

JD SCHRAMM

STANFORD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

WITH KARA LEVY

COMMUNICATE WITH MASTERY

SPEAK WITH
CONVICTION AND
WRITE FOR IMPACT

FOREWORD BY JOEL PETERSON

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD, JETBLUE AIRWAYS

WILEY

Praise for *Communicate with Mastery*

“Communicate with Mastery is an entertaining and practical guide to presenting and communicating. JD exposes our issues with confidence as communicators and reveals a pathway out of the darkness of doubt. With over twenty years of practical classroom experience poured into an easy-to-read guide, JD provides readers with the tools to engage any audience, tailor impactful messages, and navigate any communication challenge.”

Stephen J. Mellas

Principal at a Global Asset Management Firm
Adjunct Professor of Management Communication, NYU Stern

“In this engaging book, JD Schramm provides us actionable advice for how to communicate more effectively based on years of teaching and consulting. He explains how to understand your audience, find your voice, tell compelling stories, and communicate with authenticity. Schramm argues that there’s no such thing as a perfect presentation or report. We can always do better, if we are willing to seek feedback, listen actively, and iterate often. This book is a true masterpiece on persuading your audience!”

Michael Roberto

Author, *Unlocking Creativity*
Trustee Professor of Management, Bryant University

“My clients and students often ask me: what’s the difference between a confident leader and an arrogant leader? My answer: confident leaders share. *Communicating with Mastery* embraces sharing as fundamental to any leader’s effectiveness, and every page embodies that approach: *Communicating with Mastery* overflows with strategies; some of these strategies are brand new, others are time-tested, but every word of this book is *fresh* for the world that awaits us, a world that serves as the crucible through which existing and evolving leaders will test their mettle. Leaders of all kinds—early, evolving and established—will benefit from this book.”

Tim Flood

Managing Director, Management Communication Association
Associate Professor, UNC Kenan-Flagler School of Business

“A straightforward and approachable guide for anyone seeking to improve his or her communication skills. JD has both the expertise and perhaps more critically, the emotional understanding required to personally connect with any current or future leader reading this book.”

Mike Lewis

Author, *When to Jump: If the Job You Have Isn’t The Life You Want*

“Many authors encourage leaders to be authentic communicators, but JD Schramm goes further and provides frameworks and actions to bring about authentic communication. I’ve relied on many of his techniques in my own presentations and am pleased that he has now captured it all in one place so others can benefit from his insights too.”

Erin Uritus

CEO, Out & Equal Workplace Advocates

“In *Communicate with Mastery*, JD Schramm provides us with a ‘best practice Bible’ that addresses a vast array of communication challenges leaders can expect to confront in their careers. The author resists prescribing a one size fits all solution, and instead helps the reader look inward to find the powerful, authentic messages that will resonate with their audiences. Nowhere is this wisdom more apt than in the pages JD devotes to communications challenges that most often befall minority groups that face systemic discrimination and bias. JD urges leaders in the LGBTQ community, for example, to avoid the hiding and passing techniques that are commonly relied up and instead to build trust through transparency, vulnerability and honesty. JD’s big lesson is that successful professional communications are ultimately based on robust and authentic personal connections.”

John Tedstrom

Founder, NextGen Leaders
CEO, Tedstrom Associates

“In his engaging and relatable style, JD synthesizes the most powerful/relevant ideas in communication and coaching. *Communicate with Mastery* gives leaders the tools to develop an authentic style and powerful presence. Mastery of communication is an ongoing process, and JD provides the motivation and strategies for lifelong improvement that you will use every day.”

Molly Epstein

Professor in the Practice of Organization and Management
Goizueta Business School at Emory University

BY JD SCHRAMM, ED.D

WITH KARA LEVY

COMMUNICATE WITH MASTERY

HOW TO SPEAK WITH
CONVICTION AND
WRITE FOR IMPACT

WILEY

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To Ken, Toby, Roma, and Joshua—My greatest teachers on how to communicate with greater mastery. The best mirrors we have for our communication are those with whom we spend the most amount of time; for me, that's my husband, Ken, and our three kids. I regret that this book has taken some of our precious time from one another, yet I'm committed to being even more present to you using the lessons I learned and now share here.—JDS

To my past and current students at Stanford, Columbia, and NYU—Thank you for the privilege of being your teacher, but know that it exists as truly a two-way relationship. I learned from you as well; sometimes even more than I provided. May we keep the relationship alive.
—JDS

To my mentors, colleagues, and the inspiring leaders who entrust me with their communication—With gratitude for all that I learn from you every day.—KL

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FOREWORD

Early in my career, I traveled to Claremont College, where I got advice from the father of modern management, the late Peter Drucker. That advice has since served me well: “*Build on your strengths; and make your weaknesses irrelevant.*” This was the opposite of what I was doing. I was working to address my limitations, and, in so doing, I was ignoring my natural abilities, sometimes laboring toward mediocrity.

Every year, Graham Weaver, founder of Alpine Investors, comes to a second-year MBA class that I teach at Stanford. One of the most powerful lessons he leaves with students is a simple metaphor: “*Water your flowers and cut your weeds.*” It’s another version of the advice that Drucker gave to an aspiring young leader many years earlier. Powerful as it may be, it is counterintuitive advice to most of us working on a portfolio of problems and opportunities.

The same wisdom applies to our efforts to communicate effectively. Many books give high-level encouragement for powerful and effective communications; yet few instruct leaders on how to build on their strengths as a communicator and make their weaknesses irrelevant. The book you hold in your hands provides that path forward.

My friend and colleague JD Schramm has captured in one place the heart of what he’s taught to our students at Stanford about writing and speaking as a leader. Not only has he opened up his classroom to all of us, but he has also included interviews with the legion of coaches and instructors he has cultivated at Stanford.

When I consider the wide range of skills required of leaders today, many of them boil down to clear thinking and clear communication. This book will provide you the insights necessary to “grow your own communication flowers and cut away the weeds” from your writing and speaking.

Enjoy the journey JD has in store for you in the pages ahead.

Joel Peterson
Chairman of the Board, JetBlue Airways

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade at Stanford's Graduate School of Business (GSB), we've developed a practice of communication coaching that empowers our MBA students to communicate effectively and authentically. We encourage them to journey from uncertainty, to competence, to expertise, and ultimately to mastery.

I struggle with that first term, "uncertainty," because when our students show up each fall, they are in a wide range of places regarding experience, facility with communication techniques, and confidence. Some are terrified at the prospect of speaking in public or sharing their writing; others have practiced these skills for years while working in consulting, banking, or private equity, and feel they have nothing to learn from the coaches and instructors. Others still have already published books or delivered talks at Davos or TED. To imagine a "one size fits all" approach to communication is folly. Peers at other institutions have told me stories of how hard it is to teach communication in a required course to such a diverse population.

So instead of adding to the core requirements at the GSB, we went a different route: we decided to tailor our communication offerings as fully as we could. By taking this approach, our offerings became sought-after electives with long waiting lists. From zero offerings in the fall of 2007, as of the 2019 writing of this book we have 20 sections of communication courses taught by five different lecturers. In addition, our tenured colleagues are teaching another 20 sections of related courses like *Acting with Power*, *Selling*, and

Difficult Conversations, none of which existed in 2007. Year after year, students report that their training in communication has been key to their success at the GSB and beyond. Now, in this book, you can learn the elements of our “secret sauce for success” to build up your own communication skills (or those of your employees) without the time and expense of a Stanford MBA. (Of course, there are other benefits to this degree . . . so we still encourage you to apply!)

We quite purposefully used the term “mastery” in describing our work at the GSB and in this book. It’s derived from Dan Pink’s work on motivation in *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, where he examines the three elements of motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. He defines mastery as “the desire to get better and better at something that matters” (111). He further clarifies that mastery is an asymptote, the straight line that a curve approaches but never quite reaches (126–127; Figure I.1).

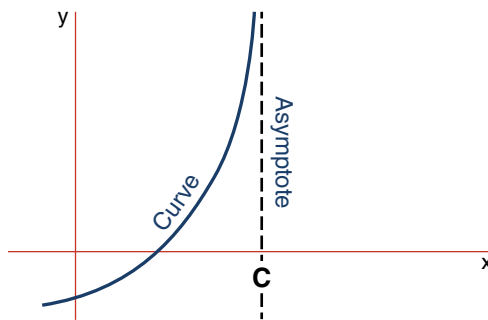


Figure I.1 Geometric refresh: The image of an asymptote

At Stanford we have encouraged our students to seek mastery in communication as an unattainable aspiration (Figure I.2). There is no such thing as a perfect email, talk, book, or presentation. Each aspect of leadership communication can always be improved. With each successive iteration we hope leaders will improve their ability to communicate, knowing that perfect never comes.

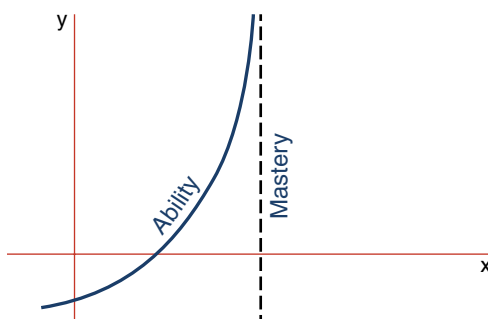


Figure I.2 Leaders approach mastery in communication

Our secret sauce to empowering young leaders (and you, our readers) is five-fold:

INDIVIDUALITY: Communication development is an individual sport. No two leaders communicate in exactly the same way. Good communication development means doubling down on your strengths as well as adding extra tools to your communication toolbox.

RELEVANCE: When leaders write or speak, they should choose topics that matter to them (to the extent possible). The more that passion, interest, or applicability drive the message, the better it will be.

ITERATION: Continual iteration (with feedback) is the key to improvement. Practice means failing, succeeding, trying new approaches, soliciting and integrating feedback, and then repeating.

FEEDBACK: Leaders learn on both sides of the microscope. It's as valuable to give feedback as to receive it—and both of these sides of the coin are a skill you can learn.

STAKES: When you increase the visibility and reach of a piece, you increase commitment to making it great. Raise the stakes to encourage the best from yourself.

Let's dive into each of these elements in greater depth.

Individuality

Today's business school assignments contain an inordinate number of group assignments. An optimist might say we are committed to helping students learn how to work in teams before they go out to lead teams. A realist (or a pessimist!) might say it's easier for a professor to grade 12 team assignments than 72 individual papers. Both perspectives have some merit. But in the discipline of communication, we need to hone our individual skills as writers and speakers.

The best business reports are written with one voice (probably with input and edits from a team), but with singular leadership. To build skills effectively, leaders must write on their own and speak on their own. When you can tailor your work to your existing skills and talents, the outcome will be more efficient for you and more engaging for your audience. Certainly I deliver "lectures" to large groups at Stanford and elsewhere, but they're very interactive—if the members of the class or audience want to improve, they need to stand up and speak, or sit down and write. I also task students with self-reflection on almost every piece they write or deliver. This process of individual self-critique requires them to be thoughtful about what truly worked or didn't work in their talk or paper and, most importantly, to commit to goals for improvement before the next opportunity to communicate.

Relevance

That leads us to relevance—starting with the relevance of the assigned material. So often in other B-school classes students read and write endlessly about case studies of CEOs (usually male, though increasingly more diverse) and the firms they established or turned around. Case write-ups are a good way to learn strategy or finance or marketing, but not to learn writing. We have found that if students can write about material that matters to them personally, they will be

more engaged and take the coaching much more seriously. If I provide edits on a deck for start-ups students are leading (or will launch after graduation), they are keen to understand every correction and suggestion. If they can speak persuasively about a cause they embrace or an issue they face, the presentation will be much more compelling. Admittedly, those of us who are no longer in school know that from time to time, we do have to write and speak on topics that aren't our particular passion. That's life. It can also happen in our classroom, but the more we can reduce it, the more our future leaders will stay engaged.

Iteration

All published writers and successful keynote speakers know that their work only gets better with revision—often revisions, plural. Rarely is the first draft of an email, report, or speech our best effort. In fact, Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird* argues that all authors should embrace the value of a “shitty first draft” on their way to the final work. Too often in B-school an assignment will have no shelf-life after it's submitted or delivered. Students get to the page or word limit and hit submit, or hit the time limit and stop talking. It's only through continual iteration that a product gets better.

At the GSB we devise ways for leaders to create a draft or do a rehearsal, get feedback, return to their work, and come back with another iteration. The easiest example of this is the LOWKeynote program, where students deliver “half of a TED talk.” These nine-minute springtime talks are the result of a one-minute application video, a two-minute introduction on the first day of the program, a “first view” (often with notes in hand) in February and a “final view” with an audience of several hundred peers in March. These talks are remarkable because the design allows students to conceive, iterate, deliver, receive feedback, revise, and deliver again.

Feedback

Several times throughout a class term I will tell students, “I love giving you feedback, but hate giving you grades.” It can easily take me up to an hour to fully evaluate and grade an eight-minute mid-term talk. I commit to providing rich feedback on every element of every talk they deliver. Often, at first, this looks like stream-of-consciousness notes. Then I go back in and synthesize my comments into coherent action steps. (Otherwise, “lack of punctuation on slide 7” carries equal weight with a comment like “no clear thesis or call to action.”)

For the first several years I taught, I saw my feedback as “the final answer” on the quality of a student’s work. I often had the students complete feedback forms for each other when they delivered talks, but I didn’t invest much time or attention in reviewing these. Over time, however, I found that these peer feedback forms (if well designed) were informational treasures to support the speaker. I’ve now started providing “feedback on the feedback” both for the recipient and the writer. If I disagree with a comment, I will write in the margins, “That wasn’t my experience.” If I agree with a comment I will circle or highlight it so the speaker knows it has particular merit. Each time I return grades, I indicate who the “feedback stars” were on the assignment, so everybody knows that I read and reviewed the feedback forms as well as the assignment.

I’ve come to see that leaders learn “on both sides of the microscope.” They learn by observing and commenting upon their peers, and they learn by being observed and getting this feedback.

Stakes

Finally, I’ve begun to see how leveraging social media tools to bring leaders’ work to a wider audience heightens the stakes.

Since 2009, I've curated a library of student presentations on YouTube. These presentations represent final assignments in my course. The title of one of these talks, "Make Body Language Your Superpower," has over 3.5 million views. Knowing that students may be able to use coursework to expand their digital footprints adds a weight to the assignment beyond what I could offer on my own.

In 2012, we expanded this opportunity for GSB students by creating the LOWKeynotes program, which provides students an opportunity to craft a talk that is taped, posted on YouTube, and seen around the world.

And in 2014 I began publishing student blogs—first on WordPress, and later on Medium. The external pressure of a mass audience invites the students' focus in a way that no assignment "for the prof" could ever do. I'm delighted to see how many of my students use their public blogs or YouTube videos as examples of their talent on their own LinkedIn profiles. If done right, this aspect of their digital footprints carries more weight than an individual grade on a transcript.

So, on the foundation of individuality, relevance, iteration, feedback, and stakes we built a remarkable container for leaders to travel from uncertainty, to competence, to expertise, to mastery. You too can travel the same continuum using the lessons and activities this book provides. You cannot learn to swim by watching swim practice from the bleachers—you gotta get in the water. I hope you will dive in and get wet through the process. Don't just read this book . . . experience it!

Part 1 Speaking with Conviction and Writing for Impact

