

# More Than Just Talk: Effective Communication Skills for HIM Professionals

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By Chris Dimick

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*Talk is cheap. But learning how to communicate is essential for those working to be leaders within their teams, departments, and organizations.*

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The HIM profession has never offered more opportunity for leadership than it does right now. EHR implementations have HIM professionals working with new departments across their facilities; emerging practices such as enterprise content management have HIM professionals working with many different types of people across their organizations.

But just because a person has an audience does not mean he or she will be heard.

Effective communication skills are the cornerstone of a good leader, says Stacey Hanke, a communications coach, author, and speaker with 1st Impression Consulting, based in Chicago. From entry-level staff to the C-suite, everyone can benefit from effective communication skills, she says. No matter what a person's role, he or she should learn to "speak to be heard."

Throughout her career, Hanke says she has trained more than 15,000 people to conquer public speaking fears, rid themselves of bad body language habits, and choose their words wisely. "I think face-to-face communication has become a lost art," she says. "And it really needs to be a new trend." With all the technology out there, we are forgetting how to communicate effectively, she says.

Simple changes in the way professionals behave and speak can have a big impact on their success as a leader or influencer.

## Body Talk: Stay Calm, Stay Loose

Regardless of the words you choose, your message will not be heard if people do not perceive you to be believable, Hanke stresses. Trust and believability are key factors in getting people to take action based on words-the sign of true leadership, she says. Body language and a fluid, confident speaking voice are essential.

Before people even speak, their posture speaks for them. "You can tell a lot about someone's personality just by how they walk, how they enter a room, and then how they seat themselves at the board room table," Hanke says.

Stay calm, she recommends. Fidgeting or pacing while speaking distracts your audience from your message. Trying to do too much at one time will distract you, too, and impede your focus.

When sitting, avoid placing yourself directly across from the person you are speaking with. A table can act as a barrier between you and the individual you want to connect with, Hanke says. Instead, minimize the objects between you and that person.

Stay loose, too. Gestures are an important fixture during conversation that demonstrate how you truly feel about a topic. All gestures should expand from your sides and "draw pictures around your words," Hanke says. However, avoid fidgeting with your hands, pens, or other items while talking, she advises. Listeners can perceive these as a lack of confidence and credibility.

When done right, gestures add emphasis to a speaker's message. This allows the audience to remember more of what is said and allows the speaker to channel any nervous energy.

When people forget what they want to say, they look away from the eyes of their listeners. This lowers the listener's confidence in the speaker. Proper "eye connection" is essential in gaining a person's trust, and certain behaviors help perfect this nonverbal form of communication, Hanke says.

That is why it is important to always look an individual in the eye when speaking to them. When speaking to two or more people, Hanke recommends completing your conversation with one person and pausing before moving your eyes and beginning to speak to the other person.

Speak to your audience, not to your notes, the top of a person's head, or to your PowerPoint slides, Hanke says. She recommends not speaking to people if they are distracted by items such as a PDA or laptop. "Only speak when you see eyes," Hanke says. "There is no reason to talk to objects."

## Speech: Be Fluid, Pause

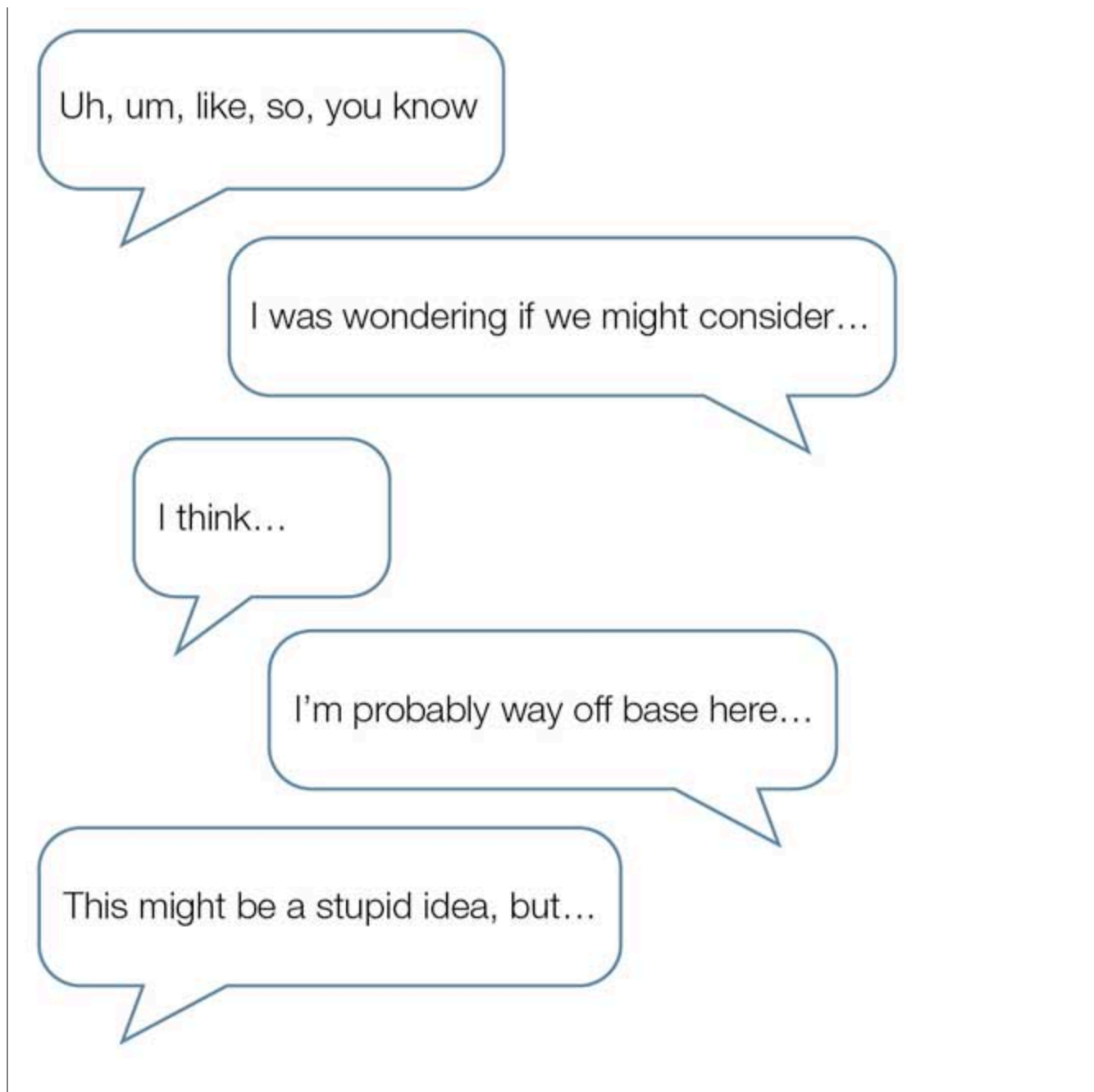
Effective communicators know when to pause during conversation. There is temptation to clutter one's language with what Hanke calls "nonwords" in order to buy time while thinking. But using *uh*, *um*, *like*, *so*, and *you know* too much hurts a speaker's credibility and distracts listeners.

"Nonwords clutter our language and make us sound less intelligent than we perhaps are," Hanke says.

Replacing nonwords with pauses clears up the message, giving listeners time to hear and absorb. Pauses allow the speaker to collect his or her thoughts, breathe, and even create drama and effect if done to punctuate a specific point, Hanke says. Pausing helps a speaker gain control of the message and appear comfortable with both the listeners and the subject matter.

### Don't Say It

Learn to replace your "nonwords" with pauses, Hanke recommends. This will help you pace your speech and give your listeners time to absorb your message. Omitting self-defeating statements increases your credibility and assures your audience that your ideas are worth listening to. Hanke advises paring these words and phrases from your speech:



Leaders need to sound confident and assured that what they are telling their audience is trustworthy. Starting off a conversation with a self-defeating statement tells people your idea is not worth listening too. Hanke recommends avoiding self-deprecating statements such as:

- “I was wondering if we might consider...”
- “I think...”
- “I’m probably way off base here...”
- “This might be a stupid idea, but...”

Hanke relates a discussion with an HIM professional who said she does not want to come across as an aggressive person in the workplace. Whenever she offers ideas, she over-qualifies her statements as a way to slowly make her point.

This fear of aggressiveness is not uncommon, Hanke says. But qualifiers lead listeners to believe you are not confident in yourself and your points. “These skills are not designed to make you aggressive, they are to make you assertive...,” she says. “If you are going to succeed in the business world, you have to be confident and assertive.”

### **E-mail: Use in Moderation**

Finally, leaders communicate important information in person. The temptation to fire off e-mail instead of picking up the phone can be great. E-mail is quick, universal, and documents information for easy filing.

But e-mail is not always the most effective way to communicate. Voiceless messages can be easily misinterpreted and lead to a complicated, negative situation that could have been avoided by a telephone call or face-to-face powwow.

That is not to say that technology is inappropriate. E-mail and other electronic communications are important, but they must be balanced with actual human interaction, Hanke says.

E-mail should never be used when the stakes are high, such as resolving a challenging situation or discussing confidential information, she recommends.

“People tell me that if they are already in conflict with someone, or they don’t get along with someone, they will send an e-mail over calling them or walking into their office, which is probably the worst thing you can possibly do,” Hanke says.

You can never be sure how a person will interpret an e-mail message. Also, e-mail is permanent, and messages sent in the heat of the moment can come back to haunt people. When a lot is on the line, have your conversation in person or over the phone, Hanke recommends. This allows you to add emphasis to words or soften the message with your vocal tone and facial expressions.

### **“When in Doubt, Pick up the Phone”**

E-mail also can create distance between people, and it has caused many to become impersonal with their staff or coworkers. Using e-mail too much jeopardizes vital personal relationships that could be enhanced by a phone call or cubical stop-by.

And e-mail may be inefficient. While it may seem like the fastest way to share or receive information, an endless chain of follow-up e-mail may result if additional questions pop up. A quick telephone chat is usually faster and more efficient than a game of e-mail tag.

“I always tell individuals, ‘When in doubt, pick up the phone,’” Hanke says.

And if you have to leave a voicemail message, she says, end by letting the listener know you will follow up by e-mail. “At least now they heard your voice-they hear the tone, the emphasis in your voice, energy, no energy in your voice-rather than reading a bunch of words. At least you have made the first step to building a relationship.”

For more e-mail best practices, see the “E-mail Enlightenment” column below.

## **E-mail Enlightenment**

### **10 Tips for Better E-mailing**

An e-mail is forever. Unlike spoken words that can be forgotten as soon as they are uttered, a sent e-mail remains in cold, hard electronic print as long as the recipient chooses. With no ability to add supporting context, the e-mail speaks for itself and can sometimes send the wrong message.

The words used when composing an e-mail should be chosen carefully to ensure the intended message is always delivered to a recipient, says Stacey Hanke, communication author and speaker with 1st Impression Consulting, based in Chicago. Hanke recommends the following top-ten e-mail best practices for regret-free e-mailing.

1. Insert the e-mail address last to prevent sending a half-written or unedited e-mail.
2. If you have an attachment to send, attach it to the e-mail first. Forgetting the attachment in a sent e-mail lowers credibility.
3. Include a topic in the subject line that grabs a reader’s attention. The subject needs to be short, specific, and to the point.

4. Don't get carried away with "Reply to All." Understand the needs of your readers to determine "need to know" versus "nice to know."
5. Be concise and to the point with paragraph breaks and bullet points. A long e-mail is discouraging to read.
6. To encourage a recipient's response, ask open-ended questions and set specific deadline dates if action is required.
7. If a recipient replies with a question that requires further explanation or makes the nature of the exchange more critical or urgent, don't send another e-mail. The matter needs the attention of a face-to-face conversation.
8. Always use spellcheck for proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Read all e-mail before you press send. Treat your e-mail messages as if you are writing an article that will be published on the front page of the New York Times.
9. Every e-mail you receive needs a response within 24 hours. If you need time to gather information, send a message saying you've received the e-mail and are collecting information. Let the sender know when you expect to get back to them.
10. Writing in all caps is perceived as shouting. Your message will either annoy your recipient or trigger an unwanted response.

## HIM Leaders Share Focus Points for Success

Hanke asked several HIM professionals working in leadership roles what skills an HIM leader requires and how a leader's voice could truly be heard in the industry. Their top five responses are paraphrased below:

- Listen to what is important to your listeners. Just because you understand something doesn't mean your listener does.
- Be accountable for yourself. Only you are responsible for your own professional development.
- Think of the big picture. Understand how your work affects other areas of healthcare, such as the quality of care provided by the facility.
- Once you get to the table, earn your keep. Establish a reputation for bringing great ideas; don't just sit idly and let others do the work.
- Do your own public relations for HIM. Communicate to others your expertise in being an effective leader.

## Great Leaders Are Great Communicators

The point of communication is simple: to express one's thoughts. The mistake many people make is to assume great communication does not require learning and practice.

"I hear people say to me all the time, 'Well, I communicate every day, and I'm good at it,'" Hanke says. "My point behind that is just because you think you are good at it doesn't mean you look it."

People need to receive unbiased feedback from others about their communication habits in order to truly understand their effectiveness. Hanke recommends listening to an audio recording of a recent meeting you led or review a video tape of a presentation you conducted to evaluate your communication style. Soliciting anonymous feedback from peers is another good way to gauge your communication skills.

"With any type of change, awareness is the first step," she says.

Communication has become harder over the years, Hanke admits. With new technologies like social networking, e-mail, and even the telephone, people now have to learn how to be an effective communicator in various mediums.

"The bottom line is, we communicate because we are trying to influence action, we are trying to have impact so people see us as part of them, see us as trustworthy, and want to act on what we have to say," Hanke says.

Those working on their leadership skills should start by improving their communication style, Hanke says. This is no easy task, and it requires people do some behavior reprogramming. But the work is worth it.

“If you keep communicating the same way, you will get the same results,” she says. “You are missing out on an extreme opportunity of how to really excel as a leader when it comes to your communication.”

“I really believe communication is a make or break,” she says, “and it does set managers apart from leaders.”

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**Article citation:**

Dimick, Chris. "More Than Just Talk: Effective Communication Skills for HIM Professionals"  
*Journal of AHIMA* 81, no.1 (January 2010): 34-36.

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