

# LOOK WHO'S TALKING

**JANETTE HURLES** OUTLINES THE BENEFITS OF IMPROVING OUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND EXPLAINS THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION.

The poet John Donne wrote the immortal words that “No man is an island” in the 17th Century and there couldn’t be a more apt description of life in the 21st Century. We live and work in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, where our ability to communicate and collaborate effectively with a wide range of constituents, both internally and externally, has never been more critical to our professional success.

**ON AUTOMATIC PILOT.** The reality, however, is that, although we spend most of our time communicating in one way or another, few of us do it well. Humans are a social species and for us communicating is as natural as breathing. So much so that with most of our interactions our mind is running on automatic pilot.

Our minds are arranged to conserve energy and we do this by developing efficient patterns of thought and behaviour. For example, having learned how to drive, we automate the actions required to the point that we need not engage conscious thinking about what we are doing on a routine journey. Only if something exceptional happens do we engage full conscious thinking again.

These automated behaviours are clearly valuable, especially with the fast pace of life today. But automated thinking and pre-determined behavioural routines can cause major problems, too. Communicating with people is not like driving a car. It is a complex process. We are all different and a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work. Every interaction has the potential for creating misunderstandings, disagreements, strong feelings and problems. These reactions can cost business dearly in terms of time, money, opportunities and relationships. If we are to make any meaningful and sustained improvements in the overall quality of communication, we need to engage full conscious thinking as a matter of course. When was the last time you asked yourself: “How do I communicate?”

**SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND...** The first principle of effective communication – seek first to understand – may not at first seem radical, but it flies in the face of what typically happens. Too often, even when we are supposedly listening, our focus is on our own point of view. When we are not speaking, we are generally busy formulating our next response, our goal, to persuade others to agree with our

conclusions and our ideas or our proposal. The run-up to the war in Iraq is a perfect example of this. President Bush’s stance of “you’re either with us or against us” created a lot of resistance and hostility, and his attempts to gain the backing of the United Nations were ultimately doomed from the start.

Reality is different for different people. We can only effect change or influence others if we both understand and appreciate their reality. To do this, we need to step into their shoes and actively seek out their priorities, their concerns, their opinions and their vision. This does, of course, take time, but not doing it is a false economy. To the degree that we allow or disallow the exploration of different realities, we will spend time, energy, emotion and money dealing with the aftermath of sabotage by individuals or groups who resent that their experience, opinions and strongly held beliefs seem to be of little interest to us.

There is a significant payoff to doing this. Quality of thinking is greatly enhanced through the process of exploring different viewpoints. New insights can often lead to higher quality decisions and more innovative solutions.

**...THEN SEEK TO BE UNDERSTOOD.** The second principle of good communication – knowing how to be understood – is of equal importance. Early Greek philosophy and the ideas embodied in the three words *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* provide a good framework for this. *Ethos* is your personal credibility, the faith people have in your integrity and competence. It is the trust that you inspire. *Pathos* means that you are in alignment with the emotional thrust of another person’s communication. *Logos* is logic, the reasoning part of communication. The sequence is important. *Ethos*, *pathos*, *logos* – character, relationship, logic. Most people, when communicating, go straight to the logic of their idea or viewpoint. They try to convince others of the validity of that logic without taking *ethos* and *pathos* into consideration. We need to ensure that we present information to others in a way that makes sense for them and will engage them. You will significantly improve your ability to communicate effectively and get the results you want when you can speak authentically, and present your own ideas clearly and logically in the context of understanding the viewpoint and concerns of the other party.

The better you understand all the different parties integral to your success, the better advice you'll be able to give to them and the better you'll be able to do your job. Also, the more you are able to communicate your needs, the less likelihood there is of you experiencing unforeseen shocks.

**WHY LESS IS DEFINITELY MORE.** As with many things in life, with communication, less is more – this is the third principle of effective communication. Just as we often mistake activity for achievement so do we often mistake talking for communication. An American psychologist once said: "Conversation in the US today is a competitive exercise, where the first person to draw breath is declared the listener."

Our early years are spent learning to speak, read and write. But very few of us have learned the ability to listen properly – either to our own voice or that of others. Our habitual way of talking with (or at) each other prevents us from hearing, even when we think we are listening. There is a fundamental difference between listening and hearing.

Silence is a very powerful and rarely used tool in communication. It helps us to slow down conversations so that we can discover what the conversation really needs to be about. Silence helps to build self-awareness. It allows us to reflect on what someone has said, to hear our inner voice and notice our emotions. Silence gives us the space to get past symptoms or effect to root cause. This enables us to give considered responses, instead of knee-jerk reactions. During meetings, the best responses or most useful solutions often come from the person who has sat silently listening, while the rest of the room was filled with debate.

**IT'S NOT WHAT YOU DO, IT'S HOW YOU THINK THAT COUNTS.**

The way we perceive a situation (person, issue, opportunity and the like) has a very real bearing on the way we approach that situation, shaping our thinking, decisions and behaviour. Perception determines what we pay attention to and how we react. Effective communication is not simply the learning of a set of skills or techniques. It requires a fundamental understanding of the two-way nature of the process. The art of effective communication is, in effect, the art of relationship building.

We all have competing demands on our time. However, the results we achieve in business come directly from the choices we make about what activities get our time and attention. Our effectiveness is determined as much by the things we don't do, and should do, as by the things we actually do and shouldn't.

If we want to really improve we must change the way we think about communication. Those of us who place value on the communication process, as well as the outcome, will undoubtedly reap the rewards in an interconnected world. Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes. Like the martial arts, mastering communication is a life-long learning process. However, by being mindful of the three principles outlined here, you can focus on improving one interaction at a time.

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