



HOW TO COMMUNICATE LIKE LIVES ARE ON THE LINE

Melissa Swift

Imagine this: you've just done a 15-foot cannonball jump into the Hudson River. You've swum out 40 feet through choppy waters. And the guy you did all this for? He doesn't want to be rescued.

This was a challenging day at work for New York City (NYC) firefighter Roland "Ro" Rodriguez. And honestly, a day at work that many of us couldn't imagine.

Writing my recent book, *Effective: How to Do Great Work in a Fast-Changing World*, I had the hunch that people who do high-stakes jobs actually do work differently. To test that hypothesis, I spoke to Roland Rodriguez, an NYC firefighter; Anthony Tisdall, an air traffic controller for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in Philadelphia, PA; and Dr. Rebecca Parker, the Chief Coding Officer at TeamHealth and the Past President, American College of Emergency Physicians.

What I learned was amazing—particularly what I learned about how people communicate differently when lives are at stake.

Now, if you've ever watched surgery, in real life or on the screen, you know what over-communication looks like. "Scalpel?" "Scalpel." "Forceps?" "Forceps." Verbally confirming what instrument another medical professional is handing the surgeon is a critical safety procedure.



It turns out, air traffic controllers do this too. When Tisdall gives a pilot a critical instruction, procedure has him ask the pilot to repeat it back. If the pilot doesn't repeat it back completely or properly, they have to repeat it again—until they get it right. If he doesn't hear back exactly what he told the pilot, he has license to bug that individual until he hears his words coming out of their mouth. The importance of the communication drives a high level of precision.

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Similarly, but in a very different context, Dr. Parker described to me a heartbreaking situation in which you absolutely must overcommunicate with simplicity and clarity: informing someone a loved one has died. Over the years, she has developed a well-honed way of delivering the most difficult news possible. She tells the story of the interventions that were tried, notes that she has bad news for the person she's speaking to, and then uses clear and precise language as to what happened. In order to avoid painful confusion, Dr. Parker notes: "you have to use words like 'dead'." In order to build her skills in conveying this message as clearly and compassionately as possible, earlier in her career she shadowed more experienced doctors in these conversations, to see how they spoke. Her communication is simple, precise, and clear—because it would be deeply unkind to screw it up.

Rodriguez, too, cites overcommunication as a necessary element of his job as a firefighter. The high levels of methods clarity—and role clarity—that make firefighting possible have to be verbally reaffirmed to make sure everyone is aligned in the midst of danger and chaos: “[You’re constantly asking] What do we have? What are we doing? What are our roles for this situation?”

These steps may seem like the most basic level of communication, but they go wrong—wildly wrong—across many types of work that are not high-stakes. Think about the fundamental underlying principles implied in how Rodriguez, Tisdall, and Dr. Parker communicate:

- Establish agreement on the situation.
- Establish agreement on the course of action.
- Establish agreement on roles (as we just discussed for methods!)
- Repeatedly confirm and reconfirm.

None of this is rocket science—but so often, when there’s a debacle at work (or in life), it’s because one or more of these steps has gone awry. In the corporate world we push away from communicating with clarity, often because we fear it. For instance, why say that dozens (or hundreds, or even thousands) of people are losing their jobs, when you could just say “It’s a reduction in force?” And then we struggle to tell the exact truth in the moment when it matters. Jim Detert, a professor at UVA’s Darden School of Business who specializes in courage, among other topics, cites telling the exact truth as one of the signature leadership skills of the current moment:

I think the ability to look people in the eye, and say I owe you the truth and even though I'm afraid of how this might go for all sorts of reasons, I am going to have this conversation—that can save us from threats to survival greater than we have ever seen in our lifetime.

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty convinced!

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So, let's look at some questions we can ask ourselves around communicating more clearly that will help us mimic the effectiveness of high-stakes work:

- **Where can I swap out particular words to make my statements clearer?** Think about Dr. Parker's guidance on communicating about the death of a loved one—you have to use the word "dead" because it's kinder to be clear. What's your work's equivalent of this? Where could you swap out a single word to be better understood, even if it feels a bit bracing? It can be hard to rewrite our whole scripts, but starting with single words and being consistent can truly shift the effectiveness of how you communicate.

- **Where do I need to ask for more clarification that I've been understood?** Workplace decorum may not allow us to use Tisdall's strategy with pilots—literally, repeat back to me every single word I just said—but in general, getting more clarification that you've been properly understood will also save everyone a lot of heartache. To make this strategy feel less onerous, you can build in rituals around reviewing next steps at the ends of meetings, a simple step that's often skipped in the hurry to get to the next 30-minute call. An even more subtle way of checking understanding might be to have someone prepare a follow-on communication to another audience, which you can then review.
- **If I need to build trust quickly, what is my approach?** In their respective interviews, Rodriguez, Tisdall, and Dr. Parker all highlighted the importance of building trust quickly as a core skill of their high-stakes jobs; this is a skill each has spent meaningful time honing. Whether you need someone to grab your hand to lift you out of choppy waves, to listen to you as you rewrite their flight path in midair, or to give you life-saving information about the gruesome injury you just incurred, getting a stranger to trust you is a critical ingredient in high-stakes work. We all have a version of this scenario, be it encountering new customers, onboarding new direct reports, or simply working with cross-functional team members for the first time. A fast-moving world means we need people to have faith in us pretty quickly. We will each have a different formula for doing so, appropriate to our personality, the person we're encountering, and the context of the encounter. That said, my interviewees did mention a consistent set of ingredients: appropriate demeanor; true up-front listening to learn the person's context; and simple phrasing on their side to be readily understood. These are not complex elements, but often all three go missing ... and trust is lost at the moment you need it most.

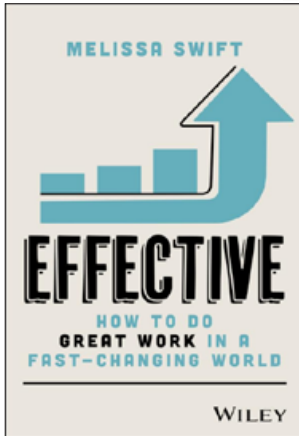


When lives are on the line, people communicate simply, clearly, and with strong emotional resonance. If we can all speak a bit more like firefighters, air traffic controllers, and ER physicians, our words will have more impact—at moments of high and low stakes alike. 📖

Adapted from *Effective: How to Do Great Work in a Fast-Changing World* (Wiley, June 2, 2026) by Melissa Swift. Swift is the Founder of Anthrome Insight, an organization that tackles the people side of challenges and provides data- and evidence-led tool to do so.



Info



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Melissa Swift is a leading voice on how organizations, teams, and individuals can succeed in an ever more challenging world of work. As founder and CEO of [Anthrome Insight](#), she is a practicing consultant and keynote speaker helping organizations with data-driven views and concrete actions to shape a productive future in chaotic times. She has held consulting leadership roles at Capgemini, Mercer, Korn Ferry, and Deloitte, and is also the author of *Work Here Now: Think Like a Human and Build a Powerhouse Workplace*. Her quarterly columns in MIT Sloan Management Review often rank among their most-read articles. Swift speaks regularly at events including the MIT CIO Symposium, and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, NPR, and *Newsweek*.

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