Tell people how to communicate with you *before they have to guess.*

Two steps for defining your communication preferences so colleagues stop guessing and start getting it right.

By **Joe McCormack** Originally published July 7, 2025 4-minute read

THE ISSUE IN ONE PARAGRAPH

Many leaders expect colleagues to figure out how they like to give and receive information, then get frustrated when people get it wrong. When nobody knows your preferences, people guess, and guessing erodes trust, slows progress, and weakens decisions. This brief lays out two steps for stating your preferences clearly: how people should bring information to you, and what role you want to play in each exchange.

SKILLS THIS BRIEF ADDRESSES

Four of the seven elite human skills

05 **Clear and Concise Communication**
A focused message leads with the main point and why it matters. See section 3.

01 **Attention Management**
Asking for actionable information instead of activity and detail protects your focus. See section 4.

04 **Prioritization & Decision-Making**
Urgency and importance decide the channel, and decision moments should be named up front. See sections 3 and 4.

07 **Executive Presence & Emotional Intelligence**
Knowing and stating what works for you helps others read you instead of guessing. See section 1.

Explore all seven skills

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Why does “it depends” leave your team guessing?

Imagine that on your first day in a new role, a colleague asks how you’d like people to communicate with you. They want to avoid what annoys you, understand your leadership style, and adjust to your preferences. They might ask:

- Do you prefer email or texts?
- Should meetings include handouts or slides?
- Can people approach you unannounced, or should conversations be scheduled?
- Do you make decisions on the spot or after careful deliberation?

Most of us answer, “It depends.” Those two words leave people unclear about how you like to give and receive information. Many leaders can only describe their preferences by reacting when something doesn’t work for them. That approach doesn’t work.

MY TAKE

I see this constantly with corporate, military, and government clients. They complain that colleagues, clients, and direct reports miscommunicate, aren’t brief, and can’t read the room or read them. Somehow they expect people to be mind readers who will figure it out on the fly.

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What does it cost when people communicate with you the wrong way?

In the BRIEF courses I lead, I often open by asking participants this question. The list gets long quickly. These answers come up most:

- Eroded trust
- Increased frustration
- Weaker decisions
- Delayed progress
- Growing confusion

When people don't know what works for you, they start to guess, and that ambiguity creates serious tension.

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How should people bring information to you?

Start small. You don't need a personality profile or an elaborate survey. Define three things: focus, frequency, and format.

Focus	Organize every message as an executive summary. Tell me the main point up front and why it matters. Don't bury me in details and save the most important message for last.
Frequency	Agree on how often you need to connect, whether that's daily or a few times a week. The agreement goes both ways, and it needs to be explicit.
Format	Know which channel fits the topic and timing: a meeting, email, Slack or Teams message, text, or phone call. People can only choose the right channel, and know when to escalate to another one, if they understand the urgency and importance of the message.

Getting this right takes ongoing conversation about what works for you and what doesn't, much like an eye exam where small adjustments lead to the right prescription.

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What role do you want me to play in this conversation?

Communication works best when people tell me my role instead of leaving me to guess. Do you want my opinion? Do you need a decision? Is this just for my situational awareness? If those roles get mixed up, I can't tell how you want me to engage. It comes down to three roles.

Visibility	Periodic updates on progress and issues keep me prepared. Send actionable information and insights, not activity reports or deep detail. Think of it as a weather forecast. If I want to know more, I'll ask.
Feedback	If you need my thoughts, critique, guidance, or reaction, say so, and tell me when you need it. Do you need it now, or do I have time to respond?
Decisions	When it's time to make a choice, approve a change, or resolve an issue, put it on the agenda up front. Don't slip it casually into the conversation.

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What this means for leaders

Over the years, I've paid the price for not being clear up front about what works for me and what doesn't. Everyone is different, so define your preferences early and share them. Your first attempt won't be perfect, but it will get people talking, remove unnecessary ambiguity, and set basic rules of engagement.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER FOR YOUR TEAM

- How should people organize a message they bring to me?
- How often do we need to connect, and through which channels?
- How will people know whether I want visibility, feedback, or a decision?

Adapted from Joe McCormack's LinkedIn article, "Job #1: Define Your Communication Preferences in Clear Terms (No More Guessing)," July 7, 2025. Read the original on LinkedIn

For more on concise communication, visit The BRIEF Lab and The Quiet Workplace.

Set clear rules of engagement *across your team.*

Talk with us about building clear communication habits in your organization.

info@sheffieldinstitute.ai · (630) 310-5190 · sheffieldinstitute.ai