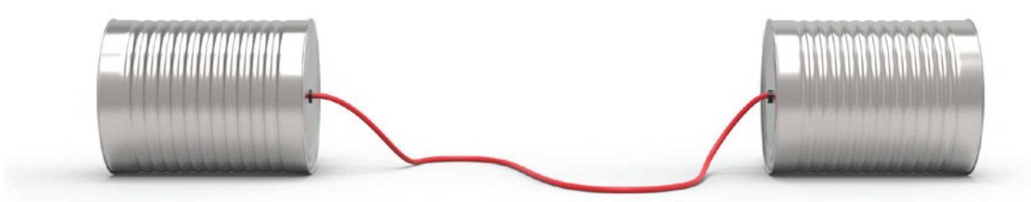
Are you communicating the right way?

THE FIRST MINUTE



HOW TO START CONVERSATIONS THAT GET RESULTS

CHRIS FENNING

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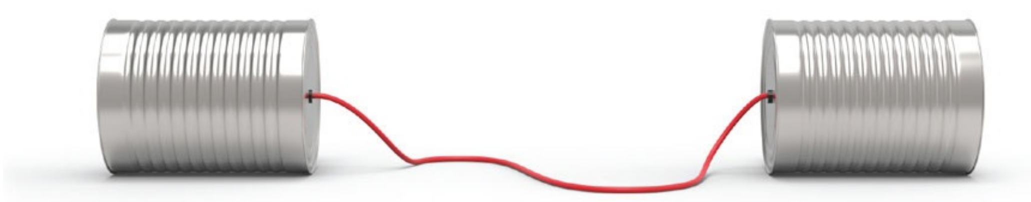

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The First Minute

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a step-by step guide for starting clear, concise communication in everyday work situations. This includes the conversations and emails with your teams, peers, and managers that account for over 80 percent of your communication at work.

The techniques described in this book are based on the following core principles.

You must prepare your audience to receive your message before you deliver it.

People are busy, so you need to get to the point quickly.

The most effective work conversations focus on actions and solutions, not on problems.

There is some crossover into social communication, but the focus of this book is communication at work.

***

We communicate with dozens and sometimes hundreds of people every day at work. Every conversation relates to a different task or topic, and they all have different goals and outcomes. Each time we start a conversation, we know what we are going to talk about and why it's important. Unfortunately, the people we speak to don't know either of these things.

When we start communicating, our audience's brains must work to understand the context of the words. They try to work out why we are talking to them and what they need to do with the information. If these things aren't clear in the first few sentences, their minds create their own version of the facts. This leads to many problems, from wasted time to incorrect assumptions and high-cost mistakes.

A study by Siemens Enterprise Communications found that a business with one hundred employees spends an average of seventeen hours a week clarifying communications.[1] That is 884 hours a year that could be spent delivering value to customers instead of repeating information to make sure it's understood. To avoid this repetition, every conversation should start clearly and concisely. This is true whether you are communicating about printer paper or the launch of a million-dollar advertising campaign.

Each conversation can be set up for success if the context, intent, and message are clear. Even the most complex topics can be started simply and clearly if they are summarized using the right structure. It is also possible to achieve all this in less than a minute by applying the techniques in this book.

By focusing on the first minute, you can position every work conversation for success. Do this, and you will be recognized as a great professional communicator.

The techniques in this book show how to give the information your audience actually needs. The first minute is not about trying to condense all the information into sixty seconds. It is about having clear intent, talking about one topic at a time, and focusing on solutions instead of dwelling on problems.

Creating the most effective first minute of any work conversation is a two-step process.

Step 1: Frame the conversation in fifteen seconds or less. Framing provides context, makes your intentions clear, and gives a clear headline.

Step 2: Create a structured summary of the entire message you need to deliver. State the goal and define the problem that stands between you and achieving that goal. Then focus the conversation on the solution.

By following these steps, you can start any work conversation feeling confident that you are communicating clearly. This is all possible in less than a minute, no matter how complex the topic.

Throughout this book you'll discover how to:

Have shorter, better work conversations and meetings

Get to the point faster without rambling or going off on tangents

Reduce the risk of mistakes caused by people incorrectly assuming they understand your message

Lead your audience toward the solution you need

Apply one technique to almost every conversation with great results

It doesn't matter what your job title is or what level you occupy in the organization; the principles in this book will help you become a clearer, more concise, and effective communicator, and you'll be able to do it fast.

I am going to start by addressing the most common causes of miscommunication at work.

Lack of context

Unclear purpose

Not getting to the point

Mixing up multiple topics in the same conversation

Lengthy, unclear summaries

You'll learn how to avoid these pitfalls and how to summarize your entire message in less than a minute. The result will be a summary that makes it clear what you are trying to achieve and what you would like your audience to do. You'll see how this technique works in different situations, industries, and job types.

You will also learn about the three components of framing—context, intent, and key message—and how these provide the foundation for a successful conversation.

Finally, you'll discover the three components required of a structured summary: 1) the goal you are trying to achieve, 2) the problem stopping you from reaching that goal, and 3) the solution to the problem. These three things will enable you to summarize any topic, no matter how complex.

The last section of this book shows how to apply these techniques in a wide variety of situations.

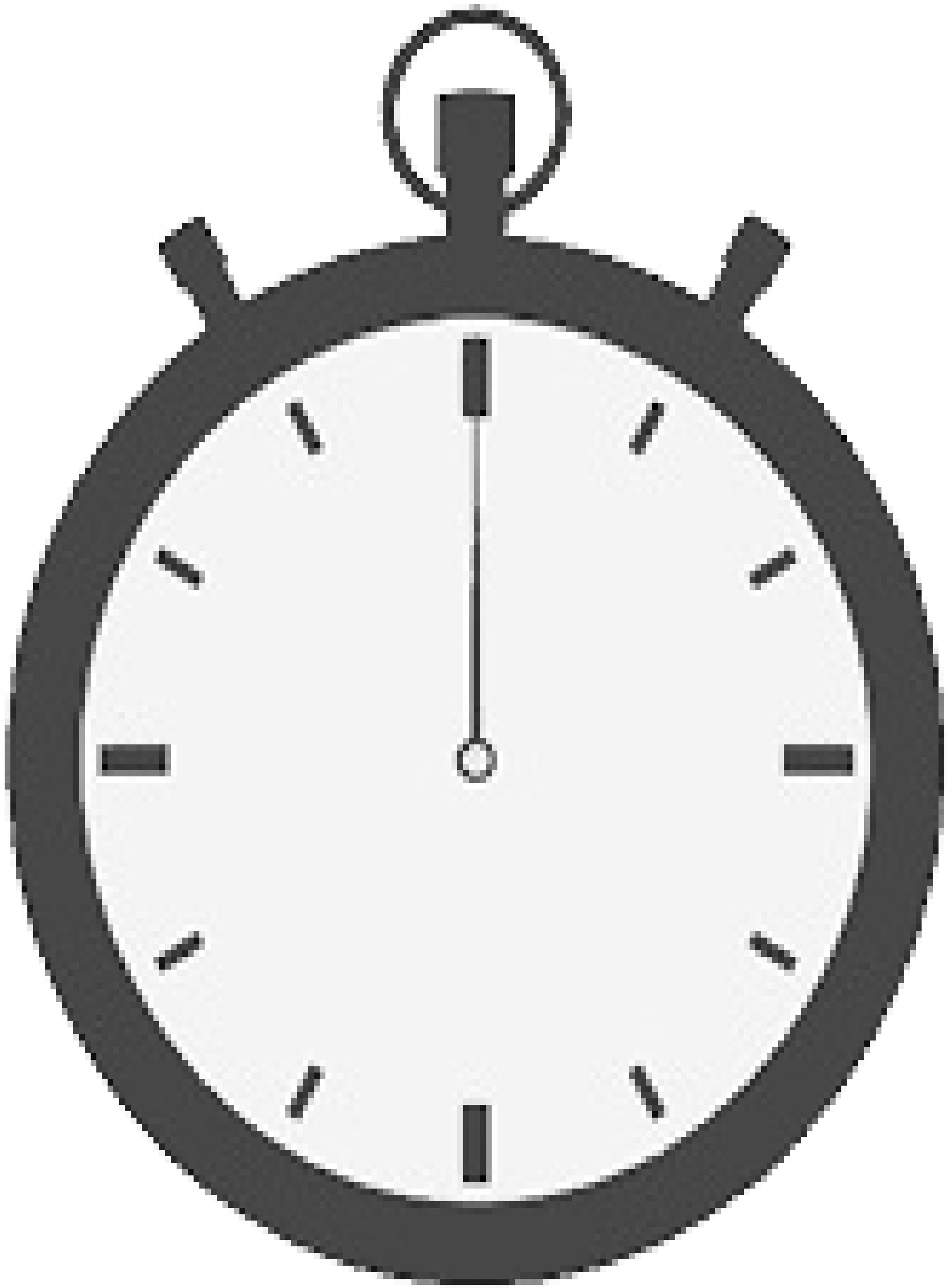
Along the way you'll meet managers, software developers, secretaries, and executives; witness the frustrations of missing out on dessert; ride the conversation rollercoaster; learn a valuable lesson in communication from a car mechanic; and even learn why it costs so much to put people into space.

This book is a result of more than 20,000 conversations in both business and technical jobs. I've trained individuals and teams around the world in these techniques. I've worked with organizations from start-ups to Fortune 50 and FTSE 100 companies. These methods work for them all.

Apply these techniques, and you will have shorter, clearer conversations that get results. It is easier than you might expect, and it all starts with the first minute.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE FIRST MINUTE?



The first minute starts when you start talking about the work topic.

In the context of this book, the first minute is not always the start of the interaction with your audience. It does not include the greeting or the time spent on personal engagement. Throughout this book, the first minute refers to the start of the work conversation. The clock starts when you shift from personal to professional topics.

Many books describe how to start conversations that establish and build relationships. Others show you how to make a great first impression in an interview or on a date. Still more show you how to start challenging conversations the right way. What none of those books teach is how to start conversations about normal, everyday work topics.

It is possible to make a great first impression with a colleague, only to ruin that impression when the conversation shifts to work. It doesn't matter how much people like you; if you cannot deliver information in an organized way, you will have a hard time being respected professionally.

WHY IS THE FIRST MINUTE IMPORTANT?

The way we communicate at work influences how people think about us. It can impact the opportunities we get or don't get, and the consequences can be significant. Poor communication skills are one of the top reasons why people don't get promoted.[2] This is especially true for people applying for leadership positions.

We spend over eight hours at work every weekday. Over 50 percent of that time is spent communicating either verbally or through writing.[3] That is a lot of time. All those interactions leave either a good or a bad impression about our ability to communicate.

How would you rate your communication skills? Do you leave a good impression, or is there room for improvement?

If you are reading this and thinking it's too late for you—you've already made a bad first impression, and there's no point trying to fix it—don't despair! You may have had some less than ideal conversations at work, but you can turn it around and become a role model for clear communication.

Research shows that poor first impressions can be reversed by a consistent strong performance. It takes eight good impressions to overturn a bad one.[4] That may sound like a lot, but we have so many interactions at work that it doesn't take long to have eight conversations with someone. For example, if you have one conversation every day with a colleague, you can go from being regarded as a poor communicator to being seen as a great one in less than two weeks. When you factor in emails and meetings, the number of times you communicate with someone each day goes up, and the turnaround time is even shorter.

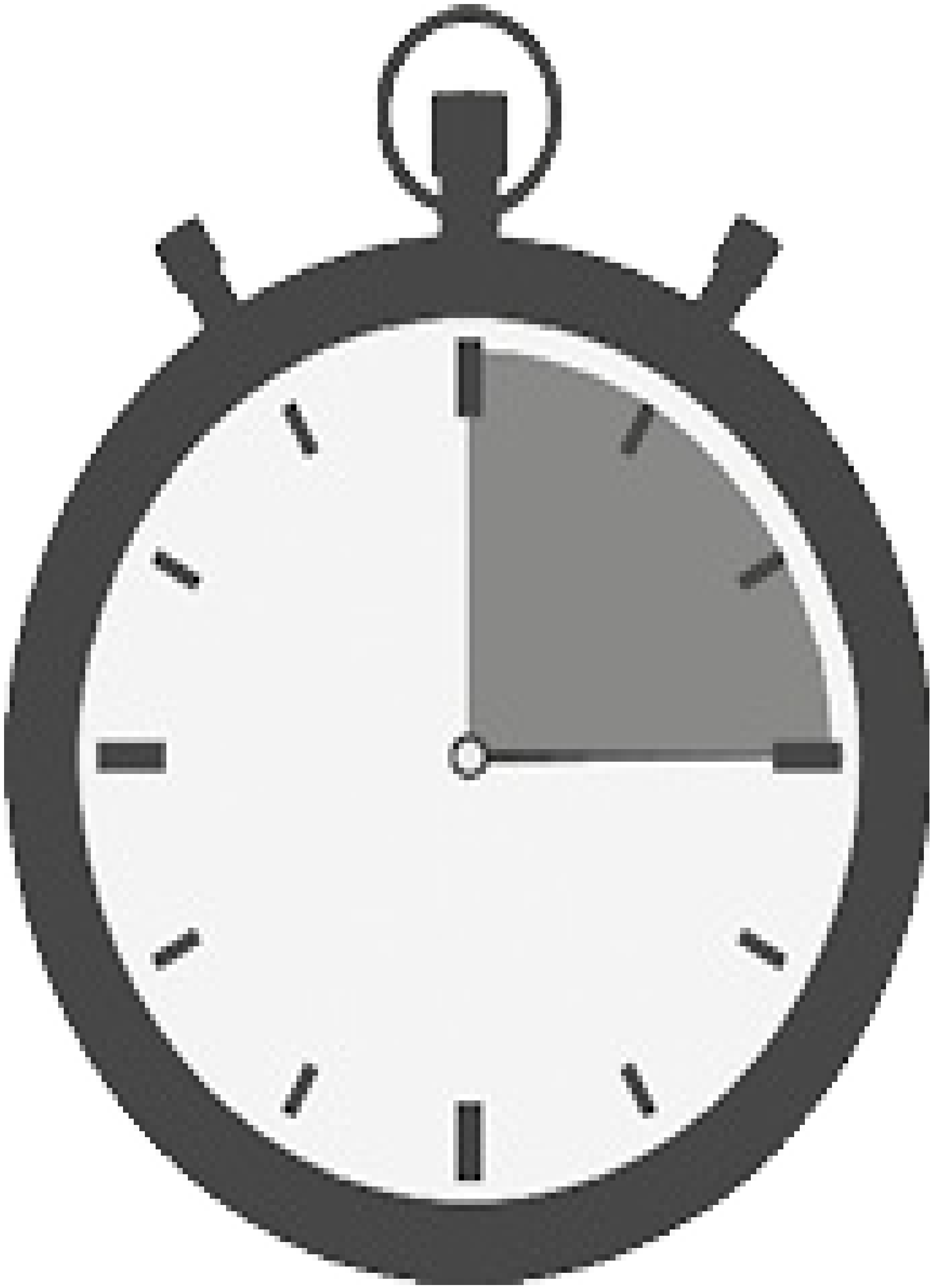
What would you give to go from being seen as a poor or average communicator to being seen as a great communicator in just eight conversations?

Plus, while you may have some work to do to change the impressions of the people you work with, there are many more chances to give first impressions when you meet and work with new people in other teams and in new companies as your career progresses.

In the coming chapters, you'll learn how to create a great first minute no matter what you want to talk about at work. When you apply this to all your work conversations, it will become a natural part of how you convey information, make requests, and engage in all other types of daily work communication.

CHAPTER 2

FRAMING



Framing happens in the first

fifteen seconds of a conversation.

"Framing helps individuals interpret data." – Erving Goffman

The problem with starting conversations about work topics is that we are never taught how to do it. Most professionals have fourteen to eighteen years of schooling and yet don't get a single lesson on how to start conversations about work topics. No wonder we have so many ineffective conversations at work.

Just over a decade ago, I was a software project manager for a telecom company overseeing the delivery of software on new mobile phones to be sold across Europe. We had at least eight complex projects running at any one time, most of them involving hundreds of people in many countries.

Like many large projects, we had our share of communication issues, but it wasn't the occasional breakdown in communication that caused us problems. Our teams seemed to struggle with day-to-day communications. Everyone on the projects said the problem was language barriers and cultural differences that come with working across a continent. But the more I observed the teams, the more I realized something else was causing the frustration.

The issue became real for me one day when I was walking to lunch. Steve, a member of my testing team, stopped me just outside the cafeteria. He started talking about an issue with a test case on one of his projects. After a few minutes, I interrupted him. "I'm sorry," I said. "What project is this for?"

"Oh, this is for the LT-10 program." Then he carried on talking about the issue.

Having found out the project name, some of the information he gave made more sense. The LT-10 project was a high-profile product launch due in the next few weeks. He had my attention now, and I refocused on his explanation.

A few more minutes passed, and it still wasn’t clear what the issue was or why I needed to know about it.

A large group of people walked past us and joined the lunch line, which now extended into the corridor. With a growling stomach and an image of an empty dessert counter, I waited for Steve to finish his current thought. “I heard a lot of interesting things there,” I said. “Is there something specific I can help with?”

Steve looked confused. “Oh,” he said, “I thought you might want to know we’ll miss the testing deadline. I need your approval to move the go-live date out a month.”

This revelation changed the nature of the interaction significantly. This was a big deal. The manufacturer had millions of dollars of TV advertising spend locked in for the end of the month. There was no way we could miss the deadline.

The images of dessert fled, and I asked Steve to start again from the beginning. This time the details he shared made more sense. I was able to ask clarifying questions to help me decide the best course of action.

The situation highlighted a key issue in the way our teams communicated. If it took almost ten minutes to say we had a major issue on a flagship program, we had a communication problem. And it was a bigger problem than “cultural differences” could cause.

Question: Have you ever been on the receiving end of a conversation like the one I had with Steve?

If you answered no, you probably work with people who know how to get the first minute right when they communicate. If you answered yes, consider the following questions:

Does it happen often?

Did the eventual revelation of what was needed change the way you reacted to the information?

Was it an efficient use of time for you and the other person or people involved?

Here’s a harder question for you: Have you ever started conversations like the one in the example?

In my live training sessions, this is the point when the audience falls silent. Eventually, I see some reluctant nods as people realize they often start their conversations this way.

Confession time: I have started conversations like the one in the example. In fact, I used to start most of my conversations this way. I was so focused on the topic I wanted to talk about, I forgot that other people didn’t have the same information as me. This meant I started many conversations in an unstructured and unclear way.

A few weeks after the lunchtime corridor conversation, the incident was still in my head. I wanted to know what we could do to be clearer and get to the point faster when sharing information at work. I started studying the conversations in my teams and began to notice common themes. It became clear that many work conversations started with the following issues.

Failing to provide context for the message. This happens when the audience doesn’t know what the topic is about.

Not having a clear purpose for the message. This happens when the audience doesn’t know why they are receiving the information.

Not getting to the point fast enough. The speaker shares a lot of information and takes too long to get to the critical part of his or her message.

Mixing up two or more topics in the same conversation. The speaker has two or more topics to discuss, but it isn't clear what they are.

Each of these mistakes can be avoided by starting the conversation with three short statements. These statements are required for every work conversation to start with clarity.

Context: This is the topic you want to talk about. Of all the topics in the world, this is the one you will talk about now.

Intent: What you want the audience to do with the information you are about to share.

Key message: The most important part of the overall message you are about to deliver (the headline).

These elements remain the same no matter what the topic is, who is talking, and who is listening. When used together in the right order, these three elements frame your message.

Framing = Context + Intent + Key Message

Framing is the simplest way to prepare an audience to receive your message before you go into detail. It lets the audience know what is expected of them right from the start. Clear framing ensures they understand the core of the message within a few sentences.

Framing should take no more than three sentences and be delivered in less than fifteen seconds.

In the example above, if Steve had started his conversation with me with framing, we would not have needed to repeat the first ten minutes.

There are lots of ways to frame a topic. Here are a couple of examples.

“Hi, we’re working on the testing for the LT-10 project. I need your help because we have a testing issue and are going to miss the deadline.”

“We’re testing the LT-10; you should know we’re going to be late.”

Both of these examples provide context by naming the project. The first example clarifies the intent by stating the need for help. The second example has the intent of delivering news. Both deliver the key message about a missed deadline, though the second example is more efficient.

These may seem abrupt, but the point isn’t to convey your entire message in fifteen seconds. The point is to let your audience know what you are going to talk about, so they aren’t guessing for the first few minutes of the conversation. If the first lines of your message provide context, intent, and a key message, you will have clearer conversations every time.

>> Activity <<

How well do you start your work communication? Grab the last important email you sent. The longer the email is, the better it will work for this activity. While much of this book describes how to start conversations, the principles are the same for written forms of communication as well. Our memories are not as reliable as we think, and using an email for this activity will help you see exactly what you wrote.

Did you provide context, show clear intent, and deliver a key message up front?

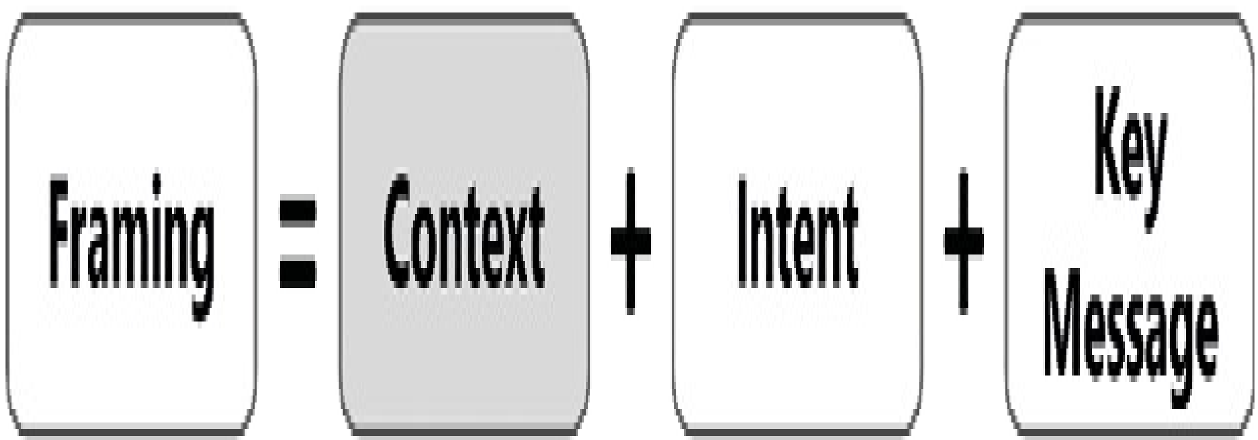
If you didn't tick all the boxes, don't worry. In the next sections, you will learn about the three core components of framing and how to apply them correctly. In the process, you'll see how easy it is to make a simple yet powerful change to the way you start your conversations.

CONTEXT

"Without context, a piece of information is just a dot.

It floats in your brain with a lot of other dots and doesn't mean a thing."

– Michael Ventura


Framing
=
Context
+
Intent
+
Key Message

When you start talking or writing an email, you already know the context of the topic. It’s in your head. and you’ve probably been thinking about it for a while. Unfortunately, your audience doesn’t have the benefit of that knowledge. They might have no idea what project you are talking about or what problem you want to discuss. They almost certainly have other things on their minds, such as other work, budget issues, what to have for lunch, a problem at home, and so on. Whatever they are thinking about, it is unlikely to be the thing you want to talk about.

Before you start talking about the details of your message, you need to provide some context. You need to orient your audience, so you are starting at the same point.

This is easy to do if you start your message with a simple context-based statement.

Name the project or the issue.

Name the process, system, or tool you will talk about.

Give the name of the customer with whom you are working.

Name the task or objective you want to talk about.

The options are endless. The key is to give the context quickly, so your audience knows the topic or area you are going to talk about.

Without context, the audience is not on the same page as you. They will be distracted trying to work out what the topic of the discussion is. Starting a conversation with clear context focuses your audience on the topic you want to talk about and helps filter out the other things that are in their heads.

Are there situations where context isn't needed at the start of a work conversation?

No. Context is always needed when starting a new conversation at work.

There are a few scenarios where it appears that context isn't needed, but appearances are deceptive. For example, if you are talking to a team member about a project on which you have collaborated closely for weeks, it may seem like you don't need to provide the project name as context for the conversation. Even in this case, at the moment you want to talk to your colleague about the project, he or she could have any number of other things in his or her head. Even if your colleague is thinking about the project, the chance he or she is thinking about the specific topic you want to talk about is tiny. In the unlikely event your colleague is thinking about the same topic as you, you won't lose anything by providing context.

Never assume the other person knows what you are talking about. It only takes a few seconds to provide context, and that will avoid a lot of confusion. In fact, you will gain positive engagement by confirming you both want to talk about the same thing.

Here are some examples of contexts that you may need to provide in everyday work situations.

I'm working on project ABC . . .

I was reviewing the new information security policy . . .

We're closing the sale on the Jefferson account . . .

I'm about to submit a request for time off . . .

I read the marketing report you sent me . . .

The office supplies have arrived . . .

The new budget came out . . .

I want to reward my team . . .

(list continued)

I'm planning the office party . . .

We're reviewing the policy for XYZ . . .

My car broke down . . .

The kitchen sink is leaking . . .

These lines are short, clear, and each one takes less than five seconds to say.

The options for what to provide as context are as varied as the number of jobs and situations that exist in the world. Despite this variety, only one thing is required when providing context: make it clear what you want to talk about.

>> ACTIVITY <<

Look again at the email you chose in the previous chapter. Does it provide clear context? What would you change to make the context clearer?

INTENT

"Tell me what you want, what you really, really want."

– The Spice Girls

Framing = Context + Intent + Key Message

Now that you've provided context and gotten the audience on the same page as you, it's time to let them know what you need them to do with the information you are about to share.

Make it clear why you are communicating

Whenever we receive information, it takes our brains a few moments to work out what to do with it.[5] We try to work out if we have to answer a question, if the speaker is looking for a response, whether we need to take action or make a decision, and so on. Our brains do this all day, every day. We process information and try to work out the appropriate response. This means that when you communicate, your audience's brains are trying to work out what to do with your message. They are doing this even before you get to the point.

The longer it takes to state the purpose of your message, the greater the chance your audience will form their opinion of your intent. The impacts of this range from minor to severe. The audience could make an incorrect assumption. They could decide the message isn't important or take unnecessary action. The consequences of these responses vary depending on the situation.

When you reveal your real intentions, the conversation may need to restart, and your audience will need to reprocess the information with the correct filter.

Example:

Emma closed her laptop and started to pack up her desk. She needed to be on the road in the next fifteen minutes to get to the offsite strategy meeting. As she was about to leave, her colleague Daniel stuck his head around the door.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked. "It's about TechCorp."

“I’ve got a few minutes,” Emma replied, checking her watch. TechCorp was a topic in the strategy meeting, and Daniel was the main contact for their account. If something had happened that wasn’t in her notes, she would need to know about it.

“Great,” Daniel said. He stepped into her office and shook his head. “You’ll never guess what they did this time.”

“You’re right,” Emma replied. “Why don’t you fill me in.”

“They just released an improvement to their software. They can now support all the changes we want.”

“That’s great,” Emma said. A key part of their growth strategy hinged on TechCorp being able to support more data. This was exactly what she needed to know for the strategy meeting.

“Not exactly,” Daniel replied.

“What do you mean?”

“The change supports the new features we want, but it stopped all the current data getting to their system. It’s a major mistake.”

The good feeling Emma had a moment before fled, replaced with concern. She began to work through the implications of the system being down. Her mind raced through contingency plans and calls she would need to make. TechCorp processed all membership for new sales. If the process wasn’t working, it meant a serious disruption to their customers.

“When did this happen?” she asked.

“Last night,” Daniel said.

“The system has been down all morning? Why wasn’t this raised as soon as it happened?”

Daniel explained how his team found the issue in the testing phase of the software release process. After they found the issue, the unplanned update was removed before it impacted any customers. He stressed that the testing processes had worked well because they caught the issue before it affected any customers.

Unfortunately, in the process of removing the problem, TechCorp uncovered another previously unknown issue that had even bigger implications.

Each time the story took another turn, Emma alternated between concern and relief. Despite the ups and downs, the information seemed to have a positive trend. Her main concern was that she didn't know what Daniel wanted her to do. TechCorp was a core part of the strategy for the next three years. She had to know if this issue affected the plan before the executive team finalized it that afternoon.

"This sounds serious," Emma said, jumping in during a break in Daniel's monologue. "Do we need to find another supplier?"

"Oh no," Daniel said, "they found a way around it this morning."

By this point, Emma had lost track of whether they had a problem or not. "I'm sorry, Daniel, but I'm confused. Is there something specific I need to know about TechCorp before my meeting?"

Daniel looked surprised. "Oh no, everything is great. They fixed everything. I just thought you would find this interesting. There's never a dull moment around here. Anyway, I should let you go. Have a good time at the strategy session."

Question: How often does this happen to you?

What do you do if five minutes into a conversation you are still unclear on what the person needs you to do? How much effort do you spend trying to work out what to do with the information?

Tip: If you find yourself in this situation, and more than a minute has elapsed without the purpose of the conversation being clear, ask the speaker to clarify his or her intentions. This will help you both get the most out of

the conversation.

INTENT CHANGES THE WAY OUR BRAINS PROCESS INFORMATION

Our brains process and store information in different ways depending on the purpose. We process information in different ways if we know it is entertainment versus a topic we need to learn. We only have about twenty seconds of recall in our working memory.[6] That time enables us to sort through information and work out what to do with it. This, in turn, defines how the information is stored in our brains. If a speaker takes more than twenty seconds to clarify his or her intent, our brains stop processing the first thing the person said and try to process the most recent twenty seconds of information.

When we don’t know the other person’s intention, we struggle to process the information provided. This is even harder if the message contains a mix of good and bad news. The lack of clear intent leads to something of a conversational rollercoaster as we try to follow the twists and turns of the topic.

For Emma, the rollercoaster started when Daniel said there was a problem, and she started to think about contingency plans. Without a clear intent, her brain assumed there was an issue to resolve. She was thinking about actions to take when she didn’t need to be. In this case, the only impact was a delay for Emma leaving for her meeting. It could have been much worse. If she had left for the meeting without Daniel clarifying what she needed to do with the information, the strategy with TechCorp could have changed with untold consequences for both companies.

The longer it takes for the audience to understand the purpose of the message, the more likely they are to guess. This means the audience is not processing the information in the way you want or need them to. Worse than that, when the audience doesn’t know what to do with information, their brains don’t retain it as easily and may label it as unimportant.

By clarifying your intent in the first few lines of your message, you give your audience the key to correctly interpreting and reacting to the information.

SHOWING INTENT IN ONE LINE

Most work-related intentions fall into one of five categories. For each category, it is possible to describe the intent of the message in one line. The table below shows the categories and some examples of how to show intent in a short sentence.

Category of Intention	[illegible]
Needing help/advice/input	[illegible]
Requesting action	[illegible]
Wanting a decision	[illegible]
Letting someone know something is about to happen, so they are not surprised	[illegible]
Providing information/input the other person asked for previously	[illegible]

This list of categories may seem short, but almost everything we communicate at work falls into one of them. For example:

If you are telling someone about an issue or problem, what do you expect him or her to do with the information? You either need help, advice, someone to take action, or you are giving the other person a heads-up.

If you are about to submit an order for office supplies, you might ask someone for the items they want to add. This is a request for action.

As with providing context, it only takes a few words to make your intent clear. Using a line like the ones shown in the table will let your audience know what they need to do with the information.

If all your interactions at work started with a short statement of intent, it would be clear every time what you needed the audience to do with the information. It would also help them decide if they have time for the conversation or if they want to talk about it later instead.

What if you just want to talk?

There is one more reason you might want to talk to someone that isn't in the table: wanting to chat. This covers a wide range of topics, including sharing stories, recounting recent events, gossiping, letting off steam without any expectation of advice or help, and general conversations unrelated to work.

If you are going to talk about something in the "wanting to talk" category, consider showing your intent using a statement like:

“I have a funny story to share . . .”

“You might find this interesting . . .”

You can also ask a question instead of making a statement.

“Do you have time for a funny story?”

“Would you like to know what happened with XYZ?”

“Can I vent for a minute?”

In the earlier example, Emma didn’t know what to do with the information Daniel was giving her. In the end, she had to ask, “Is there something specific I can help with?” Daniel could have shown his intent and set expectations for Emma with a line like, “I had a crazy morning with TechCorp. Would you like to hear about it?” Even something as simple as “It’s not urgent” or “Hey, funny story . . .” would have made it clear there wasn’t an issue. Any of these statements would have saved Emma ten minutes of worry and given her a chance to defer the conversation until after the planning meeting.

COMBINING CONTEXT AND INTENT

When you give intent and context at the start of a conversation, it is clear what the conversation will be about. In the previous example, Daniel provided great context by asking to talk about TechCorp. Unfortunately, he failed to clarify the purpose of the conversation.

Here is an example of how he could have provided a clear context and intent at the start.

"Hi, can I talk to you about TechCorp? It's not urgent, but I thought you might find it funny."

This is short, simple, and clear. Emma could have evaluated the topic and decided to listen or to defer the conversation to a later time.

Let's look at the examples of context from the previous section and add some intent statements.

"I'm working on project ABC. I need your advice."

"I'm working on project ABC. We need to make a decision."

"I was reviewing the new information security policy. There's something you need to know."

"We're closing the sale on the Jefferson account. I've got some good news."

“I’m about to submit a request for time off for and it needs your approval.”

“I read the marketing report you sent me and I think we have an opportunity.”

“The office supplies arrived and there’s a problem with the delivery.”

“The new budget came out. Here’s the summary report.”

“I want to reward my team. Can you help me?”

“I’m planning the office party and you should know . . .”

“The kitchen sink is leaking! Can you help me?”

The longest of these examples is fifteen words, and the shortest is only nine. That means in less than ten words you can prepare your audience to be in the right frame of mind to hear your message.

Imagine if every interaction at work started with one of the sentences above. It would be clear every time what the audience could expect from the rest of the conversation. They would immediately be in the right frame of mind to receive the information you need to share.

>> ACTIVITY <<

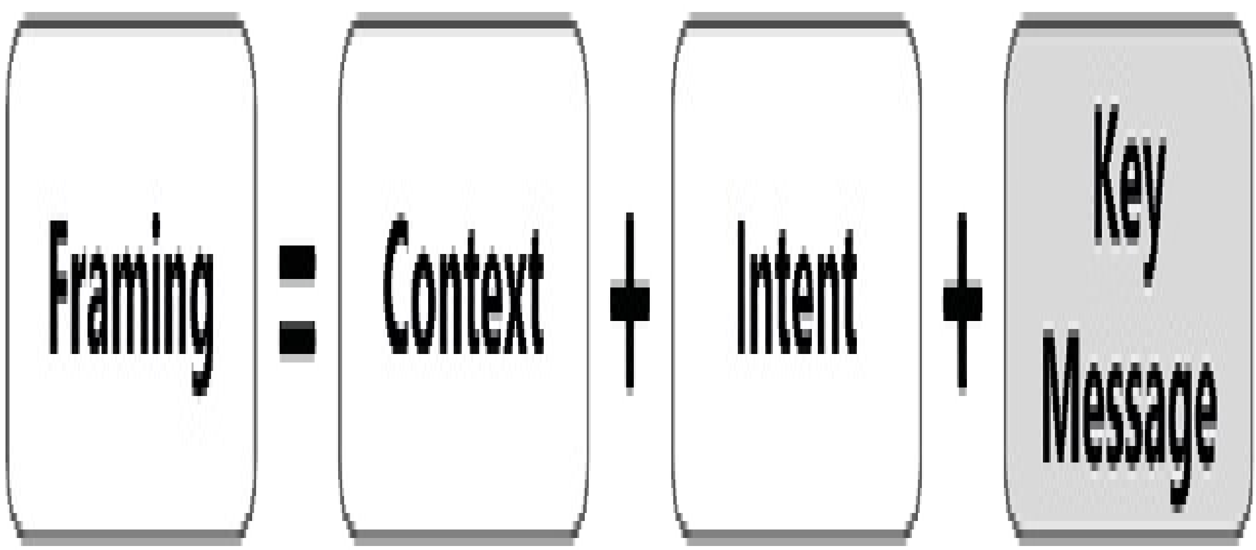
Take another look at the email you used in the previous activities. Is the intent clear? Is it stated? Is it implied? Or is it missing?

If the intent is implied or missing, the recipient might not have understood exactly why you sent the email to them. If you could write the email again, what would you change to make your intent clearer?

KEY MESSAGE

“Simple and to the point is always the best way to get your point across.”

— Guy Kawasaki


Framing
=
Context
+
Intent
+
Key Message

Having provided context and clearly stated your intent, it’s time to deliver your key message.

Your key message is the line that contains the most important piece of information your audience needs to know. The key message doesn’t have to summarize every detail of the topic you want to talk about, but it does have to be the most important message you need to communicate.

If you’ve ever found yourself listening to someone and wondering, “Why are they telling me this?” it may be because they hadn’t made their intent clear, but it could also be because they haven’t given you the key message early enough. Delivering critical information early in your communication is an important part of being a good communicator. The following example will show you what I mean.

Not long after learning to drive, I purchased an old BMW. It was a terrible decision. That old car had so many problems, it was in the garage more often than it was on the road. Whenever it broke down, I had the car towed to the same garage and had the same mechanic work on it. Not only was he able to fix anything, he also knew how to communicate the things his customers cared about most.

After checking out the cause of the latest breakdown, he would give me the news. He knew the thing I cared about most. It’s the same thing anyone cares most about when their car is in the garage. How much will it cost, and how long will I be without my car? He didn’t run through the long list of work he had to do or give me a list of parts that needed replacing. He started with the total cost to repair and how long it would take to complete. Hence, I always knew the most important information at the start of the conversation.

After giving me the price and the timeframe to do the repairs, he would talk through as much detail as I wanted. He’d answer my questions and give options to make the time to repair it shorter or the cost lower. These conversations allowed me to get to the level of understanding I needed to justify the cost. I was able to focus on the detail of these conversations because I already knew the key message. If the conversations were the other way around, with the details first, I wouldn’t have wanted the detail. I would have been distracted, wondering what the total cost would be.

I learned two important lessons from owning that car:

Don’t buy an old car.

People usually want to know the key message up front.

You saw an example of this in my corridor conversation with Steve in regard to the LT-10 testing. The key message was the delay and the missed deadline. That was the “So what?”, the most important information I needed to know. Everything else he said related to and built up to that one key message. If that key message had come at the start of the conversation, I would have better understood the rest of the detail.

One sign that you are not giving a clear key message is if people respond with the following questions or phrases:

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Is there something you need me to do?”

“I’m not sure what to do with that information.”

“So what?”

The response you get may not be exactly these words, but if they say something similar, it’s a strong indicator you haven’t given a clear key message.

This type of response can also mean the intent of your message isn’t clear, but even with a clear intent, your audience can be confused if your key message isn’t obvious. For example, if you make your intent clear with a statement like “I need some advice” but then start talking without having a clear key message, your audience will not know what you need advice about.

Sometimes your audience may repeat your message back to you in one or two lines. This could be a sign of active listening techniques. It could also mean your message wasn’t clear, and they are trying to make sense of it. If your audience summarizes your message, and they haven’t understood what you intended, clarify the key message before providing any new information. Continuing the conversation with your audience having an incorrect key message guarantees confusion later on. If their summary makes you think, “Yes, that’s what I meant to say,” it indicates the key message could have been clearer. In this case you don’t need to restate your message; you can confirm they have the right understanding and then continue.

Anyone familiar with communication in the United States military will have come across the term BLUF. This acronym stands for “Bottom Line Up Front.”[7] This is the practice of putting the conclusion and recommendation at the beginning of the message rather than at the end. This facilitates rapid decision making and helps people deliver a message in fewer words. Putting the bottom line up front is a great way to define the key message. It’s the one thing your audience needs to know or cares the most about.

The questions listed above can be useful to help you prepare for talking to someone. When framing a message, ask yourself the following questions: Why am I telling them this? Is there something I need them to do? If the answers aren’t clear to you, they certainly won’t be clear to your audience. These questions can also help identify if you really need to communicate something or if you just want to talk, gossip, or let off steam. If you just want to talk, make sure to frame the conversation with that intent, so your audience isn’t trying to work out what they need to do with the information.

HOW TO CREATE GOOD KEY MESSAGES

Before you start talking or writing an email, think about all the details you could share, and then imagine your audience asking “So what?”

Often the answer to this question is a simple description of the most important and impactful part of your topic.

“So what?” doesn’t always mean describing what happened. It might mean stating the consequences of an event. Often the implications are more significant than the event itself. If that is true, the impact might be the key message.

Let’s look at some examples to see how this works.

Example #1

“I was talking to Anne and she told me things are going well with the Davison Group. They have some concerns about our ability to handle their newest products. It’s nothing we can’t work out together, and they agreed to continue. Apparently, they liked our presentation and would like to sign a deal for $50 million. Ethan is sending over the paperwork now, and it’ll all be done by the end of the day.”

In this example, the key message was closing the deal with a big new client. All the events and information leading up to that were less important and buried the good news. The most important piece of information in the update is the signing of a high-value client. This should be stated first, not hidden toward the end.

Key message = We are closing the Davison Group today.

If this conversation started with the news about closing the new client, the rest of the information would have had more meaning. The audience could have shared in the excitement instead of wondering where the story was leading.

This example is how many everyday conversations occur. We share information, including the highs and lows and the twists and turns of the story. Our stories also tend to come out in the order that the events occurred. By sharing events in the order that they happened, we automatically leave the outcome (the result, and usually the most important thing) until the end. This can turn a simple update into a rambling, long-winded story.

In addition, when we talk through the highs and lows, we lead the audience through them too. When the audience doesn't know how the story ends, they feel each high or low as if it were the potential outcome.

Example #2

"We were working on the system enhancements the sales team asked for last month. We released a patch last night to test the new database connections, but something didn't work. Now the sales team can't use the system. It might be a problem because we think it will take some time to fix, maybe a week."

In this example, the key message is the loss of the sales system for a week. Everything else is background detail about the how and the why of the situation. The audience may ask questions about how this happened, but first, they need to know the "So what?"

Key message = The sales system is down, and it will take up to a week to fix.

A fifty-seven-word description can condense into thirteen words. Not only is the message delivered faster, the important information is clearer.

This example is short. It only takes half a minute to say all fifty-six words in the original version, and it doesn't take long to get to the point. But what would have happened if it were longer? How long would it take for you to wonder what the point of the message was?

Think about the conversations you've had at work that have taken two, five, or even ten minutes to get to the point. How often do you have to wait a long time before you understand the "So what?" of the message? Do any of your conversations take longer than necessary to get to the point? If yes, try framing the topic and putting the key message in the first fifteen seconds.

One more example. It shows the conversation rollercoaster caused by not having a clear key message.

"My aunt fell down and broke her arm. She's OK, and my brother is going to stay with her for a few weeks to help her around the house. He's able to do that because he works from home, so he can keep working while at her house. The thing is, with him away, his wife can't leave the house easily because they only have one car. It's also half term next week. My brother's wife usually looks after my daughter during the day during the holidays, so I can work. So, you see, my sister-in-law isn't able to pick up my daughter from school, and I have no one to look after her. On top of that, my wife is away with her work too. I've already delivered most of the work on the current project, and I've talked to Emma, who said she can handle everything else. So, can I take next week off work?"

Wow, that's quite a situation. You may have worked out what was happening by about halfway through, but it wasn't confirmed until the last line. The entire message could be summarized as “Can I please take next week off work?” Then the background detail could be given.

Key message = Can I please take next week off work?

Hopefully, most managers in this situation would be sympathetic, but until they know the discussion is a request for time off work, there’s nothing to help them assess the large quantity of information. They are captives on the conversation rollercoaster until the speaker gets to the point. If the person speaking had started with the key message about wanting time off, he may have gotten a quick “yes” from the manager and been able to get on with his day.

Here are some more examples of concise key message statements from common workplace situations. Each one is a summary of a much larger topic, but the “So what?” is in a single line. All the explanations and justifications have been stripped out. Only the core message remains.

“We just closed a new client.”

“The team beat the service-level target.”

“Our most experienced developer is leaving.”

“The system is down, and it will take a week to fix.”

“We are over budget.”

“We will finish early.”

“I missed a deadline, and the customer is upset.”

“The client is asking for more time.”

“You have been nominated for an award.”

These examples show that the key message can be positive or negative. As long as the message includes the most important point, you are doing well.

Framing sets up the conversation you want to have, but it doesn’t replace it. You will still have a conversation in which you can share the background detail. But just like my car mechanic knew, there is always time to go into detail after giving the key message.

>> ACTIVITY <<

Look again at the email you used in the previous activities. Is the key message clear? Is it at or near the top of the email? Have you explicitly stated the most important piece of information, or does the recipient need to piece it together? What would you add or change to make the message clear in the first few lines?

Putting It All Together

"Tell me what you are talking about. Tell me why you are talking about it. And please, please, please, get to the point."

— Annonymous

Framing = Context + Intent + Key Message

So far, we've covered the three components of framing: context, intent, and key message. You've seen how each component delivers valuable information, but individually they don't deliver a complete message.

This section shows how to put all three components together into succinct framing statements that will help you start your work conversations quickly and clearly. This is as simple as it sounds. Take the three sentences you've created for your message, and put them together in one or two lines.

Name the topic + Describe the intent + Get to the point

Let's take a look at some examples.

Example #1

Context: I'm working on the Jefferson account.

Intent: I've got good news.

Key message: We just got them as a new client.

Example #2

Context: I read the report you sent me.

Intent: Can you explain something?

Key message: I want to understand the change in timeline.

Example #3

Context: I reviewed the new IT policy.

Intent: I need you to take action.

Key message: Our firewall is no longer compliant.

Example #4

Context: I want to reward my team.

Intent: You should know . . .

Key message: I'm going to spend the entire bonus budget.

Example #5

Context: I'm working on project ABC.

Intent: You should know . . .

Key message: We missed a deadline, but the customer said it's OK.

Example #6

Context: The kitchen sink is leaking.

Intent: I need your help.

Key message: Can you call a plumber?

Each of these examples is less than twenty words and takes no more than fifteen seconds to say. Each includes a clear context, a clear intent for the message, and a key message that passes the “So what?” test.

Now that we know how to frame a topic to start a conversation well, let’s review the original example with Steve and the testing delay on the LT-10 program. We’ll see how framing could have helped him deliver a clear message in only a few seconds.

As a quick recap, Steve stopped me on my way to lunch. He talked for a few minutes before I had to ask what the topic was and what he expected of me. In the end, Steve gave the key message that we would miss a critical launch deadline.

Context: I’m testing the LT-10.

Intent: We have a problem.

Key Message: We’re going to finish a month later than planned.

If Steve had used this, or anything similar, I would have understood the topic right at the start.

With framing, most messages can be delivered faster and with greater clarity. Framing is a simple concept, but it takes practice to use it with confidence. Start using framing today. It may feel awkward at first, but your audience will appreciate it. The more you use framing, the more comfortable you’ll become with the technique, and it won’t be long before you reap the rewards of more effective communication.

If you’re concerned about the few minutes it might take to come up with good framing, consider this: those two minutes will be paid back immediately. You’ll have a shorter discussion with less chance of confusion, and you’ll have an audience who understands what you want them to do.

>> ACTIVITY <<

Take a final look at the email you’ve been working on in the previous activities. Write out a new version of the start of the email using the framing method. Does the email make more sense with a clearer introduction? Can it be shorter?

If your original email already had the three components of framing, well done; you’re on your way to becoming a great communicator. If you only had some or perhaps none of the elements of framing, hopefully you can now see the benefit of this approach and how easy it is to make a clear start to your communication.

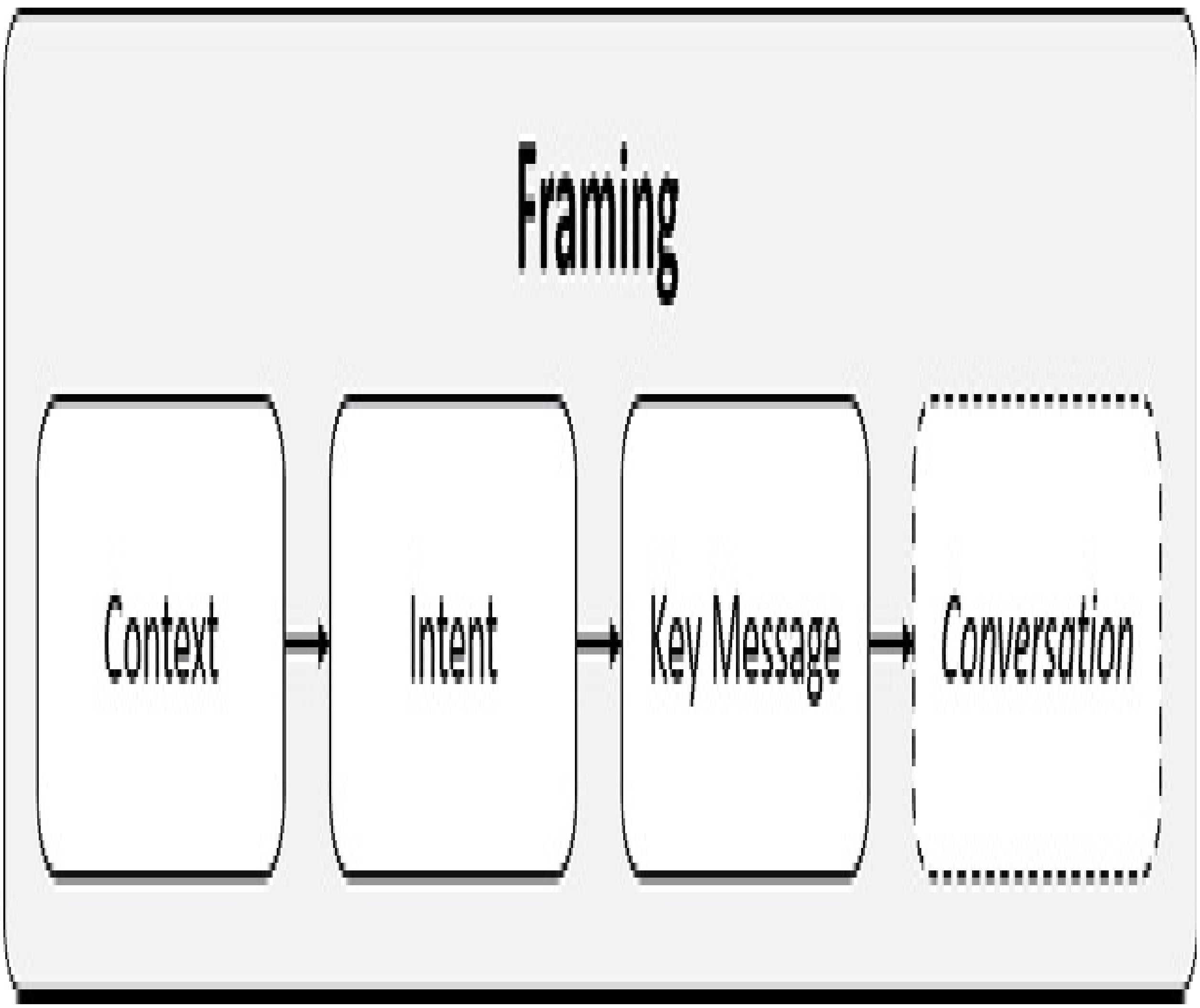
>> ACTIVITY <<

Identify the next topic you need to communicate to your team, boss, or colleagues. Write down a few short lines that include the context, intent, and key message. Once you have the framing written down, you can take it with you and use it to start the conversation.

KEEP SEPARATE TOPICS SEPARATE

“You can only add or combine two things if they are of the same kind”

– Steve Demme


Framing
Context
Intent
Key Message
Conversation

Many of our work conversations include more than one topic. While it only takes a little thought and organization to start a conversation clearly with a single topic, it is harder to be clear when talking about multiple topics.

When two or more topics are combined in a single conversation, the risk of confusion increases exponentially, and the need for clear framing is even more important. You may have experienced this confusion if you've ever had to ask someone "Are we still talking about [insert topic], or have we moved on to something new?" Confusion over whether a conversation has moved to a new topic is a clear indicator the conversation wasn't well framed.

Up to this point, everything in this book has related to framing a single topic. Single topics only have one context, one intent, and one key message. Conversations with two or more topics can have multiple contexts, different intents for each topic, and a variety of key messages. Without a well-structured start, these conversations can quickly get off track, mix up critical information, or miss important points.

A common example of mixing topics happens in emails, and it is something many of us have experienced. Have you ever sent an email with two or more questions and been frustrated when the respondent only answers one of the questions? Our tendency is to blame the other person for not reading the email properly. Then we have to spend time going back and forth with additional emails or phone calls trying to get all the answers we want.

Instead of blaming the other person, we should take a look at our original email. Did we write it in a way that made it clear that we had multiple questions? Were the questions easily distinguishable from the other text in the message, or were they buried in the middle of paragraphs? Often the cause of getting an incomplete answer is because our questions were not well structured, and it was not obvious to the audience that the message contained multiple questions.

If it's easy to mix up topics in an email when the recipient has time to read it more than once, how much harder is it to keep track of multiple topics in a conversation that's happening in real time?

In reality, many of our work conversations involve more than one topic, and this can lead to confusion. By framing the conversation correctly, it's easier to include multiple topics while also lowering the risk of confusion.

HOW TO TELL IF YOU HAVE MORE THAN ONE TOPIC

The three parts of framing not only help clarify the start of your message, they can also help you see if you have more than one topic for your conversation.

Start with context. If you can define a separate context for each topic, you have two separate topics to frame. If you want to talk about two different projects, clients, or situations, then you have two topics.

More than one context = more than one topic of conversation = more than one framing

If you have reviewed the context and have only one topic, look at your intent. If you need two different actions from your audience, you have two topics. You cannot have a topic that is an FYI and also requires an action or decision. These are two different intents, and you should prepare two different messages.

More than one intent = more than one purpose for the conversation = more than one framing

If you have a single context and a single intent, you almost always need only a single framing. An example of this is if you need to give an update on two or more items in a single topic.

“Hi, Boss. We’ve completed the filing audit. There are only a couple of things you might want to know. First, nothing needs your attention; Joanna signed off on the report. Also, we're borrowing some interns from legal to help us finish tidying the files. Larry, the VP of Legal, said it was fine."

In this example, the context was a filing audit, and the intent was giving a couple of updates. The key message had two parts: 1) getting the audit report signed off and 2) borrowing the interns. The key messages were separate, but they both related to the same context and intent.

More often than not, two key messages will need two different framings. This is because they have different intents. If you fail to separate topics in your conversation, it can lead to what I call an "ambush."

An ambush occurs when a discussion is framed with one intent, but the key message relates to a different intent. The speaker prepares the audience to do one thing and then asks them to do something different. The filing audit example above could have become an ambush with a slight change to one key message.

"Hi, Boss. We've completed the filing audit. There are only a couple of things you might want to know. First, nothing needs your attention; Joanna signed off on the report. Also, we're borrowing some interns from legal to help us finish tidying. Can you check with Larry, the VP of Legal, to see if that's OK?"

The intent of this message was set as "things you might want to know," but it finished with a request to ask Larry a question. After hearing the original intent, the recipient wouldn't be expecting the request to talk to the VP of Legal. While this may be a small thing, no one likes surprise requests or actions. The conversation should have been framed as two topics, an update and a request for help.

You may recognize these ambushes if you have ever thought "Wait, what?" after someone finished talking. This can occur when the information you receive doesn't match what you expected to hear. Sometimes this happens because the information is surprising. More often it's because the conversation wasn't well framed.

To be certain you don’t have more than one topic to frame, check your key message. Are two or more messages combined into the key message? Do the different key messages have the same context and intent? If yes, create a separate framing for each topic to ensure the messages are clear for your audience.

More than one key message usually means more than one framing.

HOW TO KEEP TWO TOPICS SEPARATE

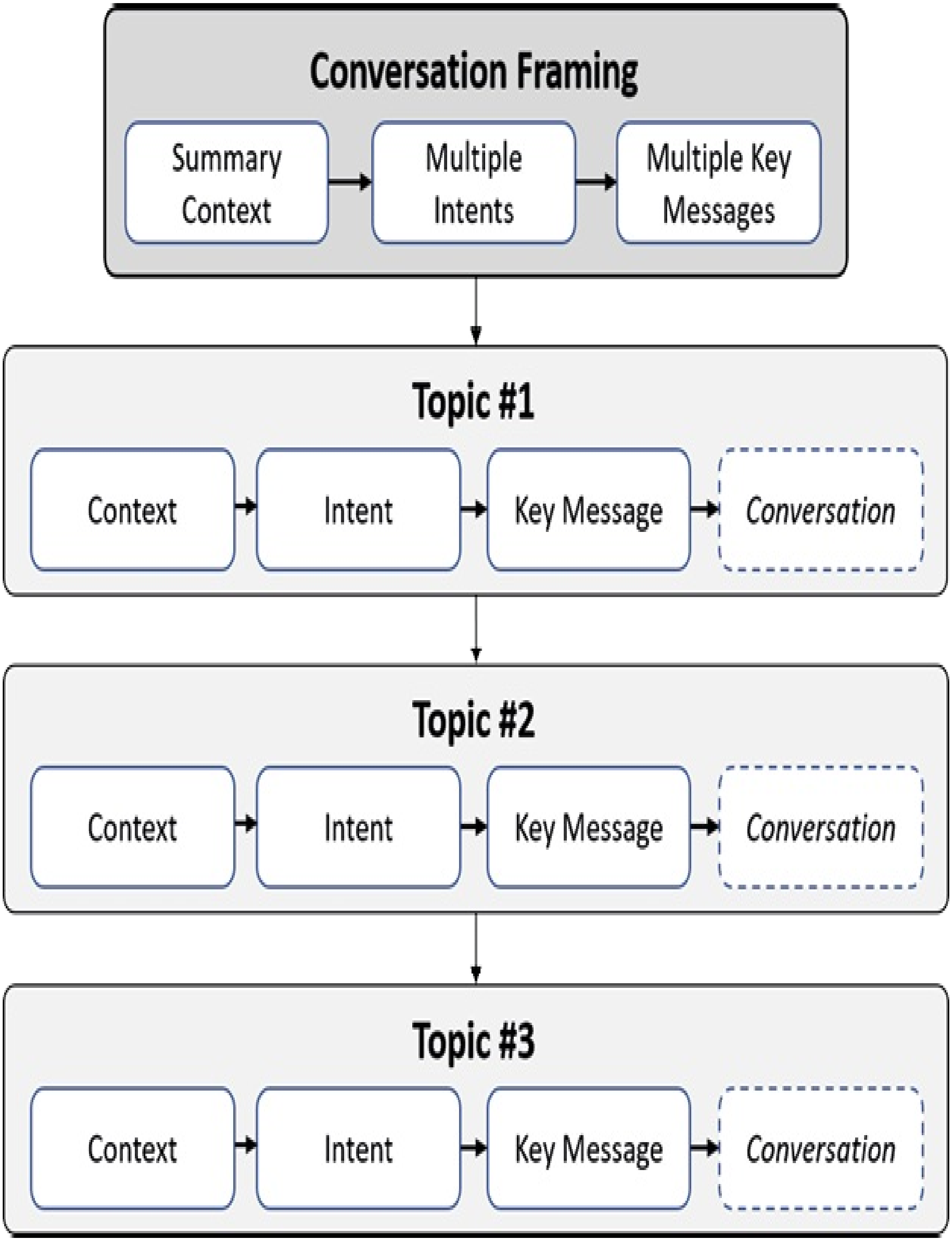
Conversations with multiple topics can be framed with a summary framing. This technique uses the same principles described in chapter two.

First, create the basic framing for each topic you want to talk about. Remember, separate topics require separate framings. Then, once you have the separate framing for each topic, create a single summary framing for the entire conversation.

This approach frames the overall conversation, preparing the audience for different topics. Each topic is then addressed one at a time as a separate conversation. Each separate conversation is framed and then continues until the topic is complete. The overall conversation then moves onto the framing for the second topic and so on until all the topics have been discussed.

At the start of the discussion, the audience knows they will talk about multiple topics. During the conversation the topics are kept separate, each introduced clearly with framing. This makes it much easier for the audience to mentally shift contexts between topics.

How to frame multiple, separate topics in one conversation


Conversation Framing
Summary Context
Multiple Intents
Multiple Key Messages
Topic #1
Context
Intent
Key Message
Conversation
Topic #2
Context
Intent
Key Message
Conversation
Topic #3
Context
Intent
Key Message
Conversation

Example:

Timothy had three topics to talk to his team leader about.

Advice about how to handle a problem with a recent delivery

A decision about nominating a colleague for an award

A decision about some time off

Timothy knew his team leader was busy, so he wanted to be as clear and concise as possible. Here's how he combined them into a single framing:

Context: I'd like to talk to you about three things.

Intent: I need some advice, and I have a couple of decisions.

Key message: We have an issue with the office supply delivery. I'd like to nominate Dave for an award, and I have a request for some time off.

When framing multiple topics, the context is the need to talk about multiple topics. This often trips people up because they expect this to be more complex. Keep it simple. If you are going to talk about more than one topic, make that clear to your audience. The intent is a combination of the different topic intents combined into a single sentence. The key message is a combination of the different key messages for each topic.

You don’t need to aim for the “less than twenty word” target. You should also expect to use more words when framing multiple topics.

This approach has multiple benefits for you and your audience.

It helps you logically organize the topics you want to talk about. This will keep them separate and help prevent confusion.

The audience can quickly absorb the different topics and evaluate the one they want to cover first.

In today’s time-limited workplace, your audience may have time for only one topic. They may also have a particular interest or need to talk about one of the topics ahead of the others. By framing the entire conversation, it’s easier to select which topics to talk about and which order to talk about them.

HOW TO FRAME MULTIPLE TOPICS WITH THE SAME CONTEXT

We often have more than one point to make or more than one request related to a single context. This is the situation most likely to cause confusion because it’s easy to mix the topics into each other. Framing a conversation to separate the topics within one context helps keep separate topics separate.

Example:

Andrea is a claims adjuster for an insurance company. Her team recently started work in a new region, and she wants to update her boss on the previous week's events. Two topics are at the top of her list, and she has prepared the framing for each topic.

Topic #1

Context: New region roll-out.

Intent: Heads-up/FYI.

Key Message: The full-time team is exceeding all their key performance indicators (KPIs).

Topic #2

Context: New region roll-out.

Intent: Need a decision.

Key Message: Should we cancel the contract for additional staff?

Having prepared both framings, Andrea feels the conversation needs to start with something to help make it clear the topics are separate. She can see how a performance update relates to the contract for additional staff but doesn't want the two topics to be mixed up. Andrea wants to make sure the full-time team is recognized for its great performance, and that the KPIs aren't seen as a reason to cancel a contract for extra staff.

Andrea prepares an introduction for the conversation that sets up both topics without mixing them up.

"I have an update on the new region roll-out and have two topics to discuss. One is an FYI about the team's great performance. The other needs a decision about the extra staffing."

Andrea has created an introduction that uses the three components of framing.

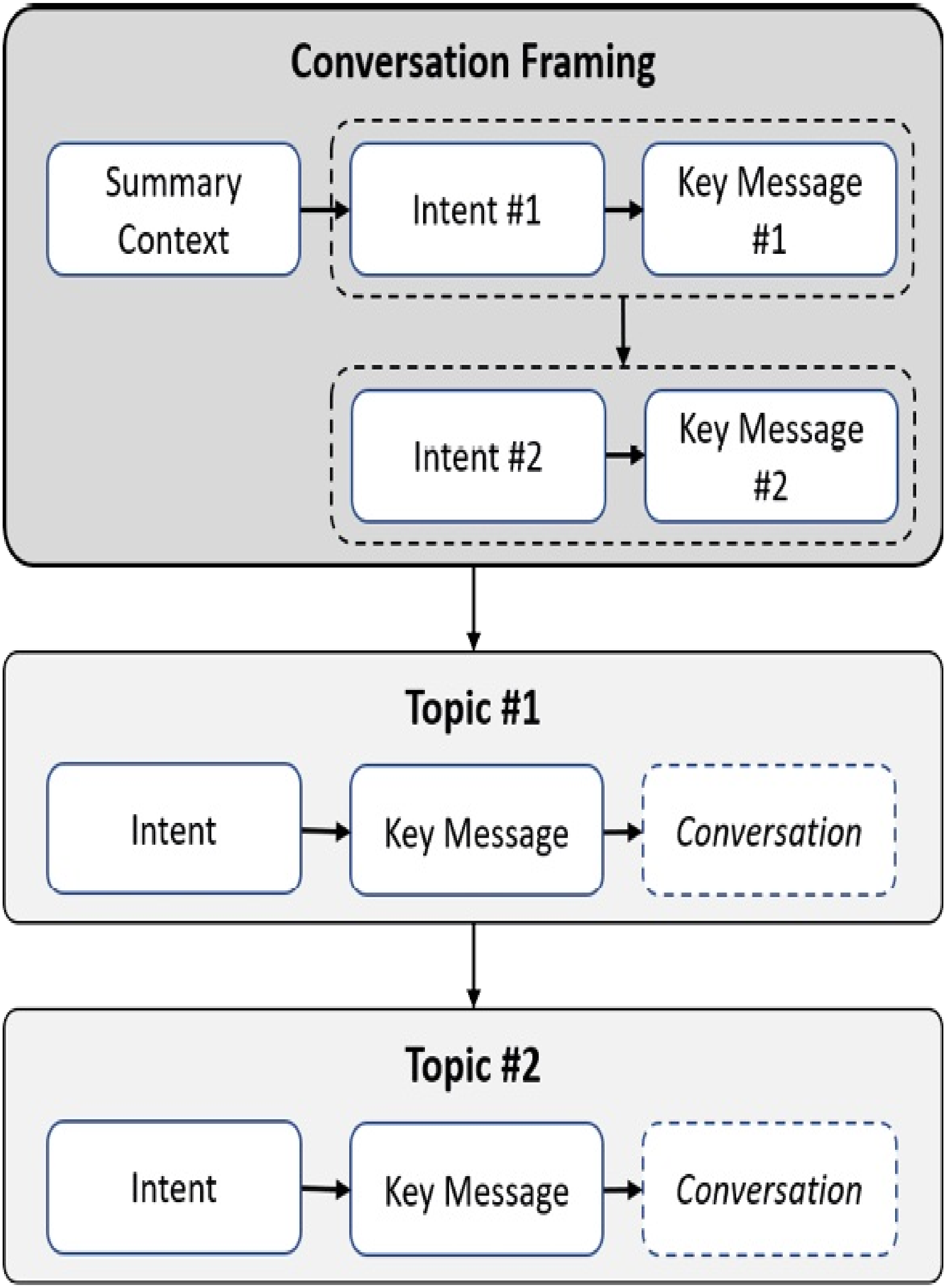
Context: An update about the regional roll-out with two topics

Intent and Key Message #1: An FYI about the team's great performance

Intent and Key Message #2: A request for a decision about the extra staffing

In this case, the context of the conversation is having two topics related to the regional roll-out. The intent is clear that one topic is an FYI, and the other needs a decision. A key message is given with each intent to help separate the two topics before Andrea starts providing details.

How to frame two different topics with the same context

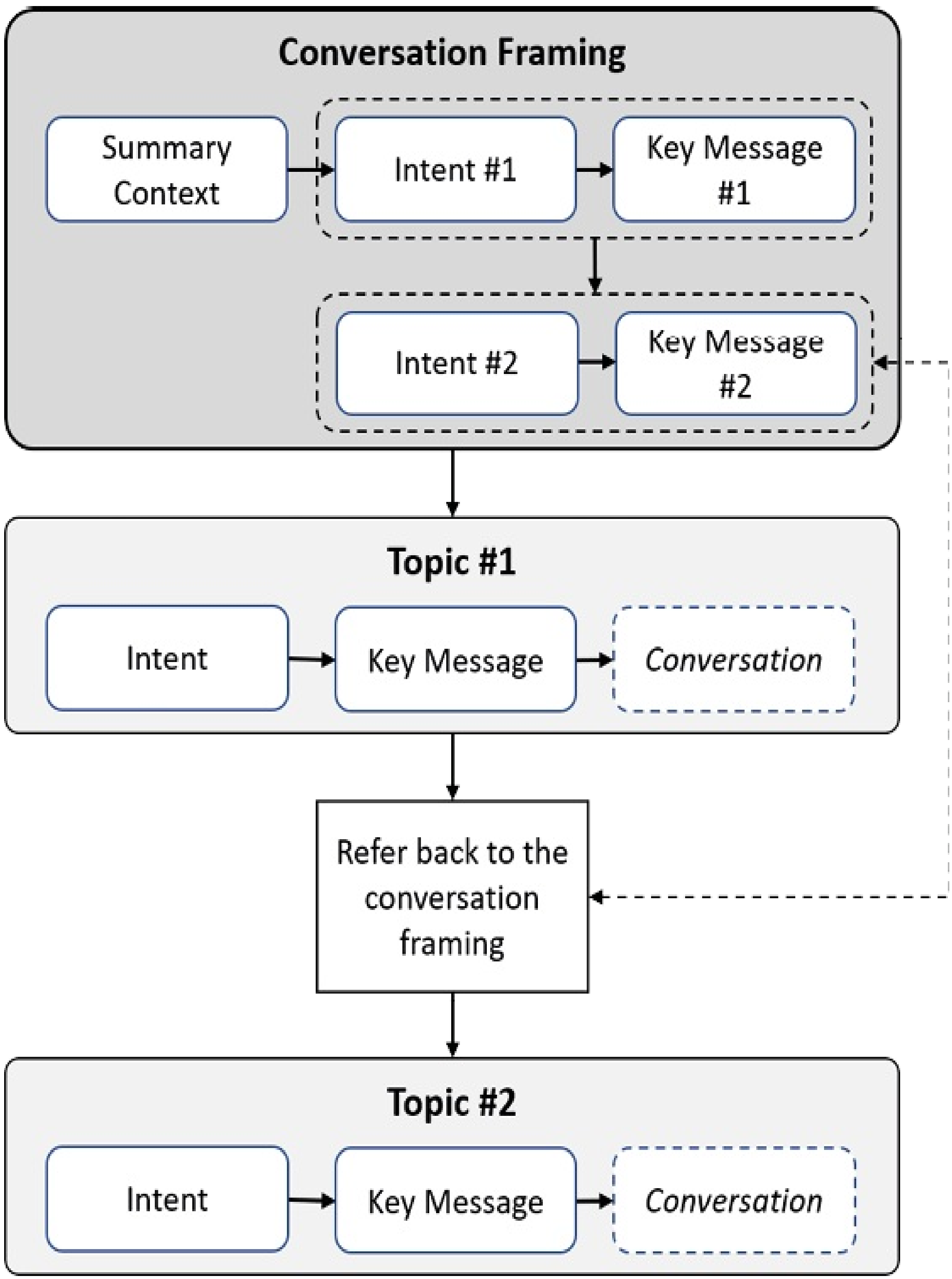

Conversation Framing
Summary Context
Intent #1
Key Message #1
Intent #2
Key Message #2
Topic #1
Intent
Key Message
Conversation
Topic #2
Intent
Key Message
Conversation

When starting a conversation with multiple topics related to the same context, the conversation framing provides the single context for everything. After that, you can complete the conversation framing with the separate intent and key messages for each topic.

When the summary is complete, you can deliver Framing #1 or Framing #2 in either order depending on the topic you or your audience would like to discuss first. After completing the first conversation topic, give the framing for the second topic, and complete that conversation. This keeps the two topics separate and prevents confusion.

If you want to be certain your audience knows about the switch between the two topics, add an additional step. Refer back to the summary framing where you said you had two (or more) topics to discuss. This calls back to the original conversation Framing helps orient the audience to the change in topic. They can mentally prepare to hear something different. It also has the benefit of making you seem organized.

How to call back to the conversation framing between topics


Conversation Framing
Summary Context
Intent #1
Key Message #1
Intent #2
Key Message #2
Topic #1
Intent
Key Message
Conversation
Refer back to the conversation framing
Topic #2
Intent
Key Message
Conversation

Sometimes we get so deep in the detail of Topic #1, we forget there’s a second topic on the list of things to talk about. In this situation, the use of conversation framing acts as a safety net. Even if you forget, your audience might remind you about the second topic. This safety net will only happen if you make it clear there are multiple topics at the start. For the sake of ten seconds, you can avoid the frustration of walking away from a conversation realizing you have something else still to discuss.

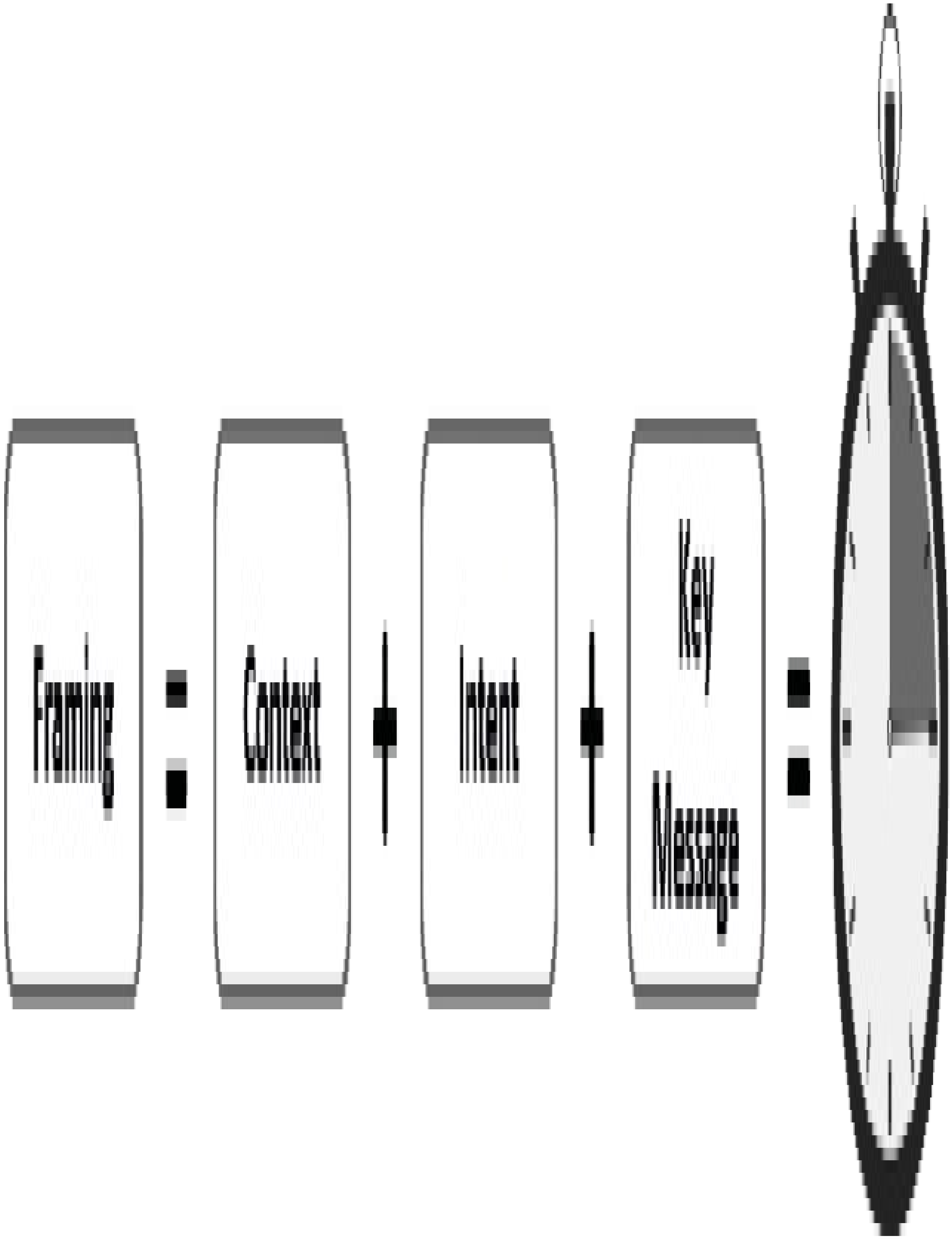
>> ACTIVITY <<

Find a recent email you’ve sent that includes more than one topic. Is it clear from the start that the email contains more than one topic? Try rewriting the first part of the email to clearly frame both topics.

>> ACTIVITY <<

Plan the next multi-topic conversation you want to have with your team, a peer, or a manager. Write down the topics you want to discuss. Do they have the same context, or are they separate? Pick the most appropriate framing method, and then write down the context, intent, and key messages to start the conversation. When you have a good framing, you can use it to help you stay on track.

FRAMING CHAPTER SUMMARY


Framing
=
Context
+
Intent
+
Key Message
=

Congratulations! You’ve made it through the second chapter of this book and learned the three core components of framing.

Context: Helping the audience focus on the topic you want to talk about

Intent: Making it clear what the audience should do with the information

Keymessage: The one line that summarizes your entire topic

You can now frame a single conversation to include one, two, or more topics. Even if each topic has different intents and messages, you can talk about them all in the same conversation with a much lower risk of confusion.

NEXT STEPS

Framing structures the first fifteen seconds of your conversation, but what happens next? How do you structure the rest of your message if you have a complex topic? How do you summarize a large topic into just a few minutes? How do you structure a message with multiple variables or one with a detailed backstory?

Setting up a conversation for success requires more than a great introduction. In the next chapter, you will learn about what I call “structured summaries.” You will discover how a structured summary can summarize anything in less than a minute no matter how complex the topic. Not only is a structured summary succinct, the technique also focuses the conversation on the next steps. How productive would your conversations and meetings be if you didn't need to review the history of a topic but could focus on solving the problems instead? Turn the page to find out how this works.

Tip: An easy way to remind yourself to use these techniques at the start of your work conversations and communication is to create a visual prompt on your desk. Write the three components of framing on a sticky note, and put it on your desk or next to your computer screen. Better still, download a printable version from my website: www.chrisfenning.com/resources

CHAPTER 3

STRUCTURED SUMMARIES

“My summaries are often longer than my main idea.” – Anonymous

Wouldn’t it be great if we could start conversations about large and complex topics in a way that was always clear and easy to understand?

Communication courses often tell us to be concise, to start with a summary of the topic, but they rarely show us how to create such a summary. It’s one thing to know you should be doing something. It’s quite another to know how to do it. The solution to this problem is to create a structured summary using what I call the “goal, problem, solution” method.

If you’re wondering how this method helps to introduce a topic, take another look at the paragraph above. It was written using the goal, problem, solution or GPS method.

Goal: Wouldn’t it be great if we could start conversations about large and complex topics in a way that was always clear and easy to understand?

Problem: Communication courses tell us to be concise, to start with a summary of the topic, but they rarely show us exactly how to create a summary. It’s one thing to know you should be doing something. It’s quite another to know how to do it.

Solution: The solution to this problem is to create a structured summary using what I call the “goal, problem, solution” method.

Starting with a good summary is critical to communicating clearly. Without a clear summary, your audience has no frame of reference for the information you are about to share. This is where things can quickly go wrong, and we see some of the following communication mistakes.

MISTAKE #1: Diving into the detail too quickly:

Diving into the detail happens when someone talks about a topic with multiple supporting points and starts talking about the first point in great detail before giving a summary of the whole topic. Speakers who immediately dive into the depths of a topic quickly confuse and lose their audience. Without a high-level summary, the audience doesn't know how the detail of each point relates to the main topic. It might be the most important point or the least important point; only the speaker knows for sure. This can occur for multiple reasons.

A speaker lists events in the order they happened.

The speaker thinks the audience needs to know all the details before they can understand the intent or the key message.

The speaker is unsure about the purpose of his or her message. The speaker is not clear what action he or she wants the audience to take.

MISTAKE #2: Going off on tangents:

Listening to someone ramble or talk about something seemingly unconnected to the original point of the conversation is one of the most frustrating and common occurrences in the workplace.

MISTAKE #3: Dwelling on the past instead of the next steps:

How much time is spent talking about the history of an issue instead of focusing on the actions to fix it? When something breaks or fails, we tend to spend a lot of time talking about the cause of the problem. Meetings set up to address the issue spend up to 80 percent of the allotted time focused on the problem and why it happened. Only at the end of the meeting, after everyone has had their say, does the focus shift to what needs to be done next. By this point there is not enough time left to have a productive discussion about the solution to the problem. This is one reason why meetings often end with an action to set up another meeting.

Most communication training courses describe these issues. They explain why these traps should be avoided and even suggest ways to elude them, such as “Be concise” or “Pick one topic to focus on in each conversation.” What the courses don’t usually provide are the specific tools or methods that show how to be concise or how to identify the one topic on which the speaker needs to focus.

This chapter describes how to create great summaries using the goal, problem, solution method. With this technique, you can start any conversation with clarity no matter how complex the topic.

The process has only three steps and takes less than forty-five seconds to deliver, which, incidentally, makes up the remainder of the first minute.

CREATE GREAT SUMMARIES

Using a structured summary in the first minute of your conversation will provide your audience with a concise synopsis of what they are about to be told, what is expected of them, and the next steps that need to be taken.

The structured summary method that I describe in this section has a simple, three-part format. With it, you can summarize an entire message in as few as three sentences no matter how complex the topic. It doesn’t matter if your full message will take five minutes or fifty-five minutes to deliver; it can still be summarized in less than a minute.

WHAT ARE WORK CONVERSATIONS REALLY ABOUT?

Before we can create a great summary, we need to understand what most work conversations are really about.

After you take out socializing and entertaining conversations, most work discussions are about solving problems and overcoming challenges. It may not be obvious that work is all about problems, but it’s true. All companies have goals, targets, and deadlines, and most of our daily work effort is about making sure those goals and targets are met. We do this by either avoiding or preventing problems.

Work problems range from the day-to-day:

The office supplies are running out.

Not being able to get time with Jane from Accounting.

The sales targets must be met.

To the significant:

The team isn't meeting their key performance indicators (KPIs).

The entire customer support system is down; we need to fix it.

To the enormous:

We've won the bid to host the Olympics. Now we need to make it happen!

Each of these problems can be complex in its own way. Each has different implications, challenges, and timeframes. It doesn't matter how complex or mundane a topic is; it's always necessary to explain it in a way that people can quickly absorb and understand.

Once you consider that nearly every work conversation is, at its heart, about solving a problem, it's much simpler to create a framework to summarize any topic in any situation. It's also possible to use the same framework to avoid the communication issues described earlier in this chapter.

Conversations should not focus on problems; they should focus on solving problems.

If the purpose of our workplace conversations is to solve problems, our communication should be structured to focus on clarifying the problem and getting us closer to a solution. By removing the context and detail from each work situation, only three types of situations remain where you have a problem and a need to talk to someone else about it.

You have a problem and a need to find a solution.

You have a problem and are recommending a solution.

You had a problem, it has been solved, and you are reporting the outcome.

This list doesn’t include the situation where you have a problem and want to hide it, because it’s understood that you should never try to hide a work-related problem.

When there are only a finite number of options for what you are trying to convey in a work conversation, it’s much easier to define a model for how to summarize them.

THE GOAL PROBLEM SOLUTION STRUCTURED SUMMARY

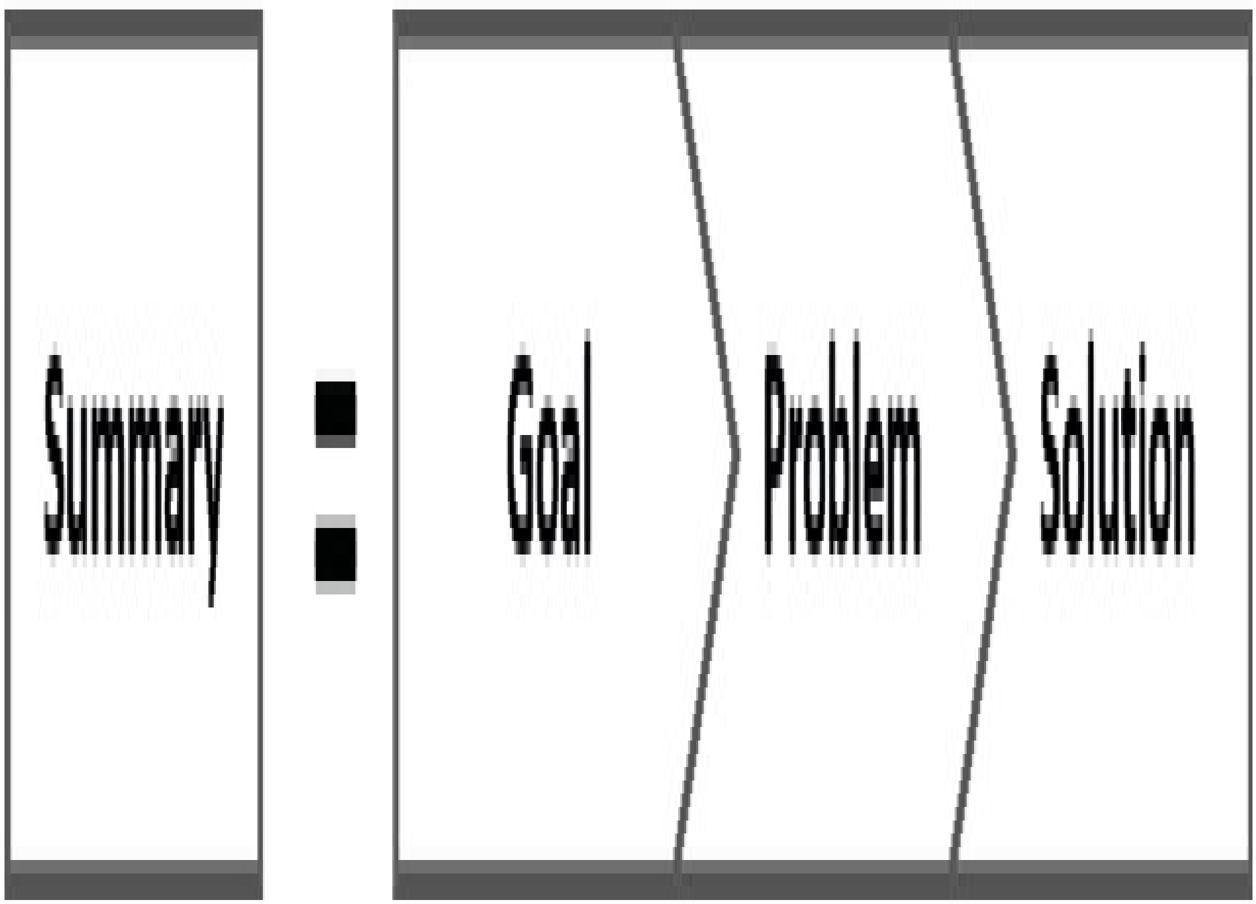
The simplest way to summarize a problem topic is to use the goal, problem, solution method. This three-part structure provides the ideal format for summarizing and starting workplace conversations. It works for simple and complex topics.

The three parts of the structured summary are:

Goal: The goal you are trying to achieve

Problem: The problem that is preventing you from reaching your goal

Solution: What I/we/you are going to do to solve the problem


Summary
:
Goal
Problem
Solution

Goal, problem, solution forms an easy-to-remember initialism: GPS. Just like the navigation aid with the same name, the GPS method is a tool to help you show others where you want to go, to highlight the obstacles between you and your destination, and to describe the route to get there.

ALL THREE PARTS OF GPS ARE NEEDED

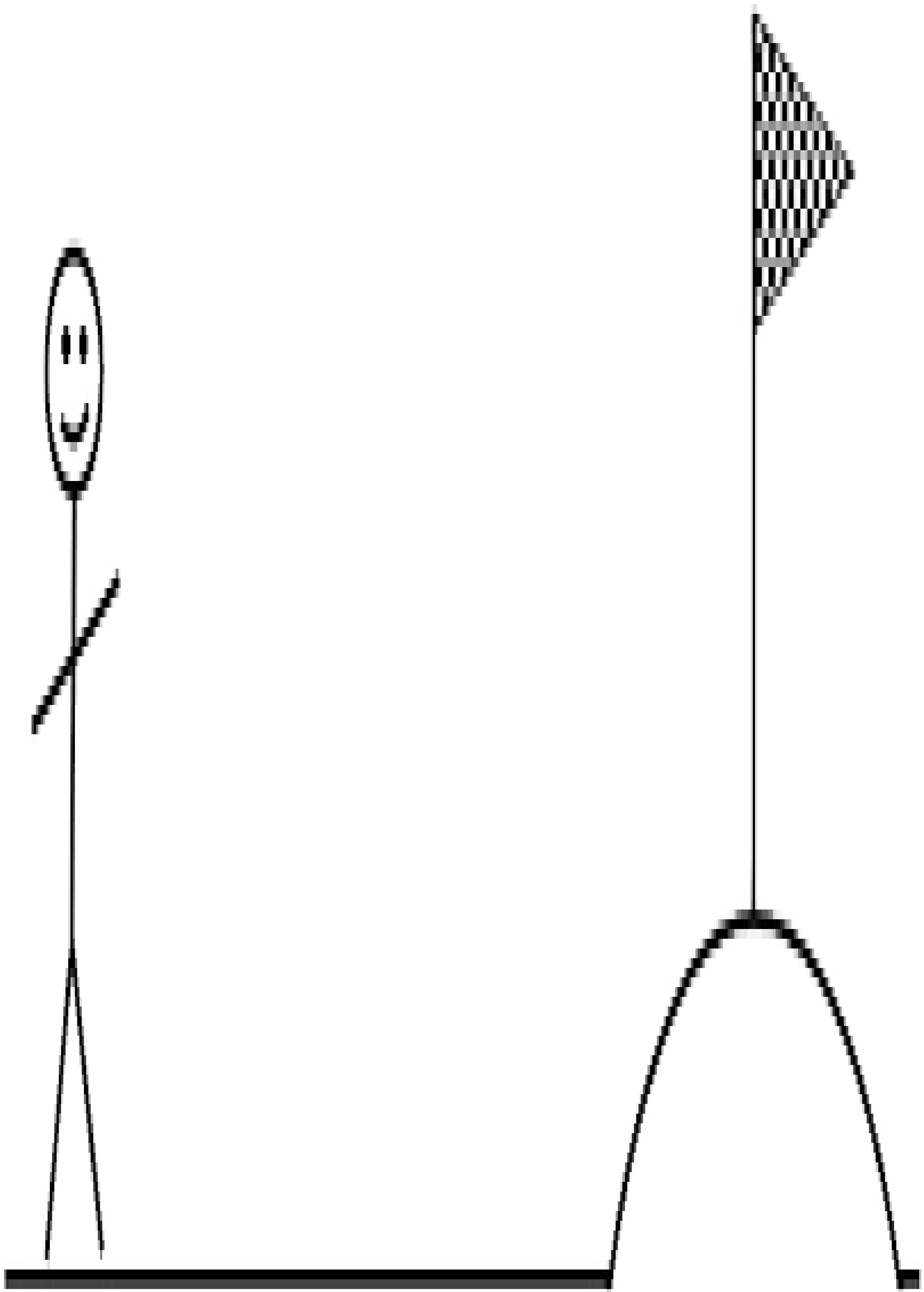
Goal, problem, and solution are separate elements that make up your message, so don’t combine them.

Goal and problem are the most common parts to get mixed up. People often find themselves describing the problem as part of the goal. It is also common to think that the goal is to solve the problem and combine these two elements into a single sentence. Goal and problem are different and should be two distinct items in your message. The goal is what you want to achieve. The problem is why you are having trouble achieving it.

Example:

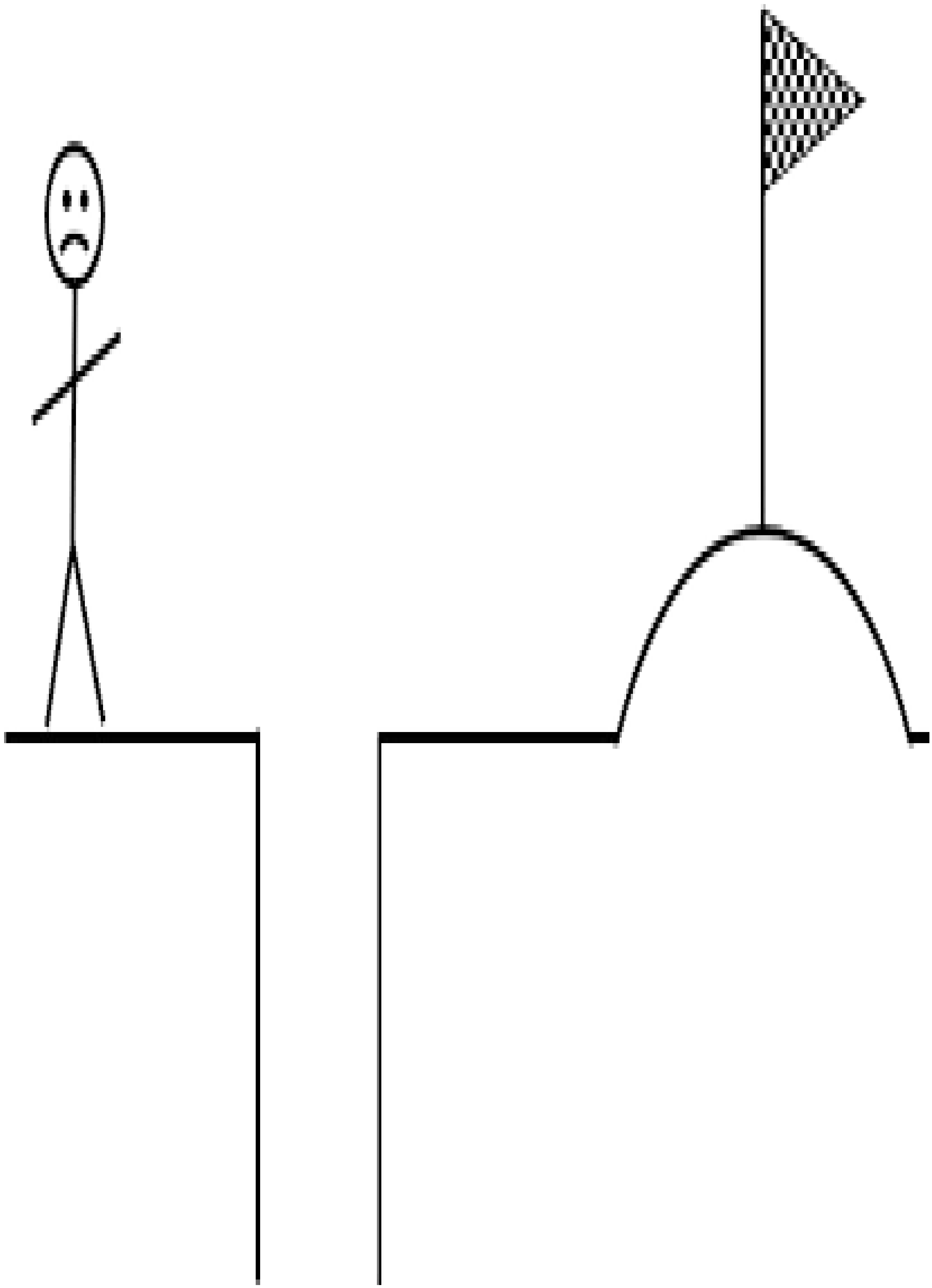
Goal is what you are trying to do or achieve.

E.g., Get to the flag.



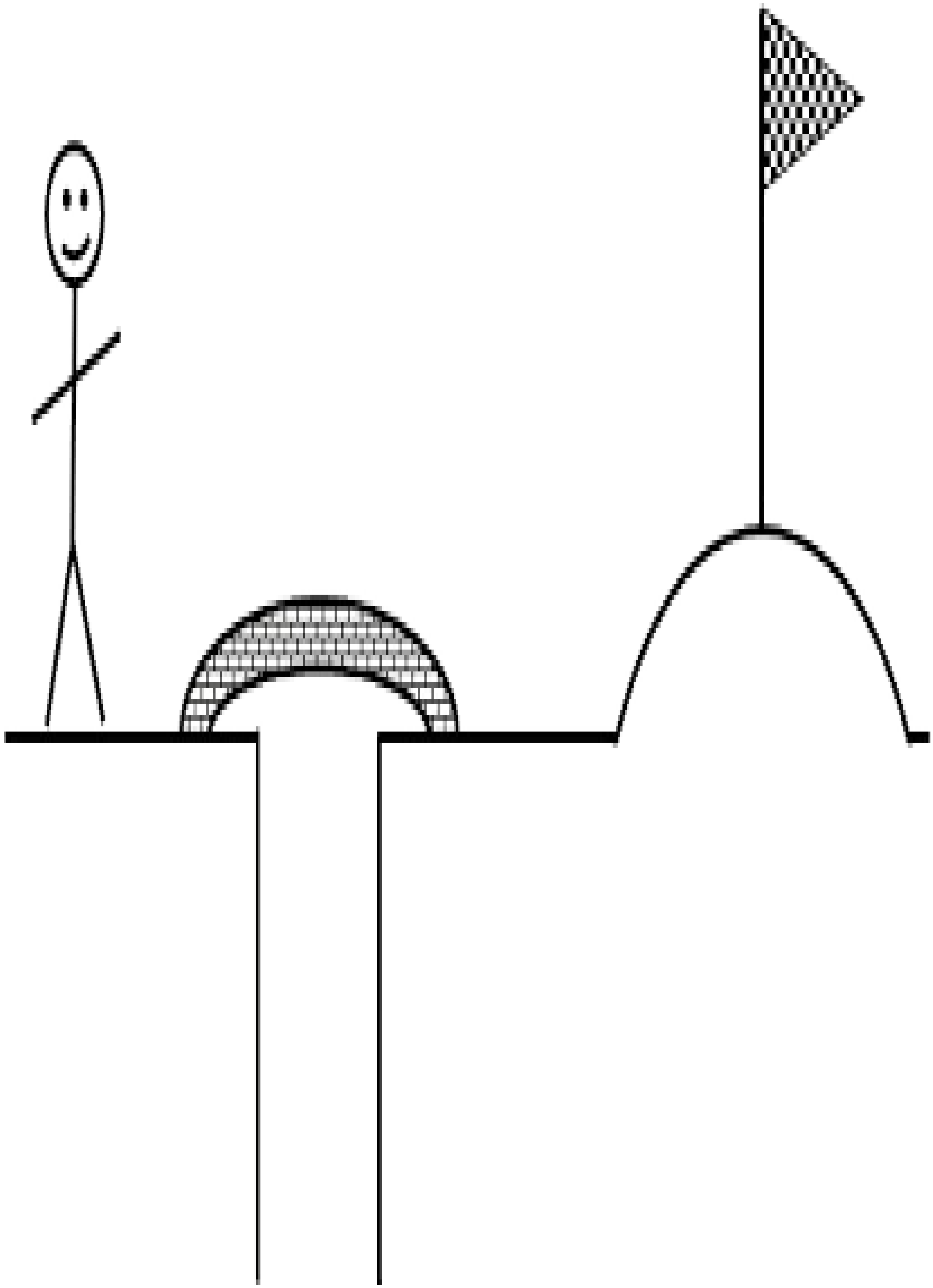
Problem is why you are having trouble doing or achieving it

E.g., An obstacle is in the way.

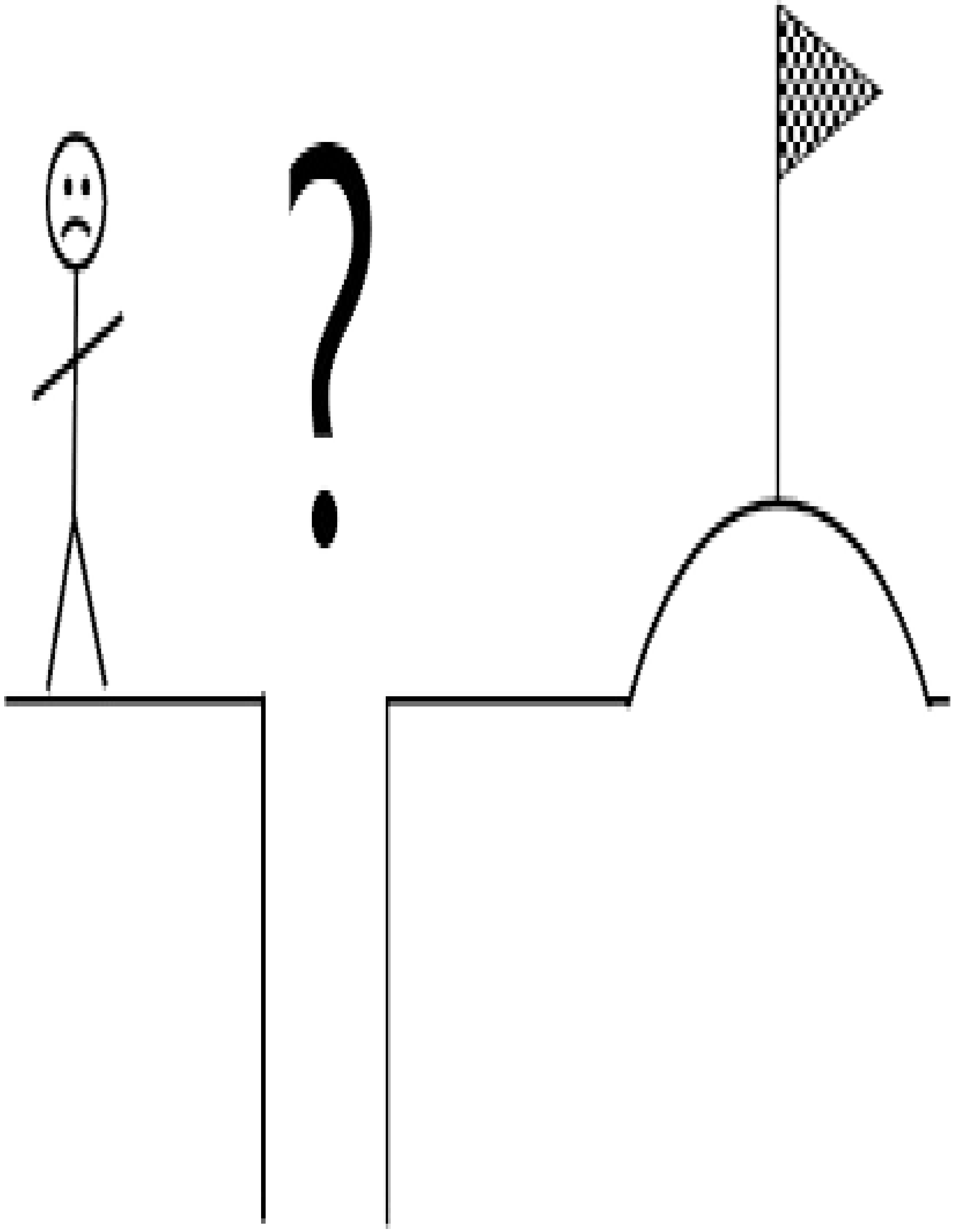


Solution is what you will do to solve the problem and reach the goal.

E.g., Build a bridge over the obstacle.



WHAT TO DO WHEN THE SOLUTION IS UNKNOWN



You don’t need to know the solution to the problem when you start a conversation.

Do you recall the three types of problem situations?

You have a problem and need to find a solution.

You have a problem and are recommending a solution.

You had a problem that has been solved, and you are reporting the outcome.

If you are in scenario 1 and don’t have a solution to your problem, the purpose of the conversation is almost certainly to help you find or get closer to finding a solution. This is the simplest scenario to address. You state the goal and the problem, and the solution statement can be “Can you help me find a solution?”

Asking for help to find the solution is the easiest way to handle this scenario, but it isn’t the best way.

It is usually better to propose solutions than to ask for help with no ideas of your own. If you don’t have ideas for a solution, you are asking the other person to solve the problem for you. On the other hand, if you have one or two ideas for a solution, even if you don’t know if they are the right ideas, you are asking the other person for advice. The difference between asking someone to do extra work and asking them for insight and advice is significant. No one likes getting extra work, but most people are happy to be asked for their expert opinion.

There is nothing wrong with asking for help, but unless you genuinely have no idea how to solve the problem, you should try to propose a solution or two when asking for advice.

Proposing solutions is something that differentiates high performers, they regularly ask for help, but usually have some ideas of their own to help start the conversation.

KEEP IT BRIEF

Remember, the structured summary is an introduction to the conversation; it is not the entire conversation. The purpose of the structured summary is not to pack all the information into a few lines. It's a clear, concise way to give your audience an overview of what is coming next.

Using the GPS method to structure your introduction makes it easy for your audience to understand what is happening and what you need. It leads your audience through the key points in a logical order, clearly stating the problem to solve, and it finishes with a focus on action.

Let's take a look at some examples.

Giving good examples of structure is easy, but showing how they are created is much harder to do. If I were to demonstrate the complete process of getting from the unstructured detail of someone's rambling introduction to the concise structure using three lines for goal, problem, and solution, I would fill a lot of pages writing out transcripts of conversations we often find ourselves in at work, with long, rambling paragraphs of information with key points out of order. That isn't a good use of paper or pixels, and it wouldn't be fun for any of us.

Instead, I will work through examples of good structure from different situations, and you can use them as a guide when you start practicing using your own work topics.

Note: I've included framing in these examples to show how framing and structure work together to create a clear message. While structure can be

used by itself to provide a summary, it is always more valuable to combine it with framing.

Example #1

Sam is a call center agent from customer service at a shipping firm. She went to speak to her boss about an issue with the Davison Group, a customer that was unhappy about a lost shipment.

Sam started with a description of when she had first spoken to the client about the missing shipment earlier in the week. Sam walked through the history of the calls with the client and gave a step-by-step description of what she had done in the past two days to try to find the shipment. Eventually, she got around to saying the client wanted a refund and that she needed her manager’s help authorizing it.

Throughout the description, the manager asked questions about the issue, and the five minutes of explanation extended to ten minutes while the manager tried to understand the complete situation. They also went off on a few tangents as the manager pointed out what might have been errors in the way the agent had searched for the lost shipment.

The conversation ended with the manager not approving the refund. He needed more time to review the details with Sam. Sam went back to her desk unhappy that she still didn’t have a solution to the refund request, and her manager was frustrated that it took so long to understand the topic.

In this scenario, it took almost ten minutes to get to the key message. Did you spot what the key message was? The need for an authorization for a refund and help finding the lost shipment.

If Sam had given a structured summary first, she would have quickly made it clear she needed authorization for a refund and also wanted help finding the shipment. Here is what the summary could look like using the structured summary approach with the GPS method.

“I’ve just spoken to the Davison Group. Can you help me with a problem? They didn’t get the last shipment and want a refund. The Davison Group prepaid for a shipment last month that didn’t arrive, and we need to fix this. I can’t find the shipment, and the refund is above the limit I can approve. Can you authorize the refund and help me find the missing shipment?”

Context: I’ve just spoken to the Davison Group.

Intent: Can you help me with a problem?

Key Message: They didn’t get the last shipment and want a refund.

Goal: The Davison Group prepaid for a shipment last month that didn’t arrive; we need to fix this.

Problem: I can’t find the shipment, and the refund is above the limit I can approve.

Solution: Can you authorize the refund and help me find the missing shipment?

This version of the message is clear and quick to deliver. If Sam had started the conversation with such a summary, the manager would have received the whole picture in less than thirty seconds. The rest of the conversation about what had happened and evaluating the methods the agent used to find the refund could either happen immediately or be put off to a more convenient time. This would allow the manager to quickly assess the situation and take appropriate steps to help Sam.

Using a structured summary doesn’t stop you from having detailed conversations. Instead, it avoids forcing the detailed conversation to happen right then. By focusing on solving the problem and avoiding getting bogged down in details, structured summaries using the GPS method provide your audience with a choice about how the conversation plays out.

Example #2

A technical analyst had read the new government guidelines for payment data handled through a firewall and was talking to the head of IT about it. This is the cleaned-up version of the discussion using framing and a structured summary.

“I reviewed the new information security policy. We need to take action because our firewall is not compliant anymore. The new industry regulations require us to have a level-five firewall for all ecommerce transactions to keep payment data secure. Unfortunately, our current software will only allow us to support up to level four. We need to come up with a plan for upgrading the software and present it to the leadership team for approval.”

Context: I reviewed the new information security policy.

Intent: We need to take action.

Key message: Our firewall is not compliant anymore.

Goal: The new industry regulations require a level-five firewall for all ecommerce transactions to keep payment data secure.

Problem: Our current software will only allow us to support up to level four.

Solution: We need to come up with a plan for upgrading the software and present it to the leadership team for approval.

The original message was a lot longer than this structured summary. It was full of technical terms and descriptions of the processes, service calls, and databases involved in the problem. The head of IT wasn't able to find a key message or a next step amongst all the detail and had to try to create his own summary of the message, repeating back what he thought he'd heard. It took almost twenty minutes for the real issue to become clear.

By contrast, the structured version of the message given above is so clear that it could be delivered to anyone in almost any role, and they would understand what was happening and what needed to be done next. The message doesn't include a lot of technical jargon, and it doesn't require technical knowledge to understand what is happening or the steps to address it. This is what makes a great structured summary.

When creating your own structured summaries, avoid using deep technical language. Then your message can be understood by almost anyone. You don't need to be an expert in the topic to understand a structured summary.

You may know nothing about system firewalls or the inner workings of a cargo shipping company, but I'm betting you understood the problems in each example above. Neither situation required you to know the details of the processes, systems, or companies involved.

Think about this the next time you need to explain a problem to someone at work. They might not know the processes, the systems, or the detail the same way you do, but that doesn’t mean you need to give them all that information for them to understand what you need. Use the GPS structure to help summarize the topic in terms of goal, problem, and solution, and they will have a much better chance of understanding what you are trying to communicate.

>> ACTIVITY <<

Think about a work conversation you need to have soon. Ideally, it should be about something complex or challenging, and it should be a new topic for the person to whom you will speak. Write down the goal, problem, and solution statements for your topic. Can you clearly define the goal you are trying to achieve? Is the problem statement focused on the one thing that prevents you from achieving the goal? Do you have a clear solution statement that lets your audience know exactly what you want to happen next?

Now that you have your structured summary written out, it will be much easier to start the conversation. Hopefully, you find this simple approach makes the start of the conversation shorter and clearer.

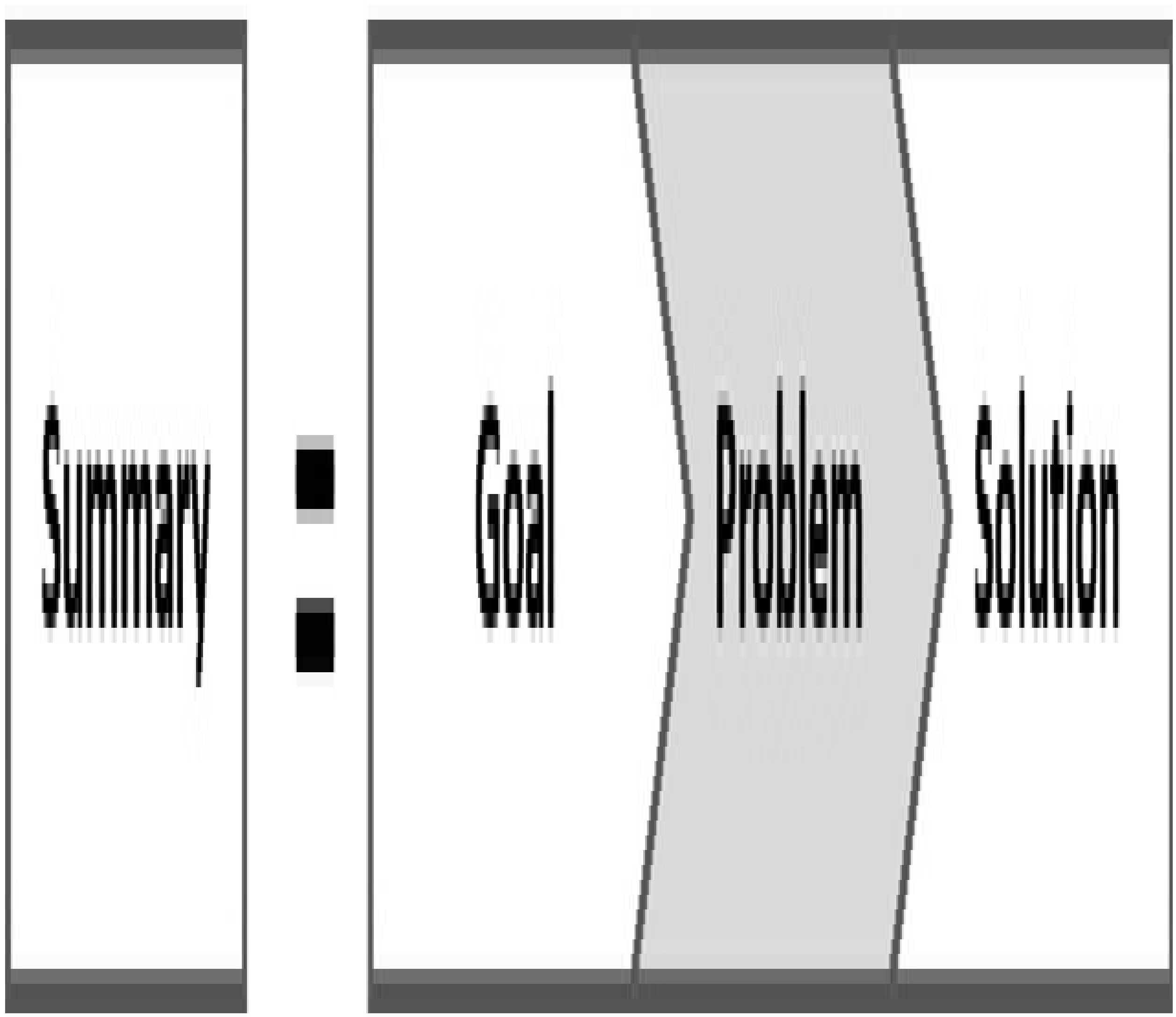
Don't worry if you struggle with this activity. We struggle to summarize complex topics for various reasons, including problems with multiple variables, many dependencies, different levels, impacts on other projects, and being linked to other problems. The GPS method works in all of these situations. The next section helps unpack these reasons and provides techniques to get past them.

If you still feel that your work problems are too complex to be summarized in just three lines, read on. We will work through some complex examples that include keeping people alive when launching them into space. There aren't many problems more complex or riskier than that!

NO PROBLEM IS TOO COMPLEX (TO BE SUMMARIZED IN LESS THAN A MINUTE)

"Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."

– *Confucius*


Summary
:
Goal
Problem
Solution

You might be reading this and thinking, “My topics are far too complex to be summarized in less than a minute.” If you are, I completely understand. I used to think the same thing until I saw the GPS method used for some truly complex topics.

Santosh and Doug, two engineers working for NASA in Virginia, USA, were at a BBQ talking about their favorite topic: the need for more funding for the International Space Station (ISS). The ISS was a major part of the NASA budget at a time when the USA was turning its sights back to the moon, and they both had strong opinions about maintaining the funding.

Santosh and Doug had been deep in the discussion for about half an hour when Nick, an executive at a healthcare firm and a teammate in their local kickball league, joined the conversation. Without realizing what he was letting himself in for, Nick casually asked why the cost needed to be so high.

The two engineers launched into a detailed description of the complexity of the ISS, the challenges caused by solar and deep-space radiation, and the fuel needed to keep the ISS at the right altitude and to ferry people and supplies to and from it. They also talked about the risks posed by debris in orbit and more. Nick didn’t seem to mind. It was a nice day, he had a drink in his hand, and it was genuinely interesting stuff. A few other people wandered over and stood listening as the two engineers talked for over twenty minutes about the scientific breakthroughs that the ISS had enabled.

When the pair finally wound down, Santosh said to Nick, “So you see, that’s why it costs a lot and why the government should keep funding it.”

“You clearly know a lot about this stuff,” Nick said, smiling. “I didn’t quite follow everything you said, but what I think you’re saying is we built a science lab in space, and it’s helping us learn a lot of important things. The problem is, space is hard to get to, and there are a hundred ways a person can be killed up there. So, it takes a lot of money to keep the lab in space and make sure the scientists using it stay alive.”

Santosh and Doug stared at Nick as the others around them commented on how it all made more sense when described that way.

“It’s a lot more complicated than that,” Santosh said, “but yes, you pretty much summed it up.”

Nick knew nothing about the ISS beyond what he’d read in the news and seen on TV. He wasn’t an engineer, he had never worked on a space program, and he knew nothing about the complexities of life in low-earth orbit. Despite that, he was able to absorb a significant amount of technical information from two highly qualified engineers and summarize it in thirty seconds so that other non-engineering people could understand it.

Did you notice how Nick’s summary followed the GPS structure? Look at it again, and see if you can identify the three components of a structured summary.

Goal: Build a science lab in space and help humankind learn a lot of important things.

Problem: Space is hard to get to, and there are a hundred ways a person can be killed up there.

Solution: Spend a lot of money to make sure the scientists using the lab stay alive.

As this shows, it is possible to summarize even the most complex topics quickly and clearly.

Some might argue that Nick’s summary was an oversimplification. If the audience had been a room full of NASA engineers working on the ISS, it probably would have been, but the people at the BBQ weren't technical; they didn't already have knowledge of the topic. The purpose of the conversation was to explain why it costs a lot to maintain a space station, and Nick's summary was the clearest way to do that. If Santosh and Doug had started with the summary, they could have had a conversation where people asked about the discoveries made or the dangers of space instead of being lectured. Everyone could have understood the key points from the start rather than listened to a twenty-minute monologue.

ANY TOPIC CAN BE SUMMARIZED

Any work topic, no matter how complex, can be summarized using the goal, problem, solution method.

A comment I often hear from attendees at my workshops is, "My topic is too complex to summarize in sixty seconds." This is an understandable belief, especially when much of our work is complex. Our work might not be as complex as maintaining a livable habitat in the vacuum of space, but it is still complex when considering the many nuances of our industries and jobs.

In the previous pages, you've seen how most work situations can be defined as problems that can be clearly explained using the GPS method. The BBQ conversation about the ISS showed it is possible to summarize the most complex of situations. Despite this, it is common to hear complex, detailed descriptions of work problems instead of clear summaries.

Why?

There are a few core and unfortunately quite common causes of overly complex descriptions at work.

Cause #1: We assume the audience thinks like us.

Cause #2: We believe the audience needs to know all the details to be able to understand the problem.

Cause #3: We focus on variables and dependencies instead of the problem.

Cause #4: We summarize more than one problem at once.

Cause #1: We assume the audience thinks like us.

Our natural tendency is to summarize things in the way we need or would like them to be summarized. In the space station example, the two engineers explained the need for funding as though they were trying to convince someone like them, someone with the same knowledge and experience they had. In reality, the audience was a group of people who knew little about the technology and only wanted to conceptually understand the reasons for the high cost of maintaining the ISS. They didn’t need to know the details to be able to understand the concepts.

When communicating at work, consider who you are communicating with. Think about what they really need to know in order to understand your intent and what they need to do with it. Always start with the least amount of information and data possible to make your point. Too much information makes it harder for people to understand your message and purpose. Start with the simplest explanation. You can always add more detail if needed.

Cause #2: We believe the audience needs to know all the details before they can understand the problem.

If you are struggling with a problem and need to get input from someone else, it's easy to assume that person needs to have all the information you have before they can help you.

Part of this comes from within. We consciously or subconsciously think, "How could they possibly know the right advice to give if they don't have all the facts?" We may also want to demonstrate the effort we've already put into finding a solution.

It is rare that your audience must have all of the information before they can provide valuable help. Given that the purpose of most workplace communication is to solve specific problems, the information we provide only needs to be enough to achieve that one goal.

If you have framed your message using the techniques described earlier in this book, you will have defined the intent of your message (request for action, input, approval, advice, and so on). Having done this, the right level of detail to include in the structured summary is just enough to achieve your stated intent. Here are some examples.

If you need a decision, the summary should focus on the decision to be made, not all the reasons why the decision is needed.

If you need advice on how to solve a problem, the summary should focus on the problem that needs solving and not on all the reasons why the problem exists.

When it comes to delivering clear messages, fewer words with the right information is best.

Cause #3: We focus on the variables and dependencies instead of the problem.

The problems we solve at work are complex. If they were simple, we wouldn't need to work so hard.

Most problems, even relatively simple ones, have more than one variable. They are also dependent on and impact things that go beyond the current situation you want to talk about. For example, IT systems are interconnected. A cost overrun in one project can impact other projects. A delay can be caused by multiple issues that come together to cause a bigger problem and so on. The list is endless.

Don't mix up the causes of the problem with the actual problem you need to solve.

When trying to summarize a problem, it's easy to start describing the various parts of the problem that make it complex instead of focusing on the problem that needs solving. The existence of multiple variables isn't a problem by itself.

If the variables causing an issue are unknown or keep changing, that is a problem in and of itself. In this case, the summary should define the problem as being changing variables, and the solution should focus on how to solve that. This doesn't require a detailed description of each variable. The conversation that comes after the summary can include the details for each variable and how it impacts the goal, but the summary doesn't need that detail. The summary should do just what its name implies, summarize the goal, the problem, and the desired solution at a higher level.

The same can be said about dependencies. Dependencies are not problems to be solved. If the dependencies are impacting your work, your goal is to resolve the problem, not remove the dependency. For example, if another project is late, and you need it finished before your work can start, the problem is the late delivery of the project, not the existence of the dependency. Your structured summary should focus on solving the problem of the late delivery.

If you can clearly define the goal and the specific problem preventing the goal from being achieved, then you will have a clear summary.

Cause #4: We summarize more than one problem at once.

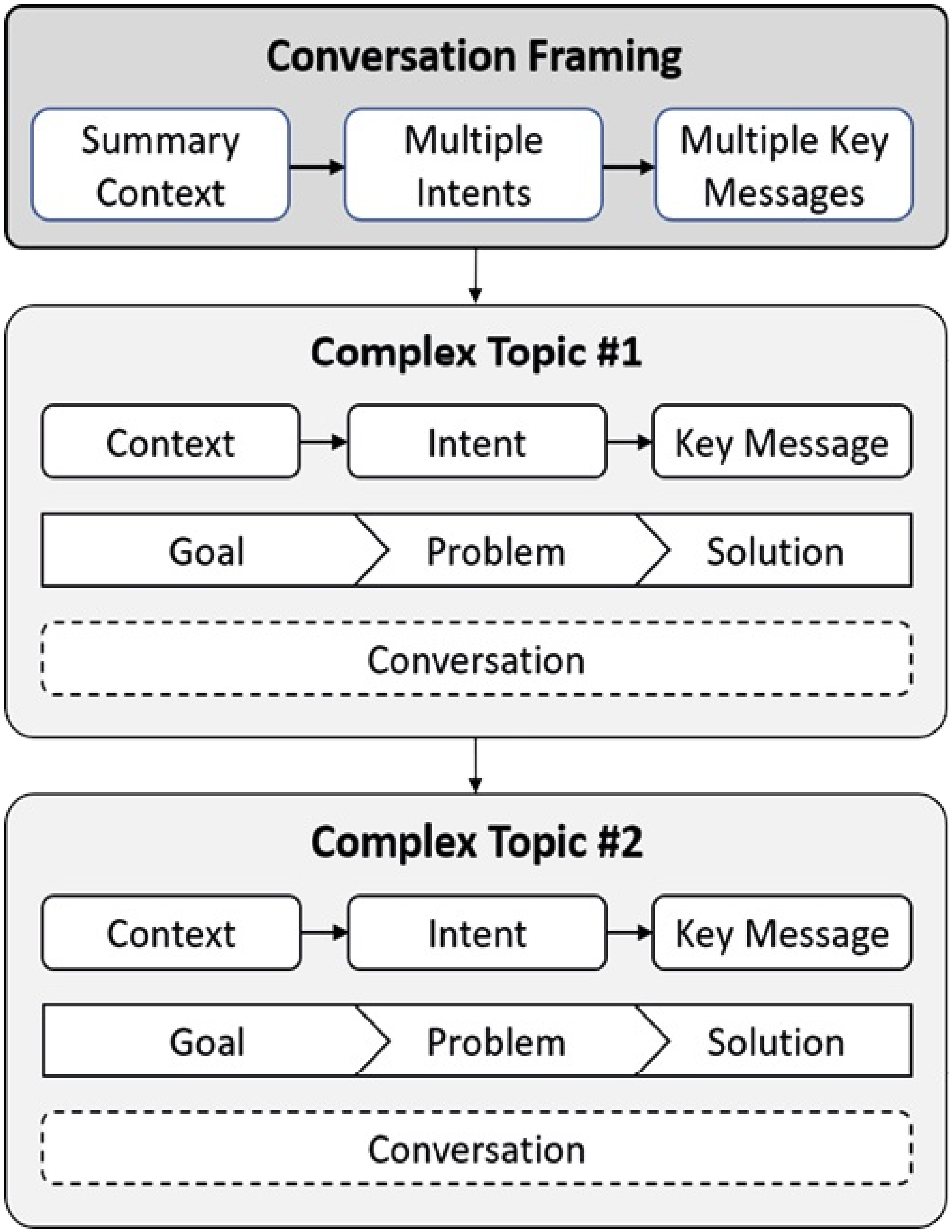
In chapter 2, we saw how having multiple topics in one conversation can cause problems. The same issues occur when trying to summarize multiple problems in the same summary. More than one problem usually means more than one solution is required.

Complex goals usually have multiple parts. Therefore, multiple problems can coexist. When faced with this situation, it’s easy to list all the problems in the summary at the start of a conversation. Unfortunately, this increases the risk of falling into one of the common mistakes listed above. It also makes it harder for the audience to keep track of the separate topics in the conversation.

Problems are solved one at a time, and each problem requires a separate conversation to solve. This doesn’t mean you need to have separate meetings or come back to speak to your audience multiple times. The topics can be covered in the same conversation if they are addressed sequentially. The key to having a clear conversation with multiple topics is to frame and summarize it at the start. Each problem needs its own structured summary, so you can have a productive discussion and can achieve your intended outcome.

Start the conversation with framing (described in chapter 2). Then start each new topic with framing and a structured summary. Complete the conversation on the first topic, hopefully focusing on the solution and achieving the desired intent, then move on to the second topic. Start the second topic with framing and a structured summary. This ensures you and your audience are clear that a new topic has started, and everyone is aware of the new intent and desired solution. (The graphical depiction of this is shown on the next page.)

How to structure a conversation with multiple problem topics


Conversation Framing
Summary Context
Multiple Intents
Multiple Key Messages
Complex Topic #1
Context
Intent
Key Message
Goal
Problem
Solution
Conversation
Complex Topic #2
Context
Intent
Key Message
Goal
Problem
Solution
Conversation

AN EXCEPTION TO THIS RULE

There is a situation where multiple problems do not require multiple framings. If multiple problems have a common cause, that common cause becomes the singular problem to address. The root cause is what gets summarized as part of the GPS structure. Here’s an example.

Goal: To deliver a product upgrade on time.

Problem: We are going to miss the go-live date because we have multiple related issues, each with different timelines.

Solution: I need to get time with your team to work through the issues and create a response plan.

This example provides all the components of a structured summary. No detail is given about the specific issues, and yet the audience has been given a summary that includes what is happening, what the problem is, and the next steps to solve it.

If you feel uncomfortable leaving out all the detail, the problem part of the structured summary can include a few specific examples to help provide more detail to your audience. Be careful not to overdo it. You will run the risk of expanding the summary too much if you start talking about the detail instead of completing the summary. Here is the example again, but this time a few additional details have been added to the problem statement.

Goal: To deliver the product upgrade on time.

Problem: We are going to miss the go-live date because we have multiple related issues, including late deliveries, a production process backlog, and delayed testing, each with different timelines.

Solution: I need to get time with your team to work through the issues and create a response plan.

Being able to summarize a topic is a key skill when communicating to leaders. They want to get the high-level summary before hearing any details. If you want to become a leader, or if you regularly communicate with leaders, the ability to summarize clearly is something you need to master.

There are many reasons we think we cannot summarize a topic, but as the examples in this chapter show, any topic can be summarized quickly and clearly using the GPS method. The key is to find the one problem you want to discuss and then summarize that. If you have multiple problems, you need to use multiple summaries to be sure your audience doesn't get confused.

>> ACTIVITY <<

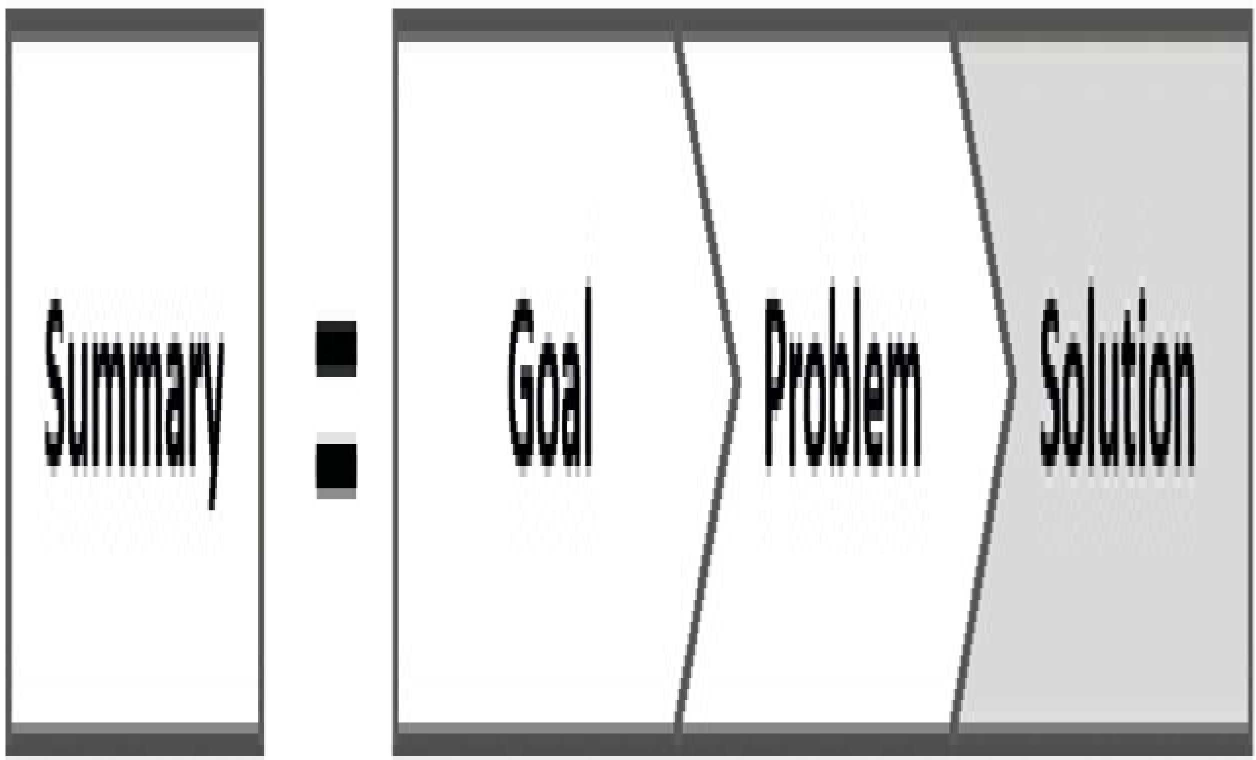
Take another look at the multiple topic framing email or conversation notes you created in the earlier activities. You should already have a good framing for the conversation, so the next step is to create the structured summary for each topic using the GPS method. Write out the summary for each topic. This process should help clarify what you want to get from the conversation. It will also give you a set of notes that you can take with you to help keep the start of the conversation on track.

SOLUTIONS ARE FORWARD LOOKING

"Don't dwell on what went wrong. Instead, focus on what to do next.

Spend your energies on moving forward toward finding the answer."

– Denis Waitley


Summary
:
Goal
Problem
Solution

The third component of the structured summary technique is the solution. The solution statement tells your audience what you want to happen next. Even if you clearly define the goal and the problem, you still need a clear solution statement because without a solution, your audience is left thinking, “So what?”

By framing the start of the communication, your audience will already know the intent of your message (e.g., making a decision, providing advice or input). The solution statement in the structured summary is where you state specifically what you want to happen next and how the audience is involved.

Why is this important? Because It focuses the audience on the solution, on the path forward, on action. It stops the discussion getting bogged down in the problem.

PROBLEMS ARE NEVER SOLVED IN THE PAST

As you’ve no doubt experienced, people explain situations chronologically, laying out the events in the order in which they happened. You’ve seen this happen in the examples throughout this book. When we communicate in this way, not only does it take a long time, our audience is forced to focus on the events that led up to the problem, the history. All of our audience’s problem-solving talent goes into thinking about how this situation could have been avoided. While this is great from a lesson-learned and process-improvement perspective, it’s terrible for solving the problem.

When we start a conversation to solve a problem, it is rare that we want to spend all our time focused on how it could have been avoided. Instead of focusing on the past, we usually want the recipient of our message to focus on the future. We want them to focus on the actions and next steps that will help overcome the problem and get us closer to achieving our goal.

Structured summaries finish with the solution so that after the first minute of the conversation, you can focus on the solution to the problem instead of getting caught up in a review of the history.

Future-looking conversations are positive conversations

Conversations that focus on the causes of problems are only positive when the goal of the conversation is to prevent the problem from happening again. If that isn't the goal, then reviewing the history of the problem only serves to remind people of the issues and mistakes that led to the problem. That isn't something that people usually feel good about.

I am not saying we should avoid learning lessons or ignore opportunities to fix issues with our processes. I am a firm believer in continuous improvement. However, the goal of most of our communication is to focus on the actions required to quickly solve the problem. The GPS method helps that happen.

A conversation that begins with a structured summary that uses the three components of the GPS method is far more likely to be a positive conversation because it focuses on solutions.

The GPS method doesn't gloss over issues, but by ending the summary with the solution, the focus shifts to the actions that will address the problem. If work has already been done to fix the problem, the solution statement becomes a statement of the good things that have already been done, once again focusing on the positive rather than dwelling on the problem's history.

Think about how this changes the energy of a status update.

Example: A manufacturing plant had an accident that caused them to shut down production for a day. The foreman was reporting on the situation to the plant manager.

"We were finishing the BAC-15 production run when the sheet-metal roller jammed. We had to stop the production line while we worked out what happened. Turns out the feeder lines were moved to make room for the installation of a new machine, and they weren't put back properly before production resumed. The teams used the original floor markings to align the rollers, but the lines hadn't been updated to account for the new layout for the new machine to fit. When we found that out, we had to repaint all the floor markings, which isn't a quick job. The safety guideline books are also out of date and need revising to account for the new layout. Anyway, we got it done, and production has resumed."

The foreman was trying to be brief. He included a lot of detail but didn't go off on any tangents, and he ended with the good news that production is up and running again. Despite this, the description was almost entirely negative as he described the mistakes and problems the team worked through as part of the solution. Not only does this focus the plant manager's attention on the past instead of the future, the description makes it seem like the problems all still exist instead of clearly stating that the solutions were found and implemented.

Rewriting this example using the GPS method can provide a much more positive status.

"We were finishing the BAC-15 production run when the sheet-metal roller jammed. We found and fixed the cause of the jam and had everything up and running again in twenty-four hours. We've already made changes to the production layout and are updating the process documents to make sure this doesn't happen again."

The goal and problem are the same in both versions, but in the second version the solution is a statement about what has already been done. The original status described the solution, but the good news was buried in the list of problems and their causes. In the rewritten version, the solution statement is a positive future-looking update: steps have been taken to fix the problem, the production line is running again, and the issue shouldn't happen again.

The problem isn't hidden, but the focus is on the steps the team took to resolve the issue, and the whole update is focused on the positives.

If you need to give a status update, especially about an issue, focus on the steps already taken to fix the problem. If you haven't taken any steps already, you can summarize the steps you will take to solve the problem. If you don't know what steps to take, the intent of the conversation is probably to get input from your audience to help find the solution. This last scenario makes the solution statement simple: "Can you help me fix the problem?"

Keep the solution in a positive direction, and it will turn the conversation from a potentially negative walk through the history of a problem into a positive, future-looking communication.

Examples

Let's take another look at the examples from the previous chapters and see how ending the structured summary with a solution helps make the conversation future-looking and focused on the actions and next steps.

Example #1: Sam the call center agent and the refund for lost cargo

Context: I've just spoken to the Davison Group.

Intent: Can you help me with a problem?

Key Message: They didn't get the last shipment and want a refund.

Goal: The Davison Group prepaid for a large shipment last month that didn't arrive. We need to fix this.

Problem: I can’t find the shipment, and the refund is above the limit I can approve.

Solution: Can you authorize the refund and help me find the missing shipment?

This example ends with a clear action request (Can you authorize a refund?) and a request for help to locate information about the missing shipment. At this point, the manager may simply authorize the refund. If so, the conversation could be over in the next minute, and Sam, the call center agent, would have just saved herself ten minutes of describing the problem’s history.

Alternatively, the manager may choose to focus on finding the missing shipment, in which case there is a good chance Sam will have to answer some questions about the steps she has already taken. We can’t always avoid working through the history, but by using framing and structured summaries, we increase the chance of getting a quicker solution to our problem and prevent ourselves from reliving the history.

Whatever the manager chooses to do, the conversation is still focused on what happens next.

Example #2: IT system upgrade required

Context: I reviewed the new information security policy.

Intent: We need to take action.

Key message: Our firewall is not compliant anymore.

Goal: The new industry regulations require us to have a level-five firewall for all ecommerce transactions to keep payment data secure.

Problem: Our current software will only allow us to support up to level four.

Solution: We need to come up with the plan for upgrading the software and present it to the leadership team for approval.

This example doesn't provide a solution to the problem. Instead, it ends with a description of the steps needed to solve the problem. The conversation that follows will likely be focused on identifying who will create the plan, how it will be done, and when. The details will vary based on when and where this situation occurs, but the key point is that after just one minute, the conversation is focused on the future, and the participants are able to start building the plan.

In each of these examples, the audience is aware of what they should do next. There is no question of "Why are you telling me this?" or "What do you want me to do with this information?" The solution part of the structured summary clearly shows what should happen next. When you start your conversations this way, your audience will be ready to engage in the next steps.

Now that you've learned how to create a structured summary and seen some examples, it's time to put that knowledge into practice. After all, the only way to get better is to practice. Eventually, creating structured summaries will become second nature.

>> ACTIVITY <<

Identify the next important work message you need to deliver, and summarize it using the GPS method.

Start by writing out the framing for the conversation with bullet points for context, intent, and the key message. Then write the summary, detailing the goal, problem, and solution.

You can build on the work you've already done by using your notes from the activities in chapter 2.

Framing:

Context:

Intent:

Key Message:

Structured Summary:

Goal:

Problem:

Solution:

If this exercise is difficult, review the previous two chapters, and see if you are struggling with one of the following common problems.

Do you have a single, clear goal?

Are you including more than one problem in your structured summary?

Have you focused on the variables and dependencies instead of the one problem you need to solve?

Are you trying to give the audience all the information you know in order for them to understand the problem?

Is your solution forward-looking and actionable?

WHEN YOU HAVE A SUMMARY BUT CAN’T MEMORIZE IT

Both the framing and the structured summary techniques are designed to be simple, easy to remember, and easy to apply. Whenever you learn a new technique or apply a new method, it can be daunting to try to remember all the parts. If you have prepared a structured summary for a conversation but aren't sure if you can remember it, the solution is simple: write it down, and take it with you to the conversation.

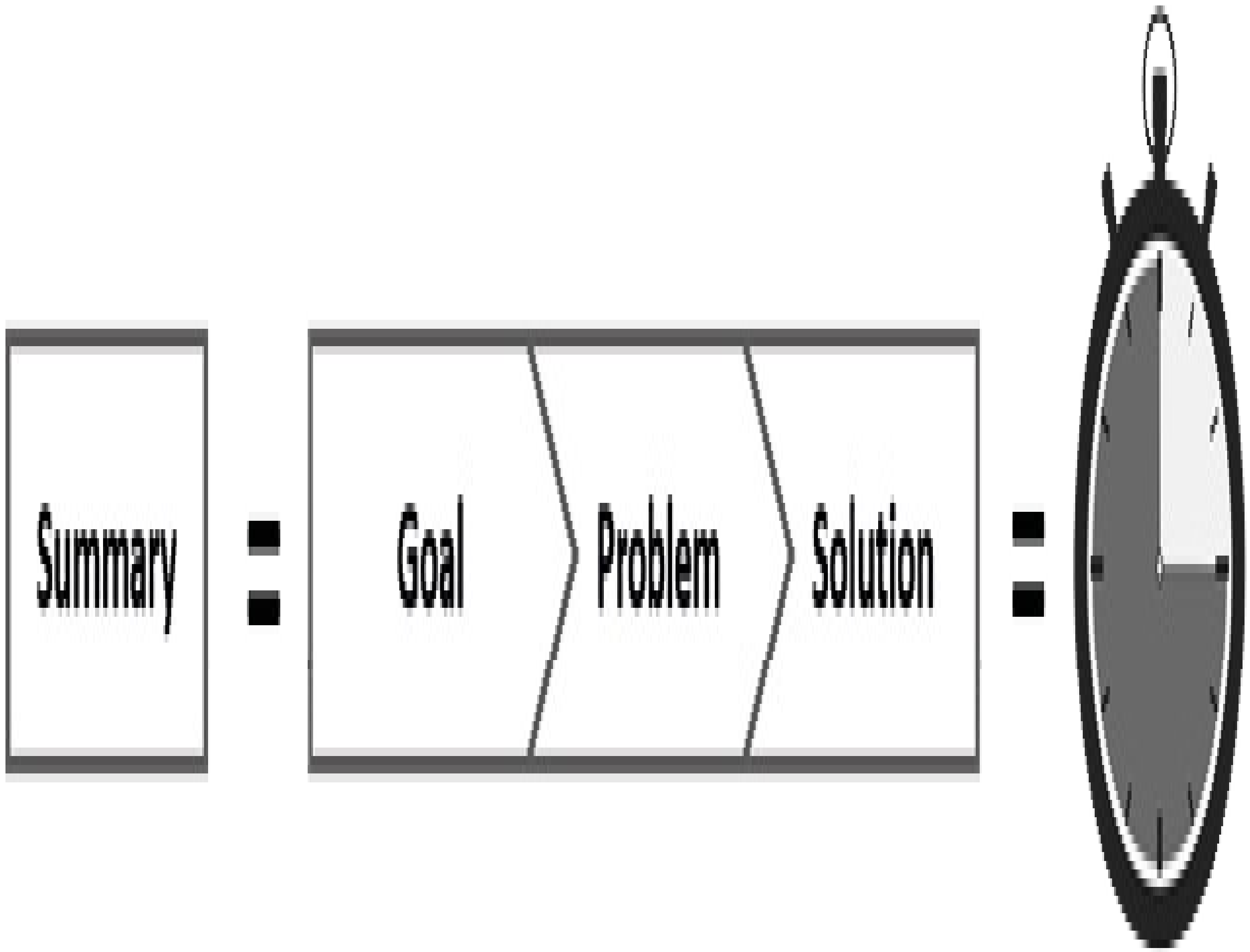
If you are worried how it will look if you are reading from notes, consider this:

The audience will focus more on the content of your message than how you deliver it—content and information matter more than perfect delivery.

Most leaders, politicians, heads of state, journalists, and CEOs give speeches using prepared notes and scripts. If it wasn't important to get the content of a message right, the teleprompter wouldn't exist.

Don't be afraid to write things down. Your audience will appreciate you more when they get a clear, concise message that makes sense. Over time, you will become comfortable thinking about and preparing your messages using the framing and structured summary techniques. You may reach the point where you don't need to write them down at all. Don't worry if that doesn't happen. I still prepare notes ahead of conversations because one minute of preparation makes me more confident. It also ensures my audience gets the clearest, most concise message right from the start.

SUMMARY



Summary
Goal
Problem
Solution

Structured summaries are the missing link between knowing that you should be concise and knowing how to be concise.

You can use the GPS method to create a summary introduction to any work conversation and avoid the most common communication issues: diving into the detail too quickly, going off on tangents, and dwelling on the past instead of focusing on solutions.

A structured summary will enable you to:

Deliver any message in a few short sentences in a way that is easy to understand

Lead your audience through the key points of your message in a logical order

Finish with a positive, forward-looking, action-oriented solution

Now that you know how to create a good summary, the next step is to make sure your audience is prepared to hear it. In the next chapter, you will learn two quick ways to check if your audience has the ability and the availability to be part of the conversation. These steps will help improve your reputation as a good communicator and also ensure that you and your audience get the most value from the conversation.

A structured summary comes after framing and fills the remaining forty-five seconds of the first minute.

CHAPTER 4

TIME CHECK & VALIDATION CHECKPOINT

“Make sure your audience is ready to receive your message.”

– Anonymous

Conversations involve at least two people, the speaker and his or her audience. Even if you have prepared a fantastic first minute for your topic, how do you know your audience is ready to hear your message? You might be eager to start talking about your topic, but does your audience have time to talk about it now?

The simplest way to know the answer is to ask, and you should do so in the first minute.

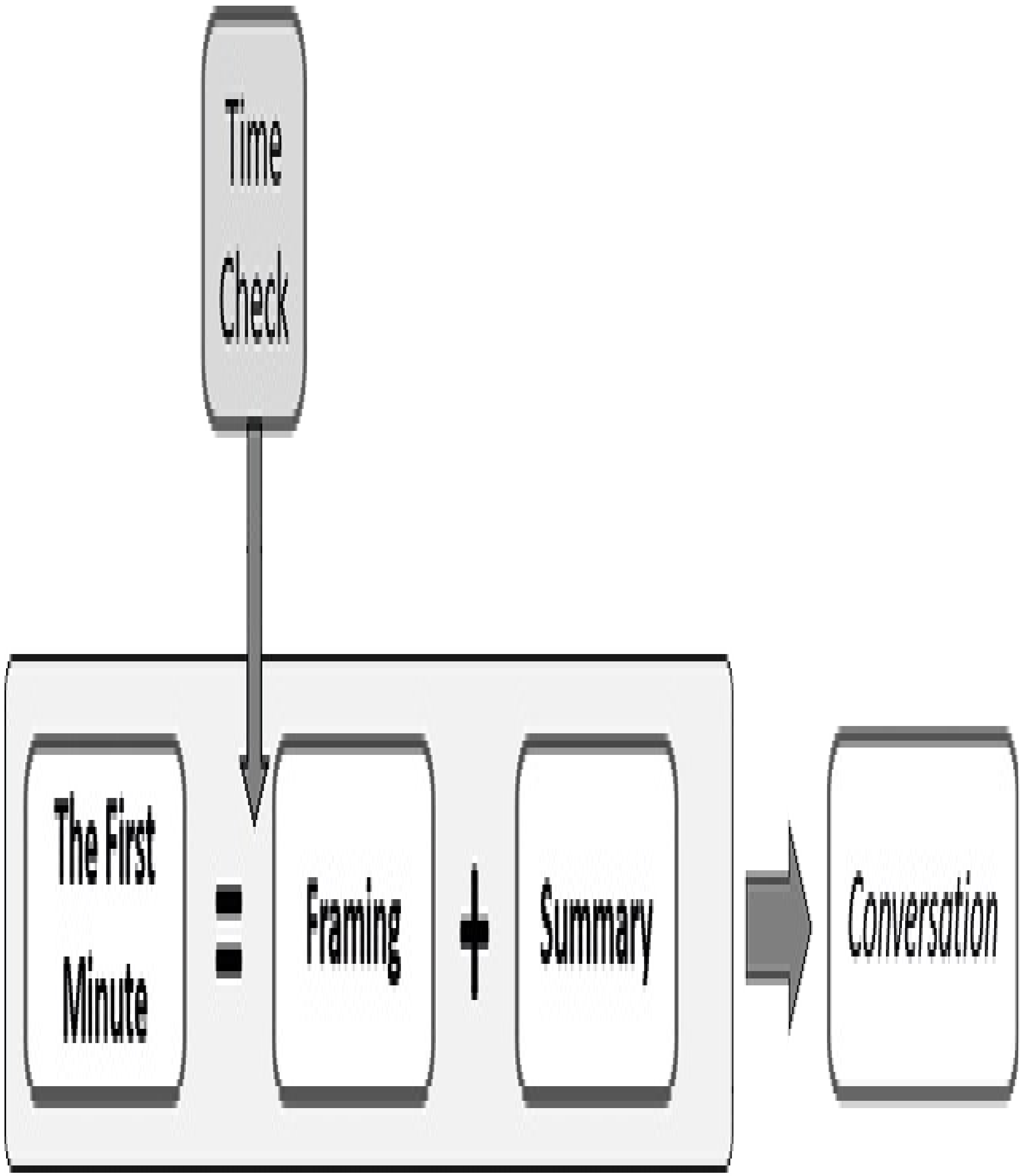
There are two key steps to take in the first minute to ensure you start the conversation well.

Step #1: Time check: This sets expectations for how much time you need.

Step #2: Validation checkpoint: This step clarifies if your audience can talk now.

These two steps come at the beginning and the end of the message you have created using framing and a structured summary. If you miss these steps, you risk damaging your reputation with the person to whom you are talking. If you include them, you will be well on your way to getting the first minute right.

TIME CHECK - DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE?


Time Check
The First Minute
=
Framing
+
Summary
Conversation

An important step at the start of any conversation is to set the expectation for how long the conversation will take.

A common question used to start impromptu and unplanned conversations is "Do you have a minute?" or "Do you have a moment?"

We are generally polite at work, and if someone asks for a minute, we give it to them. We also tend to take information at face value. If someone asks for a minute, we believe it will only be a minute.

However, as demonstrated throughout this book, it rarely takes less than a minute for people to get to the point, let alone complete a conversation. Not only does it take longer than a minute to get to the point, once we have someone's attention, we tend to launch into our topic and don't keep track of the time we are taking. Unless we have our own reason to leave the discussion quickly, these "Do you have a minute?" conversations tend to continue until our intent for the conversation is met. When you add in the time it takes for the other person to respond and complete the discussion, the requested minute quickly becomes five or ten minutes.

When the conversation doesn't fit into the requested minute, it puts the audience in the awkward position of either having to interrupt the speaker or choosing to spend more time than expected on the conversation. Spending more time on the conversation can have its own consequences, like being late for another meeting or having less break time.

THE TWO-STEP PROCESS TO FIX THE "DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE?" PROBLEM

If your topic can truly be asked and answered within one minute, the phrase "Do you have a minute?" is fine. In the more likely event that your topic requires at least a minute to describe as well as additional time to get a response, here is a two-step process you can follow to avoid asking for just a minute. Following this process will result in a better communication experience for everyone.

Step 1: Ask for the amount of time you actually need

Instead of asking for a minute, ask for as much time, or more time, than you think it will take to have the conversation. Don’t ask for a minute if you know you’ll need five or ten or ten minutes to cover the topic.

Part of communicating clearly involves managing your audience’s expectations. Don’t tell them something will take less time than you need. If you do, you are setting yourself up to miss a self-imposed deadline. This harms your reputation as a communicator and also as an effective worker. If you can’t meet a timeline you set for yourself, others may doubt your ability to deliver against other deadlines. At the very least, you might irritate your audience because they really only had one minute to spare.

Step 2: Get to the point quickly

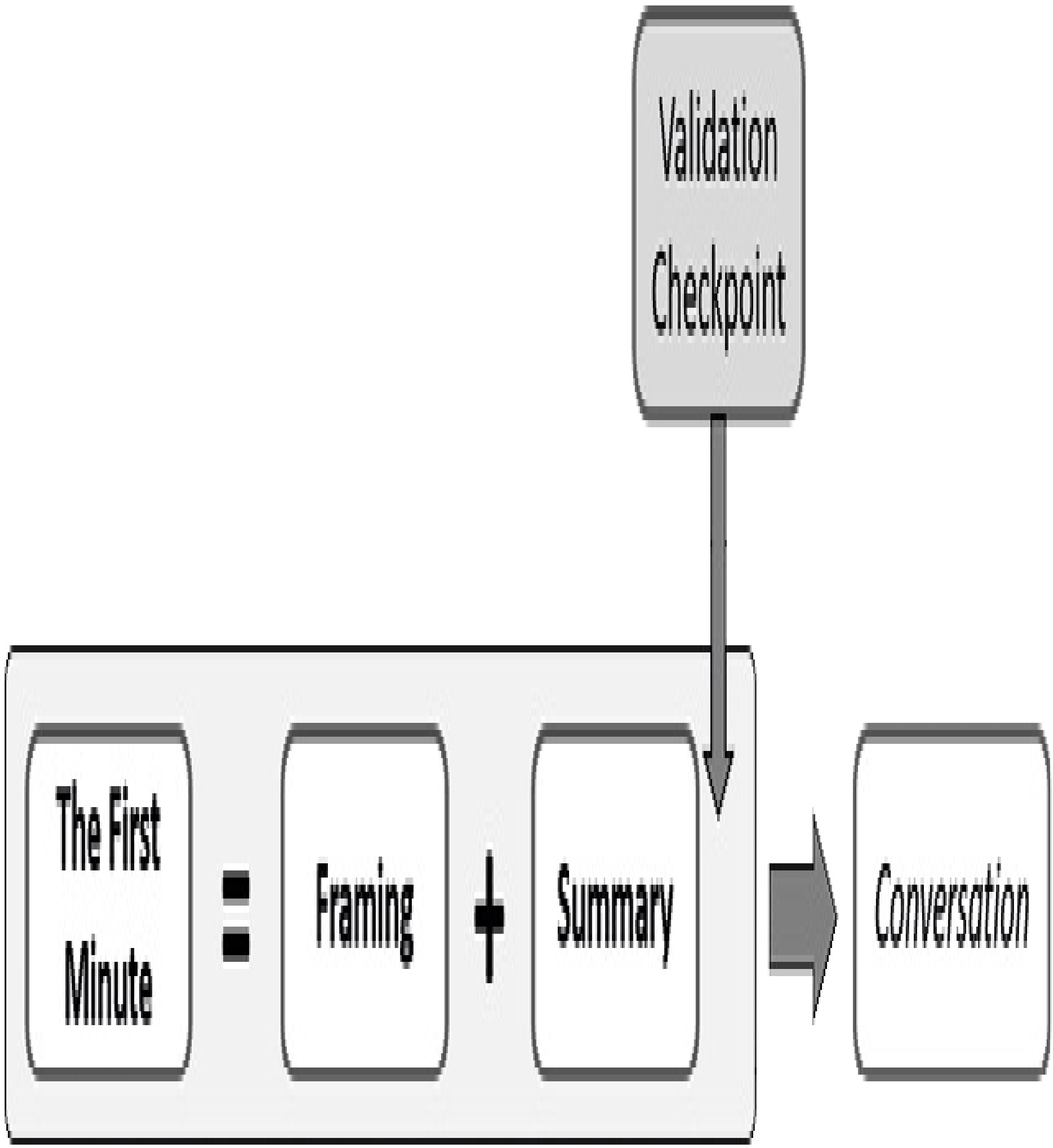
Having set the expectation that five, ten, or more minutes are needed, and assuming the person you are speaking to agrees to talk, don’t waste the small amount of time you have. Use framing and a structured summary to get your message across in less than a minute, and allow more time for the discussion you really want to have.

Giving a clear, concise message using a structured summary provides more time for your audience to respond. This is where you get the most value from the discussion, when the other person is helping achieve the intent you had for the conversation.

This process requires you to think about your topic and the conversation before it happens. This doesn’t mean sitting and thinking for half an hour before every conversation. It takes less than a minute to think through your message, to identify what you want to achieve in the conversation, and estimate how long it might take to get the answer or outcome you are seeking.

Investing one minute to prepare for a conversation is time well spent. You will get that minute back many times over when the conversation you have is clear, and your message is delivered efficiently.

VALIDATION CHECKPOINT - IS NOW A GOOD TIME?


Validation Checkpoint
The First Minute
=
Framing
+
Summary
Conversation

After the time check, deliver your framing and structured summary. This will give your audience a great introduction to the conversation you want to have. Even though they have already agreed to talk to you as part of the time-check step, you should verify that your audience is able to engage in the conversation after they have heard the additional information.

For someone to help you with your problem, the person must have the ability and the availability to do so.

Ability – the knowledge, access, or authority to help with your request

Availability – the time and the desire to help

ABILITY

If the person you are speaking to doesn't have the ability to help you, it is important to find out quickly, so you don't waste their time or yours. There is little value in spending ten minutes describing your problem, only to have your audience say, "I can't authorize that. You need to talk to Naveed." While we often think we know the right person to speak to, we should never assume our audience has the ability to help with our problem.

AVAILABILITY

Many work conversations are not scheduled. You might stop by someone's desk, call them, or start talking when you bump into them around the office. Unless you are using a scheduled meeting, you are unlikely to know if they have the time to talk about your topic when you start the conversation. The person you are speaking to might need time to prepare or have other things to do that are more pressing at that moment. If you have stopped someone in the corridor, they were already on their way somewhere, perhaps to a meeting, to take a break, or one of many other possible destinations. Rather than assuming they have the time, ask if they do. This is a key reason for including the validation checkpoint.

When we are prepared to speak to someone, we tend to assume the other person is equally prepared to speak to us. This is especially true when we are excited about a topic or we feel a sense of urgency around it. Unfortunately, the people we want to talk to may not feel the same level of interest or urgency. Using a validation checkpoint ensures you are both equally prepared to engage in the conversation.

TRAPPED IN A CONVERSATION

It is easy to start a conversation with the false assumption that you are speaking to the right person.

Have you ever found yourself listening to a colleague who hasn't quite got to the question, but you already know you are not the right person to help? Maybe the person speaking assumes you know an answer, but you don't. Perhaps they were given your name by someone else, but you aren't the right person. When this happens, you become stuck in a conversation that isn't valuable for you or the person asking you for help. This is made worse if the other person is not able to quickly and clearly get to the point. Listening to someone describe the history of a problem is particularly frustrating if you know there is nothing you can do to help them.

If you are on the receiving end of this type of conversation, you have limited options for how to respond.

You can interrupt and let the person know you can't help. This is presumptuous because you may have misinterpreted their intentions, which would have been clearer had they got to the end of their long description. It may also be seen as impolite.

You can wait for them to complete their description and then tell them you aren't the right person to answer the question. This is more polite, but it costs you and your colleague time that could be better spent finding the right person to help solve their problem.

While you cannot prevent other people from taking your time in this way, you can avoid causing it when you ask someone else for help by adding a validation checkpoint at the end of the first minute.

MAKE SURE YOU USE VALIDATION CHECKPOINTS

For someone to assess if he or she has the ability and availability to help you, the person needs to know enough about the topic to understand what you need and how urgent it is. A good first minute, using framing and a structured summary, will provide enough information for your audience to do this.

Giving clear information is a good start, but it isn't enough. Your audience must have the opportunity to choose to continue or leave the conversation. You can do this by simply asking them. I call this a validation checkpoint, and it helps ensure the conversation starts in the best way possible.

If you don't include a validation checkpoint, you are putting your audience in the position of having to wait for you to finish a long introduction or interrupting you to let you know they can't talk right now. Either way you risk wasting time talking to the wrong person or talking to someone who isn't prepared to have the conversation right now.

When you start a conversation focused on solving a problem, a finite number of outcomes exist. The person or people you are speaking to will:

Be prepared to continue the discussion immediately

Not be ready to have the conversation at that moment

Tell you they are not the right person for the topic (and potentially redirect you)

Want to clarify something you said in the framing or the structured summary

If your audience is in any category other than the first one mentioned above, they will appreciate not being trapped in a long-winded or confusing conversation.

Validating that you can continue the conversation is easy. Here are some examples of validation checkpoint questions you can ask after giving the structured summary:

Are you the right person to help with this?

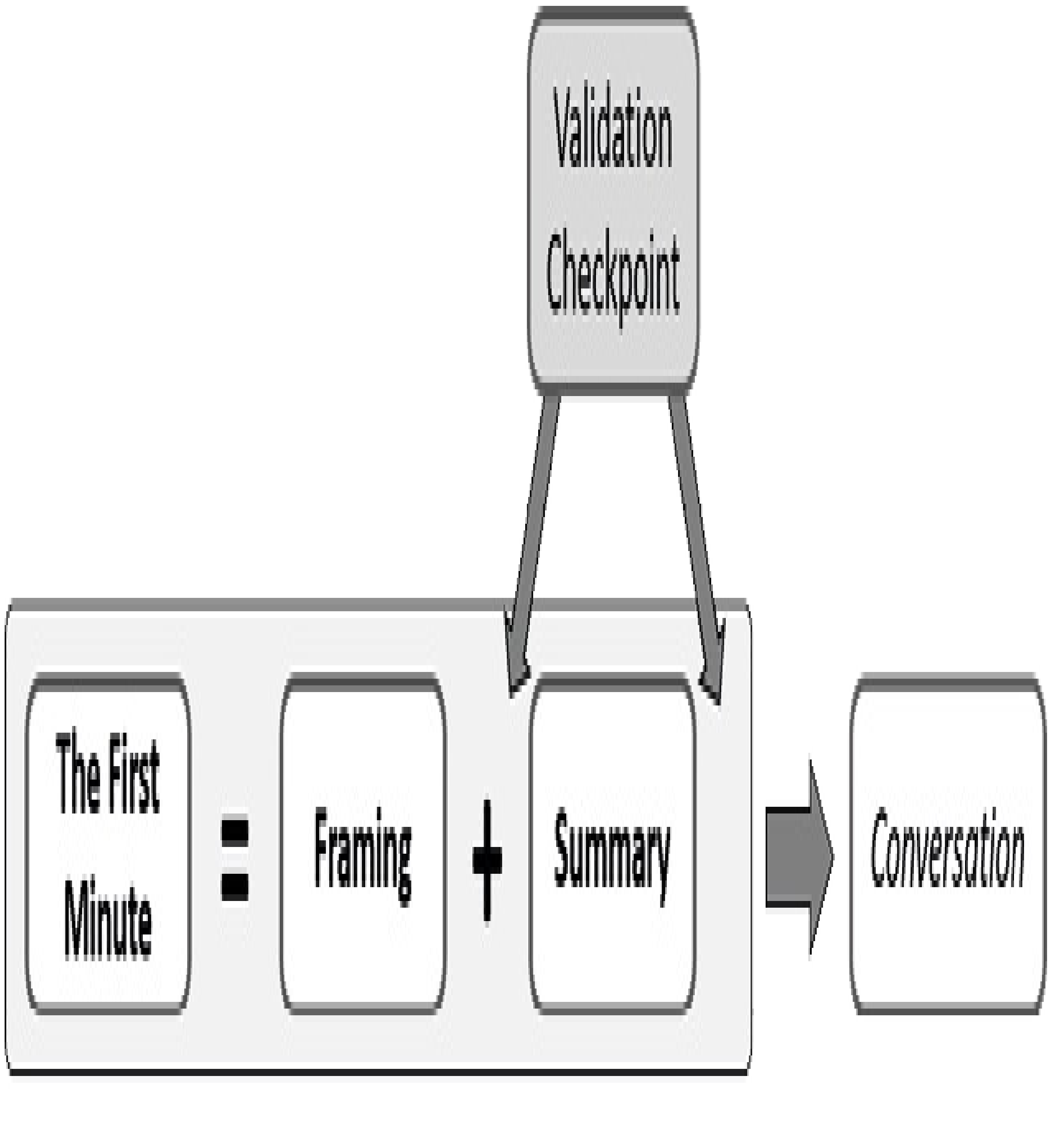
Do you have time to talk about this now?

Do you have any questions about what I just described?

Each of these questions provides your audience with a chance to advise you if they cannot continue the conversation.

WHEN TO ADD THE VALIDATION CHECKPOINTS

The validation checkpoint can be used after the framing, or at the end of the structured summary. There are pros and cons to each.



Validation Checkpoint
The First Minute
=
Framing
+
Summary
Conversation

Validating after Framing (but before summary):

Pros: Quickly allows your audience to end the conversation if they are not the right person to help or if they don’t have the time right now.

Cons: Your audience has limited information to assess the urgency of the topic. They may not fully understand what you need because they haven’t heard the goal, problem, and solution.

Validating after the structured summary:

Pros: Your audience has enough information to understand the problem and the request.

Cons: It takes longer to get to the validation checkpoint. While a minute may not seem like a long time to wait, it can be if you stopped the person on their way to another meeting or to the bathroom!

Whenever you choose to add the validation checkpoint, this simple step gives the other person a choice to prioritize the conversation you want to have against the other things demanding their time and attention.

What if I don’t know the right person to talk to?

Sometimes you don’t know who to speak to about your topic or problem. In this case the first problem you are trying to solve is locating the right contact. This means the framing and structured summary for your conversation should be focused on finding the person to help with your issue rather than being focused on the issue. It is a small but important difference.

In this case, the principles of framing remain the same. You still use context, intent, and key message.

Example:

Context: I’m locked out of the sales system.

Intent: Can you help me?

Key message: Do you know how I can reset my password?

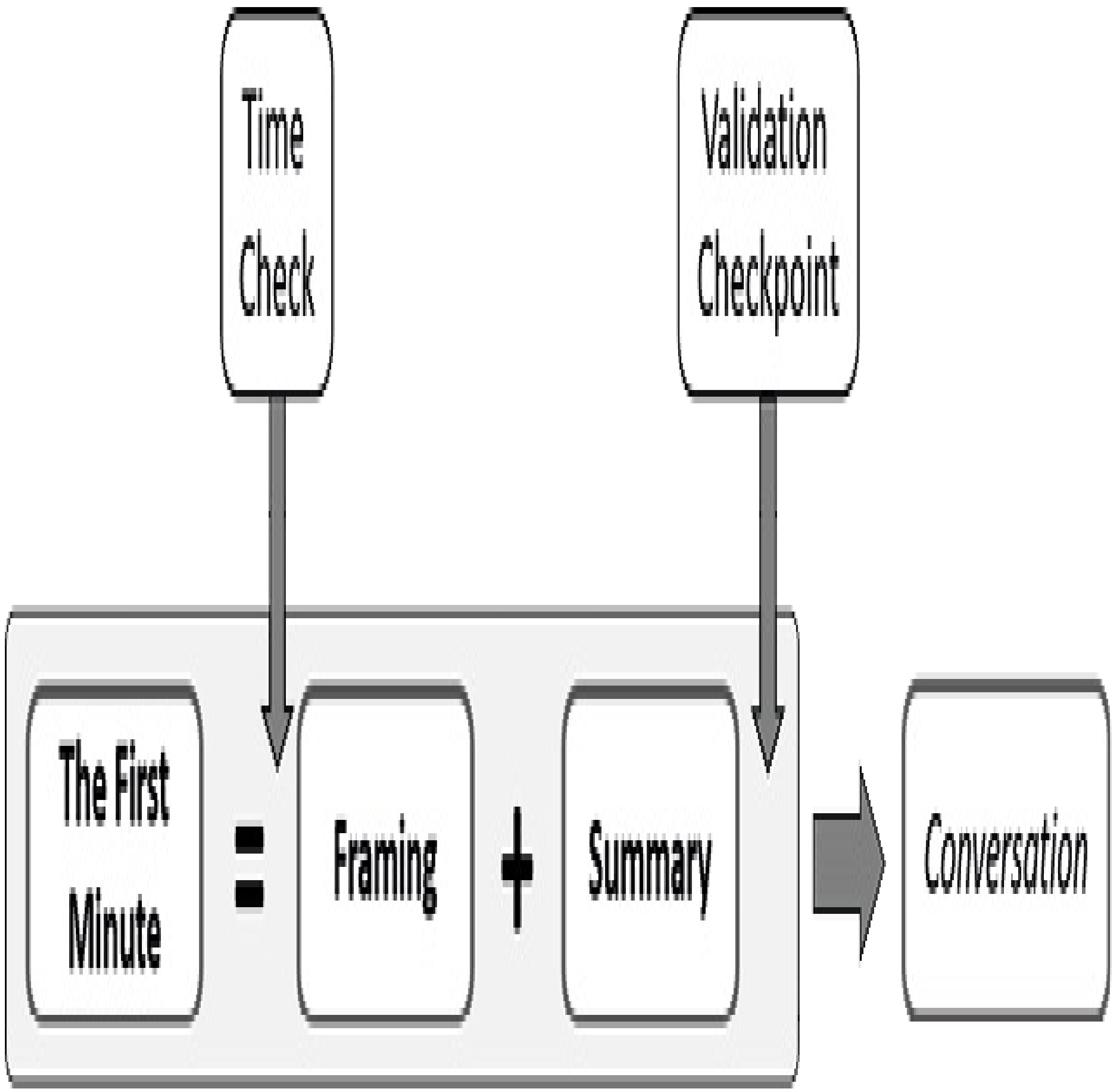
The person you speak to either knows the answer and provides the info you need or doesn’t know the answer. If the person doesn’t know the answer, he or she might suggest someone else you can speak to (e.g., “Talk to Anna. She knows all the tricks to handling that system.”), a resource you can look at (e.g., “Have you looked at the IT helpdesk?”), or any number of other suggestions.

If you don’t get the solution the first time you ask someone, use the same framing message with the next person to whom you speak.

If you are struggling with this situation, and you find yourself wanting to include more information about what you are trying to do and why, think about how you ask a stranger for directions. Do you give a long backstory, or do you keep the conversation as short as possible?

I know my preference: keep it short, get the help you need, save everyone time.

SUMMARY



Time Check
Validation Checkpoint
The First Minute
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Framing
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Conversation

Making sure you get the engagement you want in a conversation requires expectation management and validation that now is the right time to talk.

To avoid negatively impacting other people's schedules and their opinion of you, make sure you do the following.

Ask for the amount of time you actually need.

Get to the point quickly and clearly using framing and a structured summary.

Don't assume your audience has the ability to help solve your problem. Ask them if they do.

Give your audience the choice to continue or leave the conversation.

Being sensitive to the time constraints of others and being concise in your message are habits that all great communicators develop. Add the time check and validation checkpoint to your first minute, and you will truly get the first minute right. Do this, and your colleagues will appreciate it.

Up to this point, this book has focused primarily on verbal communication and conversations instead of emails, meetings, presentations, or speeches. In addition to talking to people, much of our communication at work happens via email and in meetings. The next chapter covers the application of framing and structured summaries in different circumstances. You'll see how the two techniques can help you get the first minute right in many workplace communication situations, including emails, meetings, interviews, status updates, and those awkward situations where you are unexpectedly called on to give an update.

CHAPTER 5

APPLYING the TECHNIQUES IN DIFFERENT SITUATIONS

As noted earlier, the techniques described in this book are relevant to more than just conversation-based communication. Emails, meeting invitations, escalations, presentations, and even interviews can benefit from these simple techniques.

This chapter shows how to apply the framing and structured summary techniques in the following situations:

Emails

Meeting invitations

Status updates

Unexpected questions

Escalating issues

Delivering positive messages

Introducing presentations

Instant-messaging platforms

Interview answers

EMAILS

A study of email habits by Adobe found that email continues to be the preferred way to engage with coworkers.[8] Thirty-nine percent of respondents used email as the primary method to ask coworkers a question, and 57 percent used it as the main way to provide a status update.

While email may have replaced conversation as the primary means of communication at work, it hasn’t changed the need to be clear and concise. Luckily, the framing and structured summary methods can be applied in the same way for emails as they are for conversations. This can reduce the length of an email and greatly increase the clarity of the message.

HOW TO USE FRAMING AND STRUCTURED SUMMARIES IN AN EMAIL

A general format for applying framing and structured summaries to an email is the following:

Context goes in the subject line.

Intent can go in the subject line or in the first line of the email.

Your key message should be stated in the first line of the email.

The goal, problem, and solution are labeled bullet points or separate short paragraphs in the main message.

Example:

To: Diane@work.com

Subject: Website updates – priority decision needed

Hi Diane,

Can you help me with a priority order decision for the website development team?

Goal: The product team has asked us to fix a problem with the login screen on the website. This is an urgent request because customers are calling and complaining they can’t access their accounts.

Problem: We have limited resources on our team, and another piece of work would have to move to a later delivery date for this change to occur.

Solution/Request: Can you help me understand the priority for the following items? Which one can be delayed?

Item #1: Layout changes for sidebar menus on the homepage

Item #2: Automate the generation of the PDFs

Item #3: Add a question form to the contact page

We have until Friday to decide on what to delay, so you have a couple of days. Please call me if you have any questions.

Thanks,

Chris

All the elements of framing and structured summary are present in this email.

Framing: The first twenty words show Diane what the email is about. The context is provided in the subject line, along with the intent. The intent is restated in the first line, and the key message is also in the first line.

Structured Summary: The goal, problem, and solution are labeled bullet points and stand out in bold font. Blank lines between each item help differentiate the points.

When creating the body of your own emails, you could choose to leave out the bullets and just have sentences for each section of the structured summary. However, the use of bullets with bold font showing goal, problem, and solution is a foolproof way to ensure your reader knows why each piece of information is included.

One other element is included in the example. The solution bullet is labeled “solution/request.” The addition of the word “request” helps clarify the intent of the bullet. If Diane only scanned the email, she would see the bolded words, and the word “request” would stand out because it’s a call to action.

Diane may need more information for each of the items before she can make a decision, and there could be follow-up emails or phone calls, but at least she has a clear description of what needs to be achieved, the problem, and the path to resolve it.

While it is important to use every opportunity to strengthen relationships, the majority of work email is transactional. Unlike verbal conversation, there isn’t often a need for relationship building and pleasantries in work email. This means the recipient will, more often than not, value a message that gets to the point.

SOME EMAILS DON’T NEED A STRUCTURED SUMMARY

Every email should be framed with the subject line and the first line of the email providing context, intent, and the key message, but not every email needs to include a summary using the GPS method. For example, if you are asking a one-line question, replying to a message, participating in a group email discussion, or providing feedback, there isn’t usually a need to write a structured summary using the GPS method.

For more complex topics, the first email sent should have a structured summary to ensure the topic is clear, but subsequent emails in response to the original message don’t need a summary. Think of email chains as a conversation. The responses from each participant flow back and forth naturally without the need for a formal structure each time.

The exception to this rule is if a long email chain has become confusing or is mixing up multiple topics. Email chains can easily extend to ten or more emails, and when multiple people are part of the discussion, the number of replies in the chain can get even higher. When this happens, the conversation can drift away from the original goal, and new or different problems can be introduced. This is especially likely when new people are added to the email chain partway through the conversation.

This is the time to use a structured summary in the middle of the chain. If the purpose of the conversation is no longer clear, or the nature of the goal, problem, or solution have become muddled, you should include a structured summary in your next reply. At the very least, someone will confirm if your own understanding of the situation is correct (or not), but what is more likely is that you will find others are grateful for the clarification and the refocus on the problem to solve.

If an email discussion has been going on for a long time, and the purpose isn’t clear, try replying with the following format to clarify what the discussion is really about:

Hi folks,

I’ve been following the discussion and would like to clarify the goal we are trying to achieve. Can you let me know if this summary is accurate?

Goal: [Insert your understanding of the goal here]

Problem: [Insert your understanding of the problem here]

Solution: [Insert your understanding of the solution here]

Thanks,

If you are in the midst of one of these chains, don’t sit back and accept the confusion. Instead, take a simple step, and be the one to bring clarity to the conversation. Summarize the topic, and get agreement from the group that your summary is accurate before allowing the conversation to continue.

Ideally, an email chain with lots of replies will be stopped and the discussion moved to a phone call or face-to-face conversation. In that event, the meeting or phone call should start with a structured summary to ensure everyone has the same understanding of what the conversation is about.

FORWARDING EMAIL CHAINS

There is one situation when it is always a good idea to include a structured summary in an email chain, and that is when forwarding email chains.

If you are sending an email chain to someone new, don't make the recipient dig for information or guess why you are sending it to them. You shouldn't expect them to read the whole thing from the beginning either.

Imagine if someone passed you in the corridor, shoved a stack of papers into your hands, and said, "Read this," and then walked away. How happy would you be with that interaction? Would you be inclined to read ten pages of notes to find out what the message is? My guess is you wouldn't be pleased, you probably wouldn't read the papers, and your impression of that person certainly wouldn't go up.

Most people couldn't imagine doing this; it's rude. Yet this is exactly what happens when sending an email string twenty emails long and starting it with a message that says "FYI," "see below," or "I thought you might need to know this."

When forwarding an email chain, write your email as though you are starting a new conversation, because you are. Provide context, have a clear intent for sending the email, clearly state the key message the recipient needs to know, and summarize the information. Don't make the recipient dig for information. Without a summary, there is a high chance the recipient either won't read it or will not get the specific point you want them to get.

Whether it is for information, an escalation, or to ask a question, a forwarded email chain should always, always include a summary from you.

LONGER EMAILS

Emails should be short and to the point. Despite this we still send and receive messages that are many pages long. The mere thought of reading pages of email text makes my eyes glaze over. We skip over these emails in our inboxes, promising ourselves we'll return to them when we have more time. Some people simply won't read an email that spans multiple pages.

Long, unbroken text is harder to read. If your audience is faced with a page of dense text, it makes them less likely to read it because:

The email looks like it will take a long time to read.

There is no indication of urgency for why they need to read it immediately.

It's hard to see the different sections.

There's no focus for their attention; it's not clear where they should look.

A page that is purely text requires your audience to start at the top and work their way down line by line to find the key information, calls to actions, and so on. This takes time, and with hundreds of other emails vying for their attention, the long, text-dense messages will go to the bottom of the list.

The simplest way to break up a block of text and make it easier to read is to add headings, bullets, and white space. This is where the framing and structured summary techniques provide yet another benefit; they provide the headings and bullet-point structure to create a clear message that is visually easy to consume.

Read the following two emails. They contain exactly the same content, but the second one has headings for the key message and for each part of the structured summary. Email #1 looks shorter, but it is much harder to quickly identify critical information.

Note: The examples use placeholder text. This is deliberate. The point of these examples is to demonstrate the visual impact of the structure.

Email #1: Unstructured content

Dear John,

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Cras sit amet bibendum tortor, ut ornare ipsum. In turpis orci, bibendum iaculis orci at, scelerisque ultrices est. Integer imperdiet sed erat eget luctus. Nullam et sapien in leo pharetra euismod. Nunc vel auctor felis. Donec vel turpis ut purus blandit lobortis sed sit amet diam. Integer sed finibus quam. Vivamus ligula nisi, tempor consequat turpis vitae, gravida aliquam ex. Cras convallis, turpis in Duis convallis dolor sit amet efficitur porttitor. Nunc vulputate dictum bibendum. Donec augue lectus, porttitor quis nisi a, tincidunt facilisis dolor. Vestibulum tempus, tortor ac suscipit bibendum, felis eros cursus ante, vel fringilla nisl nisi ut odio.

Donec condimentum dignissim massa sodales sodales. Integer ligula ex, congue eu arcu eu, dapibus scelerisque sem. Vivamus nec libero ut nisi ultrices condimentum id et magna. Mauris quis volutpat erat. Curabitur at tellus sit amet felis consequat tincidunt non sed justo. Phasellus nec hendrerit nulla, eget facilisis erat. Sed tempus eros sed mollis sagittis. Curabitur lobortis lorem nec lacinia pulvinar. Nunc nec mauris id libero feugiat aliquam quis ut lacus. Mauris luctus sodales velit eget cursus.

Maecenas tincidunt elit dolor, ac rhoncus erat hendrerit ac. Mauris eu metus nibh. Nam semper auctor ipsum at finibus. Aenean a fermentum augue. Curabitur vestibulum commodo dolor venenatis laoreet.

Thanks,

Dave

Email #2: Content structured using goal, problem, solution

Dear John,

Key message: Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Cras sit amet bibendum tortor, ut ornare ipsum. In turpis orci, bibendum iaculis orci at, scelerisque ultrices est.

Goal:

- Integer imperdiet sed erat eget luctus. Nullam et sapien in leo pharetra euismod. Nunc vel auctor felis. Donec vel turpis ut purus blandit lobortis sed sit amet diam. Integer sed finibus quam.

Problem:

- Nunc vulputate dictum bibendum. Donec augue lectus, porttitor quis nisi a, tincidunt facilisis dolor. Vestibulum tempus, tortor ac suscipit bibendum, felis eros cursus ante, vel fringilla nisl nisi ut odio.

Solution:

- Donec condimentum dignissim massa sodales sodales. Integer ligula ex, congue eu arcu eu, dapibus scelerisque sem. Vivamus nec libero ut nisi ultrices condimentum id et magna.

- Mauris quis volutpat erat. Curabitur at tellus sit amet felis consequat tincidunt non sed justo. Phasellus nec hendrerit nulla, eget facilisis erat. Sed tempus eros sed mollis sagittis.

- Curabitur lobortis lorem nec lacinia pulvinar. Nunc nec mauris id libero feugiat aliquam quis ut lacus. Mauris luctus sodales velit eget cursus.

Maecenas tincidunt elit dolor, ac rhoncus erat hendrerit ac. Mauris eu metus nibh. Nam semper auctor ipsum at finibus. Aenean a fermentum augue. Curabitur vestibulum commodo dolor venenatis laoreet.

Thanks,

Dave

It is preferable to keep emails as short as possible, but sometimes more information is required to clearly describe the goal, the problem, and particularly the solution. If you need to include a lot of information, the principles of framing and structured summary still apply.

First, lay out the email using the headings and structure described above. If you need more than one line or bullet under any of the three headings (Goal, Problem, Solution), simply include more bullets under that heading in the email. The goal is to structure the information in a way that makes it easy to consume and to leave no ambiguity as to the purpose of the message.

SUMMARY

The principles of framing, structured summary, and validation checkpoints are the same for email as they are for face-to-face conversations. Short, succinct messages with a pause for validating that the audience has the ability and availability to respond are critical for great communication.

Many people find it hard to be succinct in the first email on a topic, especially if they feel the information must be included for the message to make sense. Don’t give in to this temptation.

MEETING INVITATIONS & THE FIRST MINUTE OF MEETINGS

"If you send me a blank invitation, expect a blank response"

– Anonymous

Imagine a coworker came to your desk and told you to be in Meeting Room 2 at 10 a.m. and then walked away. They didn't tell you what the meeting was about or explain why you needed to be there.

How would you feel? Would you go to the meeting?

It is hard to imagine this happening very often, and yet this occurs every day to tens of thousands of people when they receive meeting invitations at work that are either blank or contain little information about the meeting.

Not only are blank meeting invitations rude, they are a major cause of inefficiency at work. A study by Ludic Meeting shows that the primary reason why meetings are unproductive is that the purpose of the meeting isn't clear.[9] The study reports that only one in ten people always understood the purpose of their meetings. A third of respondents only sometimes know the purpose of the meeting, and almost one in six rarely or never know what the meetings are about. A different study by Bain and Co reports an average of 15 percent of every working day is spent in meetings.[10] That figure increases to 35 percent or more for managers and executives.

The amount of time we spend in meetings each day, and the lack of clear purpose for them, add up to numerous meetings where the attendees don't know why they are there. Despite this, blank meeting invitations or invitations with little to no information in them are a fact of life in most companies.

The good news is, an easy fix for some of the main complaints we have about meetings is readily available. Using a modified version of framing and including a structured summary in every meeting invitation will ensure the recipients of invitations will always know what the meeting is about and why they are being asked to attend.

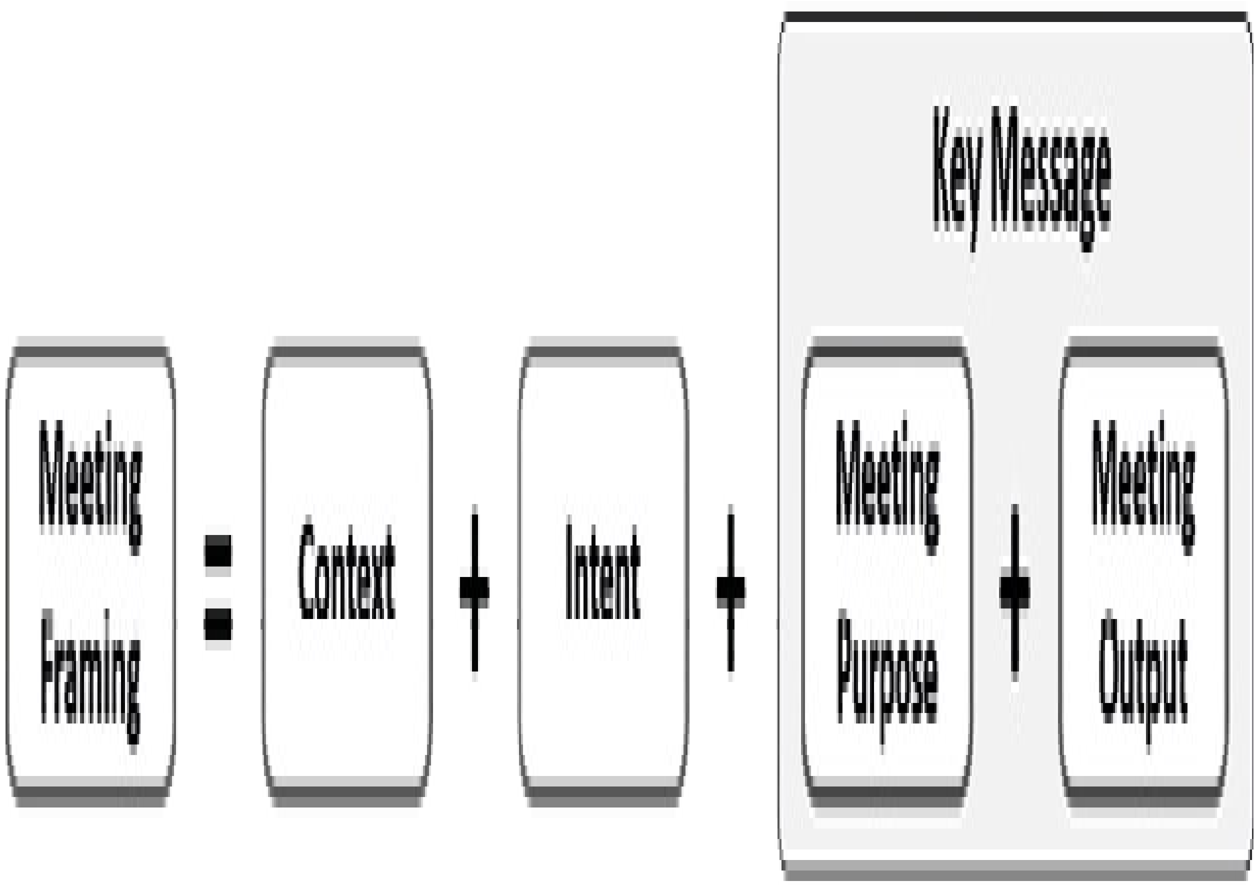
PROVIDE A CLEAR PURPOSE IN YOUR INVITATIONS

If the purpose of a meeting isn’t clear when someone reads an invitation, they won’t know why they are invited. It also won’t be clear if any preparation is needed, and it won’t be easy to prioritize the meeting against anything else happening that might be booked for the same time slot.

Meeting invitations are the equivalent of the start of a conversation. As the example at the start of this section showed, you wouldn’t walk up to a coworker and tell him or her to be in a specific location at a certain time without providing some context and a reason to be there. If you wouldn’t do it in person, don’t do it in electronic communication either.

Everyone who is invited to a meeting wants to know the purpose of the meeting and what will come of it. The output can be a decision, a more-informed group of people, a list of ideas, solutions, and so on. Whatever the expected output, it should be clear to every attendee what they will produce in their time together.

Framing is a great way to start a conversation in person, and by replacing the key message with two new elements, framing can work for meeting invitations too.


Meeting Framing
=
Context
+
Intent
+
Key Message
Meeting Purpose
+
Meeting Output

Context: Include it in the subject line.

Intent: Include it in the subject line.

Key Message is replaced by two new items:

Meeting purpose: One line describing what the meeting is for.

Meeting output: One line stating the expected outcome or output of the meeting.

Additional information can be provided in a structured summary after the meeting output line. This will provide a concise summary of the meeting topic and help people prepare for the discussion.

Example #1

To: colleagues@work.com

Subject: New project kick-off – need to identify people to work on it

(The text below goes into the body of the invitation)

Meeting Purpose: To kick off a new software upgrade project and identify resources to work on it.

Meeting Output: A short list of the people needed to work on the project.

Additional Information: Structured summary should be included here

Example #2

To: colleagues@work.com

Subject: Health-and-safety rule change – we need to prepare for the changes

(The text below goes into the body of the invitation)

Meeting Purpose: To review the health-and-safety guideline changes and create a plan to implement them in our department

Meeting output: A list of actions for us to implement the new health-and-safety guidelines.

Key Message/Summary: The company HQ has sent out new health-and-safety guidelines. We have one month to prepare before the new rules are enforced. The changes are not significant, but we need to make sure we are ready.

Additional Information: Structured summary may or may not be included here.

The person sending the second example chose to keep the key message in the framing in addition to the meeting purpose and meeting output. This gives some background information that may help invitees understand the situation better. It is a halfway step between including no additional information and including a structured summary. You may choose to do this instead of adding a full structured summary if the information in the key message is sufficient to ensure the invitees have a clear understanding of the meeting.

As these examples show, it doesn't take much to provide recipients with enough information to understand why they are invited. In only two or three bullet points, you can provide good introductory content, define the purpose of the meeting, and ensure the invitees know why they are invited.

Tip: When using the structure above, keep the bolded words in the invite. They guide readers through the message and make it easier to understand.

What about the time check and validation checkpoints?

Neither a time check nor a validation checkpoint are needed in an electronic meeting invitation.

In face-to-face conversation, a time check is needed to give the audience an option to defer the conversation to a later time. This isn't needed in meeting invitations because the recipients can choose to look at the invitation whenever they want and can return to it at a later time if needed.

The validation checkpoint isn't needed either because the response to the invitation serves as its own validation. The recipient will either accept, decline, or respond as tentative. They may also ask questions if needed.

What about agendas?

Conventional advice says all meetings should have an agenda. If a meeting has one purpose, and that purpose is to solve a specific problem, an invitation that includes the meeting purpose and the meeting output is the agenda. Adding a formal agenda only creates more work for the person setting up the meeting and is another document that invitees need to read.

If a meeting has multiple topics, there is value in having an agenda to show the topics. If each topic has a different speaker, an agenda can help show the order the topics will appear in the meeting. Even with an agenda, the principles of framing still hold. Meetings have common themes, even if the topics discussed are varied. The framing for the invitation should relate to the common theme and, if appropriate, each topic on the agenda can have its own framing and structured summary in the same way multi-topic conversations are framed.

During the meeting, each item on the agenda should be introduced as though starting a new conversation, using all the principles and techniques of framing and structured summary.

Agenda

Agenda topic 1:
Framing

Agenda topic 2:
Framing

Agenda topic 3:
Framing

Agenda topic 4:
Framing

IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY WITH A CLEAR PURPOSE AND INTRODUCTION

Starting a meeting well improves the chance of it being productive. If you include the meeting purpose, meeting outputs, and a structured summary in the invitation, you have a ready-made introduction for the first minutes of the meeting.

I recommend using framing and structured summary methods to write the meeting invitation and then use that same content to start the meeting. Even though the information is already in the invite, there are multiple reasons to review it again at the start of the meeting.

Not everyone reads the invite. Don’t assume all the attendees are aware of the meeting purpose.

Anyone who did read the invite may have done so when they received it days or weeks ago, and they probably don’t have the detail in their heads.

A clear introduction focuses the attendees on the topic at hand.

The audience is aligned. Everyone hears the same message about the goal, the problem and the proposed solution. You are all starting from the same description of the situation, and this helps remove assumptions.

It provides an opportunity for people to ask questions and validate or clarify the goal, problem, or solution. If something isn’t clear, it is better to address it at the start of the meeting so that everyone is working from the same understanding.

It calms the nerves. If you are nervous about leading the meeting, it gives you a minute to ease into the discussion. You can read the notes you already prepared, so you don’t even have to think about what to say in the introduction.

By talking about the meeting output and including the solution as part of the structured summary, you greatly reduce the time spent talking through the history of a problem. The attendees start the meeting focused on solving the problem.

I spent many years in jobs that required me to jump from meeting to meeting without a gap. In those situations, I needed to shift mentally to the new topic in a matter of minutes. This was even harder if I was leading the meetings because my head was still processing the outcome of the previous discussion when trying to start the next one.

To make things easier, and to prevent mixing topics between different calls, I would start all my own meetings with a recap of the information included in the invitation. Not only did this help me shift my thoughts to the topic at hand, it also forced me to write good, clear invitations because I knew they would be the script I used in the meeting.

Tip: Make meeting introductions easier for yourself by creating a well-structured invitation.

DON’T FORWARD BLANK MEETING INVITATIONS

Adding someone to a meeting is easy; a few mouse clicks, and the invite is sent. With the increase in remote working and virtual meetings on the phone or video, room size is no longer a physical limitation to the number of people who can attend a meeting. By lowering the barriers to include people in meetings, we have filled our calendars with meetings that are not always relevant to us.

Forwarding a meeting invitation isn’t a problem, but forwarding a blank or unclear invitation is. If a blank meeting invitation is forwarded, recipients either need to ask the meeting organizer for more information, or they must choose between ignoring the request or attending the meeting to find out what it’s about. Either one of these options will increase the risk of you being known as a bad communicator.

As an additional benefit, when you include clear information in your invitations, you will reduce the number of emails you get from people asking what the meeting is about.

REDUCE IRRELEVANT MEETINGS BY USING VALIDATION CHECKPOINTS

Meeting invitations don’t need a validation checkpoint (as explained earlier), but there is a lot of value in including one at the start of the meeting itself.

Even if you do include a good introduction and description in a meeting invitation, some people who receive the invite won’t read the content. This happens more often than you would think. These are the people who are most likely to sit through the meeting wondering why they were invited. That is a waste of time for them and a waste of time for you if you don’t get the input you expect or need from them. This situation can also damage your reputation as a good communicator.

Adding a validation checkpoint after introducing the meeting using framing and a structured summary, provides the following benefits.

It is a natural point for the attendees to ask clarifying questions about the purpose of the meeting, the background, or the summary information.

It allows the group to confirm the right people are in the meeting.

It is the ideal time to let people choose to leave the meeting.

The first two benefits are self-explanatory. The third benefit makes meeting organizers uncomfortable. It can be hard enough to get people to join a meeting in the first place, so why would you give people a chance to leave? If you work in a professional environment where people are accountable for their actions and output, then every person should be able to decide if they can get value from or provide value to a meeting. The key to this working is to give enough information for the participants to make an informed choice.

After delivering the introduction, give people the option to opt out of the meeting using a validation checkpoint. The simplest way to do this is to say, “If this isn’t something you need to be involved in, please feel free to leave.”

The framing combined with the structured summary should provide enough information for the people in the meeting to assess their own level of involvement. Then it is up to every participant to decide if they need to be there.

This may seem crazy; you might think everyone would get up and leave. However, while one or two might drop out, most will stay. Those who leave are doing themselves and the company a favor by choosing to use their time on higher-value activities.

Note: I freely admit this approach isn’t appropriate in every situation. Some

teams are too new, too inexperienced, or not aware of the professionalism required for them to be empowered. If you know that specific people must be in the meeting for any reason, name them as having to stay. You don't want to have a key participant leave when you know he or she is needed. Everyone else gets the choice to leave.

Some people are nervous about leaving a meeting and may choose to stay. If you know someone isn't necessary for the conversation, you can say you don't think they will get much from the meeting and ask if they would like to leave. Always give a clear reason, e.g., "Hi, Kim, we aren't covering anything related to your team today. You can stay if you want to, but I don't mind if you leave." Sometimes they take the opportunity to leave, and sometimes they stay. Either one is fine. The key thing is you are not demanding people stay in your meeting; therefore, no one can accuse you of wasting people's time.

This step is helpful when you have recurring meetings where the topics may change from one meeting to the next, and the whole audience may not get value from the topics in a given week. Use the validation checkpoint to give people their time back, and they will be grateful.

This attendee validation step has another benefit. By making the attendees accountability for choosing to stay, I've found attendees have a greater engagement in the discussion.

Should you write meeting invitations like you're writing an email?

It's up to you whether you want to start the message in the meeting invite the same way you would write an email (e.g., starting with "Dear John"). Personal preference and style play a big part in this decision.

I recommend starting the invitation with the meeting purpose statement and skipping the "Dear John" lines. I say this for two reasons.

Most meetings involve multiple people, so picking one name to address the meeting invitation to is awkward. It’s also impractical to list all the invitees by name at the start of the message.

Many people read meeting invitations on their phones. With limited screen space, it helps to have the meeting purpose in the first line of the message. This increases the likelihood it will be seen and read, which, in turn, improves attendance and engagement.

If you feel uncomfortable with the structured but impersonal approach of framing, you can add a personal note or email-style message after the key information.

>> ACTIVITY <<

Find an invitation on your work calendar that you have sent for a meeting that is coming up soon.

Does it provide a clear picture of what the meeting is about?

Does it contain the elements described in this chapter?

If not, rewrite the invitation to include the meeting purpose, the desired output, and a key message or summary.

When you’ve written it, send it as an update to all the attendees. If you are worried about sending too many meeting updates, know that many people will appreciate the clarity of the updated invite, and it is unlikely they’ll be annoyed by the additional item in their email inboxes. If you don’t want to update existing meeting invitations, make sure you use this format in the next meeting invites you send. You can’t fix the past, but you can make a positive change for the future.

SUMMARY

Meetings are a challenge at work. All too often we receive invitations that are blank or unclear. We also experience meetings that start without a clear introduction. Meeting invitations are the start of a new line of communication and should be framed and summarized in a similar way to starting a face-to-face conversation.

Use context, intent, meeting purpose, and meeting outcome headings in your invites. If you use an agenda, make sure each topic is framed.

The next time you find yourself about to hit “send” on a meeting invite, pause, look at the content, and consider using the format described above. If you do, the people who turn up will be better informed, more engaged, and possibly in a better mood because of it.

PRESENTATIONS, ESCALATIONS, AND OTHER SITUATIONS

Throughout this book I’ve given examples from a variety of scenarios to show how to get the first minute right in different types of work conversations and communication. Despite this, a few situations that aren’t explicitly described can still benefit from the application of the framing and structured summary techniques. This section provides guidance on using the techniques in the following situations:

Giving status updates

Structuring a response when you aren’t expecting to be asked a question

Escalating issues

Delivering positive messages

Introducing presentations

GIVING STATUS UPDATES

Using framing and structured summaries to give updates has already been covered in various parts of this book, but here is a summary of the approach.

Each update requires its own framing; either that or it should follow the approach for framing multiple topics in the same conversation. Frame each separate update, and ensure the context, intent, and key message are clear.

Status updates either relate to ongoing work or work done in the recent past. Statuses for future work are the same as giving a status for ongoing work because all updates should be focused on the action and the next steps to address an issue or achieve a goal.

Structured summaries for status updates should follow the same steps and principles described in this book. Even if the audience is familiar with the project, they may not be familiar with the specific problem addressed. If they are familiar with the problem, include a goal and a problem statement, but keep them short. Focus the majority of the update on the solution and next steps. This will help you find the balance between introducing the topic sufficiently so that the audience is on the same page as you and not wasting time describing something they already know.

The less the audience knows about the goal or the problem, the longer those parts of the structured summary should be. The focus should still be on the solution because that's where the value of the discussion is, but if the goal and problem statements are not sufficiently detailed to match the level of audience knowledge, the solution won't make sense. It is a balancing act that you will get wrong sometimes, but by using the validation checkpoint, your audience will get a chance to ask questions if they need more detail up front. Even if you oversimplify the summary, you will still provide a better introduction to your topic than if you had no summary at all.

FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS, NOT PROBLEMS

When giving status updates to people above you in the organization, it is easy to give a long description of the problems. Try to avoid that. While the audience might appreciate the efforts you and your team have put in to overcome the problems, they probably care more about whether the problem is fixed. Don't spend time dwelling on problems; focus on solutions.

It is equally easy to give long descriptions of the solution. This is understandable; it's a chance to demonstrate the good work you and your team did to overcome the challenge. Just like the conversation with the car mechanic, the audience wants to know if the problem is fixed yet, and if not, when will it be. They also want to know who is doing what to fix the problem.

If you are describing a future plan of action as the solution in the structured summary, keep the description short, and summarize only the key points. Unless you are asked to do so, don’t walk through every step of a plan to fix a problem. Give a summary, and then allow the audience to ask questions about the details. If they want to know more, they will ask.

The same approach is true for updating peers or people at lower levels in the organization. Give the summary, focus on the next steps, and then allow the audience to ask questions if they need more information.

ONE MINUTE MIGHT BE ENOUGH

In many cases, a one-minute summary of the status is all that is needed.

We have the mistaken belief that status updates need to provide detail on everything that was done to resolve an issue or describe all the things that have been fixed that mean the current status is good or “green.” For some reason, we believe our managers or our teams are interested in, or need to know, every last detail. This is one reason why status-update meetings often drag on for an hour or more.

>> ACTIVITY <<

Try giving your next status update using only framing, a structured summary, and a validation checkpoint. Add nothing else. You may be surprised at how few questions you get and how much shorter the meeting is.

When You Aren’t Expecting to Answer a Question

Sometimes we are asked a question or are asked to explain something when we are not expecting it. You might be in a meeting and are called upon to respond to a question, or someone stops by your desk and asks for something. Whatever the situation, being caught unprepared is not most people's idea of fun. These situations often lead to a flustered and rambling response.

In these situations, the framing and structured summary techniques can help you deliver a clear, concise response. Take a moment to remind yourself of the three parts of framing (context, intent, key message) and the three parts of structured summary (goal, problem, solution), and then work through them in your response. Use the structure of these techniques as a framework for your response.

Framing your response helps to clarify or reinforce the question you were asked. For example:

Manager: "Can you tell us what caused sales to be lower than expected this month?"

You: "Sales were lower than expected this month because . . . [Insert key message.] [Insert goal, problem, solution.]"

By repeating the question, you have not only confirmed that you heard it, you have also provided the context and intent for your answer. The rest of the sentence should be a one-line key message followed by a structured summary using the GPS method.

If you are faced with a question like the one in the example above, it's easy to feel defensive. After all, you've just been asked why something didn't go well, and human nature compels us to try to justify the situation. Using a structured summary makes it easier to avoid emotional responses and excuses because you are focused on the solution. Your response can focus on the steps taken to avoid a worse result or the actions being taken to improve the result in the near future. In either case the information is positive and focused on getting a better result.

As always, there is an exception to this rule. If you are called on to speak or are asked a question on a topic that you don’t have information for, you won’t be able to frame or summarize the response. Instead, be honest about not knowing. Respond with an apology for not having the information available, and propose a solution, such as getting the information and sharing it at an appropriate time in the near future (e.g., you can email it after the conversation or give an update in the next meeting).

Escalating Issues

Escalations happen when you need someone higher than you in the organization to take action or be aware of a situation. Both of these scenarios have been covered in previous chapters in the “Heads- up/FYI” and “Request for Help” examples.

Framing and structured summaries are essential for good communication when escalating an issue for the following reasons.

You get to the point faster.

Framing and structured summaries are fact-based. This reduces the chance of using emotion and giving excuses, which makes it easier for the person receiving the escalation to assess the situation.

Structured summaries focus on solving the problem. This ensures the escalation isn’t just a complaint about something that isn’t good but actually lays out a plan that focuses the attention on what to do about the problem.

If the escalation is done verbally, create the summary ahead of time, write it down, and take it with you. Don’t skip any steps, especially not the solution. That is the key to the whole message in an escalation.

If you are sending an escalation email, follow the approach described previously to ensure the email is clear, concise, and well organized.

If you don’t have any ideas for a solution to the problem, meaning you are using the solution part of the structured summary to ask for help, the method is still valuable because it quickly and clearly defines the problem and allows more time to discuss possible solutions.

DELIVERING POSITIVE MESSAGES

Many of the examples in this book focus on negative situations. This is by design because most of our work is about overcoming challenges and resolving problems. However, work is also about achieving goals, and we should celebrate those achievements.

Even when you are sharing good news, people have a finite tolerance for long, rambling explanations. It is just as important to get to the point quickly when giving praise or recognition as it is when communicating about negative issues. After all, it means there is more time to celebrate if people know the reason quicker.

Delivering good news follows the same rules as talking about problems. Provide context, make your intent clear, and get to the point.

Introducing Presentations

Presentations involve slides or speaking to a room full of people, but, in many ways, they are similar to conversations. The reasons for giving a presentation at work (other than for sales and marketing purposes) are to give information, ask for help, get feedback on a proposal, get a decision, and so forth. These are the same reasons we have most conversations at work, and the principles of framing and structured summary apply here too.

A wealth of information is available online about creating presentations, so I don’t intend to replicate or contradict any of it. The way framing and structured summaries help is to provide a format you can use to introduce your presentation.

As you start your presentation, the audience needs context, and they must understand your intent and the presentation’s overall message. They may or may not have this information already from the invitation. Whether the audience already has the information or not, it is good to give it to them again at the start of the presentation. This ensures everyone in the room is starting with the same understanding of the purpose.

After the introduction, you can work through the presentation material as normal. Remember, this advice applies to work presentations. If you are giving a presentation to entertain or you are giving a TED-talk-style presentation, these techniques may not apply.

Instant-messaging Platforms

Many companies use internal instant-messaging systems for communication between employees. Some examples include Skype, Slack, Microsoft Teams, Flock, and Chatwork. Some of these applications may no longer be around when you read this book, and others might have become popular. The point is, person-to-person messenger applications are a key part of communication at work.

The principles of framing and structured summary remain valid no matter what messaging application your organization uses. Messages sent via these applications are much closer in style to conversations than they are to email. The instant delivery of the content allows for a back-and-forth conversation instead of the complete message being delivered in one go.

You might start with a greeting and a few social interaction comments, but when you get to the work part of the conversation, the components of time check, framing, structured summary and validation checkpoint are still needed.

As with in-person communication, the messages you send need to make it clear how much time the chat will take, what you are talking about, what you expect the other person to do with the information, and a short summary of the critical information.

Just because instant-messenger apps seem informal doesn’t mean you should be any less clear in the way you communicate. If you follow the principles described in this book, your messages will be clear and concise no matter what method you use to deliver them.

Framing Interview Answers

If there is ever a situation where you want to get the first minute right, it is in an interview for a new job. Whether you are applying for a new role in your current organization or applying somewhere new, making a good first impression is critical. Interviews are chock-full of opportunities to get the first minute right, or wrong!

With communication listed as a top-three skill for almost all companies, there is no better time to demonstrate you can communicate logically, clearly, and concisely than when applying for a job.

Luckily, interviews provide one of the best opportunities to harness the power of framing and structured summaries. For anywhere from thirty to ninety minutes in an interview, you will be asked questions that start with phrases like:

“Give me an example of . . .”

“Tell me about a time when . . .”

When faced with these types of questions, you don’t have ten minutes to give the backstory and context for your examples. You need to quickly get to the specific part of the example that answers the question the interviewer really wants to hear about. Unless you are interviewing for a job in your current company with someone who is already familiar with your work, the interviewer will know nothing about the amazing examples you want to use to answer their questions.

By using framing and structured summary, you can describe any situation in under a minute. This provides the perfect format to use when giving your answers.

Interviewers want to know how you act in difficult situations and how you overcome challenges in a job. What better way to provide this information than by using a format that quickly outlines what you needed to achieve, what problems stood in your way, and what solution you implemented to resolve the problem?

FRAMING

It takes only a few seconds to prepare the interviewer to hear your example if you frame it correctly.

Here is how framing works with interview answers.

Context: Describe the situation using generic terms. Don’t use project or system names that may have no meaning to anyone outside your current team.

Intent: State what you needed to happen in the situation.

Key Message: What is the main message describing the difficult situation? This is usually the problem or challenge that you successfully overcame.

The exception to this is when you are describing a time when you didn't do something well (some interview questions ask for times of failure). In this case you can give a summary of the negative outcome or failure as the key message.

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

After framing the answer, deliver the example clearly and concisely with a structured summary.

Goal: Describe the goal for the situation. This may be your goal, the company goal, or someone else's goal that you helped them achieve. This may duplicate a little of what you said in the framing section, but that is alright. As long as you don't repeat the same words from the framing, it will help reinforce the information in the example.

Problem: Describe the problem that stopped you, the other person, or the company from achieving the goal.

Solution: Briefly describe what you did to overcome the difficult problem. If you describe a problem that someone else faced, the solution is what you did to help them solve it.

After giving a summary in less than one minute, you can expand your answer to provide more detail about the solution you used to overcome the problem and achieve the goal. As with any interview answer, you should only give relevant information and stop when you've said enough to answer the question.

Here is an example of a classic interview question with an answer using framing and structured summary.

Example Interview Question #1: Can you tell me about a difficult work situation and how you overcame it?

Context: I was signing up a valuable new customer.

Intent: I needed a senior manager to approve the contract.

Key Message: No one was available, and I was at risk of losing the biggest sale of the year.

Goal: I needed to get executive approval on the final contract for a high-value client by the end of the day. We had a hard deadline to meet, or we would lose the client to our competitor.

Problem: I had to get the contract signed by the end of the day; otherwise,

the client would go to our competitor, but the executive team was at an offsite meeting with strict instructions not to disturb them.

Solution: I contacted the admin assistant for the VP of Sales to ask if there was a phone number we could use for urgent issues. I also contacted my manager and asked if she could help. Then I spoke to the client to let them know we may need a few hours to get the signature on the contract. I didn't want to surprise them if things took longer than expected. My manager got in touch with the VP, and I drove out to their location to get the signature and then took it to FedEx. It was close, but we got the contract to the client in time.

In a few lines the interviewer has a sense of what was happening and why this was a difficult situation. The framing makes it clear what the situation involved and the problem that needed to be solved. The structured summary describes the problem in more detail, and the solution shows the multiple steps taken to resolve the problem. Each sentence in the solution is high level: no tangents, no unnecessary detail, and no rabbit holes.

This is a complete answer that can be delivered in less than two minutes. With such a concise answer, there is enough time to add a validation checkpoint. You could ask the interviewer if they would like to hear more or for you to clarify any part of your answer.

By stopping after the summary, the interviewer has the option to delve further into any part of the answer or to move on to another question. Many people give long answers that provide details the interviewer either doesn't need to know or doesn't care about. This wastes time that could be spent giving more examples of why they should hire you.

Example Interview Question #2: Describe a time you went out of your way to help somebody.

Context: I was on a deadline to submit the monthly account reports.

Intent: I planned to complete them that afternoon.

Key Message: A new member of my team, Kerry, asked for some help, and I had to choose between completing my reports or helping her.

Goal: Kerry was to give her first presentation to the managers the next day. All the department heads would be there, and Kerry knew this was an opportunity to stand out.

Problem: Unfortunately, Kerry had only recently taken over the work. It wasn't going well before she came onboard, and she was nervous about speaking to a room of senior leaders with only bad news to share. I knew it would take most of the day to help Kerry prepare, and that put my own deadline at risk.

Solution: I moved a lower-priority meeting to a different day and cleared my schedule for the afternoon, so I could work with Kerry to help her prepare for the presentation. She practiced presenting to me, we revised the slides based on some information I had on the project, and we prepared answers to the most likely questions. After she was comfortable, I went back and finished my report. It took a few hours of work that evening to complete, but it was worth it because Kerry aced the presentation.

In this case, the framing focuses on you and the situation you faced. This provides the context for why the example you are about to give demonstrates going out of your way to help someone else.

The structured summary is different because it describes Kerry’s goal, the goal of the person who needed help, instead of your goal. The problem summarizes Kerry’s problem and also ties back to the problem you faced. Unless you are impacted in some way, you cannot say you went out of your way to help someone else. The solution focuses on what you did to help Kerry as well as the solution to the problem you faced.

PREPARE BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

It is possible to structure an interview answer on the fly, especially if you are familiar with using framing and structured summaries. This can help when you are asked a question for which you are not prepared. More often, it is better to prepare for an interview by identifying the examples you want to use for the questions you know are likely to be asked. When preparing, you should write out the examples using the framing and structured summary techniques and review them against common interview questions. You might need to frame an example slightly differently to highlight the relevant key points depending on what the question asks for.

If you have examples that will be used to answer more than one interview question, you can frame the subsequent answers by referring to the goal and problem that you already described in response to previous questions. This saves you time and helps you get to the solution part of the answer faster, which is what you want to be talking about because it demonstrates your abilities.

The main change to make when applying these techniques in interviews is to make all the content past tense. Instead of stating what you need, say what you needed. Everything else is still valid.

Interviews are often stressful, high-pressure situations that tend not to bring out our best communication skills. By using the techniques of framing and structured summary, you can consistently give clear, concise answers that show the interviewer that you are a great communicator.

CONCLUSION

Clear Communication Starts by Getting the First Minute Right

The first minute of any conversation is critical to its success. The engagement, understanding, and next steps your audience will take can all be defined in the first minute. Without a clear, well-structured start, you risk confusing your audience, wasting time, and not getting the results you expected.

Give your message the best chance at being understood by preparing your audience to receive it. Set clear expectations for how much time you need, so your audience knows if they are about to have a thirty-second or a thirty-minute discussion. Use framing to focus the audience's attention, giving context for the topic, letting them know what you intend for them to do with the information, and then getting to the point quickly with a key message.

Having prepared your audience to receive your message, keep their attention with a clear structured summary of your topic. Most work conversations are rooted in solving problems and achieving goals. Summarize your topic with a clear statement of your goal. This helps people see what you are trying to achieve. Give a short description of the specific problem that is preventing you from achieving the goal, and then propose a solution, which may be an actual solution to the problem or a request to help find a solution. Either way, make sure the summary focuses on the future and doesn't dwell on the past.

Unless you are giving an entertaining or suspenseful speech, your topic should always be summarized in a few lines at the start. This helps your audience see the whole picture. It doesn't matter how complex your topic is; anything can be summed up in a few lines.

Finally, don't forget that communication involves two or more people. While you might be ready to talk about your topic, your audience may not be. Make sure you validate that your audience has the ability and the availability to engage in the conversation. Give them an opportunity to defer the conversation to another time or to redirect you to someone else who can help.

The techniques described in this book are simple, but it takes time, practice, and the application of these techniques in a wide range of situations to get comfortable with them. It may help to write out the framing and structured summary for each message before speaking to your audience. It only takes a minute or two to write these down, and you'll get those minutes back many times over in the shorter, more effective conversations you have every day.

Over time you will find it easier to think in terms of context, intent, key message, goal, problem, and solution. Eventually, you won't need to write anything down before you use it in conversation, although you may still choose to prepare some notes in exceptional situations. I still write my own summaries when the topic is complex, or the conversation is particularly important. It has never hurt me to be prepared when it really matters.

Thank you for allowing me to share this information with you. Use these techniques, and I am confident that you will become known as a great communicator because you'll have clearer, more effective work conversations that get results.

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