or speaking tips; it is about getting tools that will help you approach, diagnose, and implement a plan to get your message across to all of your intended audiences. Whether you're seeking a promotion, interviewing for a new job, making a case for a bigger budget, managing a difficult employee or patient, or presenting at an international convention, *Listen. Write. Present.* provides the tools to implement an effective communication strategy.

As scientists, we mustn't be lulled into thinking that being a content expert is enough. The way we communicate our message is just as important as the content itself. This small yet wise book reminds us that true leaders transcend their circles of expertise and never forget that for each audience there is a different message and a different way of delivering it.

You already have the potential; this book will unlock it for you.

Rodolfo Chaij, MD  
Former Senior Director, Medical Affairs  
Talecris Biotherapeutics

# Preface

## **WHY DID WE WRITE THIS BOOK?**

Check any online job-hunting website for science, technical, pharmaceutical, biotech, and medical jobs, and among the hundreds of listings, you'll find one common requirement: "excellent communication skills." While this general requisite seems easy to fill, most managers, directors, and vice presidents seek employees whose communication skills go beyond the ability to draft a basic email or design a simple slide. These managers want professionals who can communicate ideas to a variety of audiences in a way that garners support, influences people, and solves problems. Organizations expect these professionals to be able to arrive at the job with both the technical training and the communication skills they need to excel.

"We live in an era of communication, interactions, negotiations, and conflict resolutions. The idea of the scientist in the glass tower happily spending endless days in solitary confinement with his or her test tube, isolated from the environment, is a literary myth. The reality is today's scientists and technology

specialists must be able to clearly and persuasively translate their research and proficiencies to audiences not fully immersed in their fields of expertise if they hope to succeed,” states Rodolfo Chaij, MD, former Professor of Pharmacology and Cardiology at the University of Buenos Aires and former Senior Director of Medical Affairs at Talecris Biotherapeutics.

Despite excellent education and training, many science and technology professionals lack these essential communication skills, or “soft skills.” In the journal *Science*, Dr. Clifford Mintz laments how little training in communication skills students in the life sciences receive: “Unfortunately, few academic programs develop these skills in a systematic way; this failure hinders students from landing industrial jobs.”<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, in information technology (IT), many organizations emphasize hard skills, such as programming languages, but it is the neglect of soft skills that leads to project failure. “I think most users would agree that when things go wrong, it’s not because the person was technically incompetent,” says consulting manager Graeme Simson. “Far more often, there’s been a misunderstanding of requirements from lack of the underlying consulting (communication) skills.”<sup>2</sup>

Further, science professionals who want to achieve better outcomes with patients, more funding for research, and career advances or promotions must develop their communication skills. Recognizing this need over the past ten years, more and more medical schools, especially pharmacy schools, have begun to include patient communication skills in their curricula. In 2008, Vanderbilt School of Medicine launched a new curriculum that

integrated patient communication skills into its coursework.<sup>3</sup> While these schools have added an important piece to the education of their students, they're still deficient in offering courses in presentation, managerial, and writing skills. Graduates are expected to obtain these skills by trial and error through residency and fellowship training or by combining their MD or PharmD degrees with an MBA. For physicians and pharmacists who wish to enter the pharmaceutical or biotech industry, communication skills are paramount. In an article titled "Transforming Clinicians into Industry Leaders," Melanie Staff-Parsons and Dr. William Pullman summarize the required behavioral competencies for medical directors: "In short, it's all about the ability to influence R&D's scope and direction by balancing technical expertise with interpersonal skills."<sup>4</sup>

## **HOW ARE WE QUALIFIED TO WRITE THIS BOOK?**

We're communication consultants who have worked as editors, trainers, public relations experts, writers, and professional speakers for a combined total of more than thirty years. The professionals described above are the people we've trained in universities, hospitals, research groups, Fortune 500 companies, and medical, nursing, and pharmacy schools around the globe. Many of them have approached us after our seminars on presentation, communication, or writing skills to say, "In all of my education and training, no one has ever taught me this." Our greatest reward is when we return to train a new group and discover that these former trainees have advanced to higher positions within their organizations.

## WHAT'S INSIDE?

The pace of today's technology-driven world seems almost frenetic. Few people have time for self-directed learning that does not offer continuing education credit. For this reason, we designed this book to be an easy pickup read. As we planned, organized, wrote, and edited this book, we concluded that the best way to improve communication is to focus on six core skills, which serve as our chapter titles.

**Plan.** Perhaps the easiest way to improve communication is to slow down and think about what you're trying to say. Before you type, speak, or write: stop. A few minutes of planning can save hours of backtracking, misunderstanding, confusion, and correcting. This chapter will teach you how to choose the right mode of communication, plan for an interaction, save time, manage multiple tasks, and set yourself up for success in all communication. The added benefit: you should be able to carve out time for the important tasks of critical thinking and project evaluation.

**Listen.** Ours is a noisy world. We get bombarded by phone calls, emails, white noise, and other "chatter." As a result, "getting the message" is harder than ever. Active listening is a learned skill that needs to be practiced and refined, not only to "get" the message the first time, but also to show the other person that you "got" it. In this chapter, we discuss the value of listening skills with specific tips on how to use eye contact, how to listen actively (and really get the message), how to interrupt politely, and how to accept criticism with grace. The benefits of acquiring listening skills: being able to retain information and influence others.

**Write.** As technology advances, one of the biggest shortfalls is in quality writing. Because we've developed a second language of text shorthand, our writing skills have suffered. Meanwhile, employers still want résumés, reports, proposals, blog posts, and emails that are clear, concise, well organized, thoughtful, compliant, and error free. Since you may not have time to take a business writing class, we've pulled together a chapter that teaches advanced writing techniques to help you become a clear, concise, and persuasive writer. The best lessons here: our years of writing and editing experience distilled into one easy-to-read chapter.

**Present.** Interpersonal communication and presentation skills are paramount to career success. After all, the best idea in the world is worthless if you can't explain it to someone else. Today clear, well-organized presentations are equated with clear, well-organized thinking. This chapter is filled with indispensable advice on telephone, webinar, and teleconference etiquette, and presentation and interpersonal communication skills. We've coached thousands of scientists and professionals on how to be better presenters and we've packed our best tips in here.

**Meet.** A fundamental part of interpersonal communication is meeting. We meet to discuss ideas in a formal gathering. We meet potential and new colleagues and clients. We meet the press when our ideas go public. How can you manage all of these meetings with professionalism and ease? This chapter provides the answers: how to present at a meeting, how to "meet and greet" new business contacts, and how to prepare for a television or radio interview. The greatest tips here are on how to run effective meetings so you can get things done.

**Serve.** Being able to communicate effectively with customers, colleagues, and superiors is the key to moving up the corporate ladder. If you see yourself as serving others, your communications will take on a whole new meaning and enhance your influence in the workplace and beyond. This chapter focuses on the timeless topics of managing others, collaborating, and dealing with difficult people. These are the communication lessons we learned by trial and error, the ones we wish someone had shared with us when we first embarked on our own careers.

### **WHY READ THIS BOOK?**

Many people have written books on communication skills that serve as great academic pieces and offer interesting theories on why effective communication works.

Our book is different. During our years of training health care professionals, we've learned that most people have already come across the theories behind good communication in a book or class. Our audiences said they needed everyday tips, often referring to them as "the pearls" of good communication. We responded and created workshops to meet this demand. Now we're offering our best, tried-and-true tips for you. Our goal here isn't to discuss theory, but to teach you specific ways to adapt your communication style so that you're more useful in your job (and your life) immediately.

As we wrote this book, we debated how to make it most effective. After all, we could easily have put in a thousand tips or shared hundreds of personal stories and well-researched examples to support our points. We chose not to include these items

because we felt that you, our reader, didn't want to wade through extra stuff to get the point.

At first glance you may think the numbered tips and lists make this book too simplistic. In fact, we deliberately chose this style to make the book a user-friendly guide, packed with important details that you can read, recall, and implement easily. The idea is for you to pick up the book any time to read just one section or use as a quick reference.

If possible, we recommend that you read through the entire book once. We know you probably think you don't have time to read it cover to cover. Please try to make time—on your next flight, during your lunch break, or while you wait for an appointment. Why? Each section has different tips and ideas and all of the sections work together. They are deliberately brief and focused, and well worth the few extra minutes.

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