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Do you generally communicate at a detailed level or high level? Given your role, should you typically talk in general terms or specifics? The answer of course is that it depends, but many people apparently don't know what it depends on. Have you ever attended a seminar where the speaker stayed at such a high level that you didn't learn a thing? Or been in a meeting with a subject matter expert who was so deep in the details that you didn't understand what was being said? Whether selling your idea, making a presentation, or developing a project plan, communicating at the right level of detail determines your level of success.

Effective communicators tailor their level of detail to their audience. When in a technical discussion, designing a product, or putting together a complex bid, they get into the details. When planning the implementation of an important project, they talk in specifics. They ensure there is understanding and alignment on all the important points. They not only talk about the end objective, but also milestones, enabling activities, performance standards, budgets, resources, schedules, systems, processes, and so on.

In contrast, when effective communicators talk to business people or kick off an initiative, they talk at a high level. They start their communications by describing the overall vision, opportunity to leverage, or problem to solve. They provide high-level background information so their audience has context for their topic. They articulate the "why" before getting into the "what" or the "how". They ensure people understand the benefits to be gained or the pain to be avoided before delving into the work that has to be done and how to do it.

If unsure how well you do at finding the right level of detail, consider if you commit one of these communications faux pas:

- You always talk at the same level of detail regardless of the circumstances or the people you are communicating with.
- You generally avoid getting into the details even when planning an important project, putting together a complex bid, or defining a critical new initiative.
- You don't find value in and typically avoid talking in general terms even when working with people unfamiliar with your topic.

If you are guilty of these issues, or don't appreciate their importance, learning to communicate at the right level of detail could be a significant opportunity for you.

To help know the right level of detail to get into, here are eight questions to ask when preparing the content of your email, presentation, or project plan:

- **Audience** – Is your audience familiar with your topic? If not, start with the basics. Give them the big picture before progressively moving into deeper detail.
- **Time & Attention** – How much time do you have? Base your level of detail on the amount of time and attention you expect to have. Don't try to cram detailed content into a short timeframe.
- **Format** – Does the format of your communications favor more or less detail? If you are presenting PowerPoint slides to a large audience, keep the charts and message simple. In contrast, if you are writing a procedures manual, give detailed step-by-step instructions.



When to Be Detailed and to Not Be

- **Expertise** – Do you understand the details yourself? If not, don't try to explain them. At best you will be confusing. Worse, you will look foolish.
- **Importance** – How important are the details given what you are trying to accomplish? If the details aren't very important to the intended outcome, don't waste time on them.
- **Certainty** – How clear and believable does your message need to be? If leaving people with little doubt is important, give the detail required to make your point unambiguously.
- **Next Steps** – Will your idea or plan be something that people will take action on? If so, provide sufficient detail that people know what they need to do and when to do it by.
- **Accountability** – Are there expectations or specifications that people will be held responsible for? If so, specify them in enough detail that they can be measured.

Employ these to find the optimal level of detail and enjoy the success of being a highly effective communicator.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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