

S P E A K E A S Y



EYE CONTACT BARRIERS AND BENEFITS

Why it's tough yet so essential
for effective communicators.

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The last time you were speaking with another person, you likely didn't consider how well you maintained eye contact with them. You did the talking. But when you listened, you may have been pretty focused on how much they acknowledged your presence. You've had the experience of talking with someone and feeling they really want to see how you react. And the opposite, too: feeling as though you really didn't need to be in the conversation at all.



That's because whether or not other people make eye contact with us

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changes the way we think about them and their feelings. For example, being part of a conversation in which we have “mutual gaze” makes us more likely to recall those faces later,¹ essentially increasing our recognition of that person. We also take emotions more seriously coming from a person making eye contact. Studies indicate that demonstrations of anger or joy are stronger coming from a person who is really seeing us with their eyes.²

Making eye contact appears to be essential to taking someone seriously and their making an impression on us.

The reverse is true too. We tend to discount the sincerity or trustworthiness of people who will not meet our gaze. Students in a variety of studies decided that people who avoided eye contact looked less sincere.³ We are more



inclined to believe something said to us by someone looking us in the eye.⁴

The research is quite clear from a communications standpoint: by delivering our thoughts eye-to-eye to another person, we stand to be more memorable,

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taken more seriously and perceived as more trustworthy and believable.

So, what could possibly be the downside? Well, when we are the one speaking, the eye contact that renders us so sincere and believable is very tough to maintain. Locking eyes is inherently stimulating to our brains, thrusting us into a state of high self-consciousness.

Researchers pointed out that “human adults” bodily awareness becomes more acute when they are subjected to another’s gaze.”⁵ The fine line



between self-awareness and self-consciousness means we can easily tip into a state in which we are supremely uncomfortable when maintaining that gaze with another, making it even harder to find the thoughts we want to convey.

However, studies indicate that we intuitively know that to think properly again – regain our senses – we can avert our gaze and our cognitive powers improve again.⁶ Eye contact is so intense it truly seems to use extra effort in our brains, and in order to do our best thinking, we must disengage with our listener.

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So, what is an effective communicator to do with all this? If we don't maintain eye contact, we're perceived as ineffectual, or worse dishonest. If we maintain eye contact, our brains are focused on, not to say distracted by, the intensity of that human connection. We recommend using a binary process of eye contact and thinking.

By breaking the two crucial components of communication into separate modes, an effective communicator can do both. When you are communicating, **1** use a



very brief pause – cease to speak for a moment, **2** break eye contact, **3** find your thought. Then, **4** return to the intensity of the eye contact – the gaze – with your listener to deliver that thought to them with utmost effectiveness.

By acknowledging the benefits of eye contact and our need to focus and think, we can be most effective as communicators.

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