Flat hierarchies. Open floor plans. Infinite ways to chat with the person next to you. It's a confusing time for workplace communication. Unless you know the tricks.

How To...

...Turn a Bad Idea into a Good Idea

"Continually ask, 'Why?' It's a good way to probe a speaker's thinking without making them defensive. Let's say you're running an ad company and a big brand executive comes in and says, 'We need to have a presence on Facebook.' You would say, 'Why?' And the guy would say, 'Because all of our competitors are on Facebook.' And you'd say, 'Why?' Because they want to position themselves as forward-looking and youthful. 'Why?' Because they want to make more money with young people. Now we're getting somewhere." —Jonathan Taplin, Director, Annenberg Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California

1. Be Extra Nice
   Text-based chatting platforms like Gchat can be convenient, but words alone can distort messages. "Yeah, thanks" often becomes "That's fine, now buzz off." Since you don't have an audible tone of voice when chatting online, it's important to be extra sensitive and complimentary when giving feedback. Says Mullenweg: "If you're too short or curt, people generally assume the worst."

2. Make the Call
   A disagreement over, say, a new product design shouldn't be sorted out in a tiny message box. "If you've been chatting for 30 minutes and it hasn't gone anywhere, just click the call button," says Mullenweg, who hops on Skype for one-on-ones and Google Hangout for groups. To keep people from talking over one another, keep a text chat going during the call, so a participant can pop in with a simple "Hey guys, can I jump in here?"

3. Focus Harder
   It's tempting when communicating virtually to do three or four things at once and leave the chat hanging. But if you were talking to a colleague face-to-face, you wouldn't just walk off while she was in mid-sentence, would you? Take the same attentive approach in the online realm. "Focus, just as if you were talking to the person sitting next to you," Mullenweg says.

4. Give Up and Meet Up
   Some conversations are just too heavy or require too many people to happen virtually, which is why individual teams of Automattic employees gather two or three times a year. The face time helps improve future online collaboration. "Once you've met coworkers in person, you're able to hear their voice and share their senses of humor," says Mullenweg. "It just makes the online stuff infinitely better."

...Have a Virtual Meeting

Matt Mullenweg has mastered the art of virtual conversation. The founder of Automattic, the company behind WordPress, didn't really have a choice: Automattic employs 134 people in 105 cities. We talked to him about his strategies.
...WIN THE MIND GAME

You're watching a football game, or maybe a sad movie. Your heart is racing, your palms are sweating, you're weeping. Why do the emotions feel so real? "IT'S PART OF WHAT WE CALL MIRROR NEURONS," says neuroscientist Andrew Newberg. Mirror neurons are cells located in your brain's frontal lobe, and they tend to react the same way whether you're watching someone do something or doing that same thing yourself. To harness the power of others' unconscious brains, kick every important dialogue with your pearly whites, "It smile at someone, mirror neurons mimic that behavior. To some extent, that person smiles inside."

..."YES, AND" YOUR WAY TO BETTER BANTER

The cardinal rule of improv comedy: Keep a riff lively with "Yes, and..." The phrase fosters funnier creative exchanges through positive reinforcement. Will and Kevin Hines of the Upright Citizens Brigade theater share ways to break out "yes, and"—along with other tools of the improv trade—in business settings.

1. Avoid changing the subject
   Example: Your friend says, "My boss is taking me for granted at work." Don't say, "I'm lucky. My boss is grreat!" That implies bad listening. Instead, commiserate: "I'm sorry your boss takes you for granted. He shouldn't do that." This is the "yes" part.

2. Offer words of encouragement
   For the previous example, you can go one step further: "Your boss shouldn't take you for granted. His job would be impossible without your help!" This is the "and" part. By adding compliments, you're encouraging your friend to tell you more.

3. Ask leading questions...
   When greeting your boss in the hallway, don't say: "Hey, how are you doing?" A generic question merits a generic, one-word answer: "Fine." Instead, try, "Hey, how did your son's soccer game go?" The specifics will prompt a more meaningful response.

4. ...And respond to generic questions with colorful answers
   If a coworker asks, "What did you do last night?" share a short story: "I changed the showerhead in my bathroom yesterday. I felt like a mechanical genius!" People are more likely to respond to active experiences.

5. Defuse awkwardness with wit
   Let's say you're at a boozy business lunch and you knock a glass of wine all over the table. Don't say, "Oops! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Sorry! Sorry!" Overapologizing is a sign of weakness. Instead, make fun of yourself: "I haven't even started drinking and I've already had too much."

6. Bring things full circle
   In improv there's a saying: "The end is in the beginning." If you're stuck in an endless water-cooler chat, refer back to the start, to hint at closure. If the conversation started with, "Did you see the Lakers game?" wrap it up with, "Well, I can't wait for the next one!"

...VISUALIZE AN EXCHANGE

Judith Donath sees conversations differently. The fellow at Harvard’s Berkman Center designs social interfaces for online interaction. As an instructor, she's given students the assignment of visualizing conversations. Here, Francis Lam, a new-media artist and former Donath pupil, spins an internal Fast Company thread into an infographic. The tower setup "has a subtly prescriptive air," writes Donath in her forthcoming book, Signals, Truth & Design. "One wants to make the tower of messages well-balanced." We'll let you judge.
The Art of Dialogue

...Pitch a VC

As an investor at Accel Partners, Theresia Gouw has heard her share of spiels from entrepreneurs. Here's her checklist for all the right (and wrong) things to say.

Tell your (brief) story
"VCs need to believe that you have authentic experience in the space. You've either personally felt the pain or problem you're trying to solve, or this is your second or third company and you know this industry through and through. Draw us in with a personal anecdote—a brief one—to convey how this idea came to you."

Use numbers sparingly
"Don't make an investor sit there and hear 100 different data points. Honestly, we're not going to remember. Focus on that one killer insight. Sorting through all the noise is how you show us your expertise."

Acknowledge competitors
"Point out the one or two top companies in your space, and highlight what they're missing and why your product is better. Failure to do this signals one of two things: Either you've been completely dismissive and haven't studied the market, or you don't have a very high regard for the VC you're talking to."

Cut the jargon
"Entrepreneurs use buzzwords because they're so steeped in the daily course of the business or they're nervous and revert to them as shorthand. If you continue to use them, it makes me think that you don't have a fundamental understanding of your company's product or position. I'm not afraid to say, 'Okay, let's pretend we can't use that word.'"

Ask me questions
"If your pitch starts to feel more like a lecture than a discussion, it's not a good sign. Pause your monologue and ask honest questions, to engage the investor head-on: What doesn't make sense to you? What are the one or two things you'd most like to talk about?"

Don't get defensive
"It's hard when people are criticizing your baby, but you can't get rattled. You should say, 'I understand why you might ask that question, but this is what our customers say,' as opposed to, 'Actually, that question isn't relevant.'"

...Cut the Urgency BS

There is No Value, No Unseen Potential, in Emails Marked "High Priority." In a world of texts and phone calls and walks down the hall, such message classification demands urgency in a medium that cannot guarantee it. "High Priority" is false. It is arrogant. A conversation killer. Outlook, entourage, and the rest: Please eliminate this feature. Let nobody waste seconds on its promise.

...Interrupt a Fast Talker

Tactics for four different scenarios

1. A caffeinated coworker
   Say: "Wait, wait. Slow down.
   The most direct way to address a speedy peer is also the most complimentary. "Nothing is more flattering to someone than to be listened to," says Daniel Menaker, author of A Good Talk: The Story and Skill of Conversation.

2. A boss that's zipping through instructions
   Say: "This is really interesting, but I'm not quite following. This is my fault."
   It's essential to respect the office pecking order and act more self-effacing, Menaker says. "It's not a cocktail party. You need to be modest and slightly apologetic."

3. A colleague leading a fast-moving group discussion
   Raise your hand. A hand signal is a subtle yet direct way to curb the pace of discussion. Your intent to participate is perfectly clear. According to Menaker, "You're saying, 'I'm just a student here. I have a question to ask.'"

4. An executive giving a companywide presentation
   Lean forward with a puzzled facial expression. "You basically interrupt without interrupting," Menaker says. By offering visual cues on the sly, the speaker will intuit that a pause is in order.
...TACKLE FAILURE

"AVOID BLAME. A lot of people will say, 'Oh, it's my fault. I can take care of it.' That doesn't help figure out why the failure happened and how to avoid it in the future. ASK QUESTIONS, ESPECIALLY AS A MANAGER. What do you feel happened in this situation? Is there something you could have done better? When you come up with a solution yourself, you feel ownership of it.

MAKE FAILURE A PART OF REGULAR CONVERSATION. Take time, as a group, to recognize what you’re struggling with each day. Ask each other, What are your challenges today? What is making you most nervous? That gets everyone talking and makes any future conversation about bigger struggles that much easier."

—CASS PHILLIPPS, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER OF FAILCON, A CONFERENCE THAT EXPLORES WHY AND HOW THINGS FAIL

...NEGOTIATE A SALARY

If you’re the shy or creative type, a salary negotiation is a far-from-comfortable interaction. Handle your next money talk with mettle using these principles.

1. KNOW WHOM YOU’RE DEALING WITH

Whether it’s a raise discussion with current employers or a salary conversation with a new company, it helps to know the bargaining style of your counterpart. “Chances are you aren’t the first to go toe-to-toe with that person,” says Brent Weinstein, head of digital media for United Talent Agency. He describes two types of bargainers: the person who is comfortable with multiple rounds of haggling and the person who cuts straight to the chase. Try to identify the type that matches your current or future boss.

2. IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT SALARY

“In a marketplace that is less traditional than it’s ever been, approaching a negotiation with creativity is important,” says Weinstein. “Some people focus on how much money they’re making. But there are other levers that can be pulled: What are the full terms of my employment? Am I getting equity? What’s the bonus structure?”

3. GO AHEAD, MAKE THE FIRST MOVE

Weinstein doesn’t believe the concept that whoever makes the first move ultimately ends up losing. “There’s a tremendous amount of power you have bringing the negotiations onto your turf,” he says. Do some research on the market value of your position and drop that bold salary request up front.

...DESIGN AN OFFICE FOR COLLABORATION

Studio O+A knows how to shake up the cubicle farm. With a client list that includes AOL, Facebook, and Microsoft, the interior design firm creates unconventional work spaces that encourage freer, more effective collaboration. Director of design Denise Cherry offers insight on three of O+A’s coolest designs.

1. The Cabanas

Where: Square’s offices

“The staff needed a place to go away from their desks to have a quick conversation,” Cherry says. So O+A built in what it calls cabanas: open-air cubby structures. “They’re upholstered on three sides, so they deaden noise, but you can still be part of the activity of the office.”

2. The Meat Locker

Where: Quid’s offices

O+A crafted a mini-conference room made of plastic vinyl strips for the software company. The heavy material filters light and sound without imposing the formality of a traditional conference room. Plus, “there’s a tactile, playful way to enter the space,” Cherry says. “You can push through any main point around the sphere.” Quids came up with the clever name.

3. The Open Staircase

Where: Evernote’s offices

The business occupies both the fourth and fifth floors of its building. To connect the two levels, O+A built a grand, open staircase smack in the middle of the floor plan. Cherry says there’s a psychological difference between traversing Evernote’s “communicating staircase” and traipsing up or down the standard stairway.
...UNDERSTAND YOUR QUIET COLLEAGUES

There's more to introversion and extroversion than quiet people and loud people. In fact, psychobiology decides how we interact with others. The key is in our central nervous systems. Introverts have a more active nervous system, and extroverts have a very high threshold for stimulation," says Gregory Feist, a psychology professor at San Jose State University. His work helped inform Susan Cain's 2012 book, Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking. What is the ideal working environment for an introvert? "Arrange offices in a less-stimulating way," he suggests, "with less noise or lower light levels."

...BRIDGE THE GENERATION GAP

Age difference between two coworkers can turn innocuous office communication into outright dysfunction. But there are ways to ease—and even take advantage of—the tension.

OLDSTER

Stop living in the past There will always be the temptation to reminisce about the glory days. Don't do that. "It's so easy to say, 'We launched this payroll software three years ago, and the first thing that went wrong was da-da-da,'" says Lynne Lancaster, cofounder of the BridgeWorks consultancy. "Your twentysomething CEO is looking at you like, 'I was in grad school then and didn't work here. I don't really care.'"

Learn how to text There are no rules anymore when it comes to communication, and therefore your personal rules no longer matter. "If they're texting all the time, then fine, you better get on board with that," says Lancaster.

Have fun When I started my career, being as serious as possible showed that I could do the job," says Lancaster, who categorizes herself as a baby boomer. "With the millennial generation, it's like, 'Did I do anything wrong?' And I'm like, 'No! I just want to brainstorm.'" A face-to-face conversation is still an effective way to check in and ask for an opinion.

LEAD A LATE-AFTERNOON BRAINSTORM

Post-lunch food coma. Brain drain. A lethargic late-day meeting can be downright brutal. Here's how to trump the slump.

1. Pick an unusual location
   The same old conference room down the hall? Boring. The park up the block? Now you're ideating! "Creativity depends on forcing a change of perspective, and one of the simplest ways to do that is to change the setting," says Michael Kerr, president of Humor at Work, a workplace culture consultancy.

2. Stand and deliver
   If you must stay in the office, try meeting without chairs. There's a science to standing, explains Gerald Haman, CEO of the agency SolutionPeople Innovation. "Research shows that when people are standing, there is greater oxygen flow to the brain, which stimulates faster, better, and smarter thinking."

3. Liven up the joint
   Meetings with no stimulus tend to lose steam quickly. Kick off the session with a humorous video clip or a trivia question, to get everyone laughing, thinking, and talking. Such techniques, according to Haman, "make it easier for meeting participants to interact with each other."

4. Get 'em thinking before the meeting
   Distribute a list of targeted questions before meeting time, so participants can get a jump on the task at hand. "People will arrive energized by having a head start," says Haman. Adds Kerr: "It's a critical way to start the creative process. Participants have already engaged their brains."

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...INTERPRET FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

A team of folks from the MIT Media Lab and tech company Affectiva is studying the nuances of the human face. The goal: develop education products for people with autism spectrum disorders. Here, Affectiva shares some truths about smiles.

1. Researchers classify expressions based on muscle groups. An insincere smile uses the lip-corner pullers, which are voluntary muscles. A sincere smile also involves the cheek raisers and eye crinklers, which are involuntary.

2. Most people—90%, in fact—smile when they're frustrated, and these smiles of frustration have the same physical characteristics as happy smiles.

3. But happy smiles linger longer: After filling out a buggy online form, frustrated study participants smiled for just 7.5 seconds on average. When they watched a video of a baby laughing, smile time jumped to an average of 13.8 seconds.

ABOUT THE SMILER: Issa Rae is the writer and star of the web series Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl.

"Today, we're so passive-aggressive," says Rae, "Try not to hide any natural facial expressions that come to you."

...SAY YOU'RE RUNNING LATE

University of North Carolina business professor Alison Fragale has made a study of delivering bad news. We asked her to critique three different "I'm running late" messages for important conversations with...

1. THE BOSS
   Message: I'm running late for today's meeting, hopefully by only five minutes. So sorry, my apologies.
   "When we're deferential to a boss, we're communicating, 'I know you outrank me and I'm okay with that.' This response seems appropriate, but it depends—if you have a habit of being late, you may need to say more."

2. THE SUBORDINATE
   Message: Got dragged into a meeting. Be done in five. Will grab you when I'm done.
   "You may want to be deferential to your underling, too. Bossiness isn't trendy right now; because I said so is out of managerial fashion. And remember: Employees have a lot of power over their bosses. When they put forth extra effort, they make their bosses look good. A little deference now might pay off later."

3. A POTENTIAL INVESTOR
   Message: Our preparations got out of hand this morning and we seem to be running late. It looks like we'll be at your office about five minutes later than scheduled. Apologies.
   "I'm not sure that sounds legitimate. If you're asking for money, you should be able to manage your time better. Consider: The mechanism that we find in our research is that when you lie to me, I don't like the fact that you lied, but I appreciate the reason that you lied. And the reason that you lied is that you probably care about what I think about you. You would better preserve your relationship if you had just said traffic was really bad."

...EXPLAIN AN IDEA

"IT'S SURPRISING HOW HARD IT IS TO DESCRIBE THINGS TO A CHILD, BUT IF YOU CAN DO THAT EFFECTIVELY, THEN YOU CAN PROBABLY SIMPLIFY YOUR EXPLANATION TO A PRETTY GOOD DEGREE.

SOMETHING HAPPENS WHEN YOU BECOME A GROWN-UP, YOU GET COMFORTABLE WITH COMPLEX LANGUAGE AND LONG SENTENCES, OFTEN UNNECESSARILY."

—DEMETRI MARTÍN, COMEDIAN AND AUTHOR OF THE UPCOMING BOOK POINT YOUR FACE AT THIS

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