

21st Century skills are 12 abilities that today's students need to succeed in their careers during the Information Age.

The twelve 21st Century skills are:

1. Critical thinking
2. Creativity
3. Collaboration
4. Communication
5. Information literacy
6. Media literacy
7. Technology literacy
8. Flexibility
9. Leadership
10. Initiative
11. Productivity
12. Social skills

Does it matter that Sarah Palin never actually claimed that she could see Russia from her bedroom window? When the Alaska governor and 2008 Republican vice-presidential candidate was asked what insights she had gained from her state's geographic proximity to Russia, what she really said was, "They're our next-door neighbors, and you can actually see Russia from an island in Alaska." Still, that was enough for Tina Fey to skewer her two days later on Saturday Night Live and help torpedo hopes of a McCain/Palin victory.

As the latest crop of political candidates produces a new batch of communication blunders, it's a good time to reflect on your own ability to avoid foot-in-mouth disease. Not surprisingly, communication is one of the three core characteristics that

define executive presence (EP), according to research from the Center for Talent Innovation. Your appearance telegraphs that you look like a leader and deserve to be listened to; your gravitas indicates your intellectual heft. But it's those crucial communication skills that bridge the gap between style and substance, and enable you to command a room.

Every time you present a new idea to a crowd of potential investors, answer questions in a town hall event among employees, or email a proposal to key colleagues, you have an opportunity to signal that you should be perceived as a leader. There is an added layer of complexity when trying to project credibility to leaders and stakeholders not only in the U.S. but also around the world.

Conversely, you also can blunder into a quagmire that will suck the executive presence right out of you. CTI's research uncovered the five top communication mistakes, as identified by senior leaders at the director level and above:

- Makes racially-biased comments. That this is the worst communications violation should be obvious. Such remarks not only offend or insult; they also reflect poor judgment, low emotional intelligence, and an overall lack of the worldliness and education required of leaders.
- Makes off-color jokes. Our research discovered that it's not just how you express yourself in a meeting or formal setting that helps secure your standing, but rather what you say five minutes before the meeting and in the bar or at the water cooler after the meeting that reflects on you. While the ability "to do banter really well," as one leader puts it, helps promote EP at her company, never assume that an off-the-cuff, off-the-record conversation permits you to make off-color remarks. Say the wrong thing, no matter how relaxed the setting or raucous the company, and you can be sure it will come back to haunt you.
- Sounds uneducated. Sarah Palin's remarks on Russia are a particularly high-profile example of how lack of substance can sabotage your EP. Said one IT manager in a CTI focus group, "I've been with bosses who look like they would be competent,

and then they open their mouths and sound like complete buffoons." That's why you never want to be only "one question deep" in a meeting or get caught presenting "half-baked" ideas. Know your stuff.

- Swears. Forty-seven percent of our respondents believe swearing detracts from EP. If you don't have the gravitas to say something that's meaningful on its own, cloaking your comments in four-letter words certainly won't add to your credibility. In fact, it will detract from it -- even more so, according to survey respondents, if you're a woman.

- Flirts. Flirting is seen as equally poisonous for men and women. Charm, like humor, can easily be misread or fall flat. Why gamble your gravitas by being flirtatious when you have a better chance as a straight-shooter?

All of these communication blunders are amplified online. Remember that emails last forever, and the higher you rise, the more harmful the possibility of someone misusing information posted on a social networking site to smear your reputation.

Whether honed online or in person, perhaps the most salient aspect of one's reputation is this: While it need not top the charts, it had best not be bad. A crack in your public persona can prove devastating, no matter how fantastic your performance.



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Thomas Hoepker chose not to publish this photograph in a book about 9/11.

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