Complex to Clear

Managing Clarity in Corporate Communication

Institute for Media
and Communications Management
University of St.Gallen

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Executive Summary

What is this report about?

This report presents the business case for clarity in corporate communication. It shows the high costs associated with unclear, complex messages and provides tools that can be used to ensure clear communication in a range of communication channels, from e-mail and slide presentations to reports and social media. The report also discusses clarity problems and solutions through the results of surveys and case studies.

Why is the topic of clarity important?

Unclear communication can cause reputation damage, lead to the loss of customers or employees, and create legal, financial, and security risks through misunderstandings. Our survey of corporate communication professionals shows that the importance of the topic has been recognized: almost 60 percent of these professionals are currently preparing or conducting a clear communication initiative in their organization.

What will you learn from this report?

You will learn about why communicators convey messages that are incomprehensible and overly complex. You will learn how to recognize clarity problems in your organization and how to solve them, both individually and as an organization. You will learn about current research into how to communicate complex issues clearly, and you will learn about best practices in managing clarity.

What solutions does this report offer?

Communicators should seek to identify the typical clarity problem patterns in their work context and then solve them using the CLEAR checklist and the STARTER package. The CLEAR checklist involves contextualizing complex messages, ensuring they have a logical structure, focusing on the essential items, eliminating ambiguous terms or statements, and making the messages resonate with their target audience. To this end, communicators must know their target audience, pre-check their communication whenever possible, and regularly measure whether their communication is perceived as clear. The STARTER package consists of clarity standards, training elements, accountability and roles, review processes, (IT) tools and templates, positive and negative (or before/after) examples, and resources such as assistants and time.

What should you read next if you only have 10 more minutes?

Readers who are pressed for time should review the clarity problem patterns on pages 14 and 15, have a look at the CLEAR table on page 17, and scan the check tables in the appendix on page 66.

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Preface

The problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.

George Bernard Shaw

Only clear communication can reach, inform, and convince an audience. Harry Truman once said, "If you can't convince them, confuse them." This type of approach no longer works with today's savvy and connected audiences. However, as dramatist and Nobel laureate G.B. Shaw correctly pointed out, the problem with communication is that we often have the *illusion* that it has worked, when what is clear to us still seems confusing to our audience. This is especially true for complex topics, such as corporate social responsibility, strategy, risks, crises, business models, or corporate values.

So, how then can such complex issues be made clear to an audience without oversimplifying the message? How can we *consistently* communicate in a clear and understandable manner?

This report answers these questions. The subtitle contains the term "Managing Clarity," as achieving clear communication requires more than just brushing up on verbal and graphic skills. It requires a *systematic management effort*. This study has compiled proven practices and tools, informative case studies, as well as results from three surveys. The report is also based on the authors' previous research on information overload in corporate communication and on managing information quality in communication processes. For a number of reasons, we felt it was necessary to go beyond this previous research.

Firstly, corporate communicators have lamented that the *complexity* of the messages they need to convey is increasing, which makes their communication efforts ever more challenging. For example, they need to explain issues like genetically modified food or labor disputes to the general public, inform activists about their CSR activities, or convey the essence of their R&D strategy to investors and analysts. These are all complex issues that are not easy to clarify, especially when many internal sources and contact points would like to contribute to these messages.

The second reason relates to the *target groups* of such messages, whose attention spans have generally become shorter, while their expectations regarding crisp and clear communication have risen. We live in an attention economy where the YouTube generation expects the essence of a message in 30 seconds (as, for example, in a Twitter message). This means that complex issues must be communicated quickly and in concise and consistent messages across different channels and formats.

The third reason for caring about clarity is that communication professionals are sometimes accused of deliberately obfuscating issues and not striving for clear communication. We believe that such accusations are unfounded and that the PR community does indeed embrace clarity. Nonetheless, highlighting this fact through corresponding case studies and surveys will ultimately help improve the *reputation* of the entire communication industry.

A fourth reason for conducting a study on how to be clear is that there is a great body of literature on the topic, of which corporate communicators may not yet be aware. Extensive research is available on what makes complex issues more understandable. Ironically, however, it is not documented in a clear and actionable manner that busy communicators can understand and apply. The present study aims to translate these findings into *actionable advice*.

This last reason – the generation of directly applicable insights – is particularly important here. We have paid special attention to converting our research findings into useful checklists, templates, training material, and diagnostic tools. Although all applied research is preliminary and subject to future revisions, we hope that our approach to clear communication will prove valuable for communication professionals for some time to come. We have already used many of its elements in training sessions and projects and have seen its benefits in many areas. Should you have similar experiences, comments, or feedback, we would love to hear from you at info@mcm.unisg.ch.

Martin J. Eppler and Nicole Bischof,
St. Gallen, November 2011

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Introduction: The High Cost of Unclear Communication

Clarity is the most serious communication problem in business.

James Suchan and Ron Dulek

Why should you care about clarity?

Consider the costs or losses associated with the following real-life business situations:

- Losing the support of an important stakeholder of your business strategy because he does not understand the rationale behind your strategy.
- Missing the opportunity to win the business of a major investor because he cannot fully comprehend your novel business model.
- Alienating a group of government officials because they do not properly appreciate the scope and inherent risks of your new technology.
- Having entire customer groups defect because your new service package creates confusion, information overload, and paralysis by analysis, instead of a clear picture.
- A group of journalists report on a recent mishap in your organization in a distorted and negative manner because they were not able to "get" your version of what happened.
- Losing important employees because of unclear instructions that create stress and ultimately increase fluctuation.

In each of these cases, the cost or losses involved will always be too high – no organization can afford such communication failures. However, situations like these are all too common. They occur when organizations fail to *systematically manage clarity* in their managerial and corporate communication. The root cause of such a lack of management may be the false belief that clear communication is something that can be left to the talent and inspiration of individual communicators. One of the objectives of this study is to show the negative implications of such a dangerous assumption.

As Frank Lloyd Wright noted, "Lack of clarity is the number-one time-waster." When our communication is unclear, our target audience is unlikely to understand us; and if they don't understand us, they will not agree with us. If they don't agree, they are unlikely to make a decision or take action in our favor. In such a case, the communicator will have spent time and money without achieving the desired results. What is particularly problematic, however, is that this waste often goes undetected. Communication managers may not even be aware of their communication failures, as they often do not receive immediate or direct feedback and the results of their messages only become visible after considerable time delays.

Therefore, communications managers must become aware of the *risks and high costs of unclear communication*. This is not only important for traditional communication contexts, where feedback is indirect, but also for *social media*, where the feedback to unclear communication is immediate and often brutally direct. Because this negative feedback is visible to anyone who is online, the cost of unclear communication can include temporary or even permanent damage to the sender's reputation.

There is some good news. If corporate communicators pay attention to some key elements and avoid a few bad habits and routines, they can dramatically increase the clarity of their communication every time they communicate. Several organizations have started this journey towards clarity and have found that the benefits of clear communication far outweigh the costs.

How does this study address clarity?

This study views clarity as a *strategic asset* that organizations have to manage, both actively and systematically, in order to avoid negative outcomes such as those described above. In order for communicators in organizations to treat clarity as a strategic asset, they must first *understand the problem*. Then they need to *identify the elements* that solve the problem in overview. Next, they need to see practical *examples* of the challenges and how they can be met. They must also see *evidence* that the approach is correct, and receive the *tools* that make the approach operational.

The approach of this study mirrors the steps that a corporate communicator would take. This first chapter describes why *complexity* gets in the way of clear communication. It provides communicators with an overview of the root causes of unclear communication and a conceptual vocabulary with which to handle clarity problems. Chapter 2 provides a management method (including its background) and toolkit for simplifying complex concepts, and Chapter 3 provides three illustrative case studies. Chapter 4 provides quantitative evidence on clear communication based on the survey research for this study, and Chapter 5 provides a conclusion and outlook. The appendix contains useful checklists and tools that can be used to improve clarity in a variety of corporate communication contexts.

We start by briefly examining the concepts of clarity and complexity, and how complexity can get in the way of clear communication.

What is clarity?

The word "clarity" (from the Latin claritas) can be defined as the state or measure of being clear, either in *thought, appearance*, or *style*. Although clarity is related to simplicity, simplification implies a reduction in scope or complexity, whereas clarification *transforms* complexity into a more accessible format.

Clarity, according to another dictionary definition, designates a *freedom from indistinctness* or *ambiguity*. Making something clear, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is equivalent to making it understood and reducing what is unwanted. In its original sense, clarity is the state or quality of being clear or *transparent* to the eye. In order for something to be transparent, the obstacles and elements that are not in the right place must be removed. In a communication context, this typically means *obstacles to understanding*. What are these obstacles?

In many corporate communication contexts, obstacles to understanding are created by complexity. This complexity can be inherent in a *topic* or brought about by the *(inter)actions* of the communicators dealing with a topic. Therefore, it is important to examine the issue of complexity more closely and to distinguish between different types of complexity, as they can lead to unclear communication but require different remedies.

What is complexity and how does it affect communication?

The classic definition of complexity that can be found in many text books on the topic consists of four attributes that make a topic or domain complex.

A complex problem, domain, or issue has:

1. A high number of relevant *elements*, facets, or items
2. Many (different) *relationships* among these elements
3. Many *changes* in these relationships over time
4. A *lack of overview* regarding these relationships and their cha

Therefore, something is complex because it contains many elements that interact in a dynamic, multi-lateral, and murky manner.

To clarify something complex, you must structure (or group) items to reduce their number, focus on their essential relationships, and provide an overview before going into detail, while also considering the changes that might take place after your communication has occurred. Because of this last element, it is imperative to contextualize messages in terms of their purpose, scope, and time.

In the context of corporate communication, it is important to distinguish among three types of complexity: topic complexity, process complexity, and message complexity.

Topic complexity is the level of intrinsic difficulty associated with a topic to be communicated. For example, it is not always easy to convey the risks associated with new technologies. Think about how to explain the risks inherent in genetically modified food, or the perils of nanotechnology and how they can adequately be explained to a non-expert audience.

Process complexity refers to the level of sophistication used to produce and convey a message. Involving more people in the creation and communication of a message (such as a strategy brief or a press release) will increase the process complexity. As explained below, process complexity can spill over into message complexity.

Message complexity refers to how difficult it is for the target audience to comprehend the conveyed message. Message complexity includes the topic's inherent complexity (at times amplified through process complexity), plus the complexity of the presentation format, style, and vocabulary.

As a communicator, there is not much you can do about the first type of complexity. Depending on your industry or market position, the topics to communicate can range from simple to extremely complex. However, corporate communicators can directly influence process and message complexity. They can reduce the number of people or departments involved in preparing a message and they can streamline their message to fit the expectations and foreknowledge of their audience.

Table 1 outlines some typical communication practices that increase process and message complexity. Communicators should avoid these "clarity killers."

Corporate communication area	Bad communication practices that reduce clarity (“clarity killers”)
External communication	
Crisis communication	Relying on self-organization and improvisation and allowing each communicator to deal with a crisis as she/he sees fit.
Social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.)	Writing or talking in marketing jargon and conceiving communication as a one-way street (ignoring and not inviting feedback).
Branding	Letting the brand reflect different personalities in different contexts.
Investor relations	Providing different pieces of information and different story lines to different investors.
Media relations	Waiting for the media to develop its own version of the truth and then reacting to it.
Internal communication	
Strategy communication	Communicating the strategy in the same format through which it was developed (for example, as a balanced scorecard diagram or strategy map rather than as an accessible visual metaphor).
Change communication	Changing the main topic of your change messages frequently.
Corporate vision and values	Keeping your corporate values and aspirations as abstract and generic as possible.
Risk communication	Using technical risk management language and formats and using expert criteria rather than layman’s criteria to grouping the communicated risks.

Table 1: How to kill clarity in various areas of corporate communication.

While many of these sub-optimal practices (such as the PR, MR, IR, and the strategy and change communication examples) regard process complexity, others (such as the risk communication example) are directly related to message complexity. The following section focuses specifically on the elements that drive message complexity, as communicators can tackle these issues directly to improve the clarity of their messages.

Which factors increase message complexity?

An excessively complex message can be caused by any of the six bad practices summarized in the COMPLEX acronym, which stands for:

- **C** omplicated technical jargon
- **O** verloaded sentences and documents (too many details)
- **M** essy document structures (no clear, consistent sequence or format)
- **P** olysemic (ambiguous) terms that are vague and can be interpreted in many ways
- **L** inks that divert the readers’ attention (too many connections to other messages)
- **E** ver-changing communication formats that force readers to learn new structures
- **X** tra (or e**x**cessive) elements that deviate from the main point.

Having shown how complexity can negatively affect the clarity of corporate communication, the question remains as to why many organizations continue to communicate in a complex, inaccessible manner using many of the COMPLEX characteristics listed above. The next two sections of this chapter address this question by analyzing the individual and then organizational reasons for unclear communication.

Why do some communicators embrace complex communication?

Some communicators appear to take pride in the complexity of their communication. They base their complexity-driven approach to communication on five fatal assumptions, which we refer to here as the *five fallacies of complex communication*.

1. The more complex we make our messages, the more we are perceived as *authoritative* and convincing communicators.
2. The more complex we make our messages, the more we immunize them against potential *criticism* or objections.
3. If we allow our messages to be complex, at least we are sure that we have covered all important material and have pleased everybody (on the sender’s side).
4. If we make our messages simple and clear, our audiences will perceive the topic as banal and *unsophisticated*.
5. If we make our messages simple and clear, our audience will become *suspicious* and look for a hidden catch.

These assumptions are incorrect because they are based on the premise that the receivers of a complex message will blame themselves for not understanding it. However, this premise no longer holds in an information-abundant, all-access attention economy in which any piece of information can be substituted with a simpler one through a different source. We also know from persuasion research that a message is perceived as credible and convincing if it resonates with the audience because people can connect the new message with what they already know. If communication is overly complex, there is no room for resonance.

Beyond these individual beliefs, there are also bureaucratic reasons for unclear communication. A few of these organizational causes for excessive complexity are highlighted below. This provides organizations with a simple diagnostic tool for detecting and reducing clarity problems. This is known as the clarity *problem pattern* approach.

How can you identify and reduce organizational clarity problems?

In order to enable corporate communicators to detect clarity problems in their own organizations, we have documented a number of typical problems in so-called clarity problem patterns. These problems, along with their root causes and countermeasures, have been identified through our case study research in various organizations.

A *clarity problem pattern* is a recurring managerial problem that leads to unclear communication and can be resolved through systematic action. A description of such a recurring problem consists of a simple (and memorable) pattern name, a concise description of its main symptoms, a description of the problem driver or root cause, and an explanation of how the problem can be overcome.

Checking if your organization suffers from any of these patterns can provide a starting point with which to improve the clarity in your own working context.

Too many cooks

Description: A document has been created by involving different departments with equal power over the document. The individual sections are inconsistent, overlapping, and have used different styles. This creates confusion when the document is used in communication.

Example: Unclear cut-and-paste strategy document.

Problem driver: Lack of ownership and consolidation.

Solution: Assign clear ownership rights to one coordinator (with clearly defined input parameters for others and deadlines) who can ensure there is one consistent style, format, and level of granularity. Work in small teams that will share their solutions with key stakeholders and solicit feedback selectively.

Too big to fail

Description: A document has grown to a point where everybody agrees with it (because their part is in it), but no one wants to modify it even though it contains several unclear or redundant passages.

Example: A legal contract or agreement with different partners.

Problem driver: Iterations without consolidation.

Solution: Analyze, segment, consolidate, and redraft. Show the conversion from old to new to the involved parties.

Re-use abuse

Description: Communicators re-use or recombine old text segments that are outdated and do not fit together well. This leads to inconsistent, outdated, or redundant messages, which creates confusion.

Example: A crisis report confuses employees as it uses outdated scenarios and terminology.

Problem driver: Time pressure and saving sunk costs.

Solution: Establish quality checks on message modules that are to be re-used, and add expiration dates to them.

Context chasm

Description: A document in progress has been handed from one expertise domain (department) to another. The subsequent departments do not fully understand the first domain, but they make changes to those document segments anyway; this leads to a confusing and inconsistent description.

Example: A press release regarding a new product that originated in the marketing department is elaborated and disseminated by the PR department. The PR department does not know the background of the product.

Problem driver: Gaps between experts and communicators.

Solution: Appoint a “middle man” or liaison officer who understands all sides and can span the organizational boundaries.

Swiss Army knife message

Description: A message creates confusion or unneeded complexity because, instead of being tailored to the information needs of different target groups, it serves multiple purposes and audiences at the same time.

Example: A press release about an ongoing corporate crisis is simultaneously addressed to investors, journalists, and employees.

Problem driver: Time pressure

Solution: Split up the message into separate smaller messages, each of which is tailored for a specific target group or purpose.

Chinese whispers

Description: Journalists and employees rely on trivialized or incorrect information that they have copied from other media articles. In this way, fabricated facts make their way from the local level to national or even international media.

Example: A media article about a corporate crisis is reported in daily newspapers with inaccurate facts.

Problem driver: Time pressure, resource constraints in news rooms and in corporate communication (for example, no communication staff available to answer journalists’ questions in a timely manner).

Solution: Provide the company’s own story (with strong news value) and tell it to journalists in a timely manner with full details and precise and correct facts. Ensure ad-hoc availability of media relations staff.

These and other typical problem patterns will be revisited in Chapter 3, where they are used to describe typical clarity challenges of communication departments.

What does all this mean for corporate communicators?

This chapter has looked at the reasons why clear communication should be a priority for corporate communicators. We have examined how complexity can negatively affect corporate communication and why individuals and organizations sometimes communicate in an overly complex manner. Corporate communicators should consider the areas in which complexity affects their communication work and whether any of the described problem patterns or clarity killers in this chapter are also present in their working context.

The next chapter proposes a lean and pragmatic toolkit for dealing with these challenges effectively, as well as a simple management framework for making the complex clear.

CLEAR Communication: A Systematic Approach to Managing Clarity in Corporate Communication

Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.

Matthew Arnold

What are the elements of the CLEAR communication method?

Having highlighted the challenges and opportunities that corporate communicators face with regard to making the complex clear, we now present a simple methodology for managing clarity systematically in various fields of managerial and corporate communication (including social media). This is done through two key concepts: the *CLEAR formula* and the *STARTER package*. The CLEAR formula captures the main criteria that a clear message with complex content must satisfy. The STARTER package summarizes the organizational measures that are necessary in order to meet these criteria consistently and continuously. These concepts, together with the clarity problem patterns and the COMPLEX acronym presented earlier, represent the kernel of the method.

What are the essential factors that make complex communication clear?

The CLEAR formula in Table 2 summarizes the different approaches and definitions that we have reviewed in an extensive literature review and empirically validated through three surveys and several case studies. This formula can be used to improve clarity in corporate communication.

This main finding of our research consists of five elements that distinguish a clear message from a confusing one (see Table 2): A clear message contains just enough background information to understand its context or why (and by whom) it should be read. A clear message is logically structured and reduced to its essential elements. A clear message is free of ambiguous terms and contains stimulating elements that create resonance with its audience.

Communicators can consider these crucial clarity criteria in their work by asking themselves the corresponding diagnostic check questions in the third row of Table 2.

What is the rationale behind the CLEAR formula?

The rationale behind this formula can be summarized as follows.

Contextualization (adding background information to a message) is imperative in order to be able to understand *why* a certain message has been sent and how it should be used. It is often not the message itself that creates confusion, but an unclear or missing context.

A logical structure is needed in order to have a *scaffold* or support with which to process and interpret new information. Our surveys and the literature review both consistently ranked a good message structure as one of the top factors that enables or destroys clarity.

It is important to focus on the essential parts because audiences can only process a certain amount of information. Too much information (information overload syndrome) can lead to mental shortcuts and confusion.

Ambiguity is the direct opposite of clarity; terms or sentences that can be interpreted in more than one way cause confusion and provide unclear messages. Therefore, ambiguous terms (such as "soon") should be avoided.

The final element of the CLEAR formula relates to the emotional appeal of a message or its ability to resonate with the audience. In other words, a message must stimulate the interest and curiosity of its audience. After all, without attention there is no room for communication. Having said that, resonance goes beyond attention. In order to resonate with its audience, a message must provide a pathway from what the receivers already know to new information.

The process of achieving these five elements is referred to here as the *clarification process*. Clarification is an iterative process that provides the context for a message; develops a logical, accessible, and consistent structure for its parts; reduces non-essential elements; and systematically eliminates ambiguity. Clarification also requires that communicators think about how to engage their audiences through illustrative examples, images, or questions. The clarification steps do not necessarily have to be performed in this sequence, and the steps may include cycles or iterations. Meeting the CLEAR criteria not only requires end-of-the-pipe document reviews and revisions, but also a systematic management process along the entire communication value chain (including clearly defined document goals, roles, quality gates, standards, and tools). The organizational issues are discussed below, following some more details on the five CLEAR elements in the next section.

Criteria	Explanation	Check questions for communicators
Contextualized	Provide the context or background of a message upfront.	Is it clear who should read this and why? Is it clear how and when this should be used?
Logically Structured	Structure the message in a logical and accessible manner.	What is the overall logic of the message? How do the elements build on each other?
Essential	Focus on essential elements and show them in overview before going into details.	What is the most important part? What can be left out? How can it be said more simply?
Ambiguity-free	Remove vague terms or sentences and use terms with clear, specific meanings.	Could any part of the message be misunderstood? Can the message be made more specific?
Resonating	Use a style and format that resonates with the audience and stimulates it to engage with the content.	Does the communication address the receivers directly? Are there stimulating examples, questions, illustrations, etc.?

Table 2: The CLEAR formula and corresponding check questions.

C is for Context, or: How can I add context to my message?

Key point: Provide a setting for your messages; don't jump into details right away.

The first element of communicating clearly is to briefly explain the context of your message. Why has it been written (purpose); when (date); for whom (target group); and, if necessary, what has come before it (background). In this step, it is important to analyze the target *audience* and their (reception) context because their foreknowledge and expectations determines how much contextual information needs to be added to a message. An example of contextualization is typical press releases that begin with a release date and place and end with background information on a company or person, as well as contact details. In online communication, context information may take the form of a "last updated" date, a navigation trail, or an indication or how many times a document has been viewed. In the case of e-mail communication, context can be added by pasting relevant segments of a previous e-mail into the body of the e-mail text. One company uses a so-called catalyst section for its internal and external reports. This is a one-sentence paragraph at the beginning of each report that describes why the report has been written; for example, the event that led the writer to cover the topic. Perhaps a more natural way to provide context to a message is through story-telling, where actions and key people are described in a rich and concrete setting.

L is for Logical Structure, or: How can I structure my message logically?

Key point: Give your messages a logical, easily visible structure; don't just ramble on.

Any kind of complex communication has to be made "digestible" by giving it an easily accessible (familiar), systematic, and explicit structure. If this structure is already known to the audience, it can be especially useful to provide a logical sequence of items that build on one another to convey a complex message. In this way, readers or viewers can focus their attention entirely on the content. Accordingly, companies are advised to devise standard structures or templates for recurring communication formats, such as press releases, memos, reports, and investor briefings.

Working with an existing, familiar document structure is especially important in times of crisis or stress, when people have already been distracted by a multitude of messages. The use of templates in such situations helps an audience focus on the content of a message, as they already know the structure. At Pioneer Hi-Bred (a Dow Chemical company), communications managers use a simple internal memo template when communicating with one another about critical media issues. The following simple template (developed by Mike Hall, corporate communication manager, Europe) illustrates:

Internal memo structure for corporate communication staff:

1. Situation: What has happened?
2. Response Strategy: How we are dealing with it?
3. Media Coverage: What are the media doing/writing about it?
4. Media Strategy: How we will move forward and with whom?

Figure 1: The message map template to focus communication on its essential parts.

5. Standby statement to press: What do we currently publish as the corporate view on the issue?

This process means that communicators at Pioneer know how they are going to inform their colleagues about new events. They follow a simple checklist of all vital elements and can structure their memos accordingly. The recipients are already familiar with the structure and can quickly find the information they need. Organizations that make ample use of such modular document structures include Procter & Gamble, the Gartner Group, Microsoft, and many so-called high-reliability organizations (such as hospitals, armed forces, and infrastructure groups). Many of these companies use *analytical* structures for their documents, presentations, or speeches (such as the SPIN structure: situation, problem, implications, next steps). In some contexts, however, it may be more effective to use a *narrative* (story) structure to convey a complex message. The advantages of a narrative structure are that it is more natural, entertaining, and familiar to audiences than a purely analytical sequence. Typical elements in the sequence of a narrative structure are the (hero's) context, a challenge or crisis to overcome, a failed attempt, a successful attempt (climax), and resolution, as well as an ending with lessons learned (a moral).

E is for Essential, or: How can I focus my message on its essential parts?

Key point: Cut out unnecessary elements, don't deviate from the main message.

We often know better what we really want to say or write when we have said or written it. Thus, rewriting, editing, and cutting out unessential elements is an important step to making your communication clearer. To focus on the essential, a communicator must radically align his or her message to the desired communication outcome and delete anything that could distract from that main objective. Focusing on the essential also means eliminating terms or sentences that have no real meaning, as they are only empty buzzwords or outdated communication rituals (see the section on intercultural communication for this issue). It also means that communicators should substitute complicated sentence structures with simpler ones. Readability checkers such as www.read-able.com can be used to assess the readability of a text. A simple tool that can help a group align and focus its communication efforts is the message map. Message maps are often used in crisis communication contexts and are based on the premise that the essential part of any message cannot consist of more than three main points. One organization that uses this tool is the World Health Organization in its communications regarding pandemics, such as the Avian flu. A communication team completes one message map for each key issue and target group and lists the three key messages to communicate, as well as a maximum of three supporting facts per message. The resulting chart, shown in Figure 1, can then be used as a reference guide when preparing messages.

A is for Ambiguity-free, or: How can I reduce ambiguity in my messages?

Key point: Choose specific, clearly defined, and familiar words; avoid vague terms.

Ambiguity is the natural enemy of clarity. While the use of ambiguous terms, statements, or pictures can be appropriate in contexts where creativity and inspiration are important, it is usually not conducive to understanding. Therefore, try to use simple and specific terms that you know all receivers will understand in the same way. If that is not possible, provide a concise definition of the term or illustrate its meaning through specific examples. Terms that are highly ambiguous include soon, urgent, critical, interesting, inadequate, as well as pronouns such as this, they, or it.

Ambiguity not only arises because of the choice of a particular term. A message can also be ambiguous if the communicator does not state its *implications* or relevance. Therefore, adding context and consequences to a message can reduce ambiguity. Nonetheless, ambiguity can arise even specific terms are used and the message is properly contextualize. This is because some communication channels are conducive to ambiguous messages. Take e-mail or mobile text messages as an example. As these messages tend to be short and are often written and read while the writer is distracted, their meaning is not always interpreted in the way the sender intended. This is aggravated by the fact that e-mails and text messages are not accompanied by gestures or facial expressions that make the intended meaning clearer or signal confusion on the receiver's side (emoticons are only partly helpful in this regard). Ambiguity can also be the result of a mismatch between an e-mail's subject line and its actual content; for example, when a communicator changes focus while writing the e-mail message.

Consequently, unclear e-mails are a major cause of communication stress and information overload within organizations. In order to reduce the ambiguity of an e-mail, it is important to choose an informative subject line, limit the e-mail to one topic (the one expressed in the subject line), and state upfront whether the receiver is required to take action. It is also important to relate the message to any relevant previous messages, so that the receiver understands the greater context of the message. A good, explicit e-mail structure, such as the above-mentioned SPIN structure, can further help reduce the ambiguity in a message. Finally, aggressive or critical e-mails are best left unsent and replaced by phone calls, where the tone of voice can be an important indicator to reduce ambiguity.

R is for Resonance, or: How can I craft my messages so that they resonate with my audience?

Key point: Provide stimulating elements that resonate with the audience; don't make your message dull.

Your messages will be better understood if people are motivated to read, hear, or watch them. In order to get your audiences to pay close attention to your communications, address them directly and personally; offer illustrative examples

and visualizations, as well as stories; and use appropriate analogies or metaphors. You can also use questions, quotes, and tables to focus your audience on your key message. Another way to create resonance is to use terms that you know your target groups care about and generally use in their own language.

As the Heath brothers pointed out in their bestseller entitled "Made to Stick," messages are more likely to have an impact and be remembered if they are simple (short), unexpected (surprising), credible (authentic), and concrete (with real people), emotional stories. However, the Heath brothers did not mention the power of pictures. Images are particularly suited to create resonance as they trigger emotional responses and encourage viewers to remember a message and act upon it. Innovative software such as en.lets-focus.com allows any communicator to easily and quickly produce visual metaphors to communicate in a resonating manner.

The following example illustrates a picture-based communication strategy. Syngenta, the global agro-chemical company, has developed (in close cooperation with its staff members and the British consultancy Couravel; www.couravel.com) a colorful map that makes its supply chain accessible and meaningful to employees. The picture facilitates dialogues related to the supply chain and how to best manage it. By discussing the picture in a team, the map enables people to understand their role in Syngenta's complex supply chain.

Other companies that have used similar metaphor-based maps for their internal communication include UBS, Carlsberg, Pepsi, Accenture, OWL, GIZ, Deutsche Bank, Daimler, and American Express.

Having explained and illustrated the elements in the CLEAR formula, we can now apply them to specific communication formats, such as reports, presentations, letters, e-mail or reports.

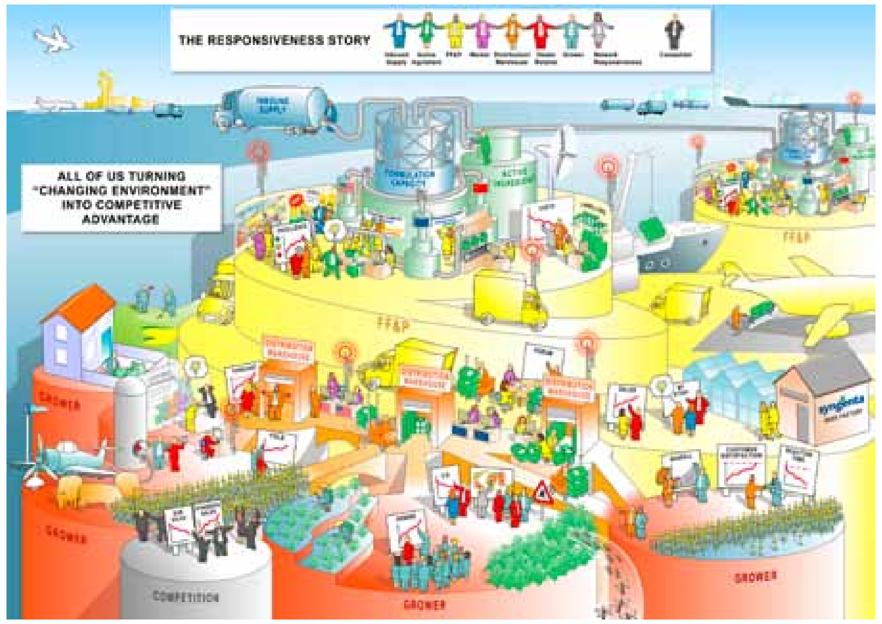


Figure 2: Syngenta's supply chain map for creating resonance.

How can the CLEAR formula be applied to different communication formats?

Having explained and illustrated the elements of the CLEAR formula, we now apply the criteria of clear communication to different communication formats. Below is a summary of success factors for clarity regarding internal or external reports, e-mail messages, slide presentations, and business diagrams.

Clear reports

Contextualized	State the authors, date, document version, purpose, and contact details (plus the expiration date, if applicable)
Logical structure	Summary, overview and introduction, main part, conclusion, background information. Guide the reader through the structure by including transitional sentences between sections.
Essential	Provide a concise executive summary with the main insights and action implications of the report. Put “nice-to-know” material in an appendix, not in the main part of the report.
Ambiguity-free	Avoid non-specific business buzz words. Provide a short glossary of key terms in the appendix.
Resonance	Make the action or decision implications of the report easily visible.

Clear e-mail

Contextualized	Relate message to previous e-mail (through an excerpt), provide the reason and necessary actions upfront.
Logical structure	Relevance/urgency, fact, interpretation, necessary action.
Essential	If possible, limit each e-mail to one single topic, so that it can be properly categorized or forwarded. Try to limit e-mails to screen size.
Ambiguity-free	Avoid criticism in e-mail messages. Words like “soon,” “urgent,” or “our client” should be replaced by “next week,” “tomorrow,” and “Mr. Stevens” (for example).
Resonance	End an e-mail with a request for agreement, comment, or other kind of reaction to ensure it has been viewed and understood.

Clear slide presentation

Contextualized	Provide your personal connection to the presentation topic. Tell the audience why the topic is important (for them) before you start providing details.
Logical structure	Use an agenda slide early on in the presentation to provide the audience an overview of the structure.
Essential	Don’t write out entire sentences on slides. Reduce slides to a maximum of seven bullet points per slide.
Ambiguity-free	Watch out for cues from the audience (such as facial expressions) that your statements have been ambiguous and provide ad-hoc additional clarification if needed.
Resonance	Use full-screen images, quotes, anecdotes, questions, and visual metaphors to create resonance with your audience.

Clear diagrams

Contextualized	Informative caption and image title; reference to the image in the accompanying text (as interpretation aid).
Logical structure	Left-to-right/top-to-bottom reading orientation with an emphasized starting point; distinct foreground (main message) and background (in less prominent colors, peripheral position, and smaller size).
Essential	Few elements per image level. Use very few colors and eliminate distracting elements such as 3D effects, shading, or grids.
Ambiguity-free	Ambiguous symbols such as arrows should be labeled. Use appropriate symbols and logos for corporate communication purposes.
Resonance	Choose appropriate visual metaphors and familiar diagram types. Bring in emotions and adapt to any cultural constraints.

How can the CLEAR formula be applied to Web 2.0 contexts?

Today's communicators increasingly rely on social media or web 2.0 channels such as Facebook or Twitter. But how can a Facebook page or a Twitter message be made clearer? To answer this question, we have screened and analyzed dozens of successful social media contributions (and guides) and interviewed social media specialists across organizations and countries about what they feel constitutes clear communication in the respective channels. In this way, we have isolated clarity drivers for the main Web 2.0 applications. The subsequent analyses have shown that the five elements of the CLEAR formula are also highly relevant for social media. However, the analysis also showed that these elements must be adapted to the specific constraints and audience expectations of each social media channel. The following tables contain clarity checklists along the CLEAR dimensions for short messages sent via Twitter, for blog posts, YouTube videos, Facebook pages, and instant messaging/chat.

Clear YouTube videos

Contextualized	Align videos to the YouTube channel context and target group. Select relevant keywords/tags and a corresponding screen background to contextualize your video(s).
Logical structure	(1) Provide an entry sequence or jingle; (2) welcome viewers; (3) provide an overview; (4) tell the story; (5) ritualistic (i.e., always similar) wrap-up and call to action.
Essential	Eliminate pauses, deviations, and distractions. Keep sentences short.
Ambiguity-free	Be aware of potentially aggressive terms or statements that could be misinterpreted and may cause negative reactions.
Resonance	Establish a rapport with the audience by addressing them directly. Use body language and creative editing. In ending the video, ask for comments, ratings, and questions.

Clear Facebook pages

Contextualized	Provide corporate context in the top section.
Logical structure	(1) Info; (2) News or Events; (3) Wall; (4) Specials; (4) Videos.
Essential	Screen your Facebook page regularly to make sure that it is aligned to your main communication goals (and values).
Ambiguity-free	Make sure your profile is not too close in appearance or style to someone else's. Make sure it is clear how your Facebook page differs from others of the same organization.
Resonance	Create buttons, discussions, and events, such as competitions or questions, to activate friends or fans. Post new photos and status updates for responses. Grow your fan- and friends-base continuously. Use other media and channels to recruit Facebook fans.

Clear Twitter Messages

Contextualized	Only tweet messages that are consistent with the context of your profile or twitter channel and the corresponding needs of your followers.
Logical structure	Most tweets follow this logical (implicit) structure: (1) Address the audience with an announcement style comment (e.g., "just found this," "check this out," RT for retweet, or @topic to refer to an ongoing discussion topic); (2) provide an interesting link; (3) provide some sort of summary or commentary regarding its content; (4) list relevant hash tags (#further topics) or ask for comments.
Essential	There is no need to introduce a tweet; get right to the point and focus on your main message in one single tweet. Use common emoticons and abbreviations, but do not necessarily use tiny URLs, as some users are reluctant to click on them.
Ambiguity-free	Because there are only 140 characters in a tweet, try to avoid ambiguous or vague terms or expressions, especially when such terms could offend some readers.
Resonance	Maximize your retweet probability by having your tweet tackle a timely, funny, surprising, useful, or deviant topic, or identify a fantastic but little-known web address. If appropriate, ask your audience for feedback or opinions.

Clear blogging

Contextualized	Provide a tag cloud, blog roll, and most-read entry; give a clear blog headline and description to clarify its context.
Logical structure	(1) Provide a title for each blog entry; (2) provide a starting question, lead, or image; (3) state the reason for the entry; (4) describe it; (5) ask for comments/suggestions.
Essential	Focus your blog entry on one single topic at a time. In other words, stick to describing one single topic, website, or event per entry.
Ambiguity-free	Avoid ambiguous endorsements or recommendations (for example, when it is unclear whether the entry is commercial or private). Blogs thrive on clear, courageous opinions, not ambivalence.
Resonance	Involve your blog readers through a comments section. Be sure to respond to posted comments or questions in a timely and constructive (non-condescending) manner.

Clear online chats/instant messaging

Contextualized	Understand the chat channel/participants.
Logical structure	(1) Write the name of person you are addressing; (2) convey your idea; (3) Ask whether the message is clear.
Essential	Use short phrases and don't use unnecessarily formal expressions.
Ambiguity-free	State which comment you are responding to and, if applicable, the person you are addressing.
Resonance	Relate to what others have said. Acknowledge their contributions with statements such as <3, LOL (laugh out loud).

How does the CLEAR formula work in inter-cultural communication contexts?

Because communication practices and preferences vary across regions and cultures, the notion of clarity is not immune to cultural differences. Cultural values, sensitivities, and taboos impact people's perceptions and interpretations and what they consider to be clear communication. These variations should be taken into account when communicating complex topics internationally. Keep the following cultural aspects in mind when using the CLEAR formula.

Context: Based on the work of Hofstede, Hall, and others, we are able to distinguish among high-context cultures (e.g., Asian and Arab countries) and low-context cultures (such as the USA, Switzerland, or Germany). A target group in a high-context culture may require more contextual information regarding a message than that of a low-context culture, as the audience may want to consider the full situation when interpreting new information. However, high-context cultures are also those in which many contextual clues remain implicit and are not easily verbalized. Therefore, communicators must be careful regarding how they communicate important contextual cues to their audience. Cultures may also differ in terms of their conception of time, which has an impact on communication. A culture can be long-term-oriented (for example, valuing delayed gratification) and emphasize perseverance. Messages communicated in such a region may be enriched with additional background information (outlining its origins) in order to emphasize continuity and consistency.

Logical structure: Not all cultures are equally fond of structure as a communication aid. Some cultures (such as Germany, Switzerland, Japan, or Korea) tend to have a high level of uncertainty-avoidance. In such cultures, a visible, logical structure should be provided upfront (for example in a slide presentation or in a long report). However, in cultures where uncertainty avoidance is low (such as Latin countries like Spain, Brazil, or Chile), one must ensure that structure does not get in the way of liveliness and spontaneity. In countries like China, a rigid structure may be viewed suspiciously as an artificial separation of things that naturally belong together. A rigid document structure may also not work well in so-called polychromic cultures (Arabic and South American countries, for example), where things are not typically done in rigid sequences, but rather in parallel streams. Nevertheless, a complete lack of structure (or an idiosyncratic, inaccessible structure) is never a conduit to understanding in any culture.

Essential Elements: Low-context cultures (which are often also individualistic) tend to reward focused communication and efforts to cut out unnecessary elements. High-context (and collectivist) cultures, on the other hand, may require more seemingly unnecessary, almost ritualistic (or etiquette-based) communication elements. High-context cultures value relationships, so it is important not to focus overly on the essential content only, but to also pay tribute to people and signal respect for them in one's communication. Another cultural variable that impacts focus and reduction is related to uncertainty avoidance. A report in Germany, for example, must be more comprehensive and provide more evidence and facts than a similar report in the USA or Spain, which can be more concise.

Ambiguity-free: What is perceived as clear and specific in one culture may be seen as ambiguous and vague in another one. This is especially true with regard to time indications. In an e-mail message, the phrase "Please respond as soon as possible" may be interpreted differently in Germany than in, say, Argentina. Whereas a German might interpret this sentence as "respond by tonight", an Argentinean may see it as a request for information within a week or so. Different cultures also have different levels of tolerance for ambiguity. Cultures with high certainty-avoidance have little tolerance for ambiguity and audiences expect clearly defined terms with specific meaning. This is not necessarily the case in cultures where uncertainty avoidance (that is, control) is not so important.

Resonance: The prototypical mechanisms used to generate resonance in communication are humor, stories, images, and metaphors. All of these devices should be used with great caution in global communication as they can be easily misinterpreted and create confusion instead of resonance. Some uses of humor, storytelling visualization, or metaphors may even be offensive in some cultures. Therefore, it is important to pre-check whether a foreign target group can understand and appreciate a humorous expression, an illustrative anecdote, a diagram, or a seemingly fitting metaphor. With regard to the use of images, one should especially check the local meaning of colors, icons, or symbols.

Although values differ widely among cultures, there are two things one should not forget when striving for clarity. Firstly, respectful, courteous communication is always appropriate. Secondly, there is an emerging global communication etiquette that can be used as the default communication mode when you are uncertain about a specific target group or area. This global communication etiquette relies heavily on the CLEAR formula. Having made these qualifications, we believe that CLEAR is a universally useful framework for communicating in business contexts.

How can the formula be used to measure the clarity of communication?

In order to measure the extent to which a message satisfies the CLEAR criteria, corporate communicators can use five check questions with their pilot audience and have certain recipients rate the message. For example, corporate communicators can use the five questions in a pop-up window as an ad-hoc clarity feedback mechanism from their audience to them, when viewing corporate information on the company's website.

1. Was it clear why this message was sent to you?
   - No indication at all;
   - some context indications given;
   - communication context clearly given upfront

2. Did you understand the structure of this message?
   - No explicit structure whatsoever;
   - explicit but somewhat unclear structure;
   - very clear and visible structure

3. Are any parts of this message non-essential?
   - Many superfluous items;
   - some superfluous items;
   - no superfluous items

4. Are any of the terms used in the communication ambiguous, unclear, or otherwise difficult to interpret?
   - Many ambiguous terms;
   - some ambiguous terms;
   - no ambiguous terms

5. Does the communication provide useful illustrations that resonate with you?
   - No useful illustrations/examples;
   - somewhat useful illustrations/examples;
   - very useful illustration provided

These questions can pop-up as an instant survey when someone has read an online message or they can accompany a printed document with a faxback form. Each question amounts to zero, one, or two points. Thus, a full clarity score would be equal to 10 points.

What are the sources of the CLEAR Formula?

The CLEAR formula for clarity in communication, as presented in this chapter, has been derived from various types of evidence. The background of the CLEAR formula can be found in our own research, as well as in the writings of others. It is based on the insights derived from our case studies on clear communication in complex corporate communication, as well as from surveys we have conducted on clarity in e-mail communication, in presentations, and in corporate communication in general. It is also based on a review of previously developed theoretical models of clarity, comprehensibility, and communication quality (such as the Hamburg comprehensibility framework). Finally, the CLEAR formula is based on seminal or classical works on clarity ranging from Aristotle to Leibniz. Table 3 summarizes these two "external" sources.

A few words on the quotes used from seminal sources of classical philosophy are needed to understand their meaning and context properly: Baruch de Spinoza derived his notion of being clear from the metaphor of a lens (which he crafted) and viewed clarity as a matter of clearly delineating one's scope when stating ideas. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz emphasized that something clear has clearly distinct parts that are separate and well organized. For Leibniz, the systematic organization of thought determined clarity. William of Occam, in his famous "Occam's razor" principle, stressed that clarity ensues when everything that can be left out has been removed. René Descartes viewed a statement as clear when it is clearly distinguishable from other things and is evident to mean only one thing. Aristotle's concept of pathos argued that communication was more likely to be successful if a communicator uses examples and metaphors that resonate with his or her audience, as they put the audience into the right frame of mind to understand (and accept) a message.

CLEAR Elements	Classic Sources/Quotes	Modern Sources/Research
Context	"An idea is clear if and only if its extension has precise boundaries." Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677)	Langer, 1989; Langer, Thun, & Tausch, 1974; Reeves, Ford, Duncan, & Ginter, 2005; Suchan & Dulek, 1990
Logical Structure	"Clear means recognizable as clearly distinct and made up of distinct parts." G.W. Leibniz (1646–1716)	De Bono, 1998; Langer, 1989; Langer et al., 1974; Maeda, 2006; Zwijze-Koning & de Jong, 2007
Essential Elements	"Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity." William of Occam (1285–1347)	Bambacas & Patrickson, 2008; Bennett & Olney, 1986; De Bono, 1998; Langer et al., 1974; Mousavi, Low, & Sweller, 1995; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009; Sweller & Chandler, 1994; Swift, 1973; Temple, 2002
Ambiguity-free	"Clear means evident and distinct from other things." René Descartes (1596–1650)	De Bono, 1998; Langer, 1989; Langer et al., 1974; Maeda, 2006; Pereira, 2006
Resonance	"You must put your hearers into the corresponding frame of mind." Aristotle (384–322 BC)	Groeben, 1982; Lloyd, 2008; Naumann, Richter, Flender, Christmann, & Groeben, 2007; Schnotz & Kürschner, 2007; Schnotz & Rasch, 2005

Table 3: The classic and modern basis of the CLEAR formula.

How can clear communication be institutionalized in an organization?

So far, we have looked at clear communication from the point of view of an individual communicator and his or her ability to make complex messages clear. This every day, individual effort is the basis for clear communication. Nevertheless, an organization that wishes to address clarity as a strategic asset should also think about organizational support for clear communication. Moving from complex to clear messages in a consistent and sustainable manner requires several organizational actions; these are summarized in the acronym STARTER. The elements in this acronym ensure that different organizational levers are used to institutionalize clear communication in a company.

The elements of STARTER are as follows. Firstly, an organization must define standards regarding clear communication. An organization must explicitly define quality criteria for its internal and external communication (and how these criteria can be met), which is what pharmaceutical company Roche and the Austrian telecom group, for example, have done. The organization must then train its employees to communicate according to these standards (through seminars, e-learnings, events, etc). It must subsequently hold employees accountable to meet these standards and help them through simple review cycles and (diagnostic) tools. In doing so, the organization should provide examples as reference points that employees can learn from (such as a "clarity hall of fame" or "hall of shame"). In this way, the organization will provide resources (time, money, management attention) that make clear communication a priority. The illustration below summarizes this process from complex to clear messages through the STARTER elements.

Table 4 below provides some pointers and examples of how these seven elements can be brought to life within a communication department or within an entire organization.

Naturally, these elements are only effective if they are closely aligned and appropriately coordinated. More consistency and focus will ultimately lead to any clarity-related measures having greater impact.

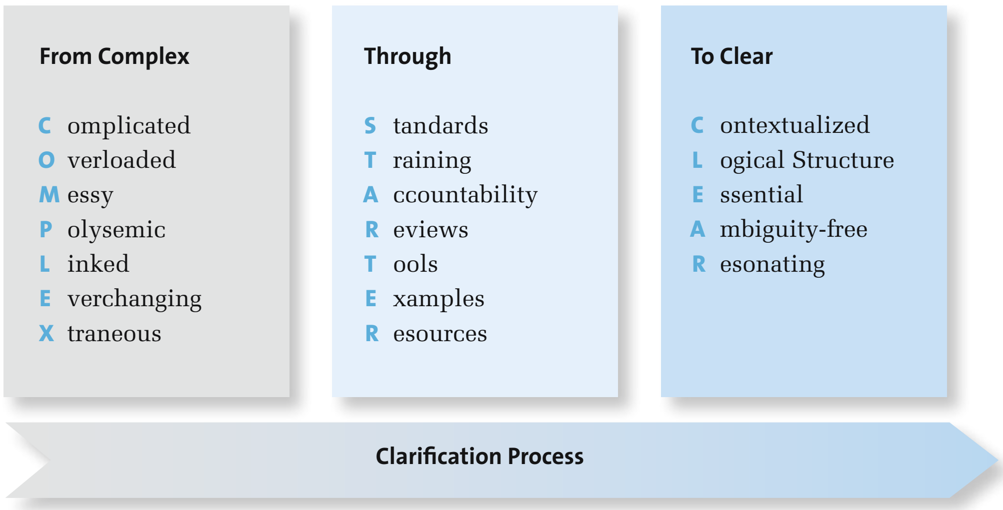


Figure 3: From Complex to Clear through STARTER actions.

Standards	Rules and standards for memos, documents, briefings. Clear principles and criteria for clear communication.
Training	Training authors in plain language factors and CLEAR elements.
Accountability	Assigning responsibilities (roles) to documents and key communications
Reviews	Review processes with at least one reviewer for influential communication. Informal review cycles among colleagues. Review tools such as checklists or quick surveys.
Tools	Readability measurement tools such as http://www.readable.com/. Authoring tools (visualization, layouting, etc.).
Examples	Real-life positive and negative examples with highlighted characteristics. Before and after (improved) examples, such as terms or phrases to avoid and how to replace them.
Resources	Clear communication guide (for e-mails, letters, presentation, memos, briefings, press releases). Corporate wording guide. Clarity champions as access points. Time and money for clarity improvement initiatives.

Table 4: The seven elements of the STARTER formula.

Standards can be articulated in the form of a communication charter, as illustrated by the example of Roche, a global pharmaceutical and diagnostics groups with 80,000 employees. The six principles outlined below set a company-wide standard for internal and external communication at Roche. The six simple adjectives describe what clear, high-quality communication means within Roche.

Comparing these six elements to the CLEAR formula shows that Roche emphasizes contextualization in its informative dimension ("a sense of the broader context"). The communication department at Roche also acknowledges that "style and tone may vary from country to country based on local language and culture." This relates to the resonance element in the CLEAR formula. The attribute of ensuring that communication is audience-appropriate is also captured in the resonance dimension of the CLEAR formula, while the credible and consistent criteria regard the

Credible	"We seek to inform and influence based on factual information, balanced perspectives and sound expertise, rather than on 'spin' or accentuating the positive while overlooking the negative. We communicate good and bad news alike."
Consistent	"We speak in one voice, ensuring that messages are aligned and consistent with company positions, even though the style and tone may vary from country to country based on local language and culture."
Informative	"We explain and provide perspective, as well as simply conveying facts, so that our audiences gain an insightful orientation on the subject, an understanding of the reasons behind decisions, and a sense of the broader context."
Proactive	"Rather than being reactive, we take the initiative in informing internal and external audiences of relevant news, decisions, and developments that have material significance to them and their decision-making."
Audience-appropriate	"We use appropriate language for each audience, communicating in technical, scientific language to the science, medical, and investment communities, and in simple, layman's terms when communicating to the broader public, patients, and consumers."
Self-confident	"We assert our right to deal only in facts, and not in rumors or speculation; to discuss our own activities and not comment on those of other companies; to refrain from disclosing financially sensitive or proprietary information; and to defend our position vigorously when criticized or attacked."

Table 5: Roche's communication values

logical structure and the reduction of ambiguity. The E in the CLEAR formula is related to the proactive criteria that Roche interprets as providing relevant news that has material significance.

What can we learn from the existing literature on clarity?

Suchan and Dulek's (1990) statement that "clarity is business communication's most sacrosanct topic" illustrates the general importance of this topic. Their article on reassessing clarity in written business documents (Suchan and Dulek, 1990) argued that clarity is the "most serious communication problem in business." Only a few scholars have examined the concept of clarity as explicitly as Suchan and Dulek, though various aspects of clarity have been subject to research studies. While some studies have focused on clarity in business communication or written texts and documents (Bennett and Olney, 1986; Suchan and Dulek, 1990), others have examined the issue of clarity in strategic communication (Reeves et al., 2005), in instructions (Kennedy et al., 1978), in business education (Feinberg and Pritzker, 1985), or in business role allocation (Hall, 2007). Most research has concentrated on assessments of clarity in the above contexts, but has failed to provide pragmatic advice on how to achieve clarity, especially in such complex domains as strategic management. The topic of clarity is often addressed in research using such closely related terms as understanding (Sweller and Chandler, 1994), clearness (Carlile, 2004), and sensitivity and specificity (Reeves et al., 2005).

What can philosophy, literature, and journalism studies teach us about clarity?

One of the first definitions of clarity was provided by the philosopher René Descartes, when he wrote that "clear means evident and distinct from other things." This definition was later further developed by the logician and pragmatist C.S. Peirce, who linked clarity to the notion of distinctiveness, but also added the element of evident action implications to clarity (Peirce, 1878). Another pioneer of clarity research is George Orwell. Despite being published as a critique of jargon and bad use of English in political debates, his seminal essay on the topic can be seen as a pragmatic approach to clarity. Orwell recognized clear thinking as a necessary step toward political regeneration (Orwell, 1946). His "clarity maxims" for reducing texts to their essence seem as timely in today's Internet era as when they were first articulated (see the box below).

George Orwell's Clarity Maxims:

"Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
Never use a long word where a short one will do.
If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
Never use the passive, where you can use the active.
Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

The domain with the most discussions of clarity is that related to scientific and journalistic writing (Strunk and White, 2008; Williams, 1990). Unfortunately, these texts mostly consist of lengthy lists of what one should do (or not) style-wise in order to write clearly. Typical suggestions found in this stream of literature are to avoid complex nouns in lieu of verbs, passive voice, long relative clauses, foreign terms, jargon, or unstructured texts. A notable exception to this list-based approach comes from überjournalist Joseph Pulitzer and his elegant clarity mantra:

"Put it before them briefly so they will read it,
clearly so they will appreciate it,
picturesquely so they will remember it and,
above all, accurately so they will be
guided by its light."

This simple formula has later been the starting point for many investigations made by cognitive and educational psychologists and pedagogues to understand and enhance the readability of texts, thereby enabling better understanding and knowledge generation, sharing, or learning.

What do you need to know about the psychology of reading?

Educational research scholars regard the process of understanding text as an active and iterative process of converting text into understanding (Jahr, 2001); it is no longer seen as passive recitation, but as an active construction of meaning. This implies that modern education challenges teachers as much as students in terms of clarity. At the forefront of modern clarity research in this tradition is Langer, Schulz von Thun and Tausch's so-called "Hamburger Comprehensibility Model" (Langer, 1989; Langer et al., 1974). This empirically-based, inductive framework proposed that texts are easy to understand if attention is paid to four crucial elements of text design: simplicity, structure and order (inner and outer order), conciseness and brevity, and additional stimulation (such as examples, quotes, anecdotes). In contrast to Langer et al. (1974), Groeben (1982) incorporated different approaches of cognitive psychology and develops a context-dependent model of text understandability. Groeben distinguished four factors that affect comprehensibility: cognitive structure/content classification, semantic redundancy, stylistic simplicity, and conceptual conflict (Groeben, 1982; Jahr, 2001). Unlike Langer et al., the Groeben model not only takes the text and its understandability (content and style, logical structure) into account, but also the reader's ability (that is, his or her necessary foreknowledge) to understand a text (Groeben, 1982; Naumann et al., 2007). Therefore, Groeben conceived of clarity as a relative, context-dependent construct, a perspective that can also be found in another, psychological approach.

What does cognitive psychology tell us about making the complex clear?

The "other" approach mentioned above is Sweller and Chandler's (1994) cognitive load theory, which has become increasingly influential in instructional psychology. This theory from the field of knowledge acquisition provides insights regarding the elements of clarity and is relevant to master clarity in complex communication (Sweller and Chandler, 1994; Mousavi et al. 1995). The necessity of adapting instructions to the constraints of the learner's cognitive abilities has been the main concern of this research. Cognitive load theory argues that many traditional instructional techniques do not adequately take the limitations of human cognition into account, as they unnecessarily overload the learner's working memory. The theory refers to the beneficial effect of *removing redundant information* as the "redundancy effect." Furthermore, it tries to integrate knowledge about the structure and functioning of the human cognitive system with principles of instructional design. Conversely, Schnotz and Kürschner (2007) criticized cognitive load theory, arguing that a reduction in cognitive load can sometimes impair learning rather than enhance it (Schnotz and Kürschner, 2007). Schnotz also investigated the effects of animated pictures on knowledge acquisition, finding that different kinds of animations do indeed have different functions in the process of learning, while a reduction of additional information to avoid information overload is not always beneficial for the learning process (Schnotz and Rasch, 2005). Therefore, clarity in complex communication cannot simply be described as "reducing information."

What are the findings from business-related research?

With a few exceptions, the recent academic literature on clarity in management and business communication contains few definitions of the term "clarity." Bresciani et al. defined visual clarity in business diagrams as the "property of the (visual element) to be self-explanatory and easily understandable with reduced cognitive effort" (Bresciani et al., 2008). Within the domain of organization studies and knowledge management, clarity has been addressed in the literature regarding knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing (Carlile, 2004; Nonaka and von Krogh, 2009). In these contexts, a lack of clarity is frequently reported as a knowledge transfer barrier (Szulanski, 2000; Von Hippel, 1994; Jacobson et al., 2005). Szulanski incorporated findings from educational science for managerial communication processes when proposing that "knowledge transfer should be regarded as a process of reconstruction rather than a mere act of transmission and reception" (Szulanski, 2000). Suchan and Dulek (1990) also linked clarity to knowledge and viewed clarity, or the lack thereof, as the result of an organization's idiosyncratic knowledge and specialized internal language. In Suchan and Dulek's analysis, clarity-related problems often begin with the existing mindset within an organization.

With regard to the analysis of organizational communication, Yates and Orlikowski (1992) defined different business communication genres in the style of rhetoric genres, such as comedy, tragedy, novel, or epic. Their genres of organizational communication encompass meetings, memorandums, letters, or proposals (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). All of these genres are situation- or context-dependent and apply a specific form and structure in relation to motives and topics of communication. Identifying and acknowledging the target audience and using the appropriate genre is key for clear communication in Yates and Orlikowski's organizational communication framework. Structure is also important; for example, in letters they emphasize the use of structure and conventions for internal documents, using headings with "to," "from," "subject," and "date" as relevant information for clear and easy identification by the receiver. In this way, the authors point at important elements of clear communication in organizations, such as structure, context-dependency and audience recognition, which are incorporated here in the CLEAR formula under the letters "L" (logical structure), "C" (context), and "R" (resonance). Another specific genre of organizational communication is the narrative. Gabriel offers a taxonomy of storytelling in organizations (Gabriel, 2000). Organizational stories are important for managers as they provide shortcuts to important insights into the organization's culture, functioning, stepping stones, and ideologies. Organizational stories offer clarity regarding the organization's mindset and can be helpful in dealing with complex processes such as change management.. Stories link up personal and social identities. This makes them a central medium for the creation of meaning in organizations and the development of a corporate identity.

What does all this mean for corporate communicators?

This chapter has outlined the five major elements that can help make complex messages clear to their audiences. These are: making the context clear, providing a clear structure, reducing the message to its essence, making the message ambiguity-free, and wording the message in a way that resonates with the audience. We have also outlined the seven organizational measures for systematically managing clarity in corporate communication. These are: clearly defined clarity standards, training, accountability (or roles), review processes, tools, examples, and resources. Corporate communicators can use the CLEAR formula as a training and checking tool; they can employ it to set clarity standards or measure the clarity of their messages.

From the various literature streams described above, it appears that the concept of clarity can be positioned at the intersection between cognition and behavior. Achieving clear communication must incorporate concepts and application from cognitive and behavioral science. It is evident from this literature review that there is still a need for an applicable clarity approach that managers and communicators can use.

Case Studies: Addressing Clarity in Complex Communication

What can be said at all can be said clearly.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The following three short case studies illustrate the *organizational context* of clear communication and the many challenges that this context creates for corporate communicators. The cases cover a wide range of communication areas, including crisis communication, media relations, client communication, and branding. While the first case describes a response to unclear communication in the media, the other two cases focus on typical CLEAR communication initiatives. The case studies also illustrate the use of clarity problem patterns and the elements of the CLEAR formula.

Clarifying a complex crisis: How Bilfinger Berger reacted to a major construction failure

Communication area:	Crisis communication
Communication format:	Press releases, press conferences, interviews
Target group:	From the general public to authorities and shareholders
Involved teams:	Executive and corporate communications
Complexity:	High
Key lessons:	On-site communicators and consistency of messages

In April of 2010, Martin Büllesbach, head of communication at the construction group Bilfinger Berger, was reviewing the persecution he had suffered from journalists from local and national newspapers and magazines. Much of their reporting had not clarified the key issues, but had instead contributed to the general confusion.

So what had happened? At the end of January 2010, the public prosecution department of the city of Cologne, Germany, had detected structural faults in one of the newly built stations of the Cologne subway system. Bilfinger Berger was the lead company among three large building companies involved in this project. Therefore, Bilfinger Berger received most of the media criticism. There was another reason why the media had focused on Bilfinger Berger. Prior to this incident, in March 2009, instabilities of the subway system and structural failures had caused the historical archive of the city of Cologne and another building to collapse, killing two people.

Having reviewed these events, Martin Büllesbach decided to change his communication strategy. Instead of repeatedly discussing the mistakes of the past and the question of who was to blame, he decided to focus his attention on Bilfinger Berger's other building projects and success stories. Büllesbach also knew that organizational changes were needed to clarify Bilfinger Berger's communication.

What were the complexity drivers?

One of Bilfinger Berger's main recent building projects involved constructing a new underground rail line in Cologne. On February 3, 2009, in the course of construction, the Cologne city archive collapsed above one particular construction location, killing two people and causing many priceless historic documents to be lost. The media reported extensively on this event; however, not everything that had been reported was correct and journalists copied this misinformation from each other. According Martin Büllesbach, "The media failed on a large scale due to the complexity of this story." The challenge of communicating clearly during this first crisis situation resulted from a number of *complexity drivers*:

1. Three large building companies, as well as the city of Cologne, the Cologne traffic agency, and a large number of experts, were involved in this complicated building project of the new Cologne subway system. Consequently, it was difficult to keep an overview of activities, responsibilities, communication actions, and decision-making.
2. All activities took place in diverse parallel processes, from decision processes up to implementing the building project.
3. A further component of complexity was the political dimension, since the project fell within an election period for the city council. In addition, it was a prestige project that every mayor used for his own political argumentation.
4. The conflict-loaded interaction between the project's two most important people –the mayor of the city of Cologne and the CEO of Bilfinger Berger – added an additional personal component to the complexity of this case.
5. The conflict potential was centered not on financial topics, but around the question of guilt, which was a main focus for the city authorities. However, the focus of Bilfinger Berger's action and communication was more on the future.

Three main clarity problem patterns can describe the challenges that Bilfinger Berger faced during the two peaks of the Cologne crisis in 2009 and 2010.

Just too late

In times of crisis, relevant and on-time information is important. If the necessary information is not available, rumors and incorrect information can spread.

Solution: A pro-active communication strategy can help avoid this threat. Present relevant information and set reliable timelines for when more information will be available.

Chinese Whispers

Media communication relied on trivial and incorrect information copied from other media articles. In this way, fabricated facts made their way from the local level to national and international media.

Solution: Convince the media of your own stories and tell them in full detail, with precise and correct facts.

Too far to connect

The project location was too distant from the headquarters and communication department, which meant that communication flows were slow at the beginning of the crisis.

Solution: There should be an on-site communications expert for each large-scale project.

To address these issues, the company took several measures, as described below.

How was clarity improved?

In this crisis situation, clear communication had to be directed towards the public and the media in a constant and persistent manner. After initially focusing on limiting the damage and clarifying the legal implications, Bilfinger Berger shifted its focus to two clear messages: it was cooperating to resolve the crisis and that this crisis was an exception. Herbert Bodner, chairman of the executive board at Bilfinger Berger, was reported as saying: "Through close cooperation with the client and the authorities involved, as well as through open communication, we want to help to re-establish confidence in this construction project." This shift helped rebuild the company's trust in the public and with shareholders.

At the start of the crisis communication, representatives of Bilfinger Berger were missing on-site. This came to be seen as a major problem and had to be solved. Clear definition of persons and their responsibilities, such as an on-site media contact person, was necessary and helped to deliver clear and correct information. For Martin Büllesbach it was clear what had to be done: "I knew a journalist from Cologne, a well-connected one, whom I could put at the front to deliver information to the media and to serve as Bilfinger Berger's outpost." For the initial crisis, this strategy of being present on-site worked very well.

At the same time, the media speculated that the financial value of Bilfinger Berger would collapse in the same way as the city archive had. Here, instead of focusing on the crisis, Büllesbach chose to present the results from a very successful 2008. In a press release two weeks after the catastrophic event, Büllesbach wrote: "Bilfinger Berger concluded the 2008 financial year with clear increases in both output volume and earnings." The presentation of Bilfinger Berger success stories from other large building projects in public transportation was a good maneuver with which to rebuild the image of Bilfinger Berger.

What can be learned from this experience?

In this case of crisis communication, Bilfinger Berger was facing great complexity and responsibility. The lessons from this crisis communication event can be summarized as follows:

- Realizing large infrastructure projects in the public sphere requires thorough preparation for a crisis situation. Clear definition of roles and responsibilities during a crisis is crucial.
- Consistency and constant repetition of the main messages are important elements of effective and clear crisis communication.
- Timing played an important role in ensuring clear reporting in the media. It may be better to communicate early than to wait for all relevant facts to emerge.
- Being close to the media, close to the public, and close to the site of events enabled the communicators to deliver appropriate, correct, clear, and convincing messages.

In terms of message clarity, the following actions lead to clear communication:

CLEAR elements	Corresponding actions of Bilfinger Berger's communication team
Contextual	Bilfinger Berger explained its role and position in the consortium; thus, the course of events became more understandable to outsiders. Clear communication of the project's context meant that the media better understood the scope of Bilfinger Berger's responsibility.
Logical structure	A clear (chronological) structure of messages made it easier for the audience to understand what had happened and to develop a fair assessment of the catastrophe.
Essential	In complex cases such as this one, a focus on the key elements was necessary in order to enter into dialogue with the media, the shareholders, and the public. The company focused on two essential messages: (1) We are cooperating to resolve the crisis; and (2) We are professional and won't let this happen again.
Ambiguity-free	Consistency and coherence in crisis communication led to distinct messages, and the repetition of correct information reached the audience. Ambiguous or technical terms were systematically avoided.
Resonating	Convincing communication with success stories led to more public recognition and shareholder support, rather than only focusing on the crisis.

Table 6: The CLEAR formula applied to the Bilfinger Berger case

Clarifying customer communication: How AXA conducted a clear communication initiative to meet customer needs

Communication area:	Client communication
Communication format:	Written communication, insurance documents, letters, policies
Target group:	Private and institutional insurance clients
Involved teams:	Product management, underwriting, IT, Operations, Marketing
Complexity:	Very high
Key lessons:	Use of familiar language in a consistent manner

AXA's clear communication initiative was started at the international group level in 2009 as part of an effort by the company to redefine insurance standards and differentiate itself through customer service. The overall project objective was to ensure clear messages in all customer-related communication. Richard Lüthert, head of marketing documents at AXA Switzerland, and Eleni Strati, head of the clear communication project at AXA Switzerland, were planning their next steps and forthcoming activities in the third phase of the clear communication initiative. Since the project started in January 2009, Lüthert and Strati and their team had changed underwriting processes, reviewed and edited hundreds of insurance documents, produced a clear communication guide with before-and-after-examples of clear letters to customers, and reduced and aligned dozens of text modules. Because the insurance business is complex, the challenge of making the complex clear has provided several useful insights.

What were the complexity drivers?

The challenge of communicating through clear documents with the customers resulted from a number of complexity drivers:

1. Letters to clients often contain difficult and unfamiliar terms. Even insurance experts sometimes struggle with the *terminology*. In addition, different terms are often use to describe the same things.
2. Clients often do not know what to *do* with the information they receive from their insurer. Most insurance letters have no direct call to action.
3. Many letters to clients contain a kind of summary of an underlying insurance calculation process. This process is complex and not transparent for the customer. The target of limiting such documents to one page does not make this task easier.
4. As soon as mutations occur in an insurance contract, the documentation changes, without making the mutations clear to the client.
5. A typical client receives a large variety of documents (modifications, contracts, bills, institutional information, etc.) throughout the year. It is not always clear to the customer which documents are really relevant and where action is required.
6. The initial documents often only include a general Internet address and a common telephone number. The customer has no way of reaching a service officer. Even the existing online help information is difficult to find on the company's website.

The challenges that AXA was facing in the course of its clear communication initiative can be described using six main clarity problem patterns:

Too big to fail

Many insurance product documents have grown to a point where everybody agrees with them; therefore, no one wants to modify them, even though they contain many unclear passages and are difficult for customers to understand.

Solution: Recreate the document from the beginning via a collaborative team workshop.

Implicit implications

Many letters to customers are perceived as unclear because they do not specify the consequences for the addressed target group.

Solution: New and clear formulations of a call-to-action.

Insight without oversight

Many billing or insurance premium letters create confusion because they do not provide the necessary big-picture context. It is not possible to recognize the most important things at first glance.

Solution: Highlight the most important information and omit unnecessary details; give the document a subject title.

Same but different

Many of the labels that the insurance documents use are confusing because they describe the same thing using different terms.

Solution: Exactly the same terms should be used on documents of the same type; use a collaborative team workshop to elaborate.

Missing in action

Documents sent to customers often lack a clear statement about how to obtain further information. Often only a general internet address (e.g., www.axa.ch) is provided.

Solution: personalize the information options. Indicate a contact person with their name and direct telephone number.

How was clarity improved?

The following measures were taken to improve the clarity of client communication.

Consistent design: Documents were redesigned in such a way that the customer could re-identify them easily at first glance. The position of contact information, the logo and company motto is now always the same.

Clear wording and familiar language: The terminology used in all documents was adjusted to layman's terms, using words that are friendly and simple, but significant. This was done through collaborative teamwork involving experts from product management, underwriting, and marketing through a facilitated discussion led by the clear communication team.

Consistency and readability: The consistent use of terminology and the use of the same words/sentences for the same idea was crucial and is now the norm. AXA is speaking with one voice, and the style and wording of letters is now consistent throughout AXA. The most important issues are highlighted for better readability.

Explaining the numbers: The numbers on insurance bills or reports are now depicted in a clearer way or explained in an online tutorial. This means that customers are now able to understand the logic of most calculations by themselves.

Options to obtain detailed information: Each document provides a new heading, including contact options for the customers, such as an individual customer service person and various telephone numbers for different purposes.

What can be learned from this experience?

In this case of written customer communication, AXA faced a great amount of complexity. Seeing the problem from the customer's perspective is one major lesson. AXA wanted to make things easier, clearer, more readable, and more understandable for any type of customer. It achieved this goal by applying *a consistent* and *easy logic*. A fresh design of the documents helped identify documents that belong together. The permanent development of online help tools, the continuing enhancement of customer services through the training of call center employees and in-house training on clear communication helped establish a "clear communication mentality". These action are summarized below in relation to the CLEAR formula.

CLEAR elements	Corresponding Actions
Contextual	AXA redesigned thousands of documents in terms of context, wording, and style. The context of a document is now clear at one glance.
Logical structure	A clear structure of documents and the elimination of duplication in documents made it easier for customers to understand the purpose of a document.
Essential	By highlighting the most important facts in an insurance document, readers can now more easily understand what documents are about.
Ambiguity-free	Consistency and coherence in wording and style led to clearer documents. The use of everyday terminology rather than insurance jargon has made it possible for non-experts to understand the meaning of the used terms.
Resonating	Special emphasis was given to a humane, personal, and friendly tone in all customer letters.

Table 7: The CLEAR formula applied to the AXA case

The corporate wording project of mobilkom austria: Clarity with a strategic twist

Communication area:	Institutional and client communication
Communication format:	Written communication, customer documents, letters, polices, presentations, contracts
Target group:	Clients, employees
Involved teams:	Marketing, legal, customer service, sales, e-business, external consultants, advertising and PR agencies
Complexity:	Medium
Key learnings:	Aligning clarity to the corporate brand; managing frictions and resistance points when addressing clear communication

mobilkom austria is a leading mobile network operator in Austria. Since 2001, the company has been collaborating with an external wording consultancy (called wortwelt), to develop mobilkom's corporate wording and align its communication with its strategic values. This case study is about the wording project that mobilkom has conducted over the last three years to improve written communication with its customers. Clarity in this context was improved by creating a clear terminology that is aligned with the company's brand values.

What were the complexity drivers?

As is the case in many other countries, the mobile phone market in Austria is highly competitive and saturated. mobilkom austria (and its service brand, "A1") differentiates itself from competitors through high-quality service. The A1 service strategy has focused on developing customer service as a value generator, with its highly skilled service employees being a point of differentiation. While this strategy initially focused on training people who work in service lines and in shops, the focus shifted to people who were not concerned with talking, but rather with writing to customers.

Since 2001, mobilkom has conducted a number of projects regarding its corporate wording. The main objective of this initiative was to move mobilkom's writing culture towards a unique "A1 style."

The wording project affected approximately 900 of the company's total of 2000 employees. The project was developed in cooperation with the following departments: customer service and sales, marketing, legal, e-business, business sales, corporate communication, and residential sales. The company decided to involve employees in the entire process to strengthen the general involvement and thereby support the project's success. Accordingly, between 15 and 20 of these departments' employees were actively involved in the project. The project targeted all kinds of texts, including letters, faxes, emails, and fact sheets. The project did not affect the communication of back-office functions, such as communication with suppliers or within the human resources department.

The company defined four objectives for its clear wording project. The first was to reinforce customer orientation and the second was to reduce costs. To this end, management wanted to be more proactive in its communication, giving customers the necessary information before they even knew that they needed it. This was able to significantly reduce costs given that the number of customer inquiries coming in directly contributes to the cost of a service call center. Hence, costs can be reduced by being more customer-oriented and by giving relevant and clear information to the clients right from the start. mobilkom's third objective was to translate its brand values into a "unique" language in order to strengthen the A1 brand. The fourth and final objective was for mobilkom to have a consistent corporate language. This meant using the same writing style in all of its communication, ranging from product fact sheets all the way to the general conditions and contract terms.

One of the greatest challenges of the wording project was to make employees aware of the need for and the benefits of such a project. It was challenging to engage employees and motivate them to change their own texts and writing habits in order to align them to the new standards

How was clarity improved?

The A1 brand values were at the center of the clear wording project. External experts acted as wording-coaches, meaning that they did not *rewrite* the texts of mobilkom austria, but they did support the employees during the revision process.

The wording project went through four main phases:

First phase: Text analysis

The consultants analyzed the company's existing texts and compared them with the A1 values. They looked for texts, words, or sentences which did not fit with the brand values. The aim of this first stage was to find specific examples for the employees of what needed to change.

Second phase: Style finding workshops

The external consultants organized workshops at which the representatives of the involved departments (such as legal, marketing, and customer support) had to define the implications of the A1 values for their own wording. To do so, they first described what these values meant for them, and then what they meant for their texts. For example, the brand value "quality" meant *clear and direct texts, active instead of passive, easy syntax,* etc. This phase laid the groundwork for an A1 language.

Third phase: Training workshops in the different departments

During this stage, each department met separately in order to define its own objectives. In addition, each department's staff defined what each of the A1 values meant for the achievement of their department's goals. It was necessary to conduct workshop separately in different departments as each departments had specific needs and targets. For example, training workshops were significantly different for marketing staff than for internal lawyers, due to the different types of texts upon which each department focused.

Fourth phase: Text Coaching

At this stage, the employees had to rewrite their texts. They rewrote standards briefs, factsheets, and other texts, by applying the new wording style and following the objectives that they had established. This phase was often time-consuming and energy-consuming. The involved employees had to rewrite the texts and send them for review to the external wording consultants. After the texts were checked, the consultancy sent them back and offered advice about what needed to be changed. The employees took the feedbacks into account and rewrote the texts again. This process was repeated until the texts matched the objectives and the A1 wording style. A law firm supported the text coaching of the legal department to ensure that the new texts were legally sound.

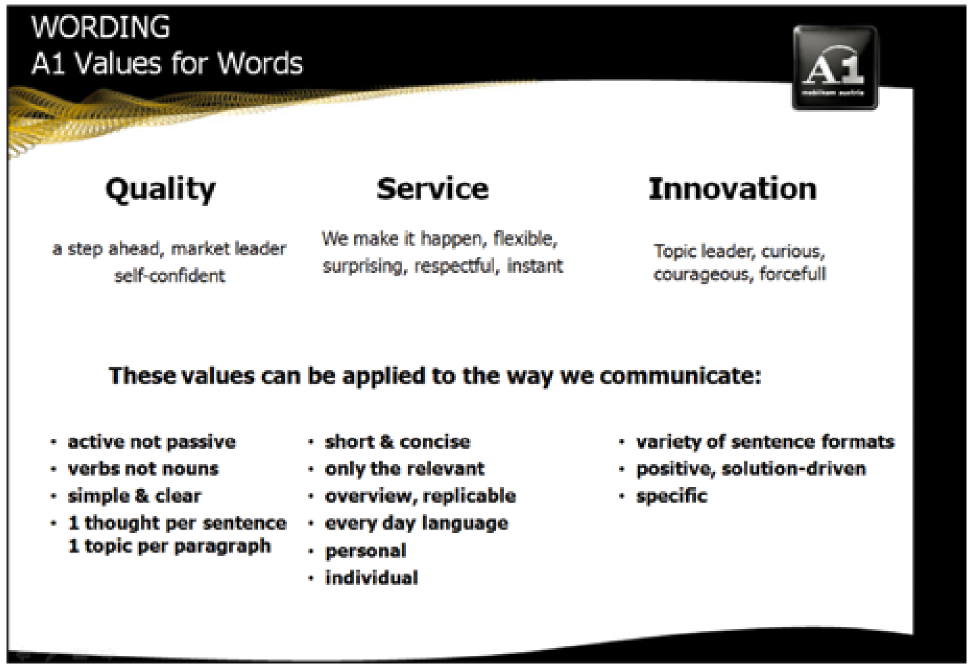


Figure 4: Key Values of mobilkom austria and their implications word clear wording

mobilkom austria also introduced a quality check process. An internal "coach," who was not necessarily a manager, was responsible for the wording quality of each department. These coaches controlled the employees' texts at random, checking that the wording standards were being respected or whether further wording training was required. Alongside these coaches, wording trainers were appointed so that mobilkom austria could train its employees internally. Because it is not always possible to change one's language in only a few months, follow-up workshops were also organized to support the employees in the long term.

The results of the project were printed and distributed to the employees in the form of an attractive "A1 Wording Handbook." The handbook was made available in three different versions, one for each of the marketing, legal, and customer service and sales departments. The handbooks are divided into two parts. The first part is the same for all departments and contains the basic and formal wording standards, such as abbreviations, signature, out-of-office email, and text layout. The second part dealt with the wording specificities of each business area.

The handbook describes the brand values and their meaning for the wording of mobilkom austria. In addition, several examples were included to concretize the new wording styles and rules. Generally, each page contains one wording rule, illustrated by one or more examples, showing "before" (old texts) and "better" (texts how they should be). The examples were selected from existing texts from the first stage of the project and from the text coaching stage. Consequently, the mobilkom employees are able to understand what the wording rules and the new standards mean for their daily work and how they can apply them. All employees have access to the handbook's content, both in paper format and on the company's intranet. Wording training based on the book was added to the orientation program for new employees. In addition to the handbook, many new standards were adopted, such as in the area of customer letters, in the internal information system, on the website, and so on. All texts were revamped to give them a clearer structure and a shorter scope. The use of everyday language made the texts easier to comprehend.

What can be learned from this experience?

This initiative is informative in terms of the frictions and challenges that a clear communication initiative may encounter. Undoubtedly, the main challenge during the project was to change employees' mindsets about wording and clear communication and to make them aware of the need for and benefits from such a project. It was essential to convince employees that the project was vital to the company's success. Furthermore, employees had to understand that they each had to make an effort to change their communication in order to achieve the company's goals. Most clear communication initiatives are likely to face the same problem: convincing employees that they are not already clear communicators. In mobilkom's case, shifting the mindset of the corporate lawyers constituted a major challenge. At first, the lawyers did not even understand why they were being integrated into the wording project. They felt that they were the company's legal army, protecting and defending it against the "hostile outside." They did not feel that they were part of the customer service. Consequently, many discussions were held during the style-finding workshops before the legal staff understood why they were involved in the project, and that their contribution was crucial for the successful development of the A1 wording. Also, during later training workshops, the legal staff was not always enthusiastic about clear communication. They were sometimes motivated and ambitious, while at other times they felt like they could not change their language at all, as clarification was not "serious enough," and that no one would believe they had studied law to write in such plain language. As a result, it was a continuous challenge for the external consultants and the project managers to motivate these legal staff. However, the lawyers did make the necessary changes and succeeded in rewriting texts such as the *General Terms and Conditions* in line with the A1 wording. Unfortunately (but perhaps typical for corporate contexts), their texts were not accepted by Telekom Austria; when the two companies merged, the old legal texts were brought back.

Another lesson learned regards collaboration with external advertising and PR agencies. As the wording of mobilkom austria changed, its agencies had to adopt the new wording as well. This created a number of conflicts, even though the agencies were involved in the wording project from the very beginning. The agencies found it difficult to accept criticism and advice from another agency (the wording consultants from wortwelt). Effectively, these external agencies considered clear communication skills to be their core competence and did not see the need to change their texts. The agencies interpreted the new rules and wording style as meaning "we know better than you how to do your job." The agencies reacted in two counterproductive ways: They either argued for hours about why their texts should not be changed, or they appeared to agree with the wording style, but then did not apply it in their work for mobilkom. Subsequently, the marketing department had to review each agency's material and re-work its texts with each of them – an extremely labour-intensive process.

mobilkom austria's eight-year-long wording effort had a major impact on the awareness of its employees. Most employees who were actively involved in the wording project became convinced about the benefits of the A1 wording approach. Their own commitment motivated other employees to care about clarity. The use of the new wording style also strengthened the A1 culture and the way in which employees wrote to another. However, a constant and ongoing challenge has been keeping this style alive and renewing efforts regarding clear wording and communication. Therefore, any clear communication initiative should foresee measures to re-motivate employees to manage clarity systematically.

CLEAR elements	**Corresponding actions**
Contextual	Title sections in customer letters clearly indicate the context of the document.
Logical structure	Letter templates, product sheets, and general conditions were re-formatted from essentially flat texts to documents with a clearly visible structure and topic-focused paragraphs.
Essential	The general terms and conditions were reduced to the bare minimum.
Ambiguity-free	Vague and technocratic terms were systematically replaced by specific, common, everyday words. Potentially ambiguous sentences were clarified through short examples.
Resonating	Letters to customers always address the customer by name, state what has happened and what it means, and list available options for action as well as contact possibilities.

Table 8: The CLEAR formula applied to the mobilkom austria case

The Complex to Clear Challenge: Empirical Evidence from three Surveys

What evidence is there to support the CLEAR formula?

The CLEAR elements presented in the previous sections have been validated through three surveys: a survey of 145 business students (most with working experience) on clarity in complex slide *presentations*; a survey on clarity in *e-mail* messages answered by 97 students and managers; and a global on-line survey of 220 professional communicators regarding general clarity *in corporate communication*. In total, 462 people were surveyed regarding their views on clear communication.

What method did we use and whom did we ask?

The survey on clarity in complex slide presentations consisted of 41 closed questions and six open questions, whereas the survey on clear e-mail messages involved 44 closed questions and six open questions. Both specific surveys were developed using a five-point Likert-scale that measured either positive or negative responses to different statements related to clarity. Respondents were asked about the effect that a lack of clarity has on the audience/receiver, as well as issues to be considered when using presentation software and e-mail. Respondents were also asked about effective mechanisms to increase clarity. Both questionnaires were distributed manually with a short introduction regarding the survey's purpose. The study was conducted at the University of St. Gallen and at the University of Lugano. We asked students and academics from different degree programs and nationalities about their views on clarity in knowledge-intensive, complex slide presentation, a subject that all respondents had extensive experience with as students and course participants. The sample consists of third-year Italian and Swiss bachelor's degree students enrolled in a program in corporate communication, master's students from the University St. Gallen and Lugano, PhD students, as well as American and Canadian MBA students. The final sample includes 145 completed questionnaires on presentation clarity and 97 completed questionnaires on e-mail clarity. The response rate for this sample was 100 percent.

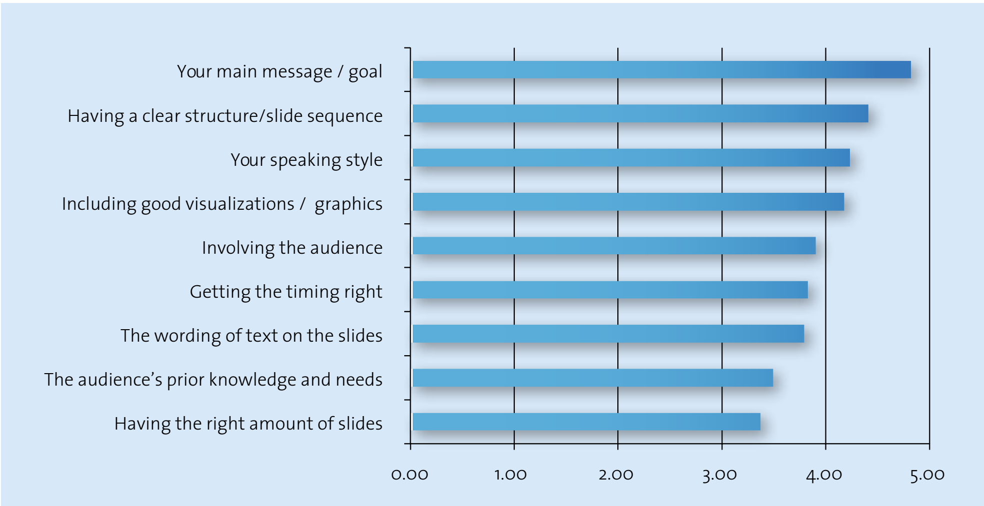


Figure 5: Items to be considered when presenting clearly with PowerPoint-based slide presentations (listed by overall ranked importance).

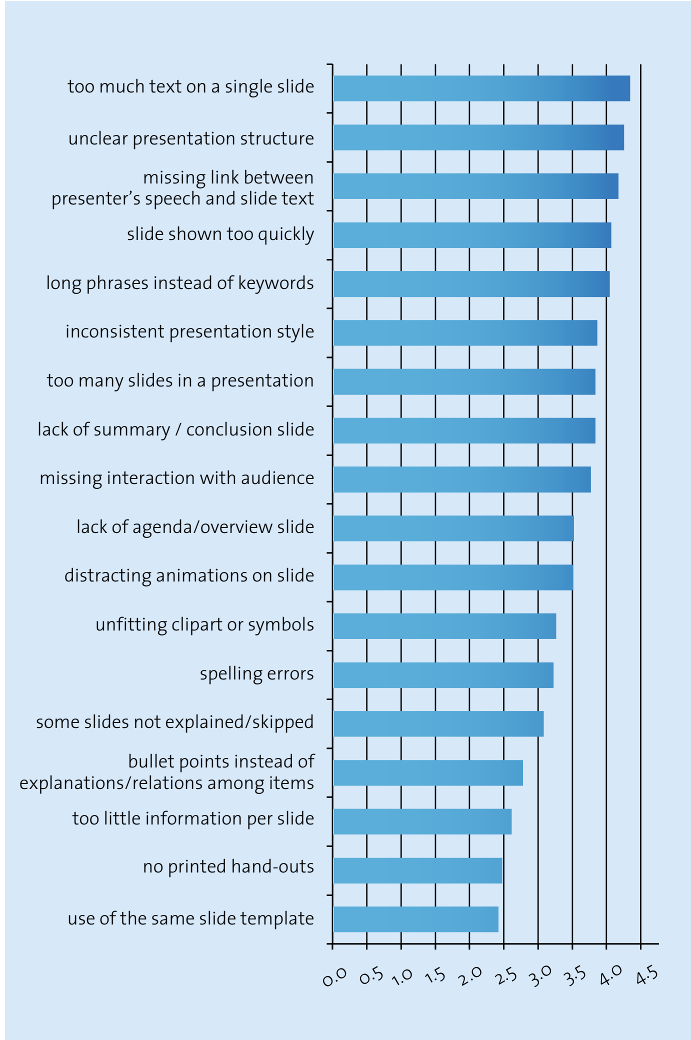


Figure 6: Items that negatively affect clarity in PowerPoint-based slide presentations (listed by overall ranked importance).

What did we learn about clarity in slide presentations?

The results indicate that our formula does indeed tackle the relevant clarity drivers and provides an easy-to-apply guideline to ensure clarity. We believe that one of the most important points to bear in mind is "concise content," in the sense of having a clear objective or goal when communicating and focusing on the essential. The survey results indicate that this is the most important issue to consider in slide presentations (mean of 4.8 out of 5, see Figure 5). The survey participants evaluated "having a clear structure/slide sequence" as the second most important issue, with a mean of 4.4 out of 5 (see Figure 5). This issue refers to the "L" of our clear formula, which stands for "logical structure."

A third element to consider for clear knowledge communication is "your speaking style" (mean=4.2; see Figure 5). This factor refers to "R" for resonance in the CLEAR formula, in the sense of being aligned with the needs, preferences, and foreknowledge of the audience and therefore addressing the audience in the most appropriate style.

The majority of respondents considered "too much text on a slide" to be the most important factor resulting in a lack of clarity in presentations (mean=4.3; see Figure 6), which refers to the "E" element ("essential elements"). The second highest ranking item was "unclear presentation structure," validating "L" ("logical structure"). The third highest ranked factor for clarity (or lack thereof) concerned "the link between speech and slides," which corresponds to our A=ambiguity-free dimension. This factor also relates to our dimension of providing a clear context for information, as contextualizing the slide text is frequently the main function of orally provided slide comments. The fourth highest ranked negative factor was "showing a slide too quickly," which means it was not ready or optimal for its intended usage.

The qualitative part of the survey focused on people's general likes and dislikes regarding clarity in presentations. The following quotes illustrate what students like about presentations: "I like it when they are filled with essential keywords followed by verbal explanation." "I like slides that are clear, use keywords, and are thus easy to understand."

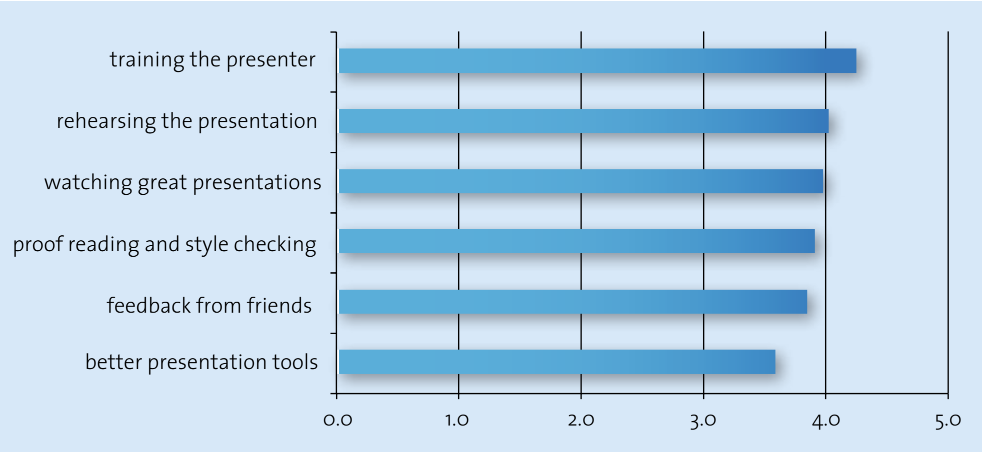


Figure 7: Mechanisms that positively affect clarity in PowerPoint-based slide presentations (listed by overall ranked importance).

On the other hand students dislike slide presentations that are unclear: "I hate it if the slides are not explained." "I hate it when presentations are too long and there is too much unexplained text on one slide."

A check question revealed that the participants generally like slide presentations (mean=3.85).

A main argument for the CLEAR framework was the premise that clear communication can be learned or trained. This argument is supported by the results of the survey (see Figure 7). The most likely mechanism for achieving greater clarity in oral presentations is considered to be "training the presenter." This is followed by "rehearsing the presentation," which touches upon the same idea; namely, professional training and exercise of clear and concise communication.

What did we learn about clarity in e-mail messages?

The results of the survey on clarity in e-mail messages also indicate a fit between our CLEAR formula and the use of e-mails; accordingly, they provide some issues to consider in written electronic conversations.

The highest ranked item to consider when writing a clear e-mail message was the statement "consider your main message or goal," with a mean of 4.77 out of 5. When writing e-mails, one of the most important factors to bear in mind is to have a clear objective or goal when communicating and a focus on the essential points. The survey participants evaluated "having a clear structure" as the second most important issue, with a mean of 4.4 out of 5 (see Figure 8). This

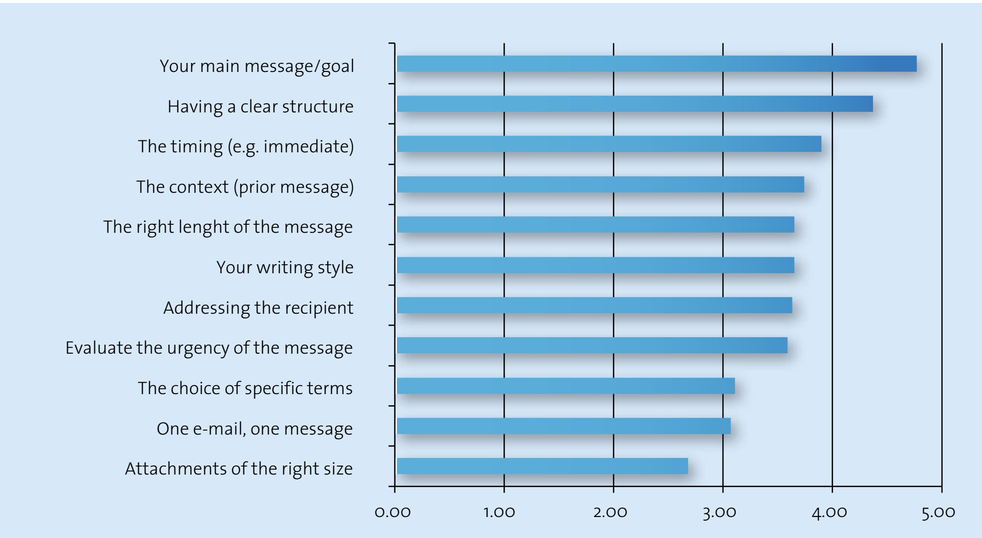
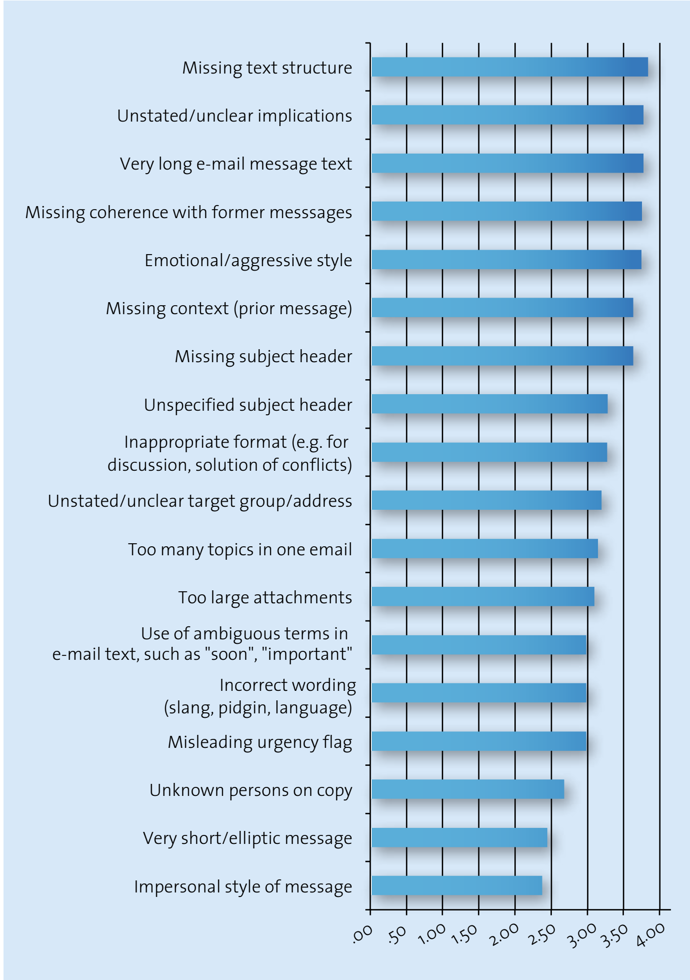


Figure 8: Items to be considered when writing a clear e-mail message (listed by overall ranked importance).

issue refers to the "L" in the clear formula. This result corresponds with the findings of the survey on clear presentations, where logical structure again ranked second in importance.

A third issue to consider for a clear written e-mail message is "timing" (with a mean of 3.9 out of 5, see Figure 8). This refers to "R" for resonance in the CLEAR formula, in the sense of being aligned with the needs, preferences, and expectations of the audience, and therefore addressing the audience in the most appropriate timing.



When asked for the most negative impact on clarity in e-mail messages, our respondents ranked four issues as the most relevant (see Figure 9):

- Missing text structure (mean=3.84)
- Unstated/unclear implications (mean=3.77)
- Very long e-mail message text (mean=3.77)
- Missing coherence with former messages (mean=3.75)

While the most negative effect refers to the "L" in the CLEAR formula (logical structure), the second highest ranked item was "unclear implications," which applies to the "C" in CLEAR; namely, the contextual meaning of a message. Another factor that gained the same ranking, with a mean of 3.77, was "very long e-mails," which corresponds to the "E" (essential) dimension in the sense of focusing closely on the most important elements in your message. The fourth factor for clarity (or lack thereof) was "missing coherence with former message." This factor relates to acknowledging the audience's foreknowledge, as the main function of an ongoing e-mail conversation is often to contextualize the e-mail text.

The qualitative part of the survey focused on participants' general likes and dislikes regarding clarity in e-mails. The following quotes illustrate what today's workforce likes about e-mail messages: "I like clear, efficient e-mails which come straight to the point." "What I like about e-mails is the possibility of having information on time."

Figure 9: Items that negatively affect clarity in e-mail messages (listed by overall ranked importance).

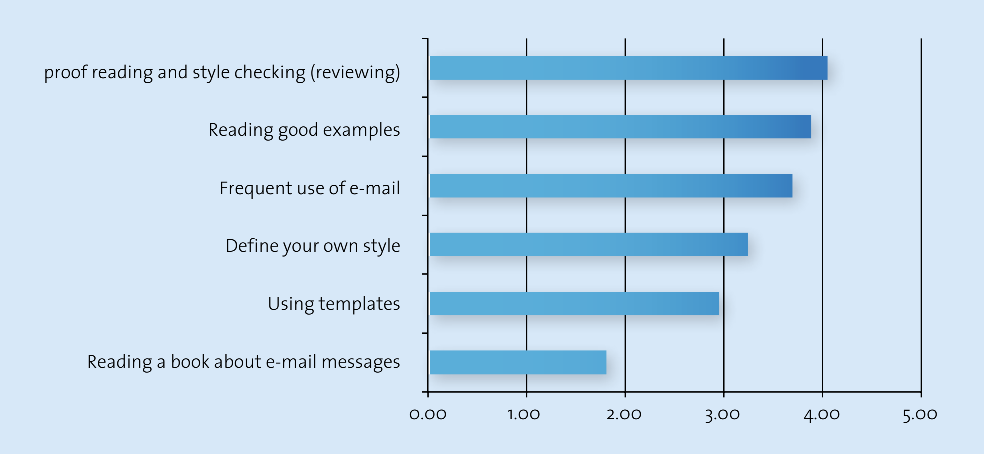


Figure 10: Mechanisms that positively affect clarity in e-mail messages (listed by overall ranked importance).

By contrast, managers and students dislike e-mail messages when they are unfocused and ambiguous: "I hate long e-mails with no clear issue/goal." "I hate if there are too many recipients or blind copies."

The majority of survey participants (mean: 3.71 out of 5) gave a positive response to the question, "Do you generally like to write and receive e-mails?"

The survey on clarity of e-mail conversations was also interested in applicable behavior for turning knowledge about clarity into action. The survey asked about the positive effects on writing style to design clear e-mails that reach the receiver and lead to intended action. The most likely mechanism for achieving more clarity in written e-mail conversation is considered to be "proofreading and style-checking (reviewing)," with a mean of 4.05 out of 5 (see Figure 10). The second highest ranking mechanism for improving clarity is "reading good examples" (mean=3.89), a mechanism that hits upon the same idea; namely, professional training and exercise of clear and concise communication.

What can we learn from professional corporate communicators about clarity in corporate communication?

This third survey asked corporate communicators of large organizations around the world about their views on how to communicate complex issues clearly to different stakeholders. The issue of making the complex clear has become increasingly important in today's business, especially with the advent of social media channels. Therefore, clear communication is defined in this context as messages that are easy to understand because they are contextualized, logically structured, focused on essential content, free of ambiguous terms, and create resonance with their audience.

The results of this survey not only indicate the importance of the topic per se (almost 60 percent of the communicators who answered presently prepare or conduct projects on clear communication in their organization), but also demonstrate the importance of reviewing and collaborative communication work. Therefore, a "quick clarity check by a reviewer for every message" was highly ranked as a factor that helps increase clarity.

What method did we apply and whom did we ask?

The "clarity in corporate communication" survey consisted of 64 quantitative questions and 10 qualitative questions. The questionnaire was developed using a five-point Likert-scale that measured positive or negative responses to various statements related to clarity in corporate communication, the effect of unclearness on the audience/receiver, issues to be considered when using avenues such as social media, and strategies to increase clarity. The questionnaire was accessible online, which made it possible to reach a worldwide audience of corporate communicators. In total, 220 completed questionnaires were returned. Figure 11 shows the professional fields of the participants.

How do corporate communicators make complex messages clear?

The qualitative part of the survey asked the professional corporate communicators if they know of any proven practices for increasing the clarity of corporate communication messages. Some of the responses include:

- "Treat messaging like you would treat a cold: Act early, repeat often and continue layering right through to the end."
- "The clarity relies on the skills of the communicator – the ability to analyze what is important for whom and what the essential points are. Tools are not the answer; training for communicators is."
- "Hire communicators with a journalistic background."
- "Employ excellent writers who are not afraid to challenge senior executives on the clarity of their messages."
- "Establish a charter between senior executives and editorial staff which gives the last word on wording to those who write for a living."
- "Teach people about how to manage their emotions and make them conscious that we essentially communicate emotions."

It is important to highlight the personal side of communication, which would refer to "resonating" in the CLEAR formula. This means keeping the audience in mind and formulating your messages in a "picturesque" way so that the reader will enjoy the message.

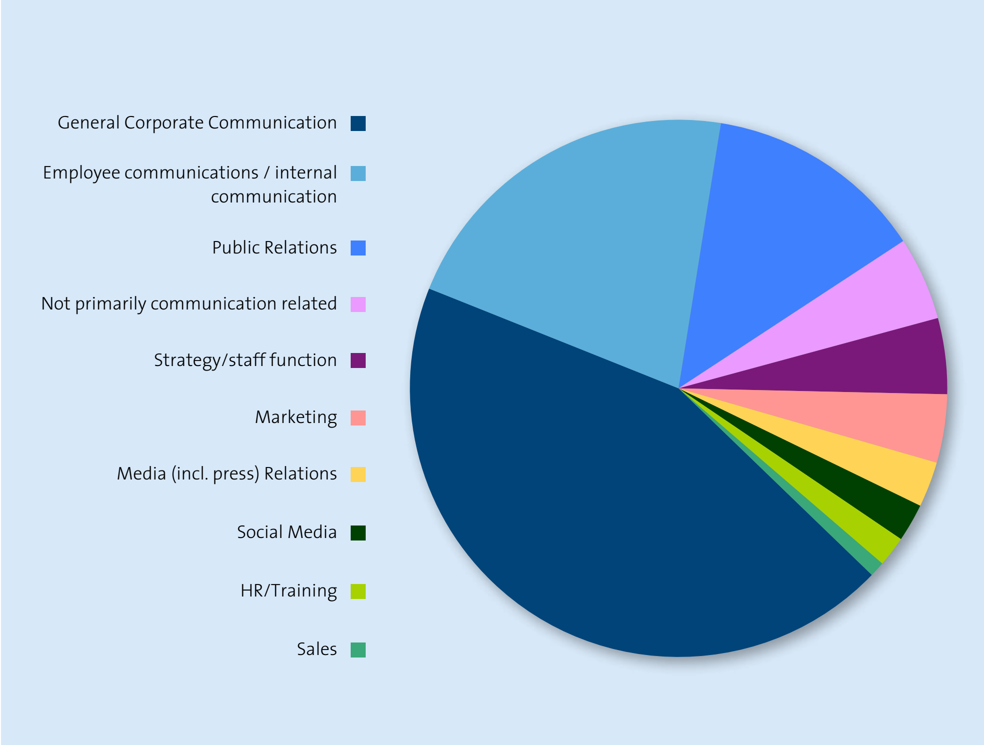


Figure 11: Professional backgrounds of the survey respondents.

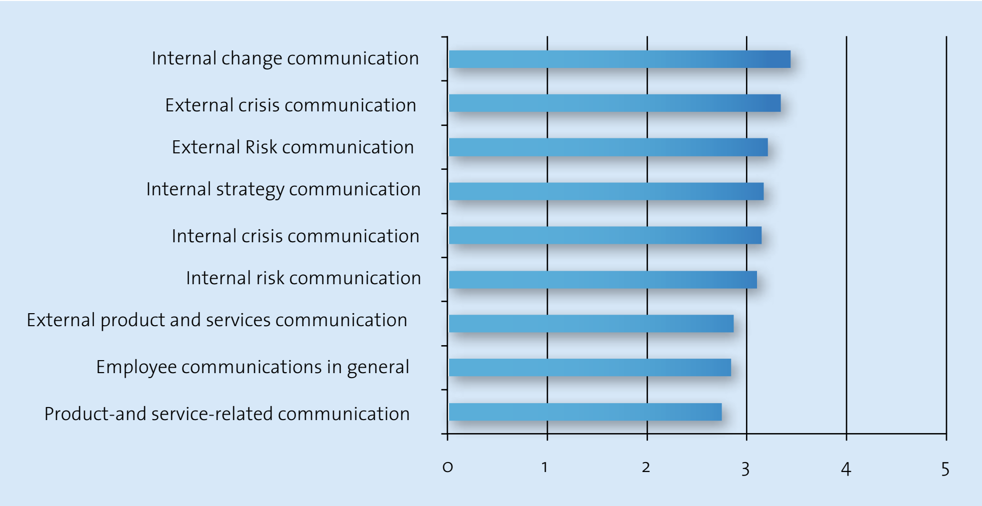


Figure 12: Areas with complex messages to communicate (listed by overall ranked importance).

What are the challenges of corporate communication and possible solutions?

The most difficult topics for corporate communicators to convey are "internal change communication" (with a mean of 3.44 out of 5) and "external crisis communication" (with a mean of 3.34 out of 5) (see Figure 12). Both topics involve not only complexity, but are closely related with issues of uncertainty, and the uncertainty connected with change and crisis communication often refers to expected losses. Therefore, most people react negatively towards change or crisis messages, which makes the communication difficult.

Apart from the topic and its complexity, other problems cause confusion in corporate messages. According to survey participants, the following three reasons were the biggest clarity killers:

- Making a message too complex by putting too many information pieces in it (mean=3.61)
- Involving too many people the creation of a document/message/communication (mean=3.36)
- Making too many changes to a document over time, leading to inconsistencies and making the document too complex (mean=3.36)

We also asked the survey participants what factor would be most helpful in terms of increasing the clarity of their messages. The two highest ranking factors were "good templates" (mean=3.13) and "a quick clarity check by a reviewer" (mean=3.09). Chapter two of this study proposed a short diagnostic test that communicators can use to evaluate messages and their clarity. This is not a substitute for having a professional colleague read your message, but it does offer some initial feedback regarding the clarity of the message.

Some additional remarks on this topic from survey participants include:

- Greater understanding of stakeholders would be very helpful
- Examples of poor communications rewritten to improve clarity
- Cross-department/cross-level conversations

The survey participants ranked the following factors as the most important benefits of clear, understandable communication:

- Help people understand our message more quickly (mean=3.68)
- Help people remember our message better (mean=3.59)

Figure 13 lists all of the benefits in terms of their overall ranked importance.

Another question in the survey was, "Which factor has the greatest impact on making a message clearer to your recipients?" The factor that had the greatest impact seems to be "unambiguous terminology" (mean=3.71); which is represented by the A in the CLEAR formula. This involves using clear and simple language, formulating the message actively and positively, and trying to avoid words that can be interpreted in different ways. The second factor with the greatest impact was "focusing your message on the essential and leaving out unnecessary details" (mean=3.65). This item, which represents "E" (essential) in the CLEAR formula, has already been accentuated by Langer, Thun and Tausch in their "Hamburg Model of Comprehensibility" (1974) as one of the most important and useful factors for making a text clear. Finally, the survey asked participants in which domain they would target their next clear communication project within their organization. "Strategy communication" (mean=3.42) and "employee communication" (mean=3.35) were the two topics that communicators identified as target areas.

Does social media help to communicate clearly in corporate contexts?

The answer to this question from survey participants and communication professionals was a clear "no." While they found Twitter and Facebook to be the two most challenging communication formats in terms of conveying a complex message, they also felt that the best channels for achieving this are "personal conversation, face to

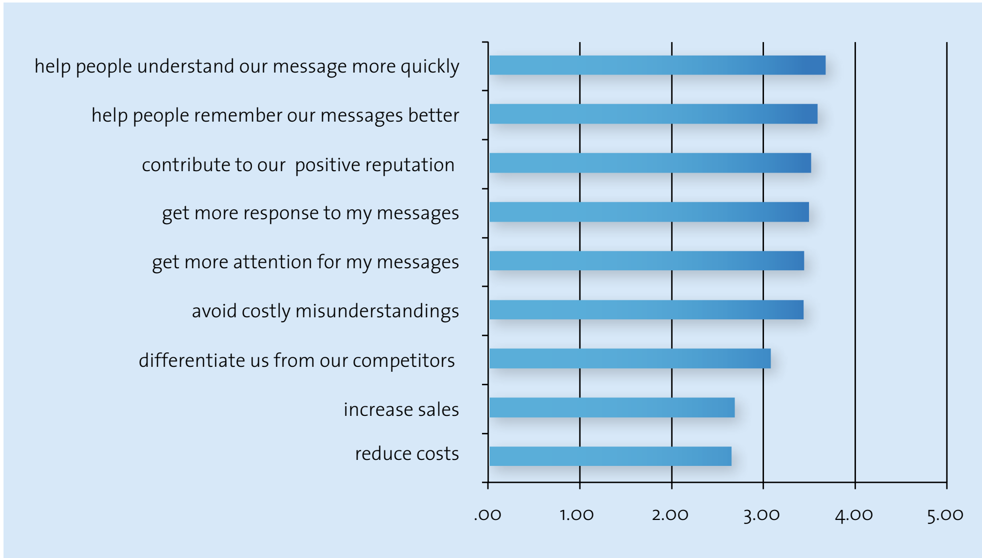


Figure 13: Benefits to be attributed to investing resources in clearer communication.

face" (mean=3.84) and "personal telephone conversation" (mean=3.15). Communicators judged Twitter to be the least suitable channel for complex messages, even if a Twitter message could at least provide a link towards a clear explanation.

Do these surveys correspond with previous studies?

The results of the "clear slide presentation" survey correspond with the findings of a study by Zenthöfer (2008) on the clarity and appropriateness of slide presentations. He concluded that PowerPoint presentations are best suited to giving your talk a structure. Showing corresponding pictures and figures while you are talking allows the audience to follow your thoughts with the same structure as it was intended to have. Zenthöfer also noted that slide presentations are not intended for documentation, reporting, protocol, art, or for impressing clients.

Previous studies also support our findings on clear e-mail messages. In DeKay's (2010) case study, structure was one of the most important clarity factors in e-mail messages, as it serves "to stylize information by lending credibility to the document, creating emphasis, and registering an appropriate tone of voice" (DeKay, 2010: 114). Structure in e-mails implies elements such as titles, headings, paragraph breaks, and bulleted lists. Leaving design issues aside, DeKay found that colorful text failed to engage readers. Therefore, our advice to managers for writing clear e-mail messages is to keep them simple and well structured. Dan Pallotta argued the same in his *Harvard Business Review* article. He said, "Less is more. Don't get fancy, don't overdo anything. Simplicity and power are not mutually exclusive. They are often one and the same" (Pallotta, hbr.org, 2011).

A large-scale international study on corporate communication regarding reputation management was carried out in the aftermath of the Enron collapse (Laurence, 2004). The study stressed the importance of putting the corporate communicators in the right place (or into the right structure). Our survey also received hints on the importance of connecting communicators with senior executives for a better internal understanding of the role of clear communication.

What are the main implications of the three surveys?

The conclusions we have reached from our three surveys on clarity in managerial and corporate communication are as follows:

1. Clarity is an urgent and often unresolved topic, especially when it comes to complex issues
2. Many organizations have started to address this challenge through dedicated projects
3. Communicators need and request effective tools such as checklists, diagnostic tests, and templates
4. Examples of clear communication help communicators improve their communication
5. Clear communication can be trained and learned.
6. The CLEAR elements correspond to the key requirements of clear communication; for example, in presentations or e-mail messages.

Conclusion: An Agenda for Clear Corporate Communication

More important than the quest
for certainty is the quest for clarity.

Francois Gautier

What is needed in order to achieve clear communication?

As this study has shown, communicating complex messages in a clear manner is not simply a writing or speaking challenge. It is also a management problem. Consistently communicating complex topics in a simple manner requires more than just talent; it requires a method.

This report has attempted to present such a method. Our approach has been based on a literature review, multiple case studies, and three surveys, as well as numerous expert interviews and focus group discussions.

The cornerstones of the *CLEAR* method are the factors that make a message overly complex (as captured in the *COMPLEX* acronym), a set of easily identifiable clarity problem *patterns* (and corresponding remedies), the *CLEAR* criteria for checking the clarity of a message, and the *STARTER* elements that can help institutionalize clear communication within an organization. The appendix to this study provides several directly applicable tools based on this approach, including a poster, card set, diagnostic test, pop quiz, and decision table. The appendix also includes a list of articles and books on the topic. Most of the existing publications and resources on the subject of clear communication reduce the topic to good writing and information design. By contrast, this study has shown that unclear communication is often the result of unclear objectives, ill-aligned processes, and fuzzy roles or responsibilities. It is difficult to convey clear strategy, change, or crisis messages without having systematic, well thought out communication processes in place. Therefore, clarity in *organizing* must precede clarity in communication. Nevertheless, communicators must also educate their colleagues about the basics of writing, speaking, and visualizing clearly. Communicating complex topics should become part of the media *literacy* of today's communicators. In doing so, habits such as using simple words or writing in short, positive, and active sentences should become second nature to all communicators. Communicators should also become aware of the importance of communicating with a human touch and embracing story-telling, as well as visualization, whenever possible.

Where can you start?

Any study that strives to tackle such a broad topic in a reasonably comprehensive manner may leave readers wondering where to start. We suggest the following practical next steps to improve clarity in your working context:

- Firstly, identify *one area* in which you are regularly required to convey complex and influential messages. Examples of this could may be letters to customers, information for investors, press releases, or change management.
- Secondly, review your communication in that area using the COMPLEX and CLEAR elements, as well as the clarity problem patterns. Where can you identify *improvement opportunities*? Which clarity-related challenges can be overcome quickly and easily and which ones require more sustained efforts? Prioritize your clarity challenges.
- Thirdly, use one or more of the STARTER elements, such as an afternoon training session or a set of good and bad examples, to systemati-

cally improve the clarity of the communicated messages in that area. Hold a two-hour clarity *pilot* training, write a two-page guide to clear communication in that area, or conduct a mini-survey on the current level of clarity. *Test* the water for clarity activities in your organization.

- Next, work systematically with your colleagues to improve the clarity of influential messages in this particular area. In doing so, pay attention to the *co-ordination mechanisms*, roles, and processes. Are they conducive to clarity or do they impede it? As you go along, try to *fine tune* the steps used to create messages so that they don't become an obstacle to clear communication.
- Finally, solicit *feedback* on improved messages and monitor improvements. Document positive feedback to improved messages and use them as a business case for clearer communication vis-à-vis your senior management.

This quest for clarity is an ongoing journey, not a one-off event. Based on the feedback you collect, you may need to devise further actions or refine your approach. Having improved one area of communication, you may decide to tackle another. Whatever route you take, we wish you the best of luck in your journey to clearer communication.

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Appendix

Figure 14: Guidelines for clear communication (Clarity Poster).

Clarity Check Questions	Check	Improvement Actions
Have you analyzed the needs, foreknowledge, and preferences of your target audience?	No / Yes	Interview members of your audience regarding their information needs and expectations and their previous insights into the topic. Check typical prior communications to the target group in terms of their style, scope, level of complexity, etc.
Do you know your main message and what you want the audience to know/do/think based on your communication?	No / Yes	Write a one-sentence paragraph for yourself that outlines the main objective of your communication. Align all of your communication to that single objective.
Is the context of your communication clear at a glance (authors, purpose, date, target group, etc.)?	No / Yes	Frontload your communication with contextual cues, such as author, affiliation, date, purpose. If useful, provide an appendix with contextual background information.
Have you structured your communication logically and in a way that is instantly visible and understandable?	No / Yes	Analyze your communication in terms of its main content chunks. What groups are there? Allocate these chunks into a logical sequence, moving from overview to detail.
Have you focused your communication on the most essential elements and avoided unnecessary points?	No / Yes	Review your communication again and eliminate elements that can be left out without affecting comprehensibility. Screen and delete distracting deviations or unnecessary detailed information.
Have you used terms and expressions that can only be understood in one (correct) way?	No / Yes	Check your communication for ambiguous terms or expressions and replace them with more specific, clear-cut expressions. Provide brief definitions or a short glossary to clarify any ambiguous or abstract terms that you have used.
Does your communication *motivate* the target group to look at it?	No / Yes	Address the members of your target group directly and highlight the benefits that the communication has for them. Make your communication attractive by leaving adequate white space and paying attention to contrast (bigger = more important) and alignment. If possible, include an illustrative image (such as a photo, diagram, or metaphor).
Your communication should now be clear.		If possible, pre-test your communication with members of the target group and incorporate their feedback.

Table 9: Clarity check questions and improvement actions.

How to Communicate Clearly: A Checklist for Managers and Corporate Communicators

Busy corporate communication professionals need to convey increasingly *complex* messages to various target groups (which could be distracted, biased, or indifferent) under great time pressure. Therefore, it is essential not to lose sight of the critical elements that make a message *clear* for its audience.

In order to communicate clearly, a communicator must remember the five key elements summarized in the *CLEAR* acronym. Clear communication clarifies its *C*ontext, has a *L*ogical structure, focuses on *E*ssential elements, consists of *A*mbiguity-free terms, and *R*esonates with its audience.

C IS FOR CONTEXT

Provide an upfront positioning; don't jump in.

The first element of communicating clearly is to briefly explain the context of your message: Why has it been written (purpose), when (date), for whom (target group) and – if necessary – what has come before it (background)?

Example: A clear report begins with a context section that describes the report's rationale and purpose and positions it among related reports. A good e-mail relates to the context of previous messages.

L IS FOR LOGICAL STRUCTURE

Give the message a logical structure; don't just ramble on.

Any kind of complex communication must be made digestible by giving it an easily accessible, systematic, and explicit structure. Use templates to ensure a consistent, logical, and simple structure.

Example: A good structure for an e-mail message, report, or business presentation is the SPIN structure (Situation, Problem, Implications, and Next steps).

E IS FOR ESSENTIAL

Cut out unnecessary elements; don't deviate from the main message.

Especially in written communication, such as e-mails or reports but also in slide presentations, we of know what we really wanted to say once we have already written it up. Therefore, rewriting and eliminating non-essential parts is an important step to making your communication clearer.

Example: Eliminate every second slide from your next slide presentation. Rewrite and shorten an e-mail message to focus it on the needs of the recipient. Provide an executive summary for long documents.

A IS FOR AMBIGUITY-FREE

Choose specific, clearly defined and familiar words; avoid vague terms.

Whenever possible, try to use simple terms that you know all recipients will understand in the same way. If that is not possible, provide concise definitions in parentheses or at the end of a document.

Example: Avoid terms such as "soon," "costly," "someone," "quality," "better," or "in one of your last e-mails."

R IS FOR RESONANCE

Provide stimulating elements that resonate with the audience; don't make your message dull.

Your messages are better understood if people are motivated to read or watch them. In order to encourage your audience to pay close attention to your communication, address them directly and personally, offer illustrative examples and stories early on, and work with fitting analogies or metaphors.

Example: Begin presentations with a question or anecdote that you think your audience would be interested in or is connected to the topic. In a report, avoid empty concept nouns and replace them with specific examples or illustrative stories or instructive diagrams.

Clear Communication Basics: A Self-Test

This simple self-test can be used to quickly assess your own clarity readiness.

Do you know the basics of clear communication? Find out by answering the 10 true or false questions. Did you get seven or more questions right? If you got seven or more questions correct, this means you probably have a good personal clarity readiness and that you are aware of the drivers of clear written communication.

Statement	True	False
You should generally write like you talk, as this leads to simpler, easier sentences.	◯	◯
Negatively stated sentences are easier to understand than positive ones (for example, "this announcement is not confidential" as opposed to "this announcement is for everyone").	◯	◯
Addressing your audience (e.g., "you should know") instead of using an impersonal style (e.g., "one should know") causes distraction and should be avoided.	◯	◯
Providing (varied) examples usually makes communication clearer.	◯	◯
Nouns (things such as a "statement") are easier to grasp than verbs (activities such as "informing")	◯	◯
Using paragraphs to structure a text makes its content harder to understand.	◯	◯
Titles should give a summary or a "so what" statement about the section beneath it.	◯	◯
Subordinate (or nested) sentences and pronouns make text much harder to understand. It's better to avoid them.	◯	◯
Most diagrams or illustrations do not need a caption and can be understood by themselves or by reading about them in the text.	◯	◯
Many problems of unclear corporate communication stem from organizational reasons (such as too many authors, too many revisions by different people, too many divergent interests, etc.)	◯	◯

Solution:
(1) T (2) F (3) F (4) T (5) F (6) F (7) T (8) T (9) F (10) T

Figure 15: How to communicate clearly: a Checklist for Corporate Communicators

Avoid **COMPLEX** messages

Complicated	Use short and familiar words or phrases in the active and positive form. Avoid jargon.
Overloaded	Stick to a maximum of seven messages per communication.
Messy	Give your message a visible structure. Categorize lists of items into logical chunks.
Polysemic:	Use unambiguous terms or define them.
Linked	Keep readers focused on your text. Avoid providing too many distracting links.
Ever-changing:	Use a consistent format and structure.
X-tra	Avoid unnecessary elements.

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Make your message **CLEAR**

Context	Have I indicated the purpose and audience?
Logical structure	Have I organized my content in an obvious way that is accessible to the target group(s)?
Essential	Have I focused my message on the essential parts? Is there an overview?
Ambiguity-free	Have I used specific terms and explained vague words or abbreviations?
Resonating	Have I used examples and action items that people can relate to and which stimulate a desired action/response? Is my message ready to use?

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Figure 16: Complex to clear memory cards.

Clear Communication Check: diagnose your message with these five check questions

– Version for writers –

1. **Context:** At the beginning of this communication, is there any indication why the communication is important (purpose) and *for whom?*
   - No indication at all;
   - some context indications given;
   - communication context clearly given upfront

2. **Logic structure:** Is there a clearly visible, easy-to-grasp structure to this communication?
   - No explicit structure whatsoever;
   - explicit but somewhat unclear structure;
   - very clear and visible structure

3. **Essential content:** Are there parts to this communication that are not essential and could be left out?
   - Many superfluous items;
   - some superfluous items;
   - no superfluous items

4. **Ambiguity-free:** Are there any terms used in the communication that are ambiguous, unclear, or otherwise difficult to interpret?
   - Many ambiguous terms;
   - some ambiguous terms;
   - no ambiguous terms

5. **Resonance:** Does the communication provide useful illustrations to create resonance with the audience?
   - No useful illustrations/examples;
   - somewhat useful illustrations/examples;
   - very useful illustration provided

Clear Communication Check: let your readers rate your message with these five check questions

– Version for readers –

1. Was it clear to you why this message was sent to you?
   - No indication at all;
   - some context indications given;
   - communication context clearly given upfront

2. Did you understand the structure of this message?
   - No explicit structure whatsoever;
   - explicit but somewhat unclear structure;
   - very clear and visible structure

3. Are there parts to this message that are not essential and could be left out?
   - Many superfluous items;
   - some superfluous items;
   - no superfluous items

4. Are there any terms used in the communication that are ambiguous, undear, or otherwise difficult to interpret for you?
   - Many ambiguous terms;
   - some ambiguous terms;
   - no ambiguous terms

5. Does the communication provide useful illustrations to create resonance with you?
   - No useful illustrations/examples;
   - somewhat useful illustrations/examples;
   - very useful illustration provided

Figure 17: Clear communication check for writers and readers.

About the Authors

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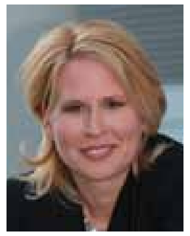
Martin Eppler is a full professor of communications management at the University of St. Gallen (HSG), where he teaches global business communication. He is also the managing director of the =mcm institute for media and communication management. Professor Eppler conducts research on managerial and organizational communication, communications management, and visualization. He has been a guest professor at a number of universities in Asia, South America, and Europe and an advisor to organizations such as the United Nations, Philips, UBS, the Swiss Military, Ernst & Young, Swiss Re, Daimler or BMW. He studied communications and business administration at Boston University, the Paris Graduate School of Management, and the Universities of Geneva (PhD summa cum laude) and St. Gallen (Masters, Steinacher prize). He has published 11 books and more than 100 academic papers, and his research has been featured in magazines such as *Businessweek* and *Harvard Business Review*. He is the inventor of the visual communication and presentation software lets-focus and the visualization portal www.visual-literacy.org. He can be contacted at martin.eppler@unisg.ch.



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Nicole Bischof is a communications researcher and senior project head at the University of St. Gallen (HSG). Her interdisciplinary research focuses on communication and knowledge transfer between science and practice. Educated as a natural scientist in Cologne and Gothenburg, Nicole holds a BA and a MSc in Geography from the University of Cologne. After seven years as a researcher at the ETH's Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research, and as manager of numerous national and international research projects, Nicole shifted her focus and career towards communications management. She holds a degree in communications management from Constance, and is currently finishing her PhD in management. Nicole currently works as a personal communication consultant for national and international academic institutions. Nicole can be contacted at nicole.bischof@unisg.ch.

About the =mcm *institute*

The Institute for Media and Communication Management (=mcm *institute*) is an internationally recognized research, qualification, and consulting center for media and communications management, as well as for culture and media. The institute helps students, researchers, and decision makers in business and society meet the challenges of the digital age from a communications perspective and with a strategic focus. The =mcm *institute* is one of 30 institutes at the University of St. Gallen (HSG), one of the highest-ranked business schools in Europe.

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