



10 WAYS

to become a

more engaging

COMMUNICATOR

By Halely Azulay

talentgrow

The title features large, bold green letters for "10 WAYS" and "COMMUNICATOR". The word "WAYS" is split into two lines. Below "WAYS", the words "to become a" are in a smaller, dark gray sans-serif font. The word "more engaging" is written in a large, flowing blue cursive script. The word "COMMUNICATOR" is in large green capital letters. At the bottom, the author's name "Halely Azulay" is in a smaller dark gray font, followed by the company name "talentgrow" in a blue, lowercase, sans-serif font where the letter "t" has a small green leaf graphic integrated into it.

Have we met? I'm Halelly Azulay. I'm an author, speaker, facilitator, & leadership development strategist and an expert in communication skills & emotional intelligence.

I am the author of two books, [*Employee Development on a Shoestring*](#) (ATD Press) and [*Strength to Strength: How Working from Your Strengths Can Help You Lead a More Fulfilling Life*](#). My books, workshops and retreats build on my 20+ years of professional experience in communication and leadership development in corporate, government, nonprofit and academic organizations.



I am the president of TalentGrow LLC, a consulting company I founded in 2006 to develop leaders and teams, especially for enterprises experiencing explosive growth or expansion. TalentGrow specializes in people leadership skills, which include communication skills, teambuilding, coaching, and emotional intelligence. TalentGrow works with all organizational levels, including C-level leaders, frontline managers, and individual contributors.

People hire me to speak at conferences and meetings and to facilitate leadership workshops, but what I love most is to help fast growing organizations create a leadership development strategy and approach.

I'm a contributing author to numerous [books](#), articles and blogs. I was described as a "[**“Leadership Development Guru”**](#) by TD Magazine. I [blog](#), publish a leadership [podcast](#), and have a popular free weekly subscription newsletter – so you should definitely sign up at www.tinyurl.com/talentgrow.

10 Ways to Become a More Engaging Communicator

By Halelly Azulay, CEO + Founder, TalentGrow LLC, and Creator + Host, The TalentGrow Show leadership podcast

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who was utterly magnetic? You were mesmerized by them, drawn in to them, and felt genuinely interested in the conversation. You were at ease, relaxed, and your defenses were down. They made you feel good and important. They showed genuine interest in your stories and wanted to know more about you.

You've probably also experienced the other end of the spectrum of communication: Your conversation partner made you feel insignificant or dumb, lowly or unworthy. Or maybe you felt bored and disinterested in continuing the conversation. And when you walked away, you felt drained, anxious, or deflated. Yuck!

We all need to network and meet new people. We ALL feel awkward in those initial conversations with strangers.

We all have relationships in which we communicate with ease, and others in which we feel like we're "walking on eggshells" – careful with our words, trying not to offend or create a defensive response.

It's natural to have different levels of communication chemistry with different personalities and there's no way to fully level the playing field.

Yet, it's also possible to reduce the likelihood of defensiveness and to increase our engagement and success when we communicate with just about anyone, anywhere.

There are proven ways to be more engaging and effective in your interactions

Whether in casual conversations or business presentations, one-on-one or with a group, with strangers or close contacts, getting others drawn into and engaged with you is important if you want to get your message across successfully and leave them wanting more. Here are ten ways that will definitely help you be a people magnet and become more engaging in all your communication interactions. I'll share them all on the next page, then break them down further, one by one.

Grab your coffee, here we go!

10 WAYS TO BECOME A MORE ENGAGING COMMUNICATOR

1. Create safety and avoid threat triggers.
2. Demonstrate trust and trustworthiness.
3. Listen to understand.
4. Ask good questions.
5. Create congruence between the verbal and nonverbal parts of your message.
6. Stay low on the ladder of inference.
7. Exude confident benevolence.
8. Be interested to be interesting.
9. Exhibit authenticity.
10. Project openness and approachability.
11. BONUS! Show enthusiasm.

NO. 1: CREATE SAFETY AND AVOID THREAT TRIGGERS

We humans are wired to protect ourselves from harm, above all, and our brain is always on the lookout for threats.

Now that we can map the brain's processes with fMRI scanners, we know a tricky fact: the brain perceives social and emotional threats (like being ignored at a meeting or having someone roll their eyes when you talk) can affect our physiological response just as powerfully as physical threats (being chased by a tiger or having a gun pointed at you).

That means that we can easily, even if unintentionally, trigger the 'fight or flight' response in others with seemingly innocent comments, a facial expression, or tone of voice. Once triggered, the 'threat response' may completely derail our communication success because it can cause our field of view to narrow, our working memory gets reduced we have fewer insights, and tend to become more pessimistic. That doesn't sound like a great way to have a good conversation, right?

The more we are aware of others' needs and triggers, the better we can avoid these emotional landmines during our interactions.

[Read more about how to avoid triggering the threat response [here](#).]

NO. 2: DEMONSTRATE TRUST AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

To be trusted you must trust others first. Additionally, to earn trust you must demonstrate trustworthiness.

Many of the other behaviors on this list will help you earn trust. Start with this: always do what you said you'll do, and be willing to give others the benefit of the doubt that they'll do the same. The principles of reciprocity work in spades when it comes to trust among people.

Best-selling author Keith Ferrazzi describes three types of trust: Swift trust, interpersonal trust, and task-based trust. Trust built through spending time together, eating meals, sharing small personal details in social interactions creates “swift (benevolent) trust” (initially) and “interpersonal trust” (through interactions over time).

So much of trust stems from interpersonal connections made during face-to-face meetings that it's much more difficult to build trust virtually. However, when we work virtually with others we can capitalize on the third kind of trust – “ability/task-based trust” – by creating repeated patterns that show us as reliable, consistent, and responsive. Virtual trust stems from demonstrating reliability.

[Read about six trust building factors [here](#).]

NO. 3: LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND

If you've ever caught yourself making your grocery list in your mind while you were supposedly listening to someone?

Whether it's with family, co-workers, our boss, our team members, or friends, we all can fall into this false-listening mode. There are so many distractions and we're always trying to multitask, but when we don't listen well, we're creating big problems for our relationships – both in the short-term and in the long-run.

Listening deeply means listening to UNDERSTAND instead of listening with the intent to respond, to disagree, or to have our turn to talk. Most certainly, listening to understand is way better than tuning out or fake-listening, which is unfortunately common practice.

Bill Nye (the Science Guy) once said, "Everyone you will ever meet knows something you don't." So listen with a curiosity to learn something new or see things from a new perspective.

[Read more about four common listening sins to avoid [here](#) and watch [this video](#) about why you should stop distracted listening.]

NO. 4: ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

What are good questions? Questions are merely tools, and like a hammer or a screwdriver, each one is very helpful in certain circumstances while not so helpful in others. There's no 'one size fits all' question type. Therefore, first assess what is the outcome you are seeking and then find the right tool – the right type of question – to help you achieve it.

Open-ended questions (typically begin with words such as "Why" and "How", or phrases such as "Tell me about...") encourage a longer answer using the person's own knowledge and/or feelings.

Closed-ended questions can be answered with one word or phrase, like "yes," "no," or "1998," and begin with "Do," "would," "are," "will," or "is." They're great if you want to confirm facts; are easy to answer; get you a quick answer; and allow you (the questioner) to keep control of the conversation.

Probing questions help to the person think more deeply about the issue at hand and provide clarity to vague or unclear language or dig for underlying causes.

Finally, **leading questions** subtly prompt the respondent to answer in a particular way, which can help guide the conversation but should be minimized because they can be manipulative and hinder your ability to really understand the other person's perspective.

I suggest that most of us could err on the side of asking more open-ended questions. Most importantly, come from a place of genuine curiosity. [Watch my video about the most important question for facilitators [here](#).]

NO. 5: CREATE CONGRUENCE BETWEEN THE VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL PARTS OF YOUR MESSAGE

How do our brains assess a conversation for safety and trust? We're looking for all of the information that comes in through all five senses.

We're listening for the words that the person chooses when they're talking to us, but we're also listening for all of the nonverbal components of the message, such as the tone of voice, volume, and pitch. We're also looking at their facial expressions: Are they making eye contact, or are they averting their eyes? Are their brows furrowed? Are they smiling? Are they frowning? What their physical body showing in their shoulders, their arm motions, and their proximity to us?

All of those things are important components of the message and our brains know to read them. So if we say we're interested but we're checking our smart phone every two seconds, our conversation partner can tell there's a mismatch between what the words are saying and HOW they are spoken, and their brain is in search of the truth. And thanks to Dr. Albert Mehrabian's research into non-verbal communication, which has been replicated for decades, we know that when faced with a mismatch between the verbal and non-verbal part of the message, we tend to believe the non-verbal message as the truth, by a long shot.

To have effective communication, you must say what you mean and mean what you say, and don't try to mask intense feelings because they will leak out, one way or another.

[Watch my video about why it's important to never use email for difficult or emotional conversations [here](#).]

NO. 6: STAY LOW ON THE LADDER OF INFERENCE

In every interaction, all communicators are each selectively noticing information, making assumptions, drawing conclusions and making decisions about them.

We then formulate beliefs about the person, topic or situation and take action accordingly. While this process, called “the Ladder of Inference” (originated by Chris Argyris and popularized by Peter Senge) is natural, we should defend against our tendency to ‘climb up the ladder’ and minimize actions that are not grounded in facts. To prevent misunderstandings and stay low on the ladder, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it possible that I am jumping to conclusions?
- What assumptions might I be using?
- Why am I making these assumptions? What led me to these conclusions?
- What makes me believe that this is the “right” way to think or action to take?
- Are there other actions to consider?
- Am I using all of the facts or data available?

Work on staying low (or climbing back down) the ladder if you want to have reality-based, honest, engaging, and fair conversations.

[Read more about the ladder of inference and do the fun video exercise [here](#).]

NO. 7: EXUDE CONFIDENT BENEVOLENCE

Some people mistakenly think that you being interested in others and also being self-interested is mutually-exclusive.

In reality, it's a 'both/and' and key to success and happiness.

When you evoke the Trader Principle, you seek to engage with others as equal traders of value. You create value for them and seek to be in relationships that also are valuable to you in the long-term – they're win-win relationships.

Being confident means being sure of yourself and what you have to offer and being benevolent is being interested in the well-being of those you deal with, like your employees, peers, clients, friends, family, etc., and believing they are interested in yours.

The combination of confidence and benevolence is a powerful one.

NO. 8: BE INTERESTED TO BE INTERESTING

Sometimes we worry that we don't have anything enticing to share. Will others find us interesting enough to keep their attention? What I've found is that the more interest you show in others and their ideas, the more attractive speaking with you will feel. When you show interest, you become interesting.

I coined the term "fascination detective" to illustrate how you can use your natural curiosity to enhance your conversations. When people think they need to have empty small talk conversations, they naturally feel repelled by the whole idea. Also, lots of us have an inner-judge that worries that the other person won't find us interesting enough, or that we won't naturally connect, or that we won't have anything in common. Or we might worry that we won't be interested in the other person.

But if we stop judging and start being more curious to find what could be fascinating about this person --actively seeking possible points of fascination -- that's when we become a fascination detective and are much more likely to find something interesting to talk about. The more that you are interested in this other person, the more likely you are to find ways to make that conversation fascinating to you.

And the more that your conversation partner is going to find you to be a riveting conversation partner. Why? Because you're interested in them. People don't get enough opportunities to be in conversations where the other person is sincerely curious and interested in them, so you're going to feel like a fantastic conversation partner to them. They'll not only enjoy the conversation, they'll remember you fondly in the future.

[Read more about the neuroscience of being a fascination detective [here](#).]

NO. 9: EXHIBIT AUTHENTICITY

We can usually smell fake from a mile away.

Sometimes when we're trying to make a good impression, we can try to impress or fit what we think others expect of us. But ultimately, you can't really sustain their interest for long when you're trying to be someone else.

Focus on being yourself and your authenticity will be a differentiator. This gets tricky when you're practicing with new communication approaches. If you intend to take on a new behavior that you believe will be more effective, people may sense your initial awkwardness with it. Some people worry that because it doesn't feel natural, it will come across as fake or inauthentic. After all, you're not really being your natural self using your age-old habits.

But it's all in your intent.

When you want to improve and communicate better with those awkward new behaviors, people will sense your sincerity. If you intend to 'look' like you're doing the right thing because you're only thinking about appearances and not the actual reason behind the behavior, your insincerity will come across. If you're feigning interest, empathy, or concern in order to appear to care, you're gaming people. That's not cool.

But if you're truly interested in their needs and trying your best to adapt to them, you're being genuine. Even if your execution is still not smooth. Be authentic and keep practicing. But always check yourself: what's your intention?

[Read more about why you should just be yourself [here](#) and [here](#).]

NO. 10: PROJECT OPENNESS AND APPROACHABILITY

Be willing to consider others' perspectives and points of view and be approachable. Sometimes, in our effort to establish credibility, we err on coming across as closed, self-absorbed, or arrogant.

To break down these walls and not seem cold, you must work on adapting an open, disarmed approach. This will have a disarming effect on others.

That requires a certain amount of vulnerability, of course. You have to let your guard down, break down that protective shield, and be real.

Your nonverbal cues will carry the most weight in this regard: Make eye contact but don't glare. Smile or have a relaxed jaw and lips. Unfurrow your brows and relax your forehead. Uncross your arms and legs and relax your shoulders.

Don't jump in with judgment, pre-determined solutions and ideas, or criticisms too quickly – rather, stay in curious and open mode longer to listen to understand and gather more information.

Your intentions will shine through and facilitate a much more engaging conversation for all involved.

[Watch [this video](#) I made about some unintended messages you might be sending with your nonverbal communication that could be causing your communication to be misunderstood.]

BONUS! NO. 11: SHOW ENTHUSIASM

I think enthusiasm is the ‘secret sauce’ of highly engaging people.

Now obviously, it’s not always appropriate. Some conversations are *supposed* to be serious or even somber because of the topic, so always use your good judgment.

But as a general rule, there is something undeniably compelling about being in the presence of someone who is genuinely enthusiastic. It’s magnetic.

So give it a try – show your (sincere, genuine, authentic) enthusiasm and see what happens!

There you have it!

When you apply these ten methods, I have no doubt that you will become a more engaging conversationalist, speaker, presenter, influencer, and leader. Then, you’ll have a better chance of getting what you need and creating more positive impact in your relationships and work.

What have you tried that worked in magnetizing your audience or one or many? Write me an [email](#) or ping me on [Twitter](#) and let’s get a discussion going!

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Marshall Goldsmith

million-selling author of New York Times bestsellers,
Mojo and *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*

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SPEAKING

Need an expert to engage, educate, and inspire your leaders to greatness? Bring leadership and communication expert and author Halely Azulay to speak at your next event, conference, or company meeting. Halely is a dynamic and energetic speaker who shared her research-based expertise in a way that is fun, interactive, and interesting. Frequent audience comments include words like, "engaging!", "knowledgeable!", "inspiring," and "enthusiastic!".

Halely speaks to audiences large and small at industry conferences, corporate events, and association meetings. As a curious and voracious life-long learner, thought leader and author, she is always on the cutting edge of industry research and publications and shares the latest findings with audiences of leaders, managers, and high-performers around the U.S. They walk away with specific tools and techniques that they can implement right away, on the job, to increase their effectiveness and engagement.

WORKSHOPS

We design and develop learning and training workshops that are geared toward how adults like to learn: hands-on, interactive, and rich with thought-provoking large and small group discussions, experiential learning activities, and self-reflection assessments and exercises. We combine the latest theoretical concepts and thought leadership with practical, concrete examples to allow learners to walk away with fresh insights, improved skills, and new tools and techniques they can begin implementing immediately.

Popular Workshop Topics include Employee Development on a Shoestring, Strength to Strength (both based on Halely Azulay's books), The 3 Keys to Communication Success, Becoming an Engaging Leader, Harnessing the Power of Emotional Intelligence, Influencing with Integrity (Even Without Authority), and Feedback: Success!.

FACILITATION

Team-Building: We help teams of all sizes identify successes and areas that present challenges. Each team-building effort is different. At TalentGrow, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each solution is customized to the specifics of the organization, the team, and the situation at hand. We listen and observe carefully and craft an approach that is targeted specifically to help your team foster the work environment and productivity it seeks.

Retreat Facilitation: When a team or organization has an important problem to solve or decision to reach, they often need an objective, external facilitator to help them succeed. Our professional facilitation skills allow your team to identify objectives and desired outcomes, develop a strong and effective agenda, and then fully focus on engaging with the subject-matter at hand and with each other and let us take care of the rest.