

5 COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES THAT MAKE YOU SOUND LIKE A LEADER

For English-learning PMs who are tired of
sounding less capable than they are

Before we start

YOU ALREADY KNOW HOW TO DO YOUR JOB

You've managed projects, navigated stakeholder politics, juggled deadlines across time zones, and handled pressure that most native speakers couldn't manage. Your expertise isn't the issue.

But there are moments (a stakeholder escalation, a senior leadership presentation, a difficult email that needs to be very clear) where something gets lost between what you know and what you say.

That gap is costing you visibility, influence, career momentum, and it has nothing to do with intelligence.

This guide is not about fixing your English. It's about making sure your competence comes through, in every critical moment.

The 5 strategies ahead are built around one idea: the most effective communicators don't talk more, but they create the conditions for the right things to happen. They build certainty in the other person's mind, and THAT is a skill you can learn.

Each strategy gives you:

- *The specific moment it's designed for*
- *The psychological reason it works*
- *A real before/after scenario*
- *One practice prompt you can use today*



About the Author

I DIDN'T WRITE THIS AS A LANGUAGE TEACHER.

*I'm Maria T. Portillo, founder of **The English Coach**, and an American professional who has spent over 30 years living and working in a second language: Italian.*

I wrote this guide as someone who has been on both sides.

For three decades, I have conducted my entire professional life in Italian, my second language. Every negotiation, every client relationship, every high-stakes conversation, in a language not my own. I know exactly what it costs to perform under pressure in your second language, and I know what it feels like when the gap finally closes.

Before founding **The English Coach**, I spent years inside multinational organisations in operations, commercial, and client-facing roles at companies including E&J Gallo Winery, Atlas Copco, and Emerson. I sat in the same rooms you sit in. I watched talented professionals lose influence not because of their skills, but because their English didn't perform at the level their expertise deserved.

That pattern repeated itself for decades. It is why I built **The English Coach**.

WHAT MY CLIENTS HAVE GONE ON TO DO

- ✓ *Deliver speeches at the United Nations*
- ✓ *Present to venture capital investors*
- ✓ *Lead board-level presentations with full presence*
- ✓ *Close multi-million euro contracts in English*
- ✓ *Run Steering Committee meetings without thinking about their language*

“

“Last week, I ran my first Steering Committee meeting with real confidence. For the first time, I wasn't thinking about my English at all. I was simply present in the room.

Senior Project Manager — 6 weeks into the program

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Inside this Guide

FIVE STRATEGIES. FIVE CRITICAL MOMENTS.

Active Listening That Actually Works:

for when you're catching 80% and not sure which 20% you missed.

Asking Questions That Make You Sound Senior:

for when you need clarity but don't want to look uncertain.

Moving Conversations Forward:

for stuck moments when silence turns uncomfortable.

Speaking Under Pressure:

for escalations, presentations, and high-stakes conversations.

Writing Emails People Actually Act On:

for when your message needs to be very clear, the first time.



Active Listening That Actually Works

1

THE MOMENT THIS IS DESIGNED FOR

You're in a stakeholder meeting and someone is speaking quickly, using idioms or abbreviations you half-recognise. You catch most of it, but not all. The worst part isn't the gap. It's not knowing which part you missed.

WHY IT WORKS

Most people think listening is passive. It isn't. Active listening is a visible skill. When stakeholders see you doing it, something shifts, and they feel understood... and a person who makes others feel understood is automatically perceived as more senior, more trustworthy, and more worth following.

HOW TO USE IT

Three micro-behaviours that make active listening visible:

1 Reflect the meaning, not the words

"So the real concern here is timeline risk, not scope ... is that right?" Don't repeat what was said. Capture what it means.

2 Name the emotion, not just the content

"I can see this is a pressure point for your team." This signals emotional intelligence and makes people feel safe to say more.

3 Pause before you respond

A two-second pause after someone finishes signals composure. In a second language, it also buys critical processing time without looking uncertain. Try regularly practicing active listening with team members, friends, or family to improve your listening skills.

SEE IT IN ACTION

Before

A VP says: 'We need this by end of Q3, no exceptions.' You nod and say 'Understood.' Later you realise you missed which deliverable she meant.

After

You pause, then say: 'Just to confirm — when you say Q3, are we talking the full integration or phase one? I want to build the right plan.' She relaxes. You just prevented a problem that would have cost three weeks.

YOUR PRACTICE PROMPT

Try this: In your next meeting, after someone makes a key point, use this sentence: 'Let me make sure I've got this right —' and then paraphrase what they said. Notice how people respond.

A woman in a dark business suit and white blouse is standing and speaking in a meeting room. She has her hands raised in a gesturing motion. In the foreground, another woman is seated at a table, looking towards the speaker. The room has large windows in the background, and the overall scene is dimly lit with a soft, professional atmosphere.

The person who listens most carefully is almost always perceived as the most credible person in the room.

Asking Questions That Make You Sound Senior

2

THE MOMENT THIS IS DESIGNED FOR

Something in the meeting isn't clear. A scope boundary, a decision that doesn't make sense, a dependency no one has named. You need to ask but in a second language, asking for clarification can feel risky. You don't want to sound lost.

WHY IT WORKS

In every high-performing team, the people who ask the sharpest questions are considered the most capable, not the ones who stay quiet. Asking the right question signals that you've understood the situation more deeply than anyone else, and that you're thinking ahead.

HOW TO USE IT

The Senior Question Framework: three parts that position your question as insight, not ignorance:

1 Anchor to context

"Given that we've committed to a Q3 delivery and the dev team is at capacity..." Start by naming what you've understood.

2 Identify the gap

"...I'm not sure we've defined who makes the call if the two timelines conflict." Name the specific unresolved thing.

3 Ask the specific question

"Can we clarify that now, or is there a decision-maker we should loop in?" One question. One answer needed.

SEE IT IN ACTION

Before

'I don't understand — who is responsible for budget approvals?' Asked cold, this sounds like a basic gap that should already be resolved.

After

'Given that procurement takes up to three weeks, and go-live is in six — who has final sign-off on budget? Is that Maria, or does it go through the finance committee?' Same question. Completely different perception.

YOUR PRACTICE PROMPT

Try this: Before your next meeting, identify one thing that isn't clear. Write your question using the three-part structure: context — gap — specific ask. Notice how it changes when you start from context.

A woman in a dark suit is speaking at a podium, with her hands raised in a questioning or explanatory gesture. She is looking towards the right. In the background, several audience members are visible, some looking towards the speaker. The image is in grayscale with a light overlay.

*Asking the right question at
the right moment is not a
sign of confusion.*

*It is a sign of
strategic thinking.*

Moving Conversations Forward

THE MOMENT THIS IS DESIGNED FOR

The meeting has stalled. Someone raised a problem, but now there's a silence or people are talking in circles. In your first language you'd know how to step in. In English, that half-second of hesitation is long enough for someone else to take the wheel.

WHY IT WORKS

When someone moves a stuck conversation forward, they don't just solve a logistical problem; they create safety. People feel relieved. And relief gets attached to the person who caused it. This is how you become the person stakeholders want in the room.

HOW TO USE IT

Three sentence starters that work in almost any stuck situation:

1 The Redirect

"Let me bring us back to the core question, which is [X]. What would help us move forward on that specifically?"

2 The Synthesiser

"I'm hearing two different perspectives — [A] and [B]. Can we take a moment to decide which one we're aligning on?"

3 The Decision Anchor

"We've covered a lot of ground. What's the one decision we need to make today to keep things moving?"

SEE IT IN ACTION

Before


The team has been debating the same scope question for twenty minutes. You wait. The meeting ends without a decision. The thread goes on for two more days.

After

At the fifteen-minute mark you say: 'I'm hearing two things — some feel the integration needs to be in scope for phase one, others think it should wait. Can we decide that now? It affects everything else.' The room focuses. A decision is made.

YOUR PRACTICE PROMPT

Try this: In your next meeting, whenever you notice a moment of drift or silence, try one of the three sentence starters. Start with The Decision Anchor — it's the most versatile.

A man in a dark suit and white shirt is standing and speaking at a meeting. He has his hands raised in a gesture. In the background, several people are seated at a table, looking towards him. The scene is dimly lit, with a whiteboard visible in the background.

*The person who moves a
stuck conversation forward
is not just managing
the meeting.
They are demonstrating
leadership.*

Speaking Under Pressure

4

THE MOMENT THIS IS DESIGNED FOR

Stakes are high. An escalation call, a client presentation, a difficult conversation. Under pressure, a second language doesn't just make you nervous — it physically reduces fluency. Words come slower. Sentences collapse mid-thought.

WHY IT WORKS

Under pressure, how you sound matters as much as what you say. Calmness creates certainty in others. When you are calm — even before you feel it — the people around you become calmer too. Calm, measured communication is one of the strongest signals of leadership presence. And it can be performed before it is felt.

HOW TO USE IT

The PACE technique ... four steps for high-pressure moments:

1 P — Pause before you speak

A deliberate two-second pause signals composure and gives your brain time to structure the response before your mouth starts.

2 A — Anchor to what you know

"What I know for certain is [X]." Start with a concrete fact. This stops the spiral of trying to handle uncertainty in real time.

3 C — Clarify the next step

"What I'd like to do now is [specific action] — does that make sense as a starting point?"

4 E — End with certainty

"I'll have a clear picture for you by Thursday." Close with a commitment, not a question. This is what people remember.

SEE IT IN ACTION

Before

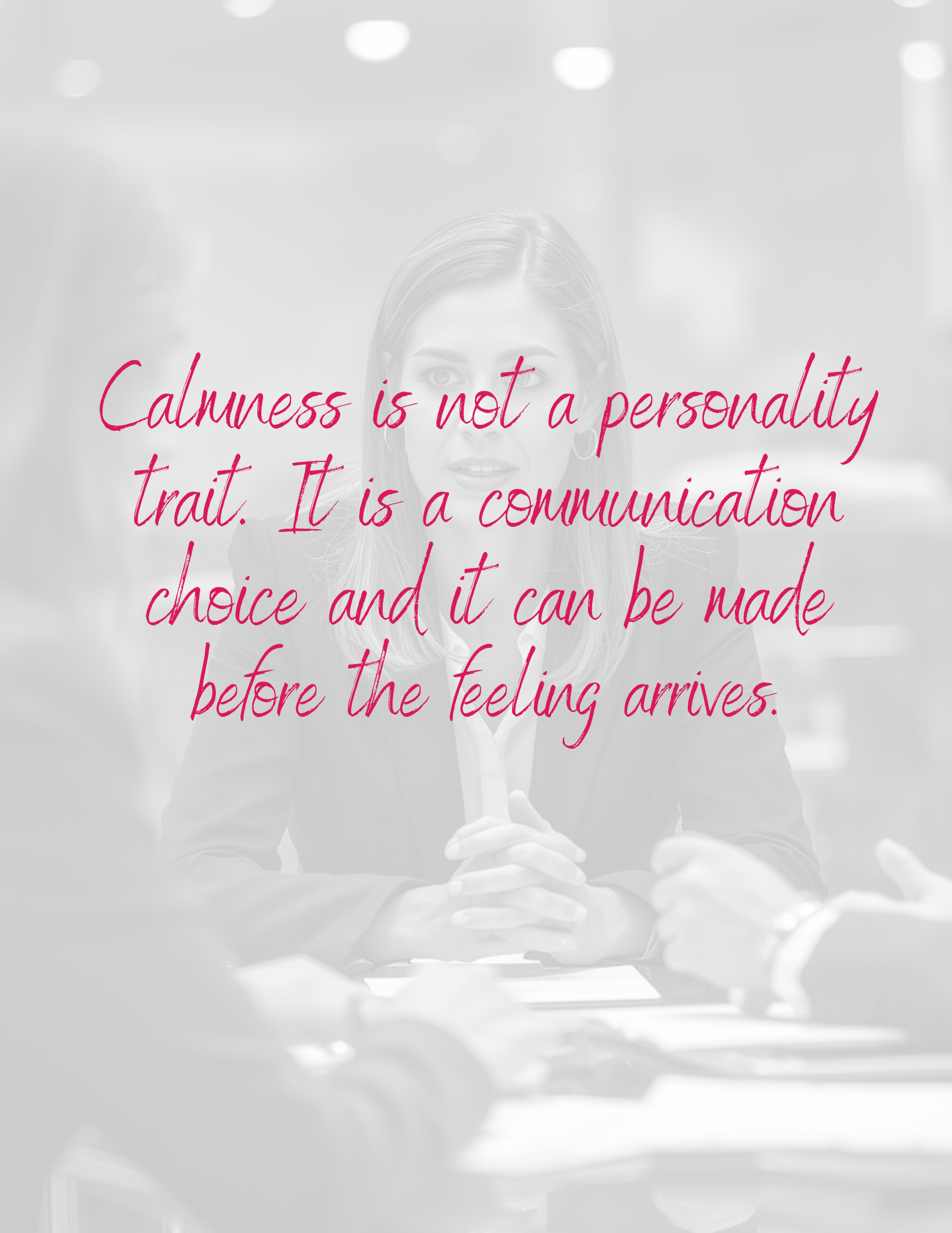
The client asks something unexpected. You say 'Um, that's a good question' and talk for ninety seconds trying to find the answer while speaking. You lose the thread. They lose confidence.

After

[Pause.] 'That's an important question. What I know right now is the Q3 timeline is confirmed. What I want to check is the data migration dependency. Can I come back to you specifically by Wednesday?' Clear. Calm. Credible.

YOUR PRACTICE PROMPT

Try this: Before your next high-stakes call, write the three most likely difficult questions. For each, write a one-sentence ANCHOR response: 'What I know for certain is...'. Having these prepared means you're never completely caught empty-handed.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark business suit, is seated at a conference table. Her hands are clasped in front of her. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred office setting with circular lights.

Calmness is not a personality trait. It is a communication choice and it can be made before the feeling arrives.

Writing Emails People Actually Act On

5

THE MOMENT THIS IS DESIGNED FOR

You've written the email three times and still aren't sure it says what you mean. Or you send it confidently and nothing happens. No reply, no action. What should have been one email becomes a thread that achieves nothing.

WHY IT WORKS

Most professional emails fail not because of language, but because of structure. When the recipient has to work to understand what you want, they delay, deflect, or ignore. When the structure does the thinking for them — context, request, next step in the right place — the friction disappears.

HOW TO USE IT

The CRN Framework — three elements every action-driving email must have:

1 C — Context (one sentence)

"Further to our call on Tuesday, where we agreed on a Q3 launch date..." One sentence that orients the reader immediately. No need to search previous emails.

2 R — Request (one specific ask)

"I'd like your sign-off on the revised project plan, attached here." Not "let me know your thoughts." One clear ask. One decision needed.

3 N — Next step (who does what, by when)

"If I haven't heard from you by Thursday, I'll proceed on the assumption the plan is approved and begin resource allocation." This removes the follow-up email.

SEE IT IN ACTION

Before

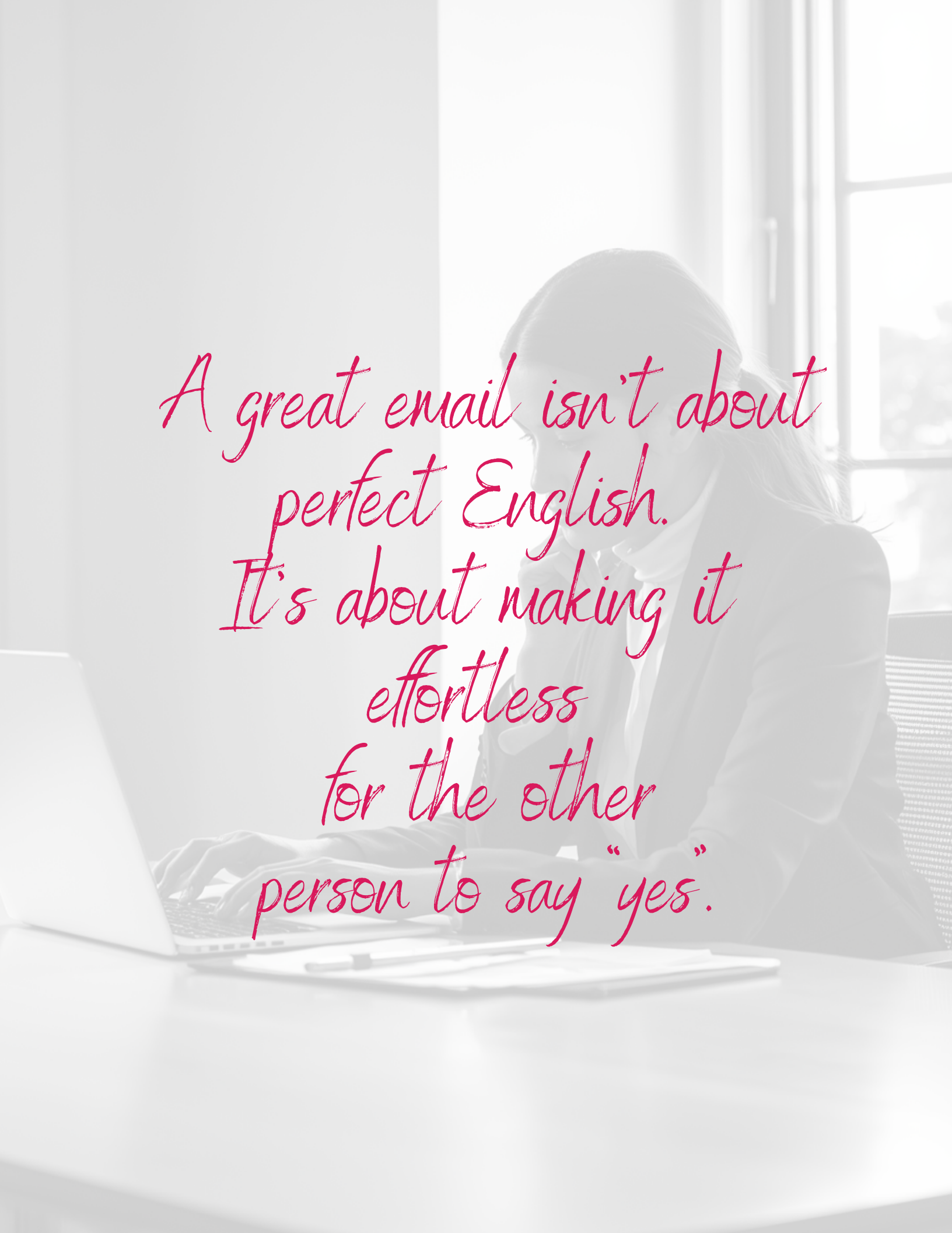
'Hi, hope you're well. I'm following up on the project plan. Let me know your thoughts when you get a chance.' No urgency, no specific ask, no next step. This email will be ignored.

After

'Hi [Name] — following up on the project plan we discussed Tuesday. I need your approval on the attached version by Thursday so we can begin resource allocation Friday. If I haven't heard by then, I'll take that as a green light.' Specific. Clear. Self-resolving.

YOUR PRACTICE PROMPT

Try this: Find an email in your sent folder that didn't get the response you needed. Rewrite it using CRN. Notice where the original was missing context, had an unclear request, or didn't define the next step.

A woman in a business suit is sitting at a desk in an office, looking down at her work. She is wearing a headset and has her hands on a laptop keyboard. The background is a bright window with a view of a city. The text is overlaid on the image in a red, cursive font.

*A great email isn't about
perfect English.
It's about making it
effortless
for the other
person to say "yes".*

What comes next

You've read the strategies. Now let's make them stick.

Reading about a communication strategy and using it under pressure are two very different things.

The first step is always the same: pick one. Not five. One.

Look back at the five strategies.

Which one describes a moment you experienced in the last two weeks? Start there.

Use it in your next meeting, your next difficult email, your next moment of pressure.

Then notice what changes.

What a few of my clients say...



Giacomo L. - Italy

This is not the classic English course: it's the perfect combo for professionals working in an international environment. The course will be tailored to your needs and your professional role to improve your English and boost your soft skills as a project manager.

Project Manager who attended The Fluency Accelerator



Elisa - Italy

For the first time, I wrote all the important things about me (my role, my goal, my success) in only four sentences...and it was clear.

When I think about what I do at work, I usually think of too many things, but after the first session, I read it and thought: yes. This is clear.

I was surprised.

Administrative Manager, Manufacturing Industry, who attended The Fluency Accelerator program



Panni C. - Hungary, based in Germany

Last week, I ran my first Steering Committee meeting with confidence. For the first time, I wasn't thinking about my English at all. I was just present in the room.

Project Manager who attended The Fluency Accelerator

Want to go deeper?

These five strategies are the foundation.

Applying them consistently (in your specific role, with your specific stakeholders, in your specific industry) is a different challenge.

The Fluency Accelerator is a personalised coaching program that takes PMs who already have the expertise and helps them communicate at the level their expertise deserves.

Not a language course, but a leadership communication program built around the moments that matter most in your career.

If any of this resonated:

The best next step is a short conversation, not a sales call, just a look at where you are and what would actually help. No pitch. No pressure. You can book your call by clicking here: **[Clarity Call](#)**

Thank you for reading. I hope these strategies change what's possible for you in your situation. — Maria

