

Every Word Counts

Brian Billick's guidelines for better communication



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In 2000, Brian Billick coached the Baltimore Ravens to their first Super Bowl title.

What you may not know is that Billick's first job in the NFL was in the communications department of the San Francisco 49ers. That's right, in 1979, Bill Walsh hired Billick as the team's PR guy.

With an undergraduate degree in communications, and a co-author credit on Bill Walsh's famous book *Finding The Winning Edge*, Billick is someone we should listen to when it comes to the craft of using language as a coach.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the longest chapter in Billick's own book is titled *Be A Communicator*, and delves into the finer detail of the most crucial craft skill a coach possesses.

Here are Brian Billick's tips to make you a more effective communicator:

Verbal Communication

- Talking *at* someone is a monologue — not communication.
- Keep it simple. Don't confound the main point of your message with a maze of meandering or complicated words.
- Avoid a patronizing tone.
- Match your tone to your intentions.
- Hear silence as its intended.
- Be sensitive to whether your feedback is actually wanted.
- Recognize the difference between defending ideas and being defensive.
- Make the words you use an asset — not an impediment.
- Be specific. Don't buy into the premise that 'just any word will do'. It won't.
- Get to the point. Confusion often increases in direct proportion to the number of words you use.
- Get your thinking straight. Muddled thinking can and will obscure your message.
- Say what you mean and mean what you say. Establish a track record of truthfulness.
- Employ proper grammar.
- Enunciate.
- Speak with an appropriate level of formality and informality.
- Project success. You don't just sound like you feel, you also think the way you sound.

Presentation Skills

Before giving any presentation, Billick recommends you spend ample time consider why you're giving it in the first place. He outlines some of the common objectives of a talk:

- to inform or instruct
- to sell or persuade
- to arouse interest
- to make recommendations
- to initiate action
- to set the stage for further action
- to interpret or clarify
- to gather ideas
- to explore ideas
- to entertain

Once you know your intent, you can set about gathering and sorting your material, and polishing it for your audience. But without knowing the purpose of your presentation, you cannot accurately sell your ideas to your audience.

Here's Billick's tips for presenting:

- Be positive — sell weddings, not funerals.
- Understand, and use, the art of persuasion.
- Assess and focus on the needs of your audience. This is basic marketing.
- Acknowledge the importance of your audience. Don't waste their time.
- Capture the interest of your audience. Ideas are like eggs — they can be served in several ways.
- Read your audience. Know when enough is enough.
- Allow your audience to reach their own solution to a problem or point you want to make.
- Be flexible; give your audience an opportunity to speak.
- Select your words carefully and wisely.
- Honesty, truth, and sincerity go a long way in presenting you and your ideas in a positive light.

Listening Skills

- Listen to receive. Everyone has something to say that's worth hearing.
- Listen skillfully for the real message. Don't let poor delivery distract you.
- Listen for meaning — the whole meaning.
- Ask questions to clarify meaning.
- Work at listening. Effective listening requires that you apply yourself.
- Schedule your listening during your best times for listening — around competing priorities, pressures, and preoccupations.
- Minimize the number of external distractions that interfere with your listening. When possible, find a good place for listening.
- Be patient. Stifle the urge to give premature feedback.
- Remember that the feelings, attitudes, and emotions of the speaker are part of the message. These cannot be separated.
- Remember that the gestures and mannerisms of the listener are part of the communication process. Lean forward rather than back.
- Thank people for their solicited feedback. Individualized expressions of thanks sound much more sincere than global praise.
- Never end a conversation without being sure of what was said and why.

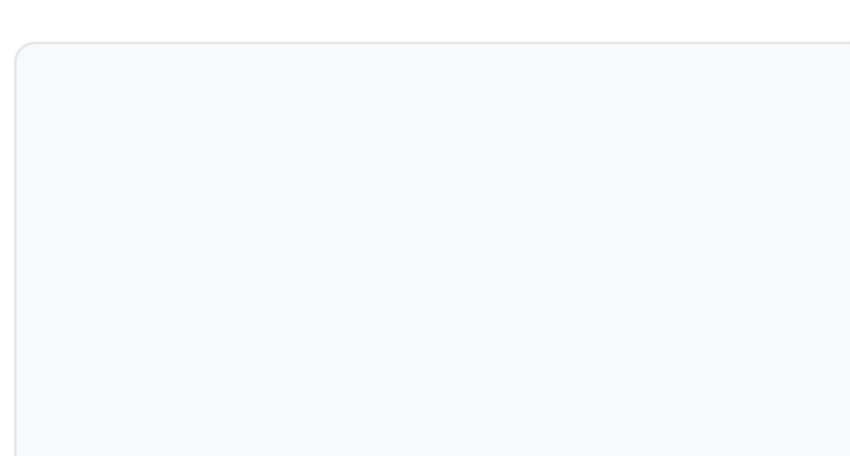
Writing Skills

- Choose your words carefully. The foundation of all good writing is effective word selection.
- Use short, conversational words. Never use technical terms unless you are certain that your reader will understand them.
- Select the word that best fits what you mean. Don't worry about impressing your reader with 'academic sounding' words.
- Avoid using words that are either overused or may be misunderstood.
- Write 'actively'. Verbs are 'doing words', which provide energy, clarity, and directness to your message.
- Use clear, natural phrases. Like words, the best phrases come naturally from the way you speak.
- Write clear, complete sentences. A sentence should communicate one clear idea in a simple, direct way.
- Write good paragraphs. Each paragraph should centre around its own theme, which should be clearly stated in the first sentence.
- Use transitions to connect your thoughts. Words, sentences, and paragraphs all flow together to help your reader move easily from one idea to the next.

Memory Skills

- Repetition is key to remembering.
- Visualization involves developing a mental picture of something you want to remember. Make strong and specific images. Wherever possible, personalize the images.
- Association involves linking new information to something you already know.
- Exaggeration entails assigning an even more embellished (even comical) image to a piece of knowledge you want to remember. The more exaggerated the image, the easier to remember.
- Acronyms involve spelling out a memorable word using the first letters of the topic you want to remember.
- Rhyming can be particularly useful when you want to remember something in a specific order (eg. seven heaven, nine wine, etc.)
- Key Words help create a connection between an activity that is familiar to you and a specific piece of information that you want to remember.

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