

## Career Boot Camp Resource: Adapting communication to an audience

To communicate effectively, you need to be precise. So, ask yourself: what is my goal, and who is my audience?

These are some examples of different audiences:

- Your team members
- Departmental colleagues
- Your leadership
- Program applicants
- Small business owners
- New Canadians

You can see that some of these audience groups are smaller and more specific than others. It is better to be specific than to be general. An audience of “all Canadians” or “the public” is very broad and hard to understand in entirety. Being precise will help you to research your audience and then tailor your communications.

Here are some things to consider when you are analyzing your audience:

- What do they already know or believe?
- What do you need them to know, believe, or do for you to accomplish your goal?
- What does your audience need or want?
- What concerns or objections might they have?
- What are their priorities or responsibilities?
- What expectations do they have?
- Do you have an existing relationship, or are you building rapport from scratch?

Essentially, try to put yourself in their shoes. There are a variety of sources of information to learn more about your audience:

- Ask questions to your team members, manager, or other colleagues who may have worked on similar files.
- Research previous work or existing information from other projects.
- Find a community of practice within the government that deals with similar topics.
- Use resources like the Public Service Employee Survey, StatsCan surveys and research papers, or HR data that might be available on your organization’s intranet.

You should question the assumptions about your audience that you might have, and reflect to see if your perspective is being shaped by any unconscious biases.

Remember that communication is a two-way street. You should actively listen to your audience and adapt your approach accordingly.

## Example: Analyzing an audience

Let's say your goal is for your team to start using a new task tracking software. You have two audiences: your manager, and your team members.

Your manager cares about things like responsibly managing human and financial resources, workload, productivity, efficiency, team morale and cohesion, and achieving departmental objectives.

Your team members care about the impact on their daily work. They are willing to make a change if the software will improve their efficiency or make their lives easier, but they are worried that the new software will be hard to learn, time-consuming, or a burden. They are also worried that it will duplicate existing efforts.

If your communication only focuses on your perspective (maybe you used this software in a past job and you really liked it), then it might be hard to get buy-in from everyone else.

To get everyone on board, you need to address and alleviate your team members' concerns and highlight to your manager how the new software will result in positive outcomes that are aligned with their priorities. Be open and honest about any costs, risks, or downsides; propose ideas for how those issues can be mitigated, or explain why the project has so many benefits that the potential downsides are worth it.

## Adapting your communication

Once you have a clear understanding of your audience, think about **how** you can communicate the most effectively. There are a variety of techniques that you can use:

- Use bullet points, subheadings, and clear formatting to make it easy for your audience to scan information.
  - This is particularly important when you are sending work for approval to a manager or director. Make it easy for them to read and understand your information in a short amount of time.
- If you are giving a verbal briefing, have a clear structure so that your audience can follow along. There's nothing wrong with saying: "Today, I'm going to talk about three things: X, Y, and Z." Make it clear when you are moving from one topic to the next.
- Build trust and rapport by personalizing your communication so your audience knows that you are actively listening to them. Pay attention to the details.
  - Remembering details and referencing them later can really help to build a relationship. On the other hand, small mistakes can harm them. In her January 2024 Toronto concert, Madonna accidentally said "Hello Boston," which made the audience very upset.
- Adapt your tone, expressions, and body language to be more or less formal as appropriate. Use your judgement to evaluate the atmosphere of an interaction and decide whether humour or more casual language would help to build rapport.
- Use clear language.
- Avoid jargon or acronyms.
- Provide background context if the audience has a knowledge gap.
- Speak and write in the active voice.
- Tell stories that appeal to human emotions and help illustrate your point.

- Provide evidence, examples, and facts to back up your arguments. Cite your sources when appropriate.
- Consider creating graphics to illustrate complex information.
- Use accessible platforms and mediums.
- Use clear, action-oriented subject lines in emails. For example: “For manager approval by end of week – New task tracker proposal”
- Be concise in team meetings and focus on updates that add value for your manager and colleagues.

Communication is a skill that you will continue to develop over the course of your careers.

You will be most effective when you think deliberately about what you are trying to achieve, and adapt your communication to meet the needs of your audience.