Professional Services Capability Framework: Communicating and Engaging

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How to communicate complex ideas simply: top tips

There are six basic principles for communicating complex ideas well

1. **Give context**. Always begin with a roadmap, moving from the satellite view down to the street-level. People need to understand where the details fit in the larger picture.

2. **Tell a story**. Narratives both stick and engage better than facts. They also allow you to ground the abstract in "real-life" application.

3. **One analogy is worth five explanations**. Our brains shut down easily when learning about unfamiliar concepts. Whenever possible, create a strong bridge between what your audience knows and what you're hoping to teach them.

4. **Use sound-bites**. Your outline should hang on a limited number of "hinges". (For presentations and lectures, you should come up with a clear, visual, memorable line to describe each of them.)

5. **Anticipate "drop-points"**. Are you using terms or concepts that contain potential ambiguity? Are you predicating your argument on an assumption that might not be shared? Are you skipping steps? Don't.

6. **Over-narrate the journey**. The best advice I've ever received on public speaking was to "*tell people where they're going, tell them where they are, and tell them where they've been*". At each check-point, do a **brief** recap the help them re-orient.

Ten ways to communicate complex ideas

Good communication helps people to understand and consider complex concepts by using techniques to simplify the concepts and create more impact. If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough yourself. Therefore, make the effort to understand the complex idea well enough to identify its key elements so you can communicate these to others.

It is essential to decide your intended outcome. Do you intend to help someone understand a concept or idea, do you want them to support it, or do you plan to get

them to act on the information? This intended outcome will shape your approach to the communication activity.

Having decided the outcome you want to achieve, you can use these 10 techniques to simplify and communicate complex ideas to others:

1. Data

The benefit of data is it shows what has happened in the past. The disadvantage of data is it doesn't explain how variables are related. Articulate to your audience what the numbers mean and why they should care. You need to go past the data – which may be laid out in visualisations, tables and maps, etc. — to capture the imagination or interest of the audience.

2. Logic

Carefully check with a colleague that the logic of your case is clearly explained. Observation or even intuition can create an initial structure for explaining a complex problem such as an issue. Logic is valuable in its own right—after all, if your audience struggles to follow the thread of your argument, it will be tough to convince them that the argument is sound.

3. Pictures

Pictures, visuals and images offer your audience an invaluable way of *remembering* the relationships between different variables. The right visual offers an easy way to see, internalise, and later recall even complicated information.

4. Infographics

Infographics are making a big impact in communicating about complex topics, making information eye catching, shareable and easily digestible. Information graphics or data visualisation (infographics) are graphic visual representations of information, data or knowledge intended to present information quickly and clearly to a live or online audience.

5. Stories

Stories that summarise certain logics or relationships between variables are perhaps stickiest of all. These stories can become memorable, almost tangible shorthand for even very abstract concepts. It helps also to keep in mind that stories are not just for your audience. "By telling that story to ourselves, it's a way for us to understand the world and cement it in our own memory."

6. Participation

Tools like data or equations or even stories are of limited value if an audience feels they can't push back, disagree, or ask for clarification. The mores senior the audience, the more important it is to actively create pauses or other spaces where misunderstandings can be voiced and clarification requested. Consider a straightforward approach: just stop and ask for any questions. Use your body language to communicate that you genuinely welcome the opportunity to clarify. Do not assume the questioner is the only one confused.

7. Metaphors and analogies

Metaphors can make a complex subject much easier to understand.

8. Find ways to make it matter to them

We tend to learn best when we're interested in something – and we're interested in topics when they relate to us directly. When you're trying to explain a complicated topic to an individual, it's best to play on that "what's in it for me" attitude and show what's in it for them. Generally, you should seek to find out what matters to them, and then base your approach on those angles.

9. Explain concepts using details they already know

The idea of connecting ideas to what someone already knows has been used for thousands of years, but it works because it's one of the best ways to explain ideas. If possible, use related information people already know, and expand on that. The more you can pull from information people already have and analogies they already understand, the better they'll understand the core concepts you're showing them.

10. Leave out unnecessary details

When you understand a concept, especially if you are enthusiastic about the topic, you can find it's all-to-easy to fall into the trap of thinking every detail is important. But describing too many details to others unnecessarily complicates the picture. You can always come back to those details later because your immediate objective is to get the main points across and help others understand a difficult concept.