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# Straight Talk

Influence Skills  
for Collaboration  
and Commitment

Rick Brandon, PhD

Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author of  
*Survival of the Savvy: High-Integrity Political Tactics  
for Career and Company Success*

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**Also by Rick Brandon, PhD**

*Survival of the Savvy:  
High-Integrity Political Tactics for Career and Company Success*

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*To Bob and Dot Bolton, whose mentoring, thought leadership, and inspiration were instrumental in my life's work within the communication skills development arena. The many people whose lives they touched were forever enriched by their vision, wisdom, clarity, and heart.*

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# Introduction

## A Workshop-in-a-Book

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Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans.

—JOHN LENNON

The above John Lennon quote reminds us to take a good hard look at how we navigate our lives—including our work and personal relationships. Life is too short to just drift along suffering what the founder of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow, called “the psychopathology of the average.”

I wrote *Straight Talk: Influence Skills for Collaboration and Commitment* to give you my global training company’s workshop in book form. Its mission is to help you to turn off autopilot and become more aware and accountable around how you’re living and relating with others. Thank you for opening yourself to being more conscious and purposeful about your communication and influence efforts.

When friends and family heard I was writing again, some asked, “Rick, are you nuts? Aren’t you afraid the book might hurt your Brandon Partners training company’s sales?” Nah, I figured. Not all companies will be clients anyway, so why not share the concepts and skills? Besides, I’ve taught communication skills my entire career, and I get psychic goodies from making an impact. So, the thought of reaching more “participants” with this book is a high. OK, maybe I need to get out more!

I call what you're reading a "workshop-in-a-book," because it simulates the *Straight Talk* course's practical, down-to-earth, non-academic, and fun delivery style so that folks who can't attend the workshop can benefit. That's why the chapters are called "modules." I've tried to keep the book upbeat and amusing, to keep you engaged and at ease as if you were in the workshop.

## My Commitments to You

**A Wellness Versus Fix-It Model.** You don't have to be sick physically to get healthier. The same is true with your interpersonal influence health. I want to support you, building on what you *already* know about positive and impactful communication. I'm not here to criticize you.

**No Guilt Trips.** You'll discover some mistakes you've made in your interpersonal communication, perhaps even ways that you've been hurtful in your work or home relationships. Please do not judge yourself or beat yourself up. The purpose is *awareness* and improvement, not remorse or blame. This book is a NO GUILT ZONE. My mom was a travel agent for guilt trips. I'm not a big fan of it as a motivator.

**No Panaceas.** I'm not peddling naïve, quick-fix solutions. We're not talking miraculous overnight changes, but practical ones that gradually make a real impact. Hurricanes and tornadoes get all the publicity, but termites effect massive change with tiny bites. Small steps are significant over time.

**Back to Basics.** While many skills will be new or upgraded, others may seem like commonsense basics. But common sense isn't always common practice. True professionals get back to basics, whether it's an athlete at training camp or a master violinist practicing scales to become a virtuoso.

**Expanding Potential Rather Than Diagnosing.** I won't analyze why you communicate how you do. No psycho-archeological expeditions into your past! Just skill-building for the future. When I was a therapist, an acquaintance remarked with a smirk, "So, you're one of those 'shrinks,' huh?" I countered, "Actually, I'm a 'stretch.' I'm not into boiling down someone's whole being into some narrow label or telling them why they are how they are. I prefer to help people stretch their potential and expand their thinking."

## Please Make a Commitment to Yourself

I invite you to maintain a learner's mindset by adopting the suggestions below. They will help you get the most from this workshop-in-a-book.

**You Decide What Fits.** I won't play know-it-all or claim to know what's right for you. Treat this book as a "work-shop:" Let's *work* hard with self-examination and experimentation, but you get to *shop*. Try on each skill. If it doesn't fit, put it back on the rack! Some skills will fit perfectly, others with a few alterations, and some not at all. All I ask is that you try them on.

**Recognize Your Own Cultural Perspective.** Our interpretations of people's behavior are colored by our own cultural lens. It's impossible to account here for every culture's communication norms, so I depend on you to apply your experience and sensitivity to adjust or even ignore some of my guidelines. Please adapt the skills to take into account national, generational, racial, gender, and sexual orientation considerations.

**Look for the Donut, Not the Hole.** I invite you to look for where the skills *will* work, not for where or why they won't. Otherwise, when you finish reading, all you'll have is a list of where you *can't* use these tools. Let's choose a healthier, optimistic outlook about the skills' value and applicability.

**Be Optimistic.** Two twin five-year-olds are at the psychologist being observed. They're put into separate rooms. Timmy is a pessimist and Jimmy is an optimist. The *pessimist* is in a room full of ice cream, toys, a magician, and a bouncy house. He cries all day. The *optimist*, Jimmy, is in a room with wall-to-wall horse manure. He laughs with glee and has lots of fun making poop castles! The psychologist is dumbfounded and asks, "Jimmy, how can you be enjoying yourself, but your brother, Timmy, is miserable in a little kid's dream room?" The little boy looks at him with a twinkle of wisdom in his eyes. "Well, Doc, I just figured . . . with all this crap in here, there must be a pony somewhere!" In the same vein, I'll be throwing a lot of material at you, but I hope you'll look for the pony!



**Discipline Yourself to Sharpen Your Axe.** Taking time out of a busy life to hone interpersonal influence skills takes discipline. My definition of *discipline* is “doing what you don’t want to do when you don’t want to do it.” Investing time and energy to “sharpen your axe” (getting your communication tools in good shape) pays off in the long run. Abe Lincoln said, “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.”

**Don’t Take It Personally . . . On Second Thought, DO!** This is primarily a book on business communication. However, applying *Straight Talk* in your personal life will boost your happiness and help you to be more congruent with your values of caring, trust, and integrity. Your overall well-being will spill over into your work life success and satisfaction.

## Special Features of This Workshop-in-a-Book

You can expect the following components, just like in my in-person and virtual courses:



**WORKSHOP TIME.** Throughout the book, I’ll ask you to imagine you are in a *Straight Talk* workshop. Please mentally transport yourself into these involvement scenarios so that you feel what it’s like to be a participant.



**EXERCISE.** Since this is a workshop-in-a-book, I’ve packed in many practice drills and other activities to make your learning action-oriented and practical. Please don’t skip them. They will enhance your insights, bump up your enjoyment, and build and integrate your skills. You can write answers at [www.BrandonPartners.com/StraightTalkBook](http://www.BrandonPartners.com/StraightTalkBook), where you’ll find a downloadable *Straight Talk Exercises Journal*. Please, please, please either use that fillable pdf document or at least create your own *Journal* for completing these engagement tasks.



**HUMOR HIT.** I believe we learn best if we’re having fun, so I’ve included occasional relevant joke jolts to keep the reading “edu-taining.”



**SELF-TALK SHIFT.** In the movie *Yellow Submarine*, the Beatles say, “It’s all in the mind, you know.” Communicating effectively isn’t just about how we interact with others, but also how we speak to ourselves. Therefore, I have embedded “Self-Talk Shifts” throughout the book, examples of how to adjust your internal mental chatter for optimal application of the skills.



**DEMONSTRATION.** In addition to many shorter examples, at times I’ll pull together teaching points with longer demonstrations.



**COACHING HUDDLE.** In my programs, I stay attuned to participant struggles, possible misinterpretations of the content, and the need for encouragement. You are now my “participant,” so I’ve inserted “Coaching Huddles” that are akin to my chatting with you at a coffee break to clarify a point, add supportive input to help you over a learning hump, or check in on how your learning is going. We’re in this together!



**VIRTUAL VARIATIONS.** Our new work world involves rampant remote communication, so at the end of most chapters you’ll find tips for adapting the module in question’s *Straight Talk* skill set to virtual meetings, telephone calls, and emails.

## Our Workshop Agenda: Module Flow

Instead of spewing out a fragmented potpourri of techniques, the content flow is visually organized from the inside out, as shown below. After building the “Why” case for this book, we’ll learn together from the inside out, starting with the *Straight Talk Mindset*, next learning Core Communication Skills, and then funneling them into various easier and tougher interactions you have from day to day.

### Part I: Core Communication Skills

Your workshop-in-a-book first establishes the need for *Straight Talk* skills to survive in today’s chaotic, challenging work world (module one). We’ll next position the importance of your Self-Talk as the enabler of a “F.I.T.” *Straight Talk Mindset* (module two), using this acronym:

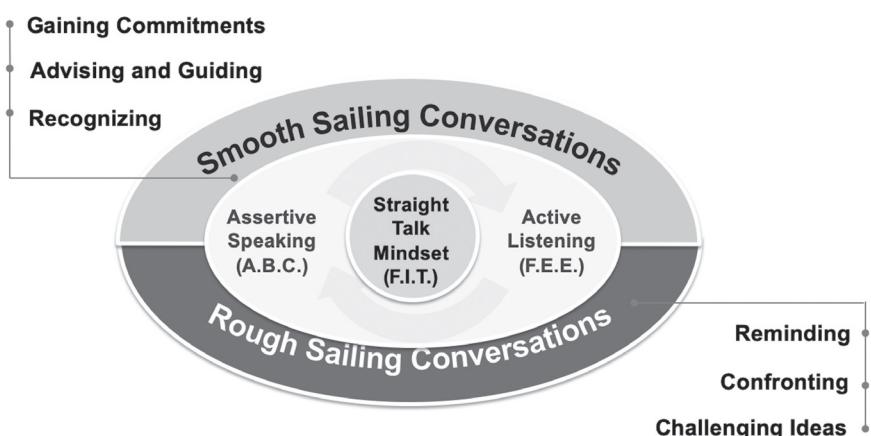
- *Foster the Business Case* for positive communication,
- *Identify Your Communication Patterns*, and
- *Take the Straight Talk Challenge* to be accountable for constructive communication.

Next, we'll hone the core skills of *Assertive Speaking* (module three). Because they form the building blocks of firmly yet respectfully expressing yourself, we use an "A.B.C." acronym for these *Assertive Speaking* skills:

- *Assertive Delivery*,
- *Behavioral Language*, and
- *Checking Reactions*.

You'll probably be surprised at all the benefits of empathetic, accurate *Active Listening* (modules four and five). It costs us something to "pay attention" (e.g., our time, our energy, and our own agenda). That's why the acronym for this core skill is "F.E.E." and stands for:

- *Focusing*,
- *Exploring*, and
- *Empathizing*.



*The Straight Talk Model*

## Part II: “Smooth Sailing” Conversations

The *Straight Talk Mindset*, *Assertive Speaking*, and *Active Listening* skills don’t occur in a vacuum. We’ll funnel them into Messages and Conversation Formats to efficiently and effectively conduct day-to-day workplace discussions. These less stressful *Straight Talk* situations are less demanding yet critical to master for reliable results, accountability, and optimal relationships:

- *Advising and Guiding* others who approach us with a problem (module six).
- *Gaining Commitments* as a key influence conversation to achieve buy-in (module seven).
- *Recognizing* helpful and positive actions (module eight).

## Part III: “Rough Sailing” Conversations

You’ll likely rate these tougher *Straight Talk* conversations right up there with walking on crushed glass because they often involve defensive, emotional, or resistant reactions that you’ll learn to de-escalate—including yelling, crying, stomping out, threats, and stony silence. They demand clear Message Templates and step-by-step formats to avoid detonation. The “Rough Sailing” applications are:

- *Reminding* others when there is “slippage” or faltering results (module nine).
- *Confronting* problem behavior or a pattern of dropping the ball (module ten).
- *Challenging Ideas* to respond to a shortsighted idea or saying “no” (module eleven).

## Epilogue: Weaving the Skills into Your Life

In this curtain call, we’ll identify and address four predictable challenges of implementing *Straight Talk* skills: faltering Self-Talk, people you don’t like, the “fade-out factor” that plagues any training, and back-home culture obstacles.

## Takes One to Know One

I don't claim to have perfected everything in this book. Far from it. Many thought leaders teach, write, and coach skills that they most need to learn themselves. For instance, the Greek orator Demosthenes was initially a stutterer, so he went down to the river every day and put pebbles in his mouth to practice speaking clearly. He became one of the greatest speakers (GOAT) after struggling. This book isn't about public speaking, but the example fits. Using good communication skills and managing my own emotions within my own relationships is sometimes a struggle for me, even though I teach the stuff! It's part of my own journey toward ongoing self-improvement. I like to say if we're not growing, we're withering (or dying).

Once, when I was being defensive and wasn't practicing what I preach during a family conversation, my wife, Cheryl, lovingly ribbed me, "Oh, hello, Mr. Listening Skills!" She broke the tension, so I continued the kidding by quipping, "Oh, you misunderstand, honey. I only use listening skills when I'm being paid!" We laughed, I apologized, and we got back on track. I believe that we all do the best we can. As my old friend Ed Lisbe used to say, "We're all bozos on this bus." We all blow it at times. What matters is whether we commit to doing something about it. Please join me in the courageous vulnerability of admitting that we can always improve our interpersonal skills.

## Ready to Rock and Roll?

My intent with this introduction was to orient you to the purpose of this workshop-in-a-book and how to get the most out of reading it. While I can't coach you in person, I trust that my explanations, activities, demos, and drills will result in your:

- *Knowledge Capability*: understanding of the rationale and how-to-steps.
- *Application Capability*: expertise and confidence to implement the skills.
- *Crisis Capability*: the ability to use the skills even under stress.

Part I

# Core Communication Skills

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## Module One | Communication Chaos

### *The Need for Straight Talk*

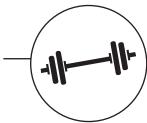
The Chinese use two brushstrokes to write the word ‘crisis.’ One brushstroke stands for danger, the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger—but recognize the opportunity.

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

### Defining Straight Talk

Communication challenges have existed since the birth of language, and monumental new needs have been sparked by the dynamics of our current work world. Healthy interpersonal performance is essential not only to survive, but also to thrive. Our real-world work pressures are eased with these interpersonal influence skills:

**Straight Talk:** *Assertive Speaking* to express our viewpoint directly and respectfully; *Active Listening* in ways that invite open expression from others, promote productivity, and cultivate positive working relationships; and using proven, step-by-step *Conversation Formats* for executing critical day-to-day discussions at work and home.



**Your Day-to-Day Pressures.** Start a *Straight Talk Exercises Journal* with a notebook or better yet, download the one you'll find at [www.BrandonPartners.com/StraightTalkBook](http://www.BrandonPartners.com/StraightTalkBook). It's a "writable" pdf document you can type directly onto, or you can print it out.

Now, list all the problems you've had at work in the past two weeks—big or small. Jot down a word or phrase for each problem, as long as you know what it means. I'll wait . . .

OK. Have I cheered up your day yet?

Next, code each problem as a "P" for People Problem, or a "T" for Task or Technical Problem. Some items may elicit both a T and a P. Now add up the Ps and Ts. For most people, there are at least as many People Problems as Task Problems, and many find two or three times more Ps than Ts. ■

### What's the Point of the Above Exercise?

We all have both Task Problems and People Problems that drain our time, energy, results, morale, job satisfaction, and health. It's often the People Problems—communication challenges—that keep us awake at night, create stress, erode our morale, and lower our productivity. Our stomachs keep score with ulcers from interactions that drive us crazy.

It's common sense, but not always common practice, to work on our interpersonal skills in order to address People Problems with greater confidence and competence. But the real-world needs for optimal communication extend far beyond your own People Problems and Task Problems sparked by the dynamics of our current work world. Organizations are having a wake-up call about the urgent need—an interpersonal imperative—for world-class communication skills.

### *Straight Talk* Overcomes Today's Hurdles

In mapping out all the below current workplace obstacles that demand optimized people skills, I hope you won't see me as a cynic who can light up a room just by leaving! It's just that in order to address and solve our demanding work life, we first have to recognize and admit that problems exist. Work conditions are tougher

than ever before. *Straight Talk* skills form a survival kit for today's arduous workplace conditions. Let's put a magnifying glass on the tough business conditions you face that necessitate the *Straight Talk* skills you'll learn.

## Miscommunication Mayhem

Rising performance bars, busy schedules, and constant voicemails, emails, and texts pull us in every direction. The warp speed pace of work leaves everyone too stressed to focus on relationships. Today's complex, matrix-oriented, global companies make effective communication more elusive than ever. The bump in skills demanded is analogous to the leap a high school basketball star must make to even make the team at a college level, much less the professional NBA level.

On top of that, managers under-communicate or miscommunicate due to limited time and resources, ridiculous deadlines, runaway organizational change, and massive responsibility without authority. Senior leaders' communication capabilities are also taxed by being stewards of their companies' resources, reputation, and profits—facing perpetual financial pressures, competition, and customer demands.

## Faulty Communication Torches Organizations

Within the maelstrom of challenges plaguing organizations, the cost of faulty communication hits billions each year. Countless time drains are traced to faulty communication. Misunderstanding poisons work relationships. Mistreatment sullies corporate climates and breeds alienation. Teamwork atrophies due to interpersonal shortcomings, and morale withers away into apathy.

## First-Line Managers' Quandary

Most new managers are promoted based on their technical expertise—achieving their *own* results. Suddenly they're responsible for getting results with and through other people, which introduces a grab bag full of People Problems. Supervisors inherit an array of headaches, especially if they're managing the same people they used to commiserate with about management (e.g., "I'm happy about my

promotion, but it's tough to give my friends feedback or hold them accountable"). This typical dilemma demands stellar communication skills.

## Executive Derailment

When an executive is axed due to communication deficiencies, the cost can reach hundreds of thousands per replacement. The Conference Board reports that rehiring costs 150 percent of an exempt professional's salary, 176 percent of an IT professional's salary, and 241 percent of a mid-manager's salary. Intelligence and technical skills are important for mid-level and senior leaders, but these are merely threshold capabilities—entry-level requirements responsible for only 20 percent of an executive's success.

Research reveals that the true success determinant is “Emotional Intelligence” (EI)—a critical group of non-cognitive skills and capabilities: empathy, social skills, self-awareness, self-motivation, and self-regulation of one’s emotional responses. The guru of Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman, found that the higher a leader advances, the more critical EI becomes.

## Engagement and Retention Shaky Ground

“My boss just doesn’t listen to me! . . . The communication around here sucks . . . Raising new ideas isn’t safe because they just get shot down . . . I can’t get through to her—she commits to following through, but no . . . I know it shouldn’t bother me, but I can’t get that conversation out of my mind . . . Do I dare tell my boss what I really think of her latest idea?”

Sound familiar? Gallup research reveals that only 30 percent of workers are fully engaged, and the number-one reason given is one’s manager. If you ask your family, friends, and work associates to tell you their biggest job complaint, many will likely identify troubling communication patterns and a demoralizing company atmosphere. Employees at every level thirst for positive “dia-logue” because they are weary of managerial “mono-logues” and toxic “duel-logues”! *Straight Talk* skills ameliorate this distress.

## Breakneck Rates of Change

Runaway organizational change prompts us to *under-communicate* due to time crunches when, ironically, that's exactly when it's better to *over-communicate* so that requirements don't fall through the cracks. Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*, a bible for change management, prescribed three coping mechanisms for the exploding rate of change: (1) learning to learn, (2) learning to choose, and (3) learning to relate. *Straight Talk* hits the bull's-eye for the third strategy by enabling effective communication.

## Remote Work's Downsides

The need for *Straight Talk* skills is paramount given our migration toward virtual communication and resulting disconnected relationships. Teleworking, remote offices, and virtual communication were escalating before the COVID crisis, more than doubling between 2005 and 2015, according to Global Workplace Analytics (GWA).

The COVID-19 pandemic put this trend into overdrive, doubling it again in 2020 to 50 percent of all workers. Tens of millions of workers around the world were redeployed to basements and home offices with video conferences and other virtual conversations replacing face-to-face interaction. GWA projected that 30 percent of workers would remain remote through 2022. The real impact is even greater.

The Gartner Report research found that by 2022, 53 percent of the U.S. workforce will be a mix of hybrid and fully remote workers. Up to 60 percent of companies will have adopted a hybrid arrangement, many doing so permanently in order to lower brick-and-mortar rent costs, eliminate commute time, and reduce distractions.

Gartner's survey of company leaders reveals that "82 percent of company leaders plan to allow employees to work remotely some of the time" and that 47 percent intend to allow fully remote work. Owl Labs' annual State of Remote Work Report, a study of 2,500 remote workers, predicts that one in two U.S. workers won't return to a job not offering a remote work option. Furthermore, 80 percent of workers expect to work from home at least three days a week after COVID guidelines and restrictions are lifted.

**The Human Costs of Remote Work.** The balance sheet savings of remote work ignore the price of shrunken in-person contact and corroded work relationships. The collateral damage includes social deprivation, isolation, and loneliness. *The State of Remote Work* study says the sacrifices include difficulty unplugging after work (22 percent), loneliness (19 percent), and lower collaboration (17 percent). Anxiety, depression, drug abuse, and suicide rates have skyrocketed. Virtual work's social isolation is surely a factor.

Noreena Hertz's 2021 book, *The Lonely Century: How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart*, says one in five adults is suffering from loneliness. Lonely workers are less productive, more likely to quit, and 30 percent more likely to die. Interpersonal contact and the enrichment of relationships through *Straight Talk* skills aren't the cure, but they can certainly ease the pain of separation, isolation, and depersonalization.

**Remote Work: A Glass Half-Full or Half-Empty?** Please don't get me wrong. Virtual technology brings opportunities for connectivity in our increasingly remote and global world. COVID prompted families to spend more time on video meetings—*seeing* one other rather than only having telephone contact. Virtual technology brings other benefits, like reduced commuting time, increased international interactions, greater ease for disabled workers, and admirable technical savvy in increasingly younger children.

However, let's also be cognizant of the drawbacks of virtual and remote work that are here to stay. Our virtual volcano is erupting into dwindling relationships and a more disconnected and depersonalized status quo. Our voice-to-voice and face-to-face interaction has become massively restricted, as documented in the frightening film *The Social Dilemma*. Our remote world isn't mutually exclusive from human connection, but the term *virtual communication* has increasingly become an oxymoron—like vegetarian meatpacker . . . jumbo shrimp . . . diet ice cream . . . the Village People's Greatest Hits (oops, sorry, "YMCA" fans!).

The remote work explosion also sends up a red flare warning about technology addiction. Organizational psychologists and human resources officers decry the pipe dream of a high-tech/high-touch balance going up in a puff of smoke. Mental health professionals lament the downsides as stunted personal and interpersonal growth. Has COVID's physical virus not only wreaked havoc on our physical health, but also constituted an emotional virus that we also need to cure?

## Module Wrap-Up

This module surfaced day-to-day problems requiring top-notched interpersonal prowess, the human and financial pain to individuals and organizations due to flawed interactions, and the unsettling relationship costs of our mushrooming virtual world. I hope the individual, organizational, and societal needs mapped out in this kickoff module whet your appetite for maximizing your *Straight Talk* skills.

The technology of the future—artificial intelligence, online classrooms, and more—will stretch our communication muscles. Interpersonal expertise will be instrumental for productivity and healthy relationships. Failing to optimize the communication aspect of virtual work will squander the tremendous opportunity for staying connected in a disjointed world.

Is optimizing communication in our increasingly high-pressure, remote, and virtual work world a utopian fantasy? NO! This book's messages are hopeful:

1. *Straight Talk* skills give individuals and organizations a fighting chance for surviving and even thriving in today's demanding workplace.
2. *Straight Talk* skills counteract miscommunication caused by work-world pressures.
3. *Straight Talk* skills optimize the in-person contact we still enjoy.
4. *Straight Talk* skills can enrich virtual communication and buffer us from the depersonalization of our virtual, remote lives.

The short story writer Damon Runyon quipped, “The race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong. But that’s the way to bet.” In today’s challenging business environment, which individuals and organizations would you bet on? My money is on those that grab the competitive edge offered by stellar interpersonal skills. World-class communication proficiency gives us a fighting chance—maybe even the upper hand—over competitors who are complacent about communication. *Straight Talk* to the rescue!