

Media and communications

Councillor workbook



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This councillor workbook includes references to materials published by the Local Government Group (LG Group) and Local Government Leadership (LG Leadership), now both the Local Government Association (LGA).

Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected members. It makes no judgement about whether you have been a member for some time, or whether you have been elected more recently. In either case, the workbook will provide you with an essential outline of the key principles and skills in handling the media and managing your own communications.

The workbook offers few firm rules for ward members as it is recognised that each individual must decide how best to approach their role in communicating with others. This will be influenced by the type of ward you represent and the methods and approaches that suit you best. There is no presumption about 'typical wards' or 'typical members' and the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map.

In practical terms, the document will take between **two to three hours** to work through. You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about the issues presented and the ways that you can be most effective in handling the media and managing your own communications. In other words, how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent.

In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about your role and skills in communicating with others. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance – this is used to indicate research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are 'pen pictures' of approaches used by other people or organisations.



Hints and tips – these represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information and support, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the appendix to the workbook.

Introduction – three key questions

What is communication?

Look at any dictionary definition for the word 'communication' and you are likely to come across a variety of descriptions of what most of us regard as a fairly straightforward activity. However, regardless of the words used, there are three things that we can say immediately about communication:

- it is an essential human activity
- it is a two-way process and involves some form of 'social dealing', 'access' or 'exchange of thoughts, messages or information'
- it can be straightforward, but is all too often less than effective.



What is communication?

"Act of imparting news; information given; social dealings, access".

The Concise Oxford Dictionary

"The exchange of thoughts, messages or information, as by speech, signals, writing or behaviour".

Dictionary of the English Language

In the context of your role as a ward member, effective communication is a key skill. Your success in bringing about change, acting as a community leader and championing the views of those you have been elected to serve, will rest heavily on your personal communication skills. And remember, communication is a two-way street. It's not just about **telling** people things or getting on your soap-box and expounding your views of the world. It's more about **listening** and developing understanding, rapport and empathy with the various audiences for your communications. Done well, it can help to boost your effectiveness as a member and make your role a lot more enjoyable and rewarding.

Why is good communication important?

At a corporate level, communication can do more than just relay facts and figures. It can help people to understand what your council is about, what it has achieved, the plans it has and the role that individual members can play in their lives. Communication can also influence people to get them involved, turnout at elections, voice their satisfaction (or concerns), contribute to activities in the community and be better citizens.



Communication at a strategic level

“Councils who are among some of the best communicators demonstrate top level buy-in to the importance of communications. They understand the link between communications and reputation, and consider the communications implications at every point in the decision-making process”.

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=9656591>

However, research has shown consistently that:

- people know very little about councils or what they do
- the less people know about an organisation the less likely they are to rate it
- good communication with residents is about being informative - open, honest and two-way
- there is a clearly demonstrable link between residents' satisfaction with councils and the level of information provided by those councils, ie those that communicate the most are rated most highly.

The role and behaviour of elected members in communicating with local people and the media is vital in ensuring that communities have a positive and accurate view of what the council is all about. As the public face of the organisation in each local area, ward members can promote clear messages, maintain a dialogue with their constituents and help to create a positive perception that

their council listens to and acts on behalf of local people. As we will see later, the attitude and behaviour of members can also impact on the council's **branding** and **reputation**.

On a personal level, effective communication can also help in all aspects of your community leadership role. The higher your profile in the community, the better your influence is likely to be – inside and outside of the council.

In fact, your personal success may be heavily influenced by your ability to communicate, eg your skills in communicating with key supporters and potential voters during local elections and your ability to manage media perceptions of you and your achievements.

And if all of this sounds daunting, don't worry – communication skills can be learnt and refined, as the rest of this workbook will demonstrate.



“Effective leaders create communities out of words”.

Martin Luther King

Who are you communicating with?

In carrying out the work of an elected member you will communicate with lots of people. Probably more than you ever imagined when you were first elected. That's principally because local government is a people business:



Exercise 1 – the people you communicate with

Think about all aspects of your role as a ward member. What individuals and groups in the community do you have regular communications with (try to be as expansive as you can)? Is this communication on a regular or ad hoc basis? To what extent does this communication impact on your personal reputation and the way that others perceive you?

Individual/group	Regular or ad hoc?	Impact (high/medium/low)
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Look again at your list. To what extent do you tailor your communication approach to suit the people you are communicating with (or do you treat everyone the same)? Is there any way that you could improve the format of your regular communications (eg use of a standard e-mail, leaflet or newsletter)? How did you determine the likely impact on your reputation? In reality, any communication has a potentially high impact on your reputation.

Clearly you cannot communicate on a one to one basis with everyone, but your role will bring you into contact with many individuals and groups. Alongside the individuals you communicate with through your casework, there are likely to be numerous voluntary and community groups that you will engage with. This might include individuals or groups campaigning on topical issues affecting the neighbourhood.

Equally, you may be in touch with partner organisations, like local hospitals or housing associations, who deliver essential services alongside the council. And it might also be that you maintain good links with the business community and those providing employment for local people. All of these are potential **audiences** for your communications.

Having identified some of the more obvious audiences, there may be others that you really ought to do more to communicate with:



Exercise 2 – communicating with the ‘seldom heard’ or ‘hard to reach’

Think about the communities you serve. Write down any examples of the following groups you can think of and indicate whether there is scope to improve your communications with these?

Religious/faith groups? Scope to improve? (Y/N)

Advocacy/campaign groups? Scope to improve? (Y/N)

Groups representing older people Scope to improve? (Y/N)

Groups representing young people? Scope to improve? (Y/N)

Groups representing disabled people? Scope to improve? (Y/N)

Groups representing newly arriving communities, eg migrant workers? Scope to improve? (Y/N)

Communities defined by their sexual orientation, eg gay or lesbian groups Scope to improve? (Y/N)

Look again at the list you have identified. Can you genuinely say that you are representing all of your constituents? Does this suggest that you need to do more to communicate with many of the people in the area? If yes, how might you overcome any potential barriers of language, culture, history, custom or belief?

The message and the media

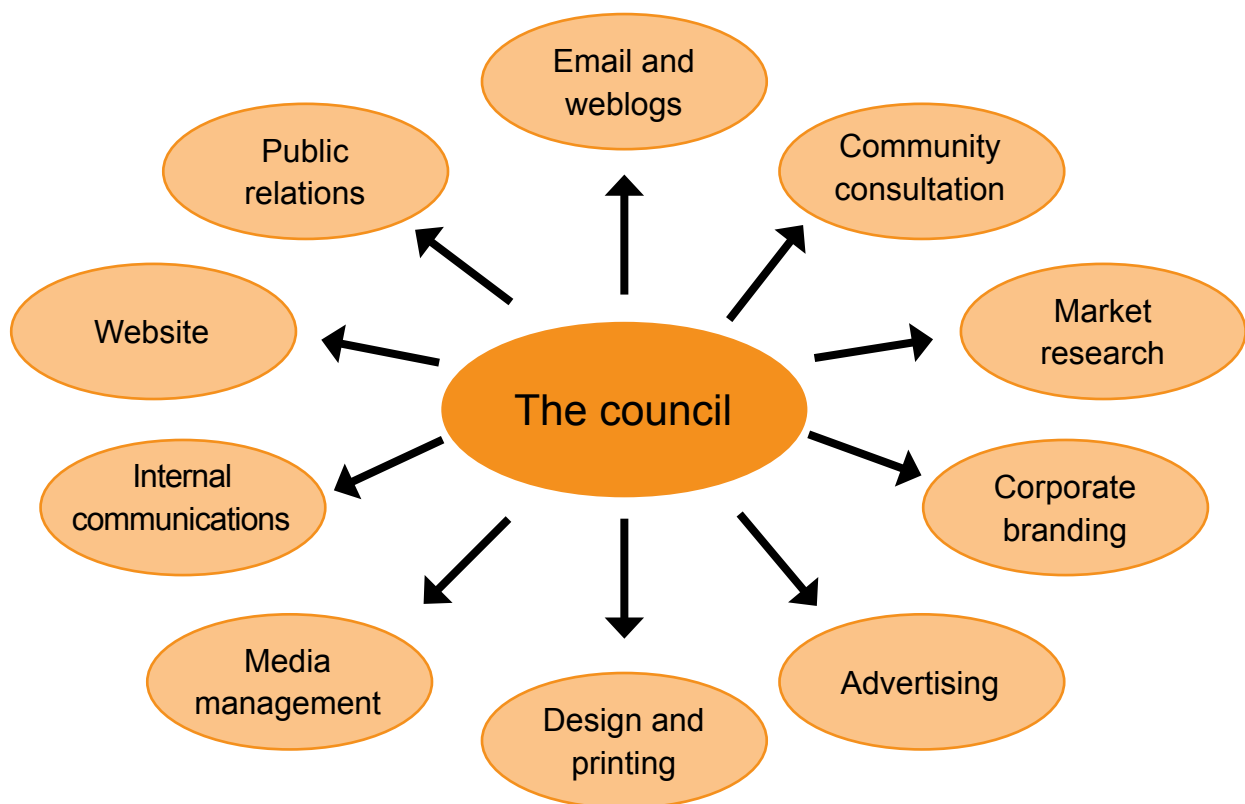
Getting the message across

There are numerous ways that councils choose to communicate messages to their audiences. Similarly, ward members will often use a wide variety of communication approaches from letters, e-mails and leaflets to press releases, weblogs and newsletters – a list far too long to cover in this workbook.

What we are concerned about is not so much the methods that you choose for communicating with local people and the media, but the way that you **plan** and **deliver** those messages. Regardless of the methods you choose, the approach needs to be comprehensive and consistent to avoid the pitfalls that poor communication can often create.



Examples of communication methods used by councils



In preparing for any communications exercise there are four basic questions that need to be answered:

- **What do you want to achieve from the communication**, eg provide information or prompt a response?
- **Who is your audience (or audiences)**, eg all constituents or specific community groups?
- **What is your key message (or headline grabber)**, ie if you could distil the overall message down into a few words, what would that key message be?
- **What communication format(s) is going to have the best impact**, eg press release, e-mail, newsletter etc.?



The risks of poor communication

- A failure to meet the needs of the audience.
- The potential waste of some or all resources.
- An erosion of trust between the member and the audience.
- Damage to the member's personal reputation.
- Potential damage to the wider reputation of the council.



Exercise 3 – planning a communications campaign

Consider how you would plan a communications exercise in the following scenario. In doing so, consider the following basic questions:

- What do you want to achieve from the communication?
- Who is your audience?
- What is your key message?
- In what format(s) are you going to communicate for the best impact?

Your council has launched some new initiatives aimed at young people between the ages of 14 and 18. One of these is to create a 'Youth Cabinet', ie a representative group of young people from across the area that can debate issues affecting their peer group and comment on council plans and services for young people. You are keen to ensure that the young people you serve are adequately involved and represented on the Youth Cabinet:

Purpose of communication

Audience

Key messages

1

2

3

Format(s) to be used

Look again at your communication plan. Were you planning to do more than just awareness-raising on the issue (after all, you are likely to want young people from your ward to come forward as potential representatives)? Your target audience may look self-selecting (ie 14 to 18 year olds), but what about their parents and/or guardians and local schools/colleges (wouldn't you want to 'sell' the concept to them as well, to encourage a good response)? What headline grabber did you come up with (is it sufficiently persuasive to engage, encourage and enthuse a potentially skeptical young person)? And what about your chosen format - is it likely to be the best channel of communication for a media-aware and technologically-savvy audience?

Handling the media

Residents' surveys consistently show that most people's main source of information about their council is through the media – and, in particular, the local press. As such, a key feature of your communication role is likely to be the development of a proactive relationship with your local media – a relationship in which you will have to invest both time and effort.

In a democracy the media is a vital mechanism for ensuring the transparency of local political decision-making and for holding councils and elected members to account. While there is a generally held assumption that local government gets a 'bad press', the evidence suggests that local media, in particular, is willing to present local government in a positive light - if handled in the right way.

Some councils have protocols governing the issuing of press releases and speaking to the local media – if you are not sure whether your council has such procedures you should check before taking any action.

At the end of the day, local press, television and radio journalists want a story to cover. These may often be the main source of information on local government for both interested and disinterested citizens and you will need to use your communication skills to ensure that a balanced and accurate account is given to the media in the first instance. Developing good media relations will require you to understand the nature of their reporting processes. In the first instance, identify all of the relevant media channels in your area.

This could include newspapers, special publications, radio services, television, internet/intranet sites, noticeboards and exhibition sites. Then make a list of contacts within these, along with telephone/fax numbers and e-mail/postal addresses. Most importantly, discover their deadlines, publication dates and reporting guidelines. Try to develop some personal contact and rapport with the individuals concerned. And remember, you're in this for the long term - so don't try to win every battle, but over time certainly aim to win the war (of words).



Some tips for handling the media

Don't respond to press calls out of the blue – ask for background and the deadline – then respond.

Identify key messages and good, punchy, quotations that can be presented to the media.

Don't point the finger, complain or consistently say 'no comment' – you may get a bad reputation.

Build a long-term relationship with the media, eg write features and suggest news stories.

Don't use jargon, council-speak or inflammatory words – these might come back to haunt you.

Act quickly and have a consistent approach to media handling – be honest, concise and helpful.



Exercise 4 – grabbing the headlines

Imagine you have been asked to give a press briefing in the situation below:

Your ward area has just received a European Community grant of £2.5 million to be spent on a number of regeneration initiatives that the council and its partner agencies have planned over a five-year period. The money is already allocated or ‘earmarked’ for specific projects, most of which involve rebuilding important parts of the local infrastructure, ie a new road, a business park (to stimulate economic growth and jobs) and a new community centre. The package of measures has been designed to address many of the needs which local residents have expressed to the council over recent years.

(a) Using no more than seven words, identify what your key message (or headline grabber) might be.

(b) List the three main things you would want to achieve from the press communication.

(c) List any particular features you would want to build into your press release to ensure that your message gets across in the way that you want it to.

Beyond the development of a positive, two-way, relationship with your local media, the main task is to **sell** your message on all communications. In other words, always be thinking ‘how will this come across to my audience?’

The following approach should help:

- Make sure the message is relevant to the intended audience, eg don’t bombard afternoon radio listeners with a long list of facts and figures about your role or the council’s performance – many will switch off (literally).
- Ask ‘what’s in it for them?’ – build in features that will keep people listening or reading.

- Try to keep your communications topical – the audience is unlikely to want to hear too much about what has gone on in the past.
- Keep your communications short and succinct and come straight to the point – remember your intended headline grabber.
- Build in some fascinating, interesting or unusual features to get your point across, eg a good quote, one or two helpful statistics or a useful motto or slogan (but nothing too clichéd).
- In a written feature, pictures, photographs, charts or diagrams can be a useful addition, but remember – ‘if a picture paints a thousand words’ don’t use a thousand words as well!
- Make sure you have adhered to the submission guidelines or house style of the media concerned.
- Focus, wherever possible, on the human angle. People want to read about people.



Legal issues

The law governing communications in local authorities is enshrined in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988 and the Government’s Code of Practice on Publicity. These set out the restrictions councils – and the groups funded by councils – work under.

Most lawyers agree that the law is badly drafted, making it sometimes difficult for councils to know whether they are at risk of breaking the law. The Chartered Institute for Public Relations Local Government Group is lobbying for changes to the Code.

The LGID website contains some useful pointers on aspects of the law relating to external communications, under the following headings:

- party politics, politicians and publicity
- who to quote
- the run up to elections.

If you remain unsure about the legalities of your external communications, please consult the legal staff within your own council.

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=7816309>

The good communicator

Using all of your communication channels

Good communication is not just about handling the media and issuing formal communications. It should be the mainstay of your approach as a ward member.

Whether you are talking at public meetings or producing your own online diary, or 'weblog', the **planning** and **delivery** of your message should follow the same structure as we outlined earlier, ie 'What do you want to achieve?' 'Who is your audience?' 'What is your key message?' and 'What format will have the best impact?' Making use of all communication channels can help to ensure success.



Members' use of blogging in Brighton and Hove

In 2006, Brighton and Hove City Council set up an independent blog site for local councillors to communicate with the public about their day-to-day activities.

Councillors understood that this was a great tool for getting exposure. The site shows the most recent posts appearing on the home page, colour coded by party. This approach has kept the blog very active and has led to competition for the top spots. It really tapped into the politicians' competitive drive, sparking 'blog wars'.

Today, well over half of all of the council's members are regular bloggers. Having recognised the value of e-communications, some councillors have set up private blogs, Facebook pages and so on.

One of the councillors has used the blog to publicise a successful online petition to launch a campaign to ban pay-for cash machines in his ward, one of the less well-off neighbourhoods. The blog has widened the opportunity for citizens to see what being a councillor means and may well have led to the increased interest of younger people in becoming a councillor. The age of councillors in Brighton and Hove has dropped by 20 years since the 2007 election.

<http://www.brighton-hove-councillors.org.uk/index.cfm?request=a1700>

Communicating internally

Your communications approach should not just be focused on the messages you send to people outside of the council. Equally important are the messages you convey to your fellow councillors and staff. In planning and preparing these internal communications, you should follow the same basic guidance that we have outlined in earlier sections of the workbook. However, you may also wish to consider the following good practice tips when communicating with staff:



Communicating internally - some good practice tips

Dos	Don'ts
make communicating with staff a high priority – get yourself known to as many staff as possible (for all the right reasons)	ignore staff and operate in a political vacuum – you are all part of the same team and the public views you all as ‘the council’
take time to explain decisions and direction to staff – keep them informed about why the council is doing what it is doing	blame staff for all of the problems facing the council – it’s demotivating for individuals and teams and can only harm the reputation of the council
invite staff to attend your events and get involved in communication exercises	make unreasonable demands of staff
provide praise for the achievements of staff and, if possible, reward excellence	be curt, rude or unsympathetic when communicating with people inside the council
take time to understand the views, concerns and aspirations of staff	assume that everyone understands who you are and what role you have staff are often unclear about the role of members and how the political process works



Exercise 5 – using all of your communication channels

Outline how you would plan to communicate with your constituents in the scenario below:

The council has started a high profile campaign to tackle ‘anti-social behaviour’ in the area, to (a) encourage local people to report incidents of behaviour that they find unacceptable, and (b) to get involved in schemes to reduce the causes and impact of this. You have decided to champion this campaign in your own ward to show what can be done and encourage greater efforts by everyone in the local community. On this basis:

What do you want to achieve from your communication(s)?

Who is your audience?

What is your key message(s)?

In what format are you going to communicate for the best impact?

The essential skills of a good communicator

The style and approach you adopt in communicating with people should always be personal to you. In essence, what works best for you, given your character, preferences and strengths, and the nature of the audience you are communicating with. The table below contains some 'positive' and 'negative' indicators which you may wish to consider in identifying a style and approach that works for you:



Communication - additional hints

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
communicates regularly with community via newsletters, phone calls and local media	interrupts, appears not to listen and use inappropriate or insensitive language, eg shouting, being rude or abusive
listens sensitively, checks for understanding and adapts style as necessary	communicates reactively and is slow to respond when approached by other, eg public colleagues, officers or media
builds relationships with local media and creates opportunities for communicating key decisions, activities and achievements	fails to listen to others' views and presents rigid and inflexible arguments
speaks clearly and confidently in public, uses accessible language and avoids jargon or 'council-speak'	uses information dishonestly to discredit others and is unwilling or unable to deliver unpopular messages
provides regular feedback, keeps people informed and manages expectations	fails to participate in meetings and lacks the confidence speaking in public
uses appropriate language to communicate key points verbally and in writing, eg letters, reports, interviews and presentations	presents subjective and confused arguments using poor language and style

The importance of branding and reputation in communication

In the commercial world, branding is often described as an organisation's **personality**, ie what it aims to achieve, what distinguishes it from others or how it presents itself to the wider world. Just think about your council for a moment – what words could you use to describe its branding?

Of course councils have some difficulties in developing a brand. Compared to many private companies they have a complex range of functions and a diverse customer base. They are politically driven, with all that implies for public perceptions of what they do. And being bound by their statutory duties and legal powers, they often have little discretion to change their brand or discontinue unpopular services.

Despite this, branding is becoming increasingly important for councils who wish to build a good reputation. Logos and symbols are important, but what is more important is to communicate to people:

- what the council is there to do
- what values drive the organisation and its vision for the future
- the promises it makes (and keeps)
- the behaviour of its members and staff and the way customers can expect to be treated
- the **look** and **feel** of how the council goes about its business.

This **brand management** is not just the preserve of officers - it is the responsibility of all politicians. Members are often the public face of the council and the ultimate guardians of its brand and reputation. As such, their attitude and behaviour is crucial and their communications are often the way that the council's personality and image is made known to the public. Get this right and you enhance the public perception of the council. Get it wrong and the reputation of the council is severely affected – to the detriment of all.

In handling the media and communicating with local people, you will always consider the likely impact on your personal reputation – how you come across and the lasting impression that you leave with your audience. However, it is also essential that you consider the wider impact on the reputation of the council. Sensible planning and preparation should help you to avoid some of the pitfalls:



“It takes 20 years to build a good reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it”

Warren Buffet, Former Chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway



The 'reputation campaign'

The LGA has developed a reputation campaign to provide leaders, executives and heads of communications with a route to improve the reputation of local public services. It sees three big issues as being crucial for councils: (a) leadership, (b) brand, and (c) communications.

It also identifies **five rules of reputation** - the areas that councils need to focus on to improve reputation, eg 'prove you provide value for money.'

<http://reputation.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelId=1>



Exercise 6 – protecting and enhancing the council's reputation

Consider how the following might impact on the Council's branding and reputation. Identify both the positive and negative potential impacts:

You write an article in the press complaining about school children playing conkers in the playground and pointing out some of the health and safety concerns. You state that you are trying to get the local education authority to introduce a ban on the playing of conkers in local schools to prevent accidents to children. Your position as a local councillor is clearly stated.

Positive potential impacts

Negative potential impacts

Reflect on the points you have identified. Do the negatives outweigh the positives? If so, is there a better way to get your point across? On the plus side, this might be seen as a community leader taking action on an issue of potential harm to children (possibly raised by parents, teachers or others). However, it might also be perceived as the council (and you are the public face of the council in this instance) nit-picking and interfering in a traditionally British pastime, with allegations of a 'nanny-state' approach.

Final summary

The ability to communicate effectively in any given situation is probably the greatest skill that anyone could possess. However, few of us can expect to be successful in getting our message across in the way that we intend all of the time. In fact, much of our success will always depend on the receptiveness of the audience or listener to both what is being said and the way that it is delivered. Both are important.

Some early thought and sensible planning will always help you to maximise the impact of your communications, but there is no substitute for the human touch – in whatever method or approach you adopt, try to talk to people in an open, honest and direct way and above all, keep your message simple, timely and meaningful.



“The more we elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate”

Joseph Priestley, Theorist



Where do you go from here?

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

(a) What key action points can you identify to improve your effectiveness as a ward member in handling the media and your personal communications, ie what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

(b) Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, eg further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc

Appendix – sources of further information and support

Printed publications

‘Councillor’s Guide (2011/12)’, LGID.

‘Mastering Communication’, Nicky Stanton, Palgrave.

‘The Art of Talking to Anyone: Essential People Skills for Success in Any Situation’, Rosalie Maggio, Magraw-Hill.

‘The Good Councillor’s Guide’, National Association of Local Councils (NALC).

‘The Handbook of Communication Skills’, Owen Hargie, Routledge.

‘The Jelly Effect: How to Make Your Communications Stick’, Andy Bounds, Capstone Publishing Ltd.



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