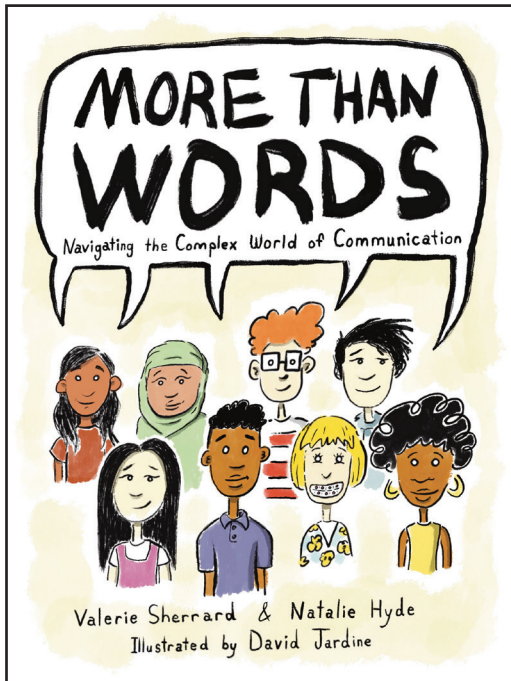


Excerpt from *More Than Words*
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Introduction

You might be wondering what you're doing holding a book about talking. After all, you already know how to talk. In fact, you've probably been talking since you were a toddler. You don't need to read this.

Or DO you?

Before you toss this book aside, you should know that there's a whole lot more to this business of communication than you might have ever suspected. In fact, strong communication skills are a lot like a superpower when you know how to use them.

Are you thinking: Who cares? Well, actually, lots of people do, and you should too, because, just like the bell you can't un-ring, words and actions can never be undone. Most of us can easily think of a time we said or did something we later regretted, all because we didn't communicate wisely.

The good news is, it doesn't have to be that way. You *can* learn to express yourself effectively and avoid the pitfalls that lead to communication fails. This superpower can change your life. Friendships will be stronger! Social activities, better! Your future, brighter!

Say Again?

Communication fails have started wars, sunk ships, destroyed relationships, and – well, the list of disastrous results is pretty much endless. After hitting an iceberg, the communication officer of the *Titanic* sent a bunch of personal messages to friends and family members of passengers *before* he sent a distress signal! It was close to half an hour after the ship hit the iceberg when he finally contacted nearby ships with the Morse Code message: “Come at once. Struck a berg.” The delay, followed by words that failed to convey the desperate seriousness of the incident were both too little and too late. In fact, the *Frankfurt*, which was one of the closest ships, responded, “What is the matter with you?”

This book will help you develop and improve ways to:

- ✓ recognize and understand “non-verbal” messages
- ✓ avoid common communication pitfalls with your friends and family
- ✓ discuss different viewpoints without becoming rude or offensive

- ✓ build your critical thinking skills
- ✓ learn interesting things about the people in your life
- ✓ increase your confidence
- ✓ expand how much you know
- ✓ develop greater patience and stronger listening skills

Besides all that, strong communication skills will make an amazing difference in your professional life. (Okay, you might not have a professional life just yet, but hey, think ahead!)

The chapters follow the normal sequence of a conversation, beginning with a chapter on how to communicate before you say a word, then learning how to genuinely listen to your conversation partner, formulating thoughtful and meaningful responses, and even how to end a conversation graciously. There is also a chapter on digital communication, which has its own special challenges in getting your meaning across. Each chapter ends with a recap of the main points and some fun activities to reinforce new skills for both individuals and groups.

Come on in!



AHEAD

-CHAPTER ONE-



The Unspoken

Ask most people what communication means and they'll tell you it's all about what you say and how you say it. And sure, that's important, but it's really only part of the whole picture.

The thing is, we communicate through *way* more than just words. In fact, words alone can be deceptive. A person might say one thing but mean another, and sometimes you can tell what they *really* mean from messages that are unspoken, or non-verbal. For example, have you ever heard someone claim to be fine when their tone, posture, and expression are all telling you the opposite?

That's why knowing and understanding basic non-verbal messages is such a big deal, and the reason we decided to start with it.

But remember, unless you're talking to yourself, this is always a two-way exchange. Being mindful of *your* signals matters

every bit as much! Not being tuned in to the non-verbal messages you're sending can easily cause a conversation fail!

Learning how to understand those signals from yourself and others is the first superpower in communication. You'll be amazed at how mastering this will up your game!

Let's Begin with Eye Contact

If the thought of looking someone in the eye makes you uncomfortable, you're not alone. This is something a lot of people struggle with. The good news is: overcoming this discomfort *is* possible... and it's not even complicated. This is one of those times when the dreaded "practice makes perfect" comes in. The more you work at it, the better you become.

One approach you can try is with a buddy system. Start with a close friend or family member — someone who's willing to be stared at just for your self-improvement! This person's job will be to offer reminders and track your progress. Since your buddy knows what you're doing, you'll be guaranteed they're making eye contact with *you* too.

But maybe you feel you'd be too self-conscious with the buddy method. If you think that could turn into a two-way awkward-fest, you might find it easier to use mindfulness. In that case, remember to watch for opportunities to make eye contact during any casual conversation.

Don't Look at Me That Way!

Making eye contact does *not* mean eyeballing someone in a locked-on, bug-eyed, unrelenting stare. That would be creepy. Or it could even feel threatening. Ask any dog. Research shows that they interpret constant, direct, eye gaze as dominance or aggression.

Try to start a conversation with eye contact, and when you look away, avoid sudden, jerky motions. Also, resist the urge to look at the floor, ceiling, or out the door. That could give the impression that you're planning your escape. Stay focused on the person you're with by shifting your eyes to another part of their face.





Use the 50/70 rule!

This suggests making eye contact about 50% of the time when you're speaking, and around 70% of the time when you're listening. That might seem like a lot at first but you can work your way up gradually if you need to. And don't worry, you won't have to set your timer to keep track— just keep those percentages in mind.

Go Gently with this new-found skill. Some people have a harder time dealing with direct gazes than others. Eye contact stimulates the layer of the brain that helps people read emotions in faces. For people with autism or post-traumatic stress disorder, too much eye contact can cause overstimulation and result in stress and discomfort.

When you're speaking in a group setting, it's a good idea to make eye contact with one person at a time, finishing a thought or sentence and then moving to someone else. Let your focus move naturally from person to person, not suddenly, as though you're trying to catch someone doing something wrong. And, of course, when someone else is speaking, you should focus on them so that if they look in your direction, they'll see they have your attention.

Still struggling?

If the thought of looking someone in the eye still makes you anxious, try taking slow, deep breaths before and during the conversation. Breathing from your abdomen (your tummy) can be very relaxing. To learn how to do this, place one hand on the upper part of your chest and the other just below the ribcage — this hand is now on top of your diaphragm, which is a muscle that helps us pull air in and push it out again. As you breathe in, make sure your lower hand moves more than your upper hand. This is how you know air is getting right to the bottom of your lungs: the incoming air causes your abdomen to move outwards. That's why it is called "abdominal breathing."

This type of breathing also helps prevent the rapid heartbeats that happen when a person is nervous.

Don't be afraid to take small steps. If a few seconds of eye contact is all you can manage to begin with, that is still progress! If you need to, you can even start out by looking at a different part of the face, such as a nose or eyebrow. Keep at it and you'll find you can work your way up bit by bit. It's been proven at least a gazillion times that the more you do something, the easier it gets.



Practice eye contact online!

There are online videos to let you practice making eye contact. Looking into the eyes of real people who are looking right back at you in a non-threatening setting may well help you build the confidence you need.

Keep trying. You *will* get there!



But careful! Don't get so caught up in the dos and don'ts of eye contact that you forget to pay attention to the conversation! You're not quite rocking the whole eye contact thing if you have *no idea* what the other person just said.

Is this really worth the bother?

Okay, that all sounds helpful, but you might be wondering, what's the big deal? Does making eye contact *really* matter?

Experts say, "Yes." Not only is it an important part of connecting with others, there are also some pretty significant perks.

Eye contact can make what you've said more memorable. *And*, it can help the other person remember your face. These benefits are especially helpful when you're meeting new people at school or on vacation, or anywhere that you'd like to make a good impression. And let's be honest, not too many of us deliberately set out to make a *bad* impression.



What's more, people are more likely to believe you when you meet their eyes while speaking. (On the other hand, looking down, or away, can give others the idea that you're being untruthful, or that you have something to hide.)

Not only will you come across as believable, but people who meet others' eyes when speaking are generally viewed as more intelligent and confident. The big bonus is that your confidence actually *will* get stronger as you do this, and this in turn will give your natural intelligence a chance to truly shine.

With so many good reasons to make eye contact, it's a communication skill well worth developing.

But guess what. The eyes don't do the job on their own. They're often joined in their expressive efforts by their fuzzy neighbors to the north: namely, the eyebrows.

As partners with the eyes, the eyebrows get in on the act for a wide range of reactions and emotions. They reinforce messag-

es of shock, amusement, doubt, interest, disapproval, astonishment, anger, delight, and many more.

But don't take our word for it! Check yourself out in the mirror looking surprised and disgusted and whatever else strikes your fancy. Notice how your eyebrows raise and lower, arch and scrunch. See how the space between them can widen or narrow depending on the emotion being expressed. Pay attention to the speed and suddenness of their movements.

Your eyebrows are a wealth of information and they can help identify other facial signals with greater precision.

Activities

Individual

Listen up!

Sharpen your listening skills with this fun activity. Once you practice active listening, you'll see your ability to retain information get better and better!

Watch a ten-to-fifteen-minute segment of an informational show such as a nature documentary. (Be sure it's something you can pause and watch again.) At the end of the designated time, make notes in point form of the various things you learned. Then go back and re-watch. Did you record the facts given accurately? Were there any that you missed completely? On the second viewing, pay extra attention to the visual clues and details that could be helpful to you in remembering.

Listen up Two!

This activity also involves the use of a show or movie. This time you'll be working on your ability to identify feelings, so try to choose something with strong emotional elements. When you hit play, turn your back so that you are only able to hear what is happening. Pay attention to voices — not only what is said but how, and to background sounds that may offer clues.

As you listen, make brief notes describing what you think each of the characters is feeling. When you've finished, replay the scene, but this time watch it. Does what you see support what you believe you heard?

When you understand the feelings involved, you're in a good position to consider ways you could show empathy. To do this, it may help to ask yourself: Have I had experiences that allow me to feel some of what the character is feeling? And: What would I want someone to do for me if I was in that situation?

Group

Did you Hear?

Divide a group into two teams. Each team forms a line with two feet between each player. A moderator whispers a starter sentence to the first person in each line.

Sample sentences: All should begin with the phrase: "Did you hear that ..." as shown in the first sample.

Did you hear that ...

... flamingos can only eat when their heads are turned upside down?

... oak trees are struck by lightning more frequently than any other tree?

... when a bat flies out of a cave it always starts its journey by turning left?

... a strawberry is the only fruit with all of the seeds growing on the outside?

1. The moderator starts the play by calling: "Go!"
2. The first person in line then steps to the second person in line and whispers the sentence. It must be quiet enough that no one else can hear. The next person does the same, and so on.
3. Two points are awarded to the team who gets the sentence to the last person in line the fastest.
4. The last person writes what they heard on a slip of paper and passes it in to the Moderator.
5. The Moderator reads each team's sentence aloud, followed by the original one.
6. Scoring is as follows:
 - Perfect, word for word final sentence: Five points.
 - Some words changed or missing but meaning still true: Three points
 - Original meaning didn't survive! Zero points
7. Play may continue with new sentences as long as the group likes, but the players should shuffle order for each round of play.
8. The team with the highest end score wins.

Catch that Word!

This game will help you to focus, and to sharpen your listening skills.

Each person in the group will take a turn as the Catcher. The Catcher is sent from the room while the others choose the secret word. (Common descriptive words are best.) The group also chooses a subject to talk about – it should be as general as possible. When the Catcher returns each person says one thing on the chosen subject, working the secret word into their sentence.

To keep it from being obvious, everyone should include several other descriptive words in what they say as well. For example, if the secret word was *small* and the subject was nature, a player might say: “It’s amazing to think that a tall, green plant started out as a small brown seed.”

The Catcher stops play when they are ready to identify the secret word.

Scoring: Five points are added to the Catcher’s score for each time the secret word is said before they correctly identify it. In this game, the lowest score wins!

Chapter Three: Rapid Recap

- ✓ Using body language such as eye contact or nodding can help indicate that you are actively listening.
- ✓ Avoid interrupting so you can process the whole message you are hearing.
- ✓ Recognize that your own opinions and biases may get in the way of feeling empathy for others.
- ✓ It is best not to judge someone on their reaction to something. Personal experiences, problems, or sensitivities can affect how they react.
- ✓ Being distracted by physical issues such as tiredness or hunger can distract us from listening well.
- ✓ We can also be distracted when our minds are preoccupied with our own troubles.