

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOHN C.
MAXWELL

THE 16
UNDENIABLE
LAWS OF
COMMUNICATION

APPLY THEM

AND MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR MESSAGE

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JOHN C.
MAXWELL



The 16 Undeniable Laws of Communication: Apply Them and Make the Most of Your Message

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*This book is dedicated to John Vereecken.
For twenty-five years you and Karla have
been helping me in Latin America.*

*You are a
Leader of Leaders
Communicator Extraordinaire
Builder of Teams
Caster of Vision
and*

*an Incredible Friend.
You, Karla, and Susi have expanded
my calling to transform nations
beyond anything I ever could have imagined.
I can never thank you enough!*

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1

THE LAW OF CREDIBILITY

Your Most Effective Message Is the One You Live

WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF THE “I HAVE A DREAM” SPEECH during the March on Washington in 1963 had been delivered by segregationist governor George Wallace instead of Martin Luther King Jr.? Or if the Gettysburg Address in 1863 had been made by Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, instead of Abraham Lincoln? Or if the Sermon on the Mount had been preached not by Jesus Christ but by Judas Iscariot? Or Pontius Pilate?

How would the people listening have responded? Would they have rioted? Would they have attacked the speaker? Would they have simply walked away? At the very least, their messages would have fallen flat. And their words would have been forgotten. Why? Because the noble, inspiring, memorable, life-impacting words in those messages would not have matched the people who spoke them. When it comes to communication, a disconnection like that doesn't work, because your most effective message is the one you *live*. Anything else is just empty words. That is the Law of Credibility.

FIRST FOR A REASON

This first law of communication is not more important than the others, but there's still a reason it's first. As a communicator, if you don't learn and live this law, the others won't help you much. Who you *are* gives credibility to everything you *say*. As my friend Jamie Kern Lima, the founder of IT Cosmetics, says in her book *Believe It*, "Authenticity doesn't automatically guarantee success . . . but inauthenticity guarantees failure."⁷ If you speak words you do not live, you lack authenticity and your communication will not be successful.

**"Authenticity
doesn't automati-
cally guarantee
success . . . but
inauthenticity
guarantees failure."
—Jamie Kern Lima**

The Law of Connecting (chapter 7) teaches that communication is all about others; your focus should be on your audience. While that's true, communication doesn't *begin* with your audience; it begins with *you*. That's true for everyone who wants to become a good communicator. The relationship we have with ourselves determines the relationships we will

have with others. If we don't accept who we are, if we are uncomfortable with ourselves, if we don't know our own strengths and weaknesses, if we aren't authentic, then the attempts we make to connect with others will misfire. Once we know ourselves, like ourselves, feel comfortable with ourselves, and act true to ourselves, then we are capable of knowing others, liking them, feeling comfortable with them, and being authentic with them.

THE QUALITIES OF A CREDIBLE COMMUNICATOR

To know and become your authentic self with others and communicate with credibility, you need to do five things:

1. Be Transparent

Communication is more than just sharing information. It's really about sharing yourself—your *real* self. That level of honesty is the key to being able to connect with people. Brené Brown, in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, says, “Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true self be seen.”⁸

It can feel like a risk to be authentic and transparent. People might not like the real you. But they might not like a phony version of you either. And if they *did* initially like an inauthentic version, when they found out it wasn't really you, they wouldn't like that either. Wouldn't you prefer to be liked or disliked for who you really are? I know I would.

People don't want perfect communicators, but they do want authentic ones.

People don't want perfect communicators, but they do want authentic ones. Speakers who are open and real in their communication are attractive because they share their failures as well as their successes. They can be honest and direct while still being empathetic toward others. It takes courage to be transparent, and people admire that in communicators—especially when those speakers value their listeners.

Nobel Prize-winning novelist John Steinbeck said, “A man's writing is himself. A kind man writes kindly. A mean man writes meanly . . . a wise man writes wisely.”⁹ When people are authentic, both their writing and speaking reflect who they really are. If you want to know me, read my books or listen to me speak. I stopped trying to project an image or be someone I wasn't in my early twenties. Since then, I've never tried to be someone other than my imperfect self. That commitment was tested when I started writing books in my early

thirties. My publisher cautioned me about a few things he believed would hurt the sales of my books. I wanted to write to leaders. He said that would greatly limit my audience. I love lists and numbers, and I like putting them in my books. He said readers don't like that and recommended that I stop using them.

I seriously considered changing my style to please my publisher, but in the end, I decided that I needed to be who I was. My calling is to help leaders. My gifting is teaching leadership. I think in lists, outlines, and numbers. I decided to write the books I believed I should write, even if it meant reaching fewer people. As it turned out, more people than they expected connected with my message and my style. And more than forty years later, I'm still writing what I love based on who I am.

2. Be Consistent

Mark Batterson says, "Almost anybody can accomplish almost anything if they work at it long enough, hard enough, and smart enough."¹⁰ What he's really talking about is consistency. Since the best predictor of what a person will do today is what he did yesterday, a solid pattern of consistency gives a person credibility. What you repeatedly *do* tells others who you *are*.

Nothing is easier than saying words. Nothing is harder than living them, day after day.

When you first begin communicating with people, they don't yet know if you're consistent. Usually, they take what you say at face value. Your words carry weight because people aren't familiar with your actions. Over time, what you say carries less weight and what you do carries more. Nothing is easier than saying words. Nothing is harder than living them, day after day. If you give good advice but set a bad example, you confuse—and eventually lose—your

audience. Consistency is crucial if you want to become a good communicator.

For more than fifty years, I have been intentional about adding value to people. That's my motivation for writing, speaking, and building relationships with others. I see every day as an opportunity to rededicate myself to helping people, and a good day for me is when I do things that improve the lives of others. When I step onto a stage and say, "My name is John, and I'm your friend," people who are familiar with my history know that I want to help them. But this takes time.

**Good work must
be stored up before
it shows up.
Consistency
compounds. So
does credibility.**

Good work must be stored up before it shows up. Consistency compounds. So does credibility. It may take time, but it always has a return.

3. Be a Good Example

Have you ever been working on writing a message and you found some material that seemed good or interesting, but you couldn't verify it through your own experience or observation? That is, it was really someone else's advice, not your own. Did you use it? Early in my career as a leader and speaker, I would. But it didn't sit right with me. After doing this several times, I made an important decision: I would not teach anything I did not wholeheartedly believe.

Making that choice gave my delivery greater conviction. A few years later, I decided to take that decision one step further. I would not teach anything I was not trying to live. That choice added greater credibility to my conviction because it committed me to being an example of what I taught. As James Kouzes and Barry Posner say, "The truth

is that you either lead by example or you don't lead at all. Seeing is believing, and your constituents have to see you living out the standards you've set and the values you profess.”¹¹

Roddy Galbraith, who has taught more than forty thousand Maxwell Leadership Certified Team coaches how to speak effectively, gives this advice to new speakers to help them choose material:

1. Relive what you have learned, allowing the audience to relive it with you.
2. Earn the audience's respect by sharing your wins and gain their love by sharing your failures.
3. Decide what you shall speak on by choosing what you have lived out.

Following this advice helps give these new speakers the credibility they need.

There's a story told about Mahatma Gandhi in which a woman took her little boy to see the great leader.

“Mahatma, please tell my little boy to stop eating sugar,” the woman requested.

“Come back in three days,” said Gandhi.

In three days, the woman and the little boy returned, and Gandhi said to the little boy, “Stop eating sugar.”

Puzzled, the woman asked, “But why was it necessary for us to return after three days? Couldn't you have told my boy to stop eating sugar when we first visited?”

“I could not tell him that then,” replied Gandhi, “because three days ago I was also eating sugar.”¹²

This story illustrates the point that being a good example brings credibility to one's words. When someone gives good advice but

sets a bad example, it creates confusion. That's why Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What you are stands over you . . . and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary."¹³ When words and actions don't line up for a speaker, he not only confuses the audience; he loses the audience.

4. Be Competent

My favorite hobby is golf, and one of my highlights has been playing in the AT&T Pro-Am Tournament at Pebble Beach. It's so much fun being paired with a professional golfer and playing the course. My brother asked me if I was nervous playing in front of a big crowd, and I said, "Not at all. None of those people came to see *me* play." My golf game can be summed up by something that happened one day when I was playing with my friend Ron Simmons. I was playing my usual game, which would put my score in the mid-eighties, when I hit a long, beautiful drive. I looked at Ron and asked, "Why can't I do that every time?"

"What you are stands
over you . . . and
thunders so that I
cannot hear what you
say to the contrary."
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Because you're not any good," he immediately answered, and we both laughed because it was true.

Why do I bring this up? Because nobody has ever asked me to speak on the subject of golf. Why? Because I'm not competent in that area. Nor have I ever been asked to speak or write about music appreciation, technology, or archaeology. I have no credibility in those areas. What I'm asked to speak and write about are leadership and personal growth.

The "weight" of a communicator's words is determined by what they have accomplished. Where have you been successful? What

skills have you acquired and used that you can pass on to others? You cannot give what you do not have. If you have not yet developed high competence in an area of your life that you want to teach about, then begin by working on that area and learning. Become great at what you do and then teach out of the overflow of your life. Competent people earn the right to speak into the lives of others.

5. Be Trustworthy

I mentioned Mahatma Gandhi while talking about being a good model, and many other stories about him shed light on the qualities that gave him credibility as a speaker. One was his trustworthiness, which he proved time and again. One such example occurred in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. Gandhi had moved there as a young man in 1893 to work as an attorney for the owner of a shipping business. When that job ended, he decided to stay to fight for the rights of Indians there because he and many others had suffered racism and abuse. In 1904, pneumonic plague broke out among the Indian population in Johannesburg.¹⁴ Gandhi came to the people's aid and rallied support, even creating a makeshift hospital in a warehouse to care for them. But the local government decided to take drastic measures to keep the disease from spreading; they intended to burn the village where the plague broke out. It was during this time that the people's trust in Gandhi was proven. In his autobiography, he wrote,

The decision was to make the whole location[']s population vacate, and live under canvas for three weeks in an open plain about thirteen miles from Johannesburg, and then to set fire to the location [where they had lived]. . . . The people were in a terrible fright, but my constant presence was a consolation to them. Many of the poor people used to hoard their scanty

savings underground. This had to be unearthed. They had no bank, they knew none. I became their banker. Streams of money poured into my office. . . . So far as I can remember, nearly sixty thousand pounds were thus deposited. . . . The location[s] residents were removed by special train to Klipspruit Farm near Johannesburg. . . . The location was put to the flames on the very next day after its evacuation.¹⁵

The accumulated wealth of that entire group of people was put into Gandhi's hands because they trusted him. He had established his credibility long before he needed it. As a result, he was able to help people, they were willing to move, and further deaths from the plague were averted.

Trust is a person's greatest asset. When you have established your trustworthiness, people know you possess good motives, that you genuinely want to help others. People can sense it. Trustworthiness makes leaders and communicators effective because people listen to them, believe what they say, and cooperate with them. Without trust, everything grinds to a halt.

Why do you desire to speak to others? What is your motivation? Are you genuinely there for the audience, to advance their cause? Or are you doing it for yourself? To advance your career? Promote your business? Get a book deal? Become famous? Those motives may not be wrong, but none of them builds trust. First and foremost, you must speak to benefit others. If you struggle with this, the Law of Connecting (chapter 7) and the Law of Adding Value (chapter 15) will help you.

PEOPLE LISTEN TO YOU BECAUSE . . .

As you work to gain credibility as a speaker, your influence with others will grow, and it will likely happen in a predictable way. In my book

The 5 Levels of Leadership, I discuss how leaders gain influence, step-by-step. My longtime friend Dan Reiland, executive director of leadership expansion at the Maxwell Leadership Center, took the stages from *The 5 Levels of Leadership* and adapted them to teach communication. I want to share his lesson with a few changes and additions of my own. As you read these five levels of communication, think about your credibility with the various groups of people to whom you speak to identify where you are with them.

1. The Requirement Level: People *Have* to Listen

When I was twenty-two, I became the pastor of a very small country church in southern Indiana. I started with no experience preaching. I was young and green and had not yet built any relationships. But the people who attended services listened to my sermons. Why? Because I had the position of pastor. It didn't take me long to realize that relying on position to get people to listen is the lowest level of speaking. There was nothing wrong with beginning at that level; that's where most of us start. But if you want to become a good communicator, you can't stay at that level. I recognized this and made an important decision: I would work to improve my speaking. I would try to become bigger and better than my position.

We've all had the experience of listening to someone speak because we were required to. Maybe you've listened to a boss because you wanted to keep your job. Or you've listened to a teacher or professor because you wanted to pass a class. Or to a government official who was the gatekeeper for a process you needed to complete. You listened because the person had a position that demanded it, and you didn't have much of a choice.

If you want to become a good communicator, you must acknowledge that your position or title will not keep people

engaged. You need to raise the bar for yourself and start developing skills that make others *want* to listen to you. That brings us to the next level.

2. The Relationship Level: People Want to Listen Because They Like You

Within a few months at that first church I pastored, I developed relationships with the people. I liked them, and they liked me. And I could sense a shift in them from *having* to listen to me to *wanting* to listen to me. Was it because my speaking had improved greatly? I doubt it. But my relationship with them had. This confirmed the truth of the old saying, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” I discovered that communication was more than just speaking. It was relating to people.

If you speak regularly to the same people, the best thing you can do is develop good relationships with them. If you're in situations where you can't develop individual relationships, then be *relational*. Care about your listeners as people, be transparent and authentic, and live what you speak, and people will like you.

People do not care
how much you know
until they know how
much you care.

3. The Remarkable Level: People Like to Listen Because You're Good

As a young speaker, when I sensed that my audience liked me and wanted to hear me, I became more motivated to improve as a communicator and give them even more reasons to want to listen. This is when I accepted the challenge of learning to become a good communicator. I estimate that it took me about eight years to find, develop, and refine my style. That may sound like a long time, but it was worth

the effort. Was I done learning at that point? No. I didn't stop then, and I still haven't. I've been speaking for more than fifty years, but I continue to learn and grow. Being a good communicator is a journey, not a destination.

Dan calls this level of communication *remarkable* with good reason because it makes a person stand out. You can achieve this level only with dedication. It takes a lot of time and effort to become remarkable. If you get to this level of communication, people take notice and tell others because it is so unusual.

I want to pause here for a moment to encourage you. I want you to become remarkable! And I believe you can be. That's why the rest of this book is dedicated to teaching you principles and skills that will help you on your communication journey. As you learn the laws and put them into practice, your speaking skills will improve. My best advice to you is to stay hungry to learn. Be like the little boy at the fair who wanted to buy a huge cone of cotton candy. The vendor took one look at him and said, "That's a lot of cotton candy for a little boy like you."

"Don't worry," the boy replied, "I'm bigger on the inside than on the outside."

If you have already been working on your communication, then the laws in this book can help you to fill any "holes" in your ability and help you to fine-tune your skills. If you're new to communication, it may take you quite some time to become remarkable, but *you can do it*. These laws will jump-start your learning.

4. The Reason Level: People Seek to Listen Because You Add Value to Their Lives

I've already mentioned the importance of a speaker's motivation. In his book *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek says, "People don't

buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it.”¹⁶ He wrote that in the context of leadership, but it’s just as important in communication.

The reason I started speaking and writing was to help people. My desire was to add value to them. But there’s a difference between *wanting* to add value to people and *succeeding* in adding value. It took me time and energy to figure out *how* to add value. And it took the earning of credibility to deliver on that desire. I want to share with you what that process looked like for me because I believe it will help you too. I had to:

- **Find Myself:** I found myself when I stopped trying to be like anyone else.
- **Know Myself:** I knew myself when I examined myself, asked myself questions, and gave honest answers.
- **Be Myself:** I became myself when I accepted the way God made me.
- **Improve Myself:** I improved myself when I consistently developed my speaking skills through trial and error.
- **Get Over Myself:** I got over myself when I stopped focusing on myself and how I looked to others.
- **Give Myself:** I gave myself when I started thinking about others and how I could help them.

“People don’t buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it.” —Simon Sinek

As you work to become a better communicator, embrace each of these lessons. They will help make you someone capable of adding value to people

5. The Return Level: People Are Eager to Listen Because of Who You Are

There is one final level of influence a person can reach as a communicator. Dan labeled this the *Return Level* because the speaker's lifetime of work improving his craft, focusing on others, and adding value to them creates an extraordinary return on investment. At this point, people listen because of who you are and what you've done over a long period of time. This is the ultimate level of credibility for a speaker, and it comes from having moral authority.

Moral authority can be difficult to describe, but you know it when you see or hear it. A story told by Terry Pearce in *Leading Out Loud* about English actor Charles Laughton, famous for his readings of poetry and other literary passages, illustrates what I mean:

Sir Charles Laughton was attending a Christmas party with a large family in London. Well into the evening, the host decided that each person in attendance should read or recite a favorite passage, one that reminded them most of the Spirit of Christmas.

Laughton's turn came near the end, and he recited, in his beautifully trained voice, the Twenty-Third Psalm. Everyone applauded his effort, and the process continued. Within minutes, all had participated except one elderly aunt, who had dozed off in a corner of the room. She was particularly loved, and they gently woke her, explained what was going on, and asked her to take part. She thought for a moment, and then began in her shaky voice, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. . . ." The room hushed as

she continued, and when she finished, tears were dripping down every face.

Upon leaving, one of the younger members of the family thanked Laughton for coming, and remarked about the difference in the response of the family to the two “readings.” In one case, appreciation; in the other, deep connection and involvement. “How do you account for it?” asked the young man, shaking his head. Laughton looked at him and replied simply, “I know the psalm . . . she knows the Shepherd.”¹⁷

Your most effective message is the one you live.

MAKE THE CONNECTION

As you learn and grow as a communicator, working on your skills and techniques, never stop working on improving yourself on the inside. Good communicators know themselves, connect with themselves, and accept themselves. You can do this by connecting with:

- Your *thoughts*, which help you prepare your content
- Your *feelings*, which inspire the delivery of your content
- Your *actions*, which give credibility to your content

Every time you prepare to speak, ask yourself, *Is this something I know? Is this something I feel? Is this something I do?* Look for a yes to all three questions, and work to keep those things in alignment.

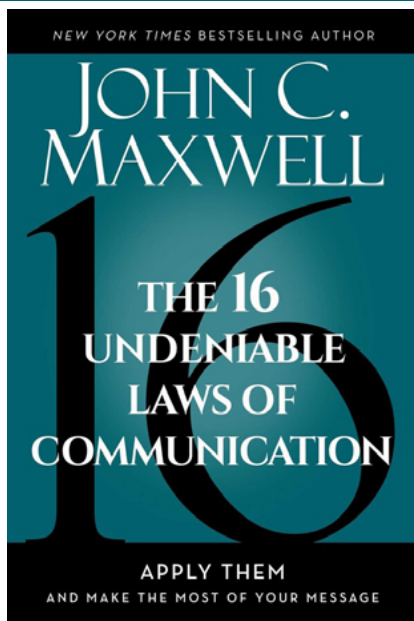
You are the message you speak. If what you’re preparing to deliver doesn’t connect with you, it won’t connect with others. It won’t breathe life into others if it doesn’t live in you. Why? Because

your most effective message is the one you live. That's the Law of Credibility.





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