



Great Consulting Starts with Skills That Matter

By Stacy Wilson, ABC

Many organizations are looking to communicators for a different set of services than those traditionally delivered. "Teach our managers to communicate better," leaders say. "Help us make smarter decisions and be more efficient," they plead. "Help me deliver messages better in front of our audiences," they implore.

At the same time, communicators work tirelessly to get to the leadership table, stay there and have real influence. We're all working toward the same end: strategic thinking and implementation that truly impacts the business. For some, operating more like a consultant, even while continuing to work inside the organization, makes more sense. But how do you transition to such a model?

First, take stock of your professional skills. You may need to bone up on skills that will not only make your life as an internal consultant easier, but also pave the way to success. In addition to the usual set of [communication](#) skills such as writing, planning and project management, great communication consultants also have sharpened their skills in teaching and adult learning, negotiation, empathic listening, presentation, facilitation, process analysis and situational leadership.

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Let's zero in on two of these: negotiation and process analysis. Both are skills you need to deliver great consulting services in your organization.

Negotiation

Most of us don't know we are walking into a negotiation until we arrive there. If we knew, we might be more prepared. There are five skills thought-leader Stephen Covey suggests mastering in order to be better prepared:

1. Use silence effectively – A powerful tool to let the heat out of a volatile situation or give you time to gather your thoughts and perspective.
2. Distinguish between interests and positions – An individual's position may not accurately reflect his or her interests, so explore his or her wants.
3. Know your Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement, or BATNA – If the best alternative is a satisfactory compromise, you may decide to take that and skip the whole negotiation.
4. Be conscious of the relationship – Sometimes the relationship trumps the negotiation.
5. Allow only one person to be angry at a time – If the client is angry, your turn will have to wait.

Listening is critical in a negotiation. Call it "empathic listening" or "active listening," just make sure you do it well. Richard Salem, author of "Community Dispute Resolution Through Outside Intervention," says that good listening benefits negotiators by

1. Building trust and respect
2. Enabling those in conflict to release emotions
3. Reducing tension
4. Encouraging surfacing of more information
5. Creating an environment conducive to collaborative problem solving.

The last one is at the core of the consulting process (see "[Consulting As A Process](#)").

When using empathic listening in a negotiation, or any time for that matter, consider these do's and don'ts.

Listening Do's	Listening Don'ts
Invite the speaker to continue or add thoughts	Make suggestions
Be attentive and alert, and avoid distraction	Evaluate the speaker

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[The Benefits of Empathic Listening](#)
Article by Richard Salem on how empathic listening enables the listener to receive and accurately interpret the speaker's message, and then provide an appropriate response.

[Business Process Change](#)
A Manager's Guide to Improving, Redesigning, and Automating Processes.

[Ideas That Drive the Consulting Business](#)
The true measure of success of a consulting firm is its ability to help clients solve difficult problems.

Reflect feelings	Probe for hidden agendas
Prove your understanding	Advise or give counsel
Seek to understand before seeking to be understood	Attempt to interpret or analyze
Read the speaker's non-verbals	Judge

Process Analysis

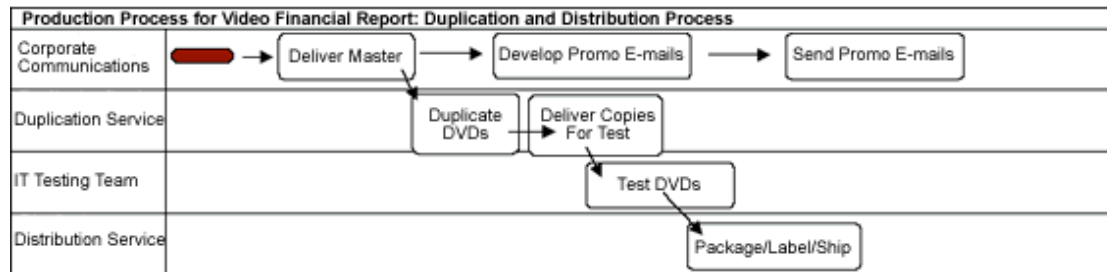
The fact that engineers have cornered the market on process analysis should never deter you from engaging in it. It is imperative that you understand how to break down a process so you can recommend improvements to achieve success. More often than not, the client need is not solved by a newsletter or brochure, but by a process overhaul.

First, be able to identify different types of processes, such as sales cycles, development cycles, production cycles, system (software) upgrade cycles and maintenance processes.

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Second, follow the six steps of process analysis:

1. Define the beginning and end points of the process.
2. Create a visual.
3. Understand the capacity of each step (how much can actually be done?).
4. Identify bottlenecks.
5. Look for other limitations.
6. Identify changes to improve upon current results.



Many of the processes communicators must analyze involve people. Paul Harmon, author of "Business Process Change," created an approach that looks at five key areas:

1. What activity standards exist, and do people know what is expected and believe they can meet those expectations?
2. Can people recognize when action is required and do they have adequate resources to do what is required without interference?
3. Are consequences aligned, meaningful and timely?
4. Do people receive feedback that is relevant, accurate, timely, specific and easy to understand?
5. Do people have the skills, knowledge and capability to perform, and do they know why their performance is important?

Note that improved communication can influence each of these positively.

Although we have reviewed only two skills in moderate detail here, take the time to assess your skills in the areas listed at the start of this article. Read, attend training, find a mentor—do what is necessary to acquire these skills and your consulting capability will improve.

Stacy Wilson, ABC, is president of Eloquor Consulting, Inc. She has served as a consultant internally, in large consulting firms, and now as an independent consultant. Her "Consulting Skills for Communicators," a manual, toolkit and workshop on the topic, will be available on the IABC bookstore beginning in late March.