

Five Fatal Flaws in Your Communication

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Make Yourself Clear

Why is it so complicated? You don't want to win a Nobel Prize. You just want to say what you mean in a way that other people understand.

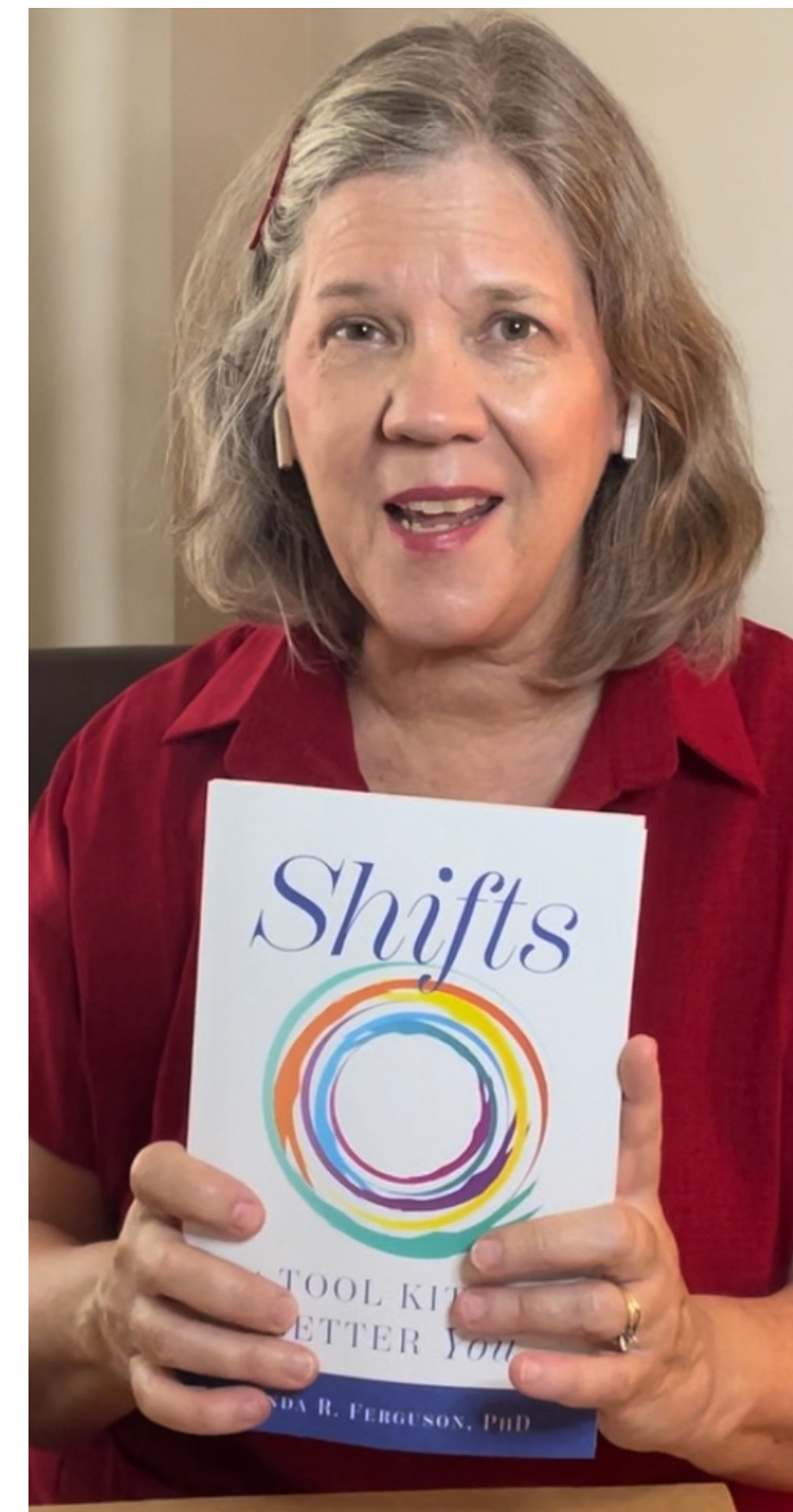
You want to be clear and persuasive but also. . . you want to send the message and move on. You have stuff to do.

I get it. I'll make this short and practical. There are 5 fatal flaws in your communication and they are getting in your way.

When you understand how and why you are doing these 5 things, you can start to make the small changes that make a big difference in how well you reach other people.

How do I know what's interfering with your communication? I've been studying how people make choices and connect with others for more than 20 years. I've been teaching communication for more than 40 years.

I know because I've done the work.



How communication happens

You've been thinking all your life, and talking almost all your life. You probably think you know what you're doing. But that's your mind playing tricks on you.

Here's a very brief version of how human beings interact with each other and the world. They take in information through their senses. The brain matches that information to memories and picks a response based on what has worked in the past. That response is known to the mind when it generates feelings, thoughts or behaviours.

That's why your mind often doesn't know what you will say until you hear yourself say it.

Communication is a behaviour. Sometimes you are conscious of making choices. Often, your words, gestures, and expressions happen before you know what you're thinking. You can make changes but only after you notice that you're communicating.

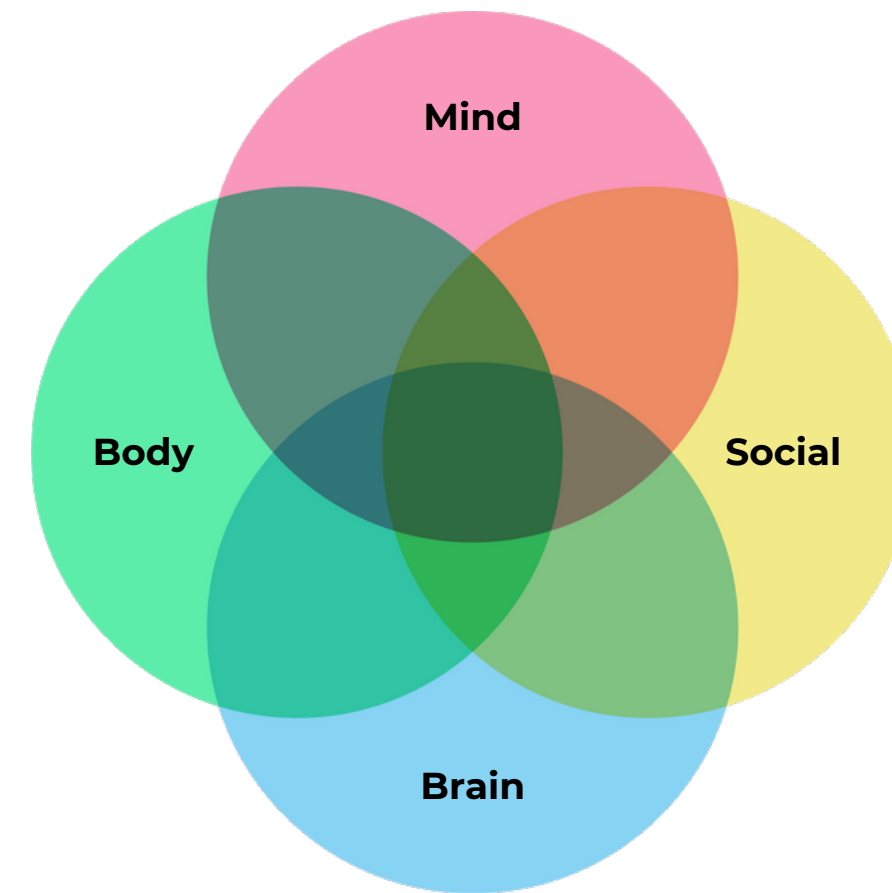
You cannot not communicate. Whenever you are in the presence of another person, they are picking up signals about your thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Their brains are eager to predict whether you plan to help or to hurt.

Sometimes you make choices, and your brain helps you carry them out. But often, you will need to course-correct to communicate effectively.

It's complicated

Every message you send is generated by the interaction of your mind, brain, body and social wiring.

Every message you send is processed by someone else through the same 4 way interaction.



Every flaw has a benefit

We are used to separating skills into the right way to do things and the wrong way to do things. We improve by doing fewer wrong things and more right things.

This is not exactly how communication works. Each of the five fatal flaws we will explore here is also a strategy for doing something we want to do. The flaws are part of how we function.

To improve your communication, you need to work with the system that produces it. You don't want to eliminate the flaws: you want to change the way you use them.

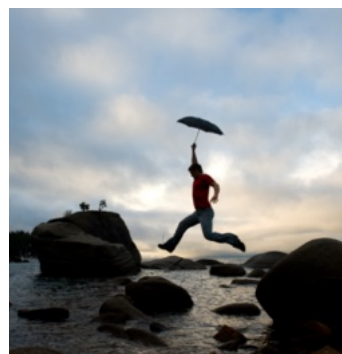
Have you heard the expression "You don't know your own strength"? It doesn't mean you should stop being strong. It means you should be aware of your impact.

Communication requires that we know the strengths of the way we think and apply them systematically to get the results we want. Before you can improve, you need to know your own strength, know its unintended consequences, and make adjustments.

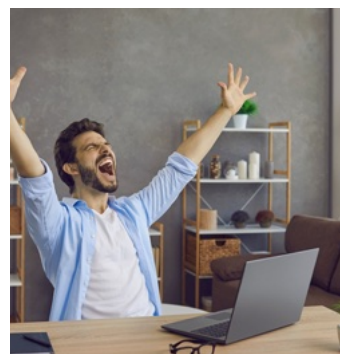
You don't need to make huge changes to improve. You need to make small changes in the right places.

5 Fatal Flaws in Your Communication

Jumping to conclusions



It's clear to you so...



Taking the easy way.



Thinking out loud



Just get it done



Look for the logo in the bottom right corner of a page. It will bring you back to this menu.





You're wired to jump to conclusions

Your brain manages your life by predicting what will happen next. It's a massively complicated data processor that generates predictions much more quickly than your mind can think things through.

The problem is that past performance is not a guarantee of future results. While most of the time the brain's predictions save energy, sometimes the predictions are wrong.



Speaking

Have you ever had a conversation that seemed to be going great. . . until you realized you were talking about different things?

In a conversation, it's natural for your attention to jump around. People speak about 150 words per minute and you can think 8-10 times that fast. Your brain recognizes a pattern in the conversation and jumps ahead to what should come next.

This process allows you to have great communication, when the predictions are accurate. When the predictions take you down the wrong path, you need to notice and course correct.

Writing

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It might take a moment to understand why, but we leap to even more conclusions when we are writing a message.

The first assumption is that someone else will read to the end of what you have written. You may be so focused on including all the details that you don't think about what will actually be read.

You are probably also leaping to other conclusions about how your reader processes information, sets their priorities, and values whatever you are writing about. You aren't even aware of jumping to conclusions: you are focused on saying what you want to say.

Check your assumptions

You don't have to worry about your assumptions when you're getting the results you like. But when people are not getting your message, then it's time to check in.

In a conversation, ask yourself: are we on the same page here? The simple act of checking in will often show you where you're off track. You can also ask out loud: no one will mind you checking to make sure you are understood and understanding.

Mistakes happen because our past experience is not always a good predictor of what comes next. Checking in does not mean anyone has been careless.

Do you know what a pre-mortem is? You assume that you won't reach a goal and backtrack to find out what went wrong.

When you write, you need to check:

- are your words clear and appropriate?
- are your sentences short and clear?
- have you used formatting to make your points easy to see?

Beyond these basics, you want to ask yourself why the reader will want to read what you have written, what stressors will influence what your reader understands, and what good reasons there will be for your reader to scan instead of reading carefully.



Your thoughts are crystal clear

How could saying exactly what you're thinking be a fatal flaw? It took so much effort to get your own thinking clear.

But. . . you're not communicating with you: you're communicating with another person or group of people. They don't share your background, priorities and assumptions.

What's clear to you won't necessarily be clear to them.



Speaking

When have you been enthusiastically describing something while someone else nods? Was that really a conversation?

Or maybe you were giving a list of instructions and didn't notice the slightly glazed look that meant your listener was no longer really hearing you?

When you are caught up in what you're saying, you are hoping that the other person is motivated enough to follow you. You're not sharing the space and allowing them to engage with your crystal clear thinking.

Writing

How long are your paragraphs? Seriously. Long paragraphs are one good way to see that you're caught up in your own thinking.

Not every long paragraph is a bad idea. But check it out. If you're working so hard to include all the details, you might be making your reader work too hard to follow you.

Another tell is actually a lack of explanation. You believe that the numbers or the graphs or the example will speak for themselves because they are clear to you. That's rarely the case.

Check with a beginner

Have you heard it said that if you can't explain an idea to a child, you don't understand it well enough? This may be true in physics, but it's an odd test of many things we need to communicate.

Instead, consider paying attention to how you feel when someone is presenting information you don't quite understand. We all have these experiences. The trick is to learn from them.

When you understand how important it is that you never make someone feel out of the loop or insecure about their own expertise, you'll be motivated to put your message in terms they can understand.

If writing is hard to understand, people often ignore it and wait for a clearer explanation. It's much easier to ignore a written message than to ignore a person who is standing in front of you.

This means two things. The first is that you need to proof your work. Give it to someone who is not an expert and ask them questions to see what they understood.

The second is that before you send any written message, you need to ask yourself: "what's in it for the reader?" Make sure you've highlighted that, even if it's not crucial from your point of view.



It will be quicker if I . . .

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In our minds, the hard part is the thinking. We need to have an idea, shape it, test it, back it up with evidence, and ensure it's in line with our goals. That part feels so hard that we are likely to choose the easiest way to communicate what we think.

The easiest way is always to blurt it out, in speaking or in an email, with little editing and less attention to the way the idea will be received. After all, we did the hard work up front. Now it must be someone else's turn.



Speaking

Speaking the easy way often means talking until you run out of time or air. The easy way to convey an idea is to tell it as it comes to you.

And when you see that you're not engaging people, you get louder and longer because you know they need to hear the message. Louder and longer are easy.

Sometimes the easy way is to use fewer words. You say what you need to say and then you're done, even if you know that what you've said hasn't made an impact. You've done your part.

Writing

Writing the easy way means writing the way you think, often in long rambling sentences. Sometimes it means sending an email with a complicated attachment and little introduction.

Sometimes writing the easy way means sending a very brief instant message, even though you know you have little control of when or how it will be received.

Writing the easy way means showing that you shared information without making sure the information is received and understood.

Ask the right questions

You've probably heard that the best way to teach or coach is to ask good questions. Instead of presenting the right way forward, you help someone discover it for themselves.

Asking questions is not the easy way. You have to understand the result you want so well that you can connect the dots between the message and the experience and priorities of the person receiving it.

But... the effort it takes to ask better questions makes a difference. You'll understand your message better and so will your audience.

You can't lead with questions in the same way in a written message. Instead, you have to think about the questions the reader will have and ensure that you highlight your answers to them.

This won't feel natural, and it will take some effort to get used to the structure. We've all learned to start with an idea and then back it up with evidence. That's the structure for every powerpoint slide and every report.

The logic is a little different when you think about your topic from the reader's point of view.

Thinking out loud

Most of the important thinking we do happens outside our conscious awareness. Our brains are processing superpowers who handle vast amounts of information. Our conscious minds are limited. There's always a disconnect between what we know and what we think.

One of the ways we bridge this disconnect is to think in words. Thoughts make us aware, but they come and go quickly. Sometimes we speak or write our thoughts so we can hear ourselves think.



Speaking

Have you ever talked to someone who could argue both sides of something at the same time? It's hard to process as communication, but easier to understand as weighing the options or connecting with different possibilities.

You've probably also had conversations where you felt invisible, conversations where someone carried the entire flow without making space for responses. This is another sign that someone is thinking out loud.

When you think out loud, you hear yourself but you don't play well with others

Writing

Journalling is one way that people learn to work through their thoughts and feelings.

Essays and reports provide the same function for developing expertise in different fields. When these formats are used with discipline, they can allow both thinking and communication to happen simultaneously.

But they are often not used with discipline. Whether we send instant messages, emails or longer documents, we too often figure it out as we go along. We are thinking at the expense of communicating and we frequently leave gaps where our readers need bridges.

Mark out your processing

Do you make a practice of checking in with others when you are speaking? Whether it's a presentation or a conversation, it's useful to ask others for feedback while you are making your point and not just at the end.

This discipline reminds you that when you are speaking in the presence of others, you are communicating. What they think matters.

When you catch yourself thinking out loud, it's helpful to mark that out by saying something like "I'm just thinking this through out loud" and then asking for feedback because your thoughts are a work-in-progress.

In writing, there's no substitute for three steps:

- draft a quick outline of your thinking
- write the message
- check the message to see where you have changed your idea or your strategy

It's normal to have new ideas while you are preparing a document. If you let them flow, you will compromise the structure you had planned. Your readers will not be sure how you got to where you ended up.

If you check the message against your plan, you'll see where new ideas have changed your approach. You can rewrite earlier portions to build the bridges readers require.



Just get it done

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The most dangerous frame for a communication is: "I have to get it done." It turns communicating into a one way task that can be done the same way you would do the laundry.

Communication means focusing on how your message is landing and adapting it to the needs and biases of the other person. It happens only when you are clear about having an impact, not about 'getting it done.'

It doesn't take longer to connect with purpose.



Speaking

How do you feel about someone snapping an instruction at you? Or about the person who gives you a list of ten different things to do without pausing for breath (or note-taking)?

As listeners, we are trying to process our own thoughts and priorities, understand the framing of the person communicating with us, and hear the details. There's a lot to process.

Just telling someone something is not the same as making sure they've heard it. If they haven't caught it, they won't remember it, and the message is a waste of time and rapport.

Writing

We are most likely to revert to task mode in sending written messages. Whether they are quick pings by instant message or emails or decks or documents, we put them on our to-do lists and start working through them.

This is not a good way to communicate. It encourages us to grind out data instead of framing it to be understood and remembered. Not only do we feel dehumanized by cranking out documents, our readers feel it too.

This matters because communication demands effort from both sender and receiver. And when we don't feel fully human, we are unlikely to make that effort.

Stay connected to your purpose

Communicating isn't about checking something off a list. It's driven by one of three changes you want to make: you want to persuade, to collaborate or to motivate. Knowing which you want to do changes the way you show up in a conversation or presentation.

You might be surprised that I didn't put "teach" or "inform" in that list. You can't see those results, so it is hard to be motivated by them. It's better to focus on change that you will be able to verify while communicating and after the communication. When you start hitting your goals, you'll be less likely to go into task mode when speaking.

Writing is difficult because much of the business writing we do is less about communication and more about documentation of who knew what when.

If you're just trying to document, then that's your purpose and communication is not relevant. But if you want your writing to persuade, collaborate or motivate, you need to be focused on the person or people you will change.

That person or group needs more than data; they need to understand how your information connects to their priorities. When you show them that, you both win.

Manage Your Fatal Flaws

to become a more
effective communicator

All 5 of the fatal flaws start as good things, as ways of connecting with your own thoughts and goals and of managing your time and energy.

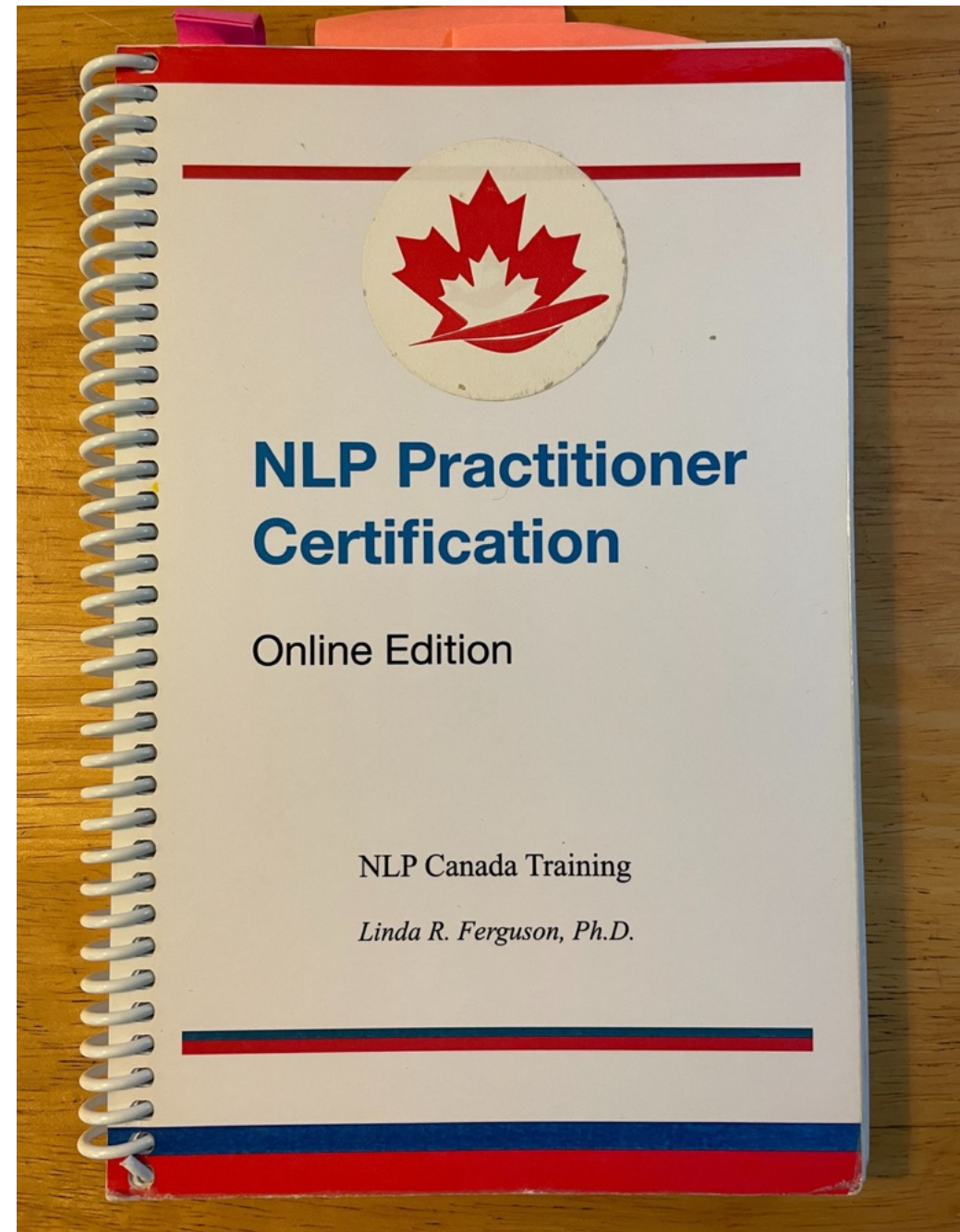
The way to achieve more is not to fight with your fatal flaws. It's to acknowledge the good they do for you and then balance them with your will to make connections and influence others. They only kill communication if you don't widen your focus to include your listener or reader.

The paradox is that the more you focus on your message instead of the person who will receive it, the less you accomplish. The answer is not to be less clear or engaged with what you have to say.

The answer is to practice being thoughtful and inclusive.

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