Second Edition

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Stepladders to Success for the Professional

By Richard Ellis

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Stepladders to Success for the Professional

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Introduction to New Edition

It might be thought that it says something about the speed of development and innovation in communications technology that a new edition of this book should be published soon after the first. There is something in that. There is for instance no mention in the first edition (2003) of blogs, texting, podcasts, e-books or Facebook. But a further reason for a new edition has been the reaction of those readers who have given helpful feedback, advice and suggestions. Then there have been the author's experiences from running courses in communication based on this book. In addition, two particular issues have emerged with even more force during this time: cultural dimensions to communication and the research into emotional or social intelligence. Both of these have been addressed within this new edition. This new text also provides an opportunity to consider the effectiveness of the new technologies of communication as against their efficiency, in particular, the use of PowerPoint in presentation.

Introduction

The ability to communicate is a vital ladder to all career and personal development. Without sufficient communication skills it is possible that there will be little movement upwards (or increasingly these days, sideways). If you are planning one day to develop your own 'career' in self employment then communication skills will be critical to any chances you have of gaining, holding and enlarging your client base. There is considerable evidence to suggest that those who lack a range of well-developed communication skills find it difficult to advance their careers. This shouldn't really surprise us if we consider just how much time we spend communicating with our colleagues, managers, and customers, and how the quality of that communication will affect our relationships with these.

Surveys of what employers are looking for when they recruit suggest that effective communication skills are high on their wish list. However, there is some vagueness as to what 'communication skills' actually refers to – that will be addressed in this book. Many people – you may know some – are effectively blocked in their working lives because they are unable to draft that report, make that presentation or sustain that interview. This book is concerned with providing you with approaches, techniques, and advice to enhance your communication skills and so unblock those particular barriers to your professional progress.

Profession and professional are rather vague terms; as far as this book is concerned they refer to the work that someone does which requires special training or expertise, for instance accountancy, teaching, medicine, law, surveying, planning, health and safety, engineering, politics, human resources, and general management. If your particular profession is not in the above list, please do not take offence.

Getting up the stepladder

A stepladder is just that – a means by which you can take certain steps to reach your goal e.g. change that light bulb in the hall. Very often in our careers we will need to 'change light bulbs', get some new ideas, develop brighter ways of communicating, put new sources of energy into our talk and writing, hence this book.

Developing your self-esteem and reducing stress

If we feel confident about our communication then this tends to increase our self esteem and self-worth. There are many people who have never developed this sense in themselves and consequently find it very difficult to be assertive and confident in their communication with others. These feelings of inadequacy can increase stress – we bottle up our feelings instead of expressing them, and this can do damage to our health and sense of well-being. Enhancing your skills in communication should have real benefits. If you look and sound more confident, people may think you are more confident; this can have positive consequences for you.

We cannot promise you that by reading this book and acting on its advice you will immediately experience less stress in your life but it may help. It should certainly encourage you to be a more confident communicator at work and in other aspects of your life. We very much hope that the experience of reading this text, working through the exercises and taking the ideas back to your life and work, does increase your feeling of esteem.

Careers today

A word of explanation. Some years ago careers meant exactly that: gradual and in some ways quite predictable steps upwards – under factotum, factotum, senior factotum, managing factotum, executive factotum, etc. These days there are still those career paths: one can still move from junior doctor to house officer, registrar and consultant, but in many organizations there is now a core and a periphery, the core and those more on the edge, the periphery who may be engaged job per job, short-term contract by short-term contract, etc. Handy (1984) has written of the emergence of the 'portfolio career' where there are a number of distinct strands within it; this he suggests will more and more replace traditional career paths. Increasingly people will want some combination of career gaps, secondments, sabbaticals, study leave, job share, etc. Enhanced communication skills should certainly help those experiencing these roller coaster career rides.

Professional competence

We are familiar with the word 'skill'. As professionals you will be gaining certain skills, you will also be learning through your professional practice how to use those skills in order that you achieve competence. And increasingly, your competence to practice will be monitored during your career – as with the doctors, who will be going through regular re-validation procedures.

The notion of competence implies knowledge of the 'what' (for instance, the core professional concepts) and knowledge of the 'how' (the ways in which we put these concepts into practice). This implies that what we do is underpinned in some way by concepts of 'theory', in other words our skills are not built up haphazardly; according to the theory of competence we build up 'theories' of how things 'work' – what is successful, what fails, what could have worked better.

Reflective learning

David Kolb ([1971]1984) in his work on reflective learning suggests that we should move from the experience (that meeting which didn't come off) to reflection (Why not? Was it the agenda, the timing, etc?) to thinking about various concepts and theories, i.e. theories about the effect of peer pressure or groupthink, both of which will be dealt with in Chapter 10.

Following this we should move into active experimentation such as 'Let's try this change at the next meeting', and further reflection on the results. ('So how did these changes work out?') Kolb's model (1971), adopted and refined by others, follows the pattern in Figure 1.1.

In essence then the experience will, if possible, be followed by some kind of reflection. We have to admit that for most of us it is very difficult to do this; things happen too fast, we cannot take out time to reflect. 'Sorry, I can't be at the meeting, I'm reflecting on that presentation I gave'. Such a position is not defensible, it couldn't work. But do try and get into the habit of building some reflective time into your diary, perhaps on a weekly basis. Take advantage of committed time – waiting for that meeting to start, that train to arrive or that delay in the departure lounge – to do some reflection.

Communicative competence

The notion of communicative competence rests on a similar foundation of theory, reflection and experimentation. It is pretty clear that few of us actually do much of this experimentation and reflection; most of our communication just happens, we are far too busy coping with work, with life, with crises, with failing computers and troublesome work colleagues – all at the same time! We should reflect in order to increase our communicative competence (the ability to do and the knowledge of just how we do it). For instance, we should take a few minutes after that meeting

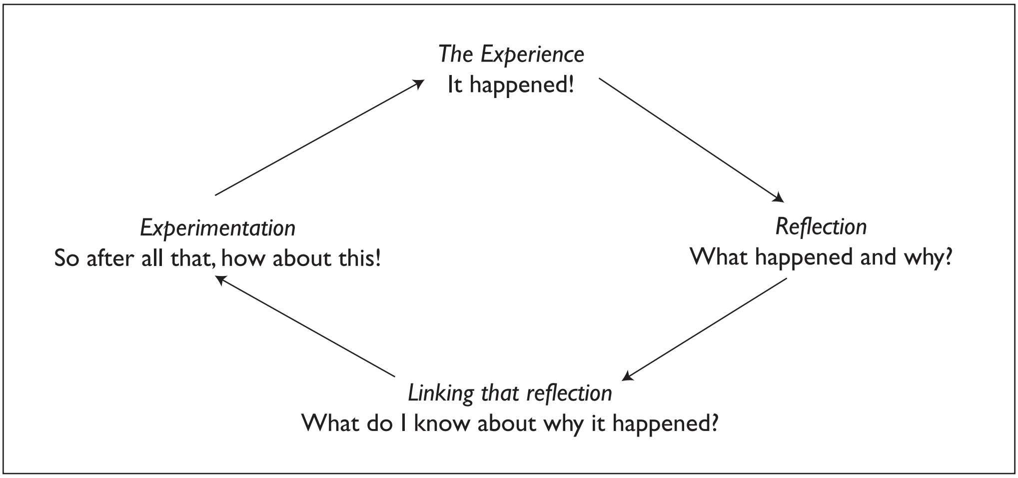


Figure 1.1 Kolb's model.

to review it, after that presentation to think of how the audience responded: after that interview to see whether we actually covered the ground we had planned. Doing this is a discipline; it requires time to be set aside for it; it is a time management discipline. This books aims to enhance this discipline. It also aims to enhance your knowledge of the various concepts underlying communication. Hymes (1971) has written about this:

> Communication competence refers not only to the ability to perform but also the knowledge of how to perform.

The reflective practitioner

Kolb's work lies at the heart of the concept of the reflective practitioner. We can define this as thinking /learning as one works: not just repeating mistakes and going over old ground but stretching our intellectual muscles and moving into different patterns of behaviour. This is increasingly favoured in medical education, teacher training and MBA programmes. The use of reflective diaries is increasingly popular, as is the use of mentors who help with these reflections. CPD (continuous professional development), which you may be undertaking, is based on these notions of appreciating what we do *and* how we do it. To some extent it is a habit in which we should encourage ourselves: that habit of self analysis and reflection, before we rush off to our next 'performance.' Some professions in the NHS, notably pharmacy, strongly encourage its members to complete a SEA (significant event analysis) form. This is designed to capture an event, analyse it and either to seek to build on it – the successes – or to prevent it from happening again – the failures.

You will note that in this book we invite you, the reader, to pause, reflect and perhaps, on occasion, jot down some ideas *before* you read our suggestions. In this way we hope this will enhance the usefulness of this book.

The learning organization

We know there must be such an entity but most of us have never been in an organization that is truly a learning one. The provision of training for all staff cannot guarantee this will happen, nor will investment in the latest technology. We have to be able to tap into and mobilise the individual's motivation and enthusiasm to do the job better: not to be content with the average; to learn from successes and failure. All of this implies some notion of being reflective, of learning from experience: 'How did we do?' 'How can it be improved?'

The concept of a learning organization needs to be encouraged from the top. Senior staff need to provide an example of learning, of reflective practice and desire for self-development. In the author's experience it is quite rare, when companies are drawing up their training plans, for senior staff to be encouraged to draw up their own training and development needs. We can recognise a learning organization if staff can answer yes to these questions:

- Does the appraisal system encourage reflection and learning from experience?
- Is there a recognition that staff will occasionally make mistakes and will be encouraged to learn from them? The important thing is not to engage in a blame culture: 'It was all your fault', but to encourage reflection and appraisal so that similar mistakes can be avoided
- Do staff meetings attempt to encourage this process of reflection and learning or are they forums where people's confidence is lowered and mutual recriminations abound?
- Does the training budget support internal review, building on individual and team success and, are these given proper recognition in the organization?

We're not suggesting that this is an exhaustive list; there may be many other criteria that apply particularly to your place of work.

> ***First reflection: you might like to pause at this point in your reading to consider the above list and what might be added to it. Or you might like to think about where you work at present. How many of these questions could your team leader or HR Director answer with a 'Yes'?***

So many organizations simply stumble on, repeating mistakes; they spend money on training, but they could never be considered learning organizations. Here is an example from retail.

> Every year, a large city centre store lays on a Christmas hamper promotion unit; each year they give the management of this to a trainee manager to cut his or her teeth on. The staff, mostly made up of part timers, are hired for the 4–5 weeks before Christmas and then paid off. Every year various panics ensue. The staff are thanked for their work and taken out in the last week for coffee and cake on the company, but at no time is any member of that staff asked their opinions as to how the unit might be made to function more effectively. This is a pity since the work attracts mature, well-educated people, many with experience of management – they would provide some excellent ideas if they were asked! The only review that takes place is that the trainee manager is asked to write a report. The difficulty here is that very few such aspiring managers are going to be very frank about their shortcomings or those of the staff they have attempted to manage. They will not want to present themselves in a poor light. The temptation is to soften the criticisms and lay the blame for various disappointments on lack of floor space, trouble over deliveries, an unexpected surge in demand for this product etc.

What we can say is that there is very little learning that goes on either by individuals (they're just casuals) or by managers (I'll be moving to Lingerie next week) or by the organization (well it is not a large profit centre!). Many of the problems of this Christmas will occur again next time. If senior staff are not interested in learning from the past to improve performance, one can hardly blame the staff for not being motivated to reflect, to analyse and to seek to enhance the standard of work.

Communication and the learning organization

You may be asking what all this has to do with a book on communication skills? Developing a learning culture has everything to do with communication. This culture will not just happen by itself, it has to be engendered and nurtured. It requires communication through recognition of the individual, effective presentation of the ideals of the learning organization, sensitive and well-conducted appraisals and meetings; it may mean developing a mentoring system for individuals where they can receive one-to-one assistance. Above all it lies in the communication of values that praises individual learning, and the use of initiative, that recognizes that the staff are the most precious asset to any organization, and that the establishment and nurturing of a learning culture requires communication on an organizational, team and individual level of the highest order.

We hope that, in reading this book and reflecting on the various concepts of communication, you too will feel more able and motivated to reflect on your success and failures and, by doing this, it will enhance your self-awareness of your strengths and of your weaknesses in communication. We certainly do not want you to become paralysed by this process of analysis. In short, the hope is that you will become an individual who learns and who will, because of this, enhance the learning culture of any organization you decide to join, or the one you eventually form!

Modelling communication

Before we look at some key concepts of communication, let us look briefly at how students of communication have attempted to model it. As you can imagine, this has occupied a great many researchers a great many hours. Very basically we have:

Sender --------*message*------ *Receiver*

Now what the Sender does is to encode a message, that is put it in some form that he or she thinks will be understood by the person/s receiving it – unless there is a deliberate intention of not communicating. The very process of encoding will form a large part of this book; for example:

Selecting the appropriate language (encryption to a MI5 officer; chemical formula to a pharmacist, a map to a geologist).

Deciding on the appropriate structure (headings to an editor, a time chart to a planner).

Considering the appropriate channel (e-mail, letter, telephone call, digital photo).

Deciding on the time for the message (just before the test; in the coffee break, during the meeting or immediately after the wedding!)

On the other hand, the receiver will need to decode the message – we'll be thinking about this when we examine listening, and how audiences react to presentations, but for example:

Receiving the message clearly (an absence of surrounding noise, being able to read the text as it emerges twisted from your printer).

Receiving the message quickly (lack of pauses, hesitations, interruptions).

Receiving the message fully (no empty pages, absent conclusions, omitted figures).

Let's now add a vital element to the model.

Sender encodes --------*message*------ *Receiver decodes*

Feedback ←————

If communication is really going to be *communication* – a two way process – then the sender has to pay close attention to feedback. As you can imagine this is a very involved process. We know that some people appear to be more 'cue-quick' than others: they are better able to 'read' the non-verbal signals, the 'leakage' given off. A whole literature has developed since the pioneering work of Argyle and Goffman in the 1960s and 1970s.

During this period, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) sought to create greater awareness of how we decode a whole array of communication cues and in particular, as described by O'Connor (O'Connor & Seymour, 2002). NLP is a set of skills for communicating more effectively with yourself and others and a way of extending choices and making better decisions.

The practitioners of NLP claim that, by studying and application, students of NLP can 're-program' their senses so that their ability to 'read' others is enhanced. This text does not go into detail on NLP but do consult the references at the end of this chapter. Many known to the author have found the NLP approach extremely helpful.

More recently, Goleman (2007) has put forward the notion of Emotional Quotient (EQ). This implies that there is an attribute that marks some people off from others – the ability to be 'intelligent' with emotions. Organizations, in their selection process, are increasingly looking for both IQ (intelligence quotient) and EQ. It is realized that future leaders will need to have both attributes. There will be fewer opportunities for bright but insensitive leaders. Goleman has also come up with the notion of Social Intelligence (SI), a more refined ability to appreciate and act on the signals of others.

There are several other aspects that need to be included in any model.

Efficiency and Effectiveness in communication

We need at this stage to consider the difference between efficiency and effectiveness in communication. We may have a very efficient form of communication, for example e-mail: it is rapid, gets to everyone on the system and is cheap. However, is it effective? Do those receiving it actually take notice of these e-mails?

There is considerable evidence from audits of communication, including those run by the author, that many e-mails are ignored. The sheer deluge of electronic communication causes acute problems (5000 texts are sent every second in the UK). Many people at work are being swamped by this channel of communication, so what looks like efficiency may not be so in practice.

To make e-mails more effective we may have to follow them up with phone calls or visits. The evidence from communication audits suggests that people find face to face communication by far the most *effective* form of communication. This evidence shouldn't really surprise us. But effectiveness like this takes up time – it does not come cheap! We may increasingly have to invest time in our communications, including more face to face talking and listening, in order to avoid wholesale wastage of electronic messages.

Redundancy in communication

Think of various adverts that use typewriter text with its unevenness and inconsistencies to communicate the message. Typewriters have been almost entirely displaced by computer word processing systems and yet some advertisers make use of this old fashioned text. Why? Because it stands out – we notice it. Similarly, you may well have seen in documentary and music videos the use of Super 8 film – it looks old fashioned; it has a grainy, jumpy quality which provides a sense of authenticity. Now the occasional use of these 'redundant' technologies may well make us look harder. Their very redundancy gives them more potency. Likewise, a handwritten note from a senior executive to a member of staff will carry with it more impact than an e-mail – it stands out. It also suggests that more effort was used in its composition. However, if we overuse a redundant form it quickly loses its appeal – it becomes normal, usual, and unremarkable.

We'll see how, in presentation, the use of PowerPoint has now reached a stage where it has become 'normal'. There is a search on to find alternatives to it, or even to abandon it and speak entirely unaided by such technology – think of some party leaders at conferences who have even given up teleprompters in order appear more natural and spontaneous. Maybe one day we shall yearn for the return of PowerPoint!

Responsibility in communication

One of the themes of this book will be the reciprocal nature of communication – it takes two to tango, or tangle! Both the sender and the receiver have responsibilities to ensure the success of the communication – its effectiveness. We will see this in the chapters on listening and interviewing, but also when we come to consider presentation. This is often a neglected aspect of communication: we tend to blame the sender and hardly ever consider the responsibility of the receiver. And yet, if the readers can't be bothered to finish the report, listeners switch off after the introduction or audiences fall asleep, it makes the task of the sender that much harder.

Styles of communication

Increased attention is being given to the *styles* of how we communicate. These styles arise partly from what we are – our personality and where we are – the work we do, the agendas that we operate by. We shall see in Chapter 8 just how these styles can influence communication.

For instance, a senior manager in the NHS may be preoccupied with targets. Much of her week is spent discussing, negotiating, pushing, exhorting, fighting for targets to be achieved. Her style is *action-based*. Her agenda is action-lead. She makes use of such words as 'targets, progress, and results'. One day, at a meeting, she meets a senior manager from the social work department. His agenda is very *people-centred*. He is concerned with the effect of hospitalization on people: on their lives, their families and those who care for them when they leave the wards. He talks a great deal about, 'people', 'feelings', 'needs', 'values', 'morale'. At their meeting they communicate after a fashion – after all they both speak English – and have an interest in achieving some degree of consensus but they do not find it easy to actually communicate. They are coming from different agendas, with different styles.

Cultural issues in communication

We have long known that one's national or regional culture will have an influence on the way in which one communicates, both in sending and in receiving. From work done in the last decade, it is apparent that this is an even greater influence than previously thought.

Many of you will have travelled and found yourself in a different culture, having to make up, improvise or act out communication in unfamiliar settings. You may have experienced this within your own country or city. You may still be speaking English but you are not seemingly able to communicate very successfully – something is getting in the way of understanding, perhaps you are using inappropriate gestures; too much/too little eye contact – the wrong sort of eye contact (you appear to be staring); the wrong posture – you shouldn't be standing; the wrong tone of language; the wrong kind of handshake. If you ever travelled widely in the USA, you will know that this cultural effect can come as quite a shock – they do speak English but there are all kinds of communication barriers that make it hard to get that message across.

Think back to a time you were in a different culture.

What kinds of communication difficulties did you experience? How did you resolve these?

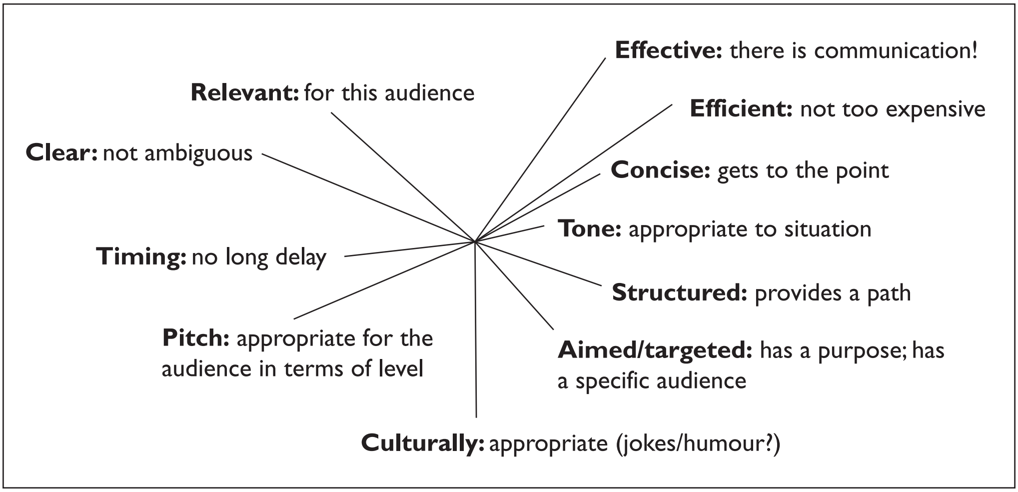
We'll be looking at this in more detail and in particular the work of Hofstede (2002).

The criteria of successful communication

Before we finish this chapter, is it possible to set out what makes a successful, communication – one that is decoded, understood and, if necessary, acted upon. Are there certain criteria that will apply to all forms of communication – written (texted, faxed, e-mailed, printed); spoken (face to face, video conference, filmed, or videoed).

Before we list our selection you might like to jot down yours.

We will examine each of these criteria in this book, but first we need to look at the notion of skills and how we develop them.



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2

Skills Development

This book is concerned with the skills of communication and how these may be developed. We've already noted that skills should be built on some degree of understanding of theory: the key concepts underlying the communicative competence approach. In this section we explore some methods by which you can maintain, develop and enhance these skills.

Motivation to learn

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of any skills acquisition and development is motivation. Just think how much you concentrated on getting that driving licence, all that practice on top of the lessons and just how much you wanted to pass that test. Would you have developed the skills of driving (or passing the driving test) if there had not been that motivation to get a licence?

A hunger to gain a skill will help you enormously to acquire that skill. The fact that you are reading this book indicates that you have some motivation to develop your communication skills. That is a promising start. If you have regular appraisals of your work you may have gained some impression of your strengths and deficiencies in your communications 'portfolio'.

Communication skills are so many and varied that it is asking a great deal of anyone to be motivated to develop each and every one; yet as you will see in this book, although the chapters have been set out according to different categories, i.e. writing, meetings and presentation etc., they are intended to weave together to form a whole. Communication is an entity which contains many strands.

Key factors in learning

We should set out at this stage some basic parameters as to how adults actually learn. We've already mentioned motivation as a key ingredient. Here are some others:

Adult learners need to be actively involved with their own learning

This is a challenge for the author, since reading a text is hardly active involvement. To assist, various case studies and examples have been included. We hope you will think about these and do some active reflection on them. There will be occasions when we invite you to jot down your ideas, put things into a list, prioritize items, etc. Try and do this *before* you read on.

Learning needs to be seen as both relevant and significant
This we hope will become apparent as you read this book; the contents have been developed and designed with case studies and examples drawn from the author's own career and experiences from training and consultancy in communication.

Learning should be linked, where possible, to existing knowledge and understanding
This presents severe problems for the author since there is no way of being able to gauge where each and every reader's understanding is. We have had to make an estimate of where the majority of readers are. We hope we do not disappoint! We have added to each section a short list of key texts which can take your studies further and deeper. There is also now, much more since the first edition, a wealth of material on every aspect of communication available from various websites. Explore.

Learning should be presented in a logical order
What is logical will depend to some extent on the reader's perceptions. We shall see in our chapters on report writing and presentation various ways of logically laying out material for your audience. We have attempted in this text to follow a logical path, i.e. from general to particular, from overall concerns of communication to the particulars of specific skills.

Learning should be sufficiently challenging
You, reader, will have to be the judge of this. Challenge yourself with the various exercises; carefully consider how you could apply the various ideas to your workplace.

Learning should be reflected on
We stress the need to reflect on your learning as in our previous discussion of the Kolb model. This book is intended to assist you link theory with practice. Charles Handy (1984) has said that there is nothing so practical as a good theory; we would subscribe to this view.

The learning of skills needs to be accompanied by feedback on performance
Practising a skill without gaining feedback is very often a waste of time unless, that is, you are prepared to give yourself feedback.

How did I do in that interview today? Not bad

The trouble with this kind of self-focused feedback is that we are often just too close to be objective. As an example, we can take a box of 100 golf balls and proceed to drive them at the range: this will provide us with plenty of exercise and not a little frustration, mingled with odd moments of exhilaration. But it is very difficult for us to judge if we are in fact improving. What we need is someone to provide us with feedback – but not too much. If your coach keeps piling up the feedback like this,

> *Hands up a little; shoulders down a little; left hand round; knees bent more; head slight to one side; cock the wrists more; keep head still; lower left shoulder. And keep your eye on the ball – do not forget that!*

you will suffer from overload and become confused! Feedback like this is almost useless; there is too much of it and it is coming too rapidly to be of much help. It needs to be specific and well timed.

We cover various ways of giving and receiving feedback and we recommend that you look for a coach who will be prepared to offer you useful, reliable feedback and advice on your communication skills.

Skills acquisition

The model in Figure 2.1 depicts how skills may be acquired and starts from that time when we arrive as complete novices to when we perform so fluently that we no longer realize what we are doing. This model, based on the work of Landy (1989), can be applied to the taking of driving lessons.

When we sit in the car for the first time with our instructor we are in a state of unconscious incompetence; it does not take very long however – just long enough for us to crunch those gears – for us to move into the second state: conscious incompetence.

We know just how poor we are, and what a difficult time we are in for – with three pedals and only two feet! This is the arousal stage. This state may last some time. Eventually we gain skills and pass our test. We move slowly into the unconsciously competent stage. It is when we are attempting to give a beginner some lessons or 'hire a car' that we slip back into that conscious competent stage. The final stage, as far as driving is concerned, then, is only when we decide to take the Advanced Driving Test. Here we will be asked to provide a one-hour running

Unconscious incompetence	Conscious incompetence	Conscious competence	Unconscious competence	Conscious competence
Help!	*I'm not that good*	*Getting better*	*OK*	*I never knew I was doing that*
Instruction	Arousal	Practice	Use	Increased awareness

Figure 2.1

commentary to the examiner on our driving. We then have to be fully consciously competent.

Let us see how this model of skill acquisition might be applied to the development of communication skills.

When we take driving lessons we usually start from cold, whereas when we pick up a book on communications or attend a course on the subject, we have a stock of experiences to draw upon.

For instance, writing reports: this might be something that you just do; you normally plough on without much awareness of what a report is; you have never received much feedback. The ones that you normally write are more like extended memos but no one has done much to help you (Unconscious incompetence). However, your manager suggests that you attend a report-writing course. Your awareness is raised and you return a mixture of conscious incompetence and, thank goodness, a little conscious competence. You now need feedback, advice and some coaching before you can put the lessons of the course into practice and so move to a more fully conscious competence as a writer.

We trust that this book will assist you in developing your communication skills and competence. In the final chapter we outline recommendations as to how you can become a more advanced communicator!

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Interpersonal Skills

This term covers a wide range of communication skills. It is useful in that interpersonal implies a sense of comprehensiveness in communication – all the various components being brought together. When we say someone is interpersonally skilful we mean that he or she can do more than just listen, or can present well, or can negotiate effectively; there is this sense of an all round ability – within their communication competence many skills can be recognized.

When we say someone is a good driver, and by that we mean that he or she is not just able to use the brakes well, steer effectively or change gear without crunching, it implies that all these sub-skills are brought together smoothly and effectively.

We have placed this discussion of interpersonal skills here to serve as a bridge between the various strands of communication that we will examine, such as listening techniques, use of non-verbal communication, telephoning, assertiveness, negotiation, and presentation skills. We describe these skills in later chapters and we argue that professionals need to be effective in a range of skills if they are to maintain and sustain positive relations with clients, customers, colleagues and managers. No doubt you have come across someone who was outstanding in one area of communication but much less so in others. We do not all have to be star performers in the various sub-skills but we should strive for a measure of competence in all of them. With the increase in electronic forms of communication, it can be argued that inter-personal skills – those used face to face – are even more important.

We can perhaps think of people who show a high level of skill in one area of communication, such as their ability to write a well-structured and concise report, and yet we have witnessed their complete inability to present this with the same clarity and conciseness at a meeting.

Think now for a moment of someone you would nominate as being interpersonally skilled, not just in one area of communication but across a broad range; it could be a colleague, a client, or friend. What mix of communication skills does this person possess that would cause you to make such a nomination? Think of situations where you have seen him or her communicate.

You might have, as part of your selection, felt that this person:

- Possesses a wide range of communication skills. He or she is not deficient in any one area as in our above example of the excellent report writer but poor presenter. There is a sense of completeness in their communication
- Mixes the various communication skills well and blends them, i.e. they not just good listeners, but also ask interesting questions and then when presenting ideas do it succinctly and clearly
- Shows awareness of non-verbal communication – gesture, tone and tune of voice, eye contact etc. and has developed good 'cue' judging skills, i.e. he or she can 'read' the non-verbal leakage of others – those nonverbal signs that say 'I'm puzzled' or 'I'm bored' or 'you're going over time'. (There is evidence from many authorities in this field, analysed by the author, that some 50 per cent–80 per cent of interpersonal communication comes through the non-verbal facial and body gestures and paralinguistics – tone and tune of the voice)
- Has an ability to do all this: to 'read' the situation carefully and then react accordingly, in a way similar to, using our previous example, good drivers who also 'read' the road conditions and gauge the use of gears and brakes so as to be able to drive safely even in the most tricky fog and ice conditions. We will examine this 'reading' in more depth in Chapter 5
- Can cope with a wide range of situations: his or her interpersonal skill is not limited to one setting, i.e. effective as presenters at formal meetings and competent in informal settings, and one-to-one meetings for instance. They have a wide repertoire of communication skills, and although they may not shine in some situations they can at least be reasonably competent in any of them
- Can get themselves out of communication holes: they do this by altering their strategy to suit the conditions that they are faced with. See Chapter 16
- Take great care to remedy obvious defects in their communications 'portfolio' so that these do not interfere with their work or diminish their interpersonal effectiveness.

Can you see yourself or a colleague or manager in any of these descriptions?

We shall now examine each of these strands of interpersonal communication and how, although they are dealt with separately, they mesh together.

You may want to develop certain strengths in areas that correspond with the demands of your work, but we do recommend that you aim to become an all-rounder who will impress by this ability to cover the key areas of communication.

Further reading

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4

Before You Start Communicating: Your Audience

In order to communicate we need an audience – communication is not a solo activity, unless you make a recording of your 'performance' to play at a later date to others, or are keeping a diary! One of the hallmarks of a successful communication is tied up with the notion of it being at the right time and in the right style, to provide the right kind of communication to match the right kind of audience. You've probably heard this kind of remark:

Well what a thing to say in the circumstances!
Not a bad speech but not for that occasion!
Well it would be OK as an e-mail but remember this is going to the Board.

What these statements have in common is that they all signify a lack of appropriacy – the communication didn't fit the bill; it wasn't up to what was expected, and it should have been more carefully tuned to the needs of that particular audience.

A communication is successful if the audience thinks it so. This is one of the hallmarks of communication. It is true that there have been instances where a communication was so novel in its presentation, so innovative or subversive that the audience was stunned, disappointed or just merely puzzled. Later this communication became celebrated and a model for others. We can't rely on this happening!

Think carefully for a moment of the implications of such a statement. It implies that it does not matter how much we take a pride in our communication if that has little or no positive effect on the audience; and by positive we mean if:

It makes them take notice; it encourages them to read further, listen more.
It triggers some questions.
It makes them laugh, cry, chuckle, think, wonder, reply to our invitations (even our e-mails!).

There is that presenter on the stage; she's obviously enjoying the talk and thinks she's doing a great job, but ask some of the audience afterwards and their impressions are very different. 'Dead boring!' 'Right over our heads'. This does not mean that the audience has to like the communication, they may disagree with it but it has to have an impact on them; it should make them at least take notice.

As we saw in our model, communication implies a mutuality, a reciprocity of sending and receiving. Yeats, the Irish poet, once said: 'somewhere between my reading aloud my poem and you listening to it, the poem is born'. Somewhere between your communicating and the audience's listening, applauding, reading, noting, adapting, quoting is the communication! If that is the case what then are the implications? Well, the first thing is that we need to know our audience.

Information you need about your audience prior to communicating

In order, then, for our communication to be successful in these terms, we have to know what our audience will be. This sounds easy but in practice it can be very difficult to achieve. Sometimes we do know pretty well who the audience will be. We know that it is Joe who is coming next for the interview; we know that it is Aunt Betty who will read the letter we are struggling with; we can safely assume that it will be a tax inspector who will scrutinize our arithmetic on the tax form.

In other situations we cannot be so certain. When we are invited to give a talk we are not able to seek out each and every member of the audience to ascertain precisely what are their attitudes, their interests, their likely reaction to our material, our stories. However what we can do is try to put ourselves in the minds of our audience, to try to imagine what we might feel when presented with the communication we plan to deliver.

Although this process is valuable, there is more we could do. We can, and should, try to obtain intelligence about the audience. We need answers to a number of questions.

Think for a moment about this. What questions would you want to ask?

What are their attitudes likely to be?

Attitudes towards our communication can range from the highly positive to the very negative. We shall see in Chapter 11 on presentation that it can be very dangerous to form assumptions as to your audience's likely predisposition. It is particularly dangerous to assume that they will be friendly and receptive to your message – you can hope so but you cannot guarantee it – think of Tony Blair and the Women's Institute.

What will they know about your subject?

It is vital to try and tease out some information on this. You will need this if you are going to be able to make a stab at pitching the material at a reasonable level so that you do not either bore them to sleep or go right over their heads and confuse them. It would be very helpful to discover what, if anything, they have they experienced in your subject before – have they had anything similar on a recent programme; have they ever commissioned a similar report in the past or received a similar presentation? If so, what was the result?

***What is the make-up of this audience*?**

It will be useful to have information on the size of the audience (particularly important if you are to make a presentation); the proportion of overseas visitors – English as second language users; their familiarity with technical terms; their professional background; experience of similar presentations; their seniority; age range, etc. These questions need to be asked and answered *before* the communication takes place.

Where is all this information to come from? Here are some possible sources:

Organizers of talks and conferences
Publishers and editors of journals
Secretaries of local societies
Chambers of commerce and local enterprise councils
Federation of Small Business local groups
Colleagues and friends who have already addressed similar groups

You will never have complete intelligence about your audience, but you should make every effort to push for as much information as you need. We will be saying more on this in the section on giving a presentation, Chapter 12.

Post-communication feedback

While it is vital to find out what your audience will need *before* you start, it is also very useful to open up a channel *after* the communication has taken place. We all need feedback on our communication. We saw in Chapter 1, when we were examining the idea of a learning organization, that opening up channels of feedback with managers, colleagues and clients was very important – what we had done and what we could improve. It is essential for an aspiring communicator to be sensitive to the reactions of his/her audience. How do we achieve this feedback? Here are a few ideas for you to consider:

- Put a *brief* feedback sheet at the back of that document and encourage your reader to complete it
- Put out a *brief* evaluation sheet to a sample of your audience after your talk, course etc
- Put down *Review* in your agenda and, for example, elicit ideas from your colleagues on the way you chair these sessions, give the briefings or present the monthly report

- Above all, be sensitive to the various forms of non-verbal leakage from your audience; be as cue conscious for this as possible
- Build in time for reflection.

One of the problems facing you will be the fatigue felt by audiences in having to complete yet more questionnaires and provide yet more evaluations. However it is worthwhile trying to get some real quality evaluation; if you explain why it is needed and you make the questions as succinct as possible, collection efficient and easy, then you should be able to overcome much of this reluctance.

Asking those questions before you communicate and obtaining some kind of feedback afterwards will enormously assist your confidence and the likelihood of your being successful. It is certainly worth the effort.

Further reading

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5

Listening and Interviewing

Introduction

Throughout this book we come across listening and its importance in communication – how crucial it is in being interviewed, at handling questions when presenting to groups and when we occupy the chair or participate constructively at meetings. We have linked listening with interviewing because the two are interdependent. By interviewing, we refer to one-to-one meetings, face to face or over the phone, formal meetings, panel interviews and those done via video and telephone conferencing. And apart from selection, we can include appraisal, market interviewing, grievance or complaint handling, and interviewing for radio, TV, and the press.

Listening is an activity which is so crucial in all our communication that it deserves a section to itself. Many managers, in various surveys carried out by the author, have put down listening as their predominant communication activity, with some 35 per cent of their working week being devoted to it!

Consider just how much of your time at work is spent listening to others, whether this is on the telephone, at meetings, or informal chats.

Those of you who have attended time management courses will probably have tried to keep a record of your work activities and divide these up into various categories – high to low priorities; urgent or important. Did you include listening in your list? The time spent listening seems to slip by mostly unnoticed, unremarked and uncosted.

You might now like to do an audit of your listening to calculate just how many minutes of a typical day you are spending at it. It could amount to over a third, even, on some days, a half. Auditing in this way will give you an idea of the quantity of listening; we now need to move to consider the actual quality. They may not be one and the same thing!

Active listening

We can be listening – certainly to any casual observer it would appear that we are in fact doing so – but we are actually doodling, daydreaming, thinking extraneous thoughts, particularly as X walks by our desk...... What we may well have been doing is hearing rather than listening. You may be familiar with the phrase, 'I hear what you're saying'. This often implies that the person is not really paying much attention – it is just being absorbed without much, if any, intention to act on the words or ideas concerned. It can be interpreted as a dismissive phrase which reduces the importance of the other's contribution, i.e. 'I hear it but now let me have my say'.

Hearing is often defined as a fairly passive process; the material just comes in and is absorbed, as in the following examples: 'I can hear the birds'. 'We can hear the trains running, particularly when there is a westerly wind'; 'Sometimes you can hear the planes taking off'; 'We heard various noises but didn't think to mention it'.

These are all examples of hearing as a *passive* activity. Sometimes we start off by hearing and end up with listening. That mobile phone call in the train: all you're conscious of to start with is how annoying that voice is and how much you wish that person would not speak so loudly. Then you begin to pick up the odd word and phrase that you recognize. That person's talking to a client of yours; you bend forward pretending to read your papers but intent on picking up every syllable. Now you're listening, really listening. This example shows how we separate out passive hearing from *active* listening.

The concept of the 'Active Listener' (Anderson and Boyle 1987) has gained currency. Successful listening (as opposed to the more passive hearing) is to do with actively processing the incoming information and doing some work – hence the term active. The authors define this as:

> The active listener is one who weighs up incoming information to ensure that it is coherent with information that is already available, whether that established information is derived from general background knowledge or specific visual data or from what has been previously been said.

Then they suggest that:

> When incoming information is *not consistent* with already established information, the listener has to do some extra work. First he/she must recognise that the information is inadequate or inconsistent, and secondly, he/she must identify where the inadequacy/inconsistency lies, and thirdly, do something about it – such as checking, asking questions etc.

Notice the three distinct stages:

> Recognition there is a gap / Identification of where the gap is / Moving to repair that gap.

As active listeners, we must be prepared to ask ourselves such questions as:

Why am I listening to this?
What would I like to gain from this?
How does what I'm listening to equate with what I've just been given/what I already know?

Posing questions such as these helps to ensure that we remain active. Trying to follow these three stages explains why active listening is such hard work and why to do it well can be draining. Being an active listener is crucial when it comes to conducting interviews, as we shall see later.

Barriers to active listening

It is all very well to talk about the need to be an active listener, and it all sounds fine in theory, but we know that in reality it is so much easier to be a passive listener – the active variety requires that much more effort. So if we can think of those barriers which reduce our active listening then we may be in a better position to counter these and develop more active listening habits.

Consider what are those main barriers at your place of work that make listening difficult, then compare them with ours.

Motivation to listen

Let's face it if we are really interested in something then we will listen – those lottery numbers, or the scores from the football match! If at work you manage others, then you will soon be familiar with the sheer number of accounts, explanations, complaints, evasions, anecdotes, challenges, worries and even compliments you will be asked to listen to. It is no wonder that so many managers learn to tune out and indulge in passive listening, as in:

'Yes ...... fine ...... um,..... yes...... I see...... well ....'

We all have to wage a personal war against such switched-off listening. We'll look at ways of doing this later in this section.

Attention span

Research into listening to lecturers (Bligh 1998) shows that most of us can maintain quite high levels of listening for about 15–20 minutes. After this it becomes increasingly more difficult. We will see in Chapter 12 that presenters should be aware of listening fatigue from their audiences. Apart from such events as talks and lectures, any sustained period of concentrated listening can be very tiring. It is far better to try to listen in short concentrated bursts than in long stretches; give yourself a break from listening to refresh you. When carrying out interviews, do not try and cram too many into one part of the day: allow sufficient breaks for you to catch your thoughts; have a coffee; stretch your legs (and your ears!).

Familiarity with the material

The more familiar we are with material, the less likely we are to listen to it actively or intently. This is a problem with any kind of interviewing and it explains why it is very dangerous to second guess what the other person is saying. It is a very common fault and most likely to occur when we can predict more or less what the other person is going to say. Early diagnosis is not just a danger for doctors: most of us are pretty good at making predictions but we do have to watch out – there will come a time when we predict wrongly and we miss something important. For example, in this scene where the PA is providing travel details to her manager:

'It is pretty much as before'
'Oh yes' *(The manager replies)*
'Yes pretty much the same, similar times, same airline'
'Fine' *(The manager says and stops listening because he's heard all this before, these travel briefings from his assistant have a certain predictability)*
'However you'll be landing at the north terminal this time'
'Right' *(he says, busy with papers and not noticing the importance of what is being said!).*

Next day, as this manager waits impatiently at the south terminal of Gatwick airport for the contact, he wonders why there is been this delay. He just didn't listen to the message; the fact that all the time he's been doing this journey and he ended up at the south terminal made him a passive listener: he'd heard it all before and therefore failed to listen to the one vital alteration in the plans.

You could argue that, if this information was so critical, the PA might have reinforced the point: *'The North terminal not the South as you usually go to.'* Responsibility for communication – remember it is two-way!

Attitudes

We have already seen from our model of communications how attitudes may affect the way we perceive incoming information. Our attitudes tend to distort this information: if we approve of the person, or the message, we may listen more intently. If we disapprove then we may tend to close information out. This has implications for us as interviewers, and it can also affect the way we take notice, or fail to do so, during telephone calls and meetings.

'Hello Sue, it is me, Tim'
'Yes hello *('God what a bore how can I get him off the line?')*
'I've got an idea for you'
'Yes... good.....' *(said without enthusiasm)*

'You remember we were talking about those shares.....'
'Yes .... shares ...um *(Sue has tuned out from this conversation just because she finds Tim boring, with a thin high whining voice which she finds difficult to take seriously – such a pity since it later turned out that this was a very good tip!)*

If we want to be successful listeners, we have to *postpone* our judgment until we've actually listened intently to what is being said. We should adopt SIER, that is:

Sense, then **I**nterpret and leave the **E**valuation until much later. (**R** stands for response which normally comes after we've listened!)

The tendency is that we **S**ense and then *immediately* make an **E**valuation, based often on surface features such as accent, tone of voice, attractiveness, height, colour of eyes, previous encounters, others' recommendations or damnations. This, as you can imagine, can be very dangerous. It is what is called the Halo Effect – the positive or negative attributes that colour our impression of the person and warp our judgment. Work by Honey (1991) suggests that those with a Birmingham/Black Country accent are often perceived as being less intelligent than others and those with Scottish accents as being more trustworthy with financial matters – Chancellors of the Exchequer!

Environmental considerations
There is no doubt that if we are uncomfortable – too hot, too cold, sitting on a very hard chair, suffering from failed air conditioning, draughts from loosely fitted windows and sunlight pouring through broken blinds – this will certainly affect our ability to listen.

We should do everything possible to ameliorate such negative influences.

Having catalogued the barriers we now consider what we can do to enhance our listening ability.

Consider what strategies you have made use of, if any, to enhance your listening abilities. Reflect a little on your personal experiences.

Enhancing our listening
We can offer you the following suggestions:

- Just being aware of the sheer difficulty of listening and noticing the differences between hearing and active listening will take us part of the way
- Being aware of the responsibilities of the listener for effective communication
- Being able to consider active listening as very much a two-way process, since it depends on both listener and speaker (sender). There has to be some kind of recognized dance step between the two.

One of these 'steps' is for us as listeners to keep alert by providing or thinking through short summaries of the input. This forces us to be active in our listening and helps to reassure the speaker that we are concentrating on what he or she is saying. If we have a very rapid speaker, or if the incoming information is very complex or poorly organized, then we may have to interrupt the flow in order to ensure we are keeping up, e.g:

Just before you go on, Susan, let me see if I've got it so far – the key points. You've mentioned that the change process hasn't gone that far in hospital administration; you're concerned about the communication of our change programme to staff nurses and worried by the actual timetable for these changes. Is that a fair recap?

Provided we keep such summaries to a minimum we can not only help ourselves as active listeners but also stimulate the speaker to continue. We'll see the value of this technique when we examine negotiating skills in Chapter 9.

- We can, as listeners, ask questions and by doing so, we again reassure the speaker that we are motivated and listening.

There is always a danger that our questions will disturb the other person, knock him or her off course and disrupt a train of thought; however if we do not ask questions, then we are likely to slip into the passive listener role and perhaps give the impression that we are not that concerned. Furthermore we are likely to get 'lost', increasingly puzzled, fed up or disillusioned.

Asking questions to improve our listening

The skill in asking questions is to try and *build* the other's response so we gain more information, not less; you can hear both kinds in interviews with politicians!

There is a variety of questions we might ask. It is important for us as listeners to be able to recognize these in order to select the most appropriate for the task at hand. When we are interviewing (to include selection, appraisal, grievance, disciplinary, counselling, sales, marketing, surveying, etc), such appreciation of the various forms of question can be crucial to our success. Briefly we can list these as:

Open

This is where we as listeners are interested in gaining the widest possible range of responses from the other person or interviewee. We cannot tell what kind of response we will get from such a question, which is why we call it open. It serves as a probe to loosen up the flow of ideas, break the log jam and encourage the other person to talk. These are very useful to start an interview.

Can you tell me about your recent experience with…?
How do you feel about ....?

Closed

This is the kind of question that leads almost inevitably to a 'yes' or 'no' answer. It is used to establish facts and check on details – to be used sparingly. In any selection interview these facts should be obvious from the CV/application form.

Did you take the gap year before university?
Was that the first time you'd worked outside the UK?

Inexperienced interviewers can easily get stuck with closed questions; the interview does not then move onto a deeper, more probing level. Too many closed questions can appear to be almost insulting and patronizing to the person being interviewed, and it can turn an interview into an interrogation.

Clarification

This is the kind of question that is used to clarify information. In all our listening, whether at an interview or not, such questions are the hallmark of an active listener. If only our manager friend had asked a clarification question about his forthcoming trip to Gatwick airport he would have been spared a great deal of trouble and stress. Here are examples:

Can I ask you to explain this in more detail?
Is that is always the case? Are there exceptions?

Expansion

This type of question is employed to stimulate the other person to take his or her ideas forward, to provide further material via illustrations, examples, etc. Such questions are useful in opening and *sustaining* any conversation; they are used to stimulate the other person to talk and to continue talking.

I see, could you give me a recent example of how that happened?

Behaviour questions

We hope by using these questions to be able to elicit specific behaviours that the other person actually used in the past (or claims to have used!). This is one predictor of future behaviour: the best predictor of future performance is often, current performance. The use of *hypothetical* questions such as:

What would you do if…?

provides us with answers that the other will think would be acceptable – the ideal solution, and may not actually reflect any actual past performance, whereas behaviour type questions actually test out what did happen and why.

Candidates in job selection interviews will often think up answers that will 'please' rather than address openly and honestly what they really think and believe. When planning these questions, be sure to think of the particular duties that the candidate would be performing. For instance:

- Describe a time when you were faced with a challenge which tested your coping skills. What did you do?
- Give us an example when you were able to build motivation in your colleagues
- We've talked about goal setting. Tell us about a time when you set such a goal in the past and your success in reaching it. Why did that happen?
- Have you ever had to handle conflict in a team? Tell us what you did and what you learnt
- How did you manage change in your last job? Would you have done it differently?
- Describe a time when you made a mistake that shows your need for further self development.

The use of such behaviour-based questions is not infallible but you as an interviewer are likely to gain more useful and reliable information than with other questioning techniques.

There is some evidence (Statt 2004) that it is probably more difficult for candidates to lie when faced with these behaviour type questions, since they are so busy trying to think back for examples that they have less time to concoct lies or distort the evidence. Remember that even if candidates do prepare answers to the expected behaviour questions, it is the follow up questions that will test them. We should remember this advice:

> I have six honest serving men
> They taught me all I knew
> Their names are What, and Where and When;
> and Why and How and Who (The Elephant's Child, Rudyard Kipling).

Reflective listening is a technique where we try to reflect back to the speaker what he or she is saying, not in a parrot fashion but reflecting the ideas and especially the mood /emotions of the utterance. It is a very specialized form of listening and we refer you to texts which will provide you with more information.

Here is an example of the technique being used. An elderly resident is talking to a social worker about how she has had to get used to living as a resident in a nursing home after many years with her family:

How are you doing? What with all the fuss and commotion it is difficult….. all so different really, not knowing many people, I mean moving here as a stranger ….. It was difficult, not easy at first ..... missing so much……. family and friends nearby.

Not easy then at the beginning? No it wasn't – things improved, got better, made friends, like Jane in the next room – she and I used to know each other way back, funny to meet up again... and after a month or so began to settle a bit. Suppose you've got to allow that when you first move in, being a newcomer.

You feel more settled now? Yes, though I must say I did miss my old neighbours. Missed them a great deal. Still you've got to face change; there is no point sitting and being depressed.

Quite a change then? Yes, couldn't stay. Just too much for them, the family, all that work looking after me.

The risk in using this technique is that it will appear condescending and vaguely patronizing to the listener; it can also lead the speaker to agree with you. The reflective question must truly reflect the speaker's feelings and not be part of the listener's agenda. Had the listener said:

Got to make the best of it. The home's better for you isn't it?

we could see how the agenda has been shifted: we are on the listener's ground and away from that of the speaker. She may well think that but she hasn't said it.

When using this technique take great care not to put words or thoughts into the speaker's mouths. The skill in using this technique is to prompt the speaker to continue by tuning into his or her emotions and feelings. Reflective listening is something most of us have used at one time or another; it can be of great assistance in helping communication by building a rapport between parties.

Leading questions

This is the one kind of question that we should avoid, particularly in an interview. By leading we mean that, from the form of the question and the tone of voice used, it is very easy to spot where the questioner wants us to go – we are in fact being gently (or not so gently) led! It is the kind of question that defence lawyers are trained to spot and, if they smell them, will spring to their feet and ask the judge to intervene.

Had you ever thought of stealing these goods before?

It is reasonably easy to spot the obvious leading questions, such as:

Surely you do not believe in taking the easy way out?
I'm right in thinking that you'd support management in this decision?
You're not wanting to challenge this view are you?

It is much more difficult to spot those subtle leading questions which come about more as a result of the way the conversation or interview is framed. By this, we refer to the settings, expectations and power relationships between the individuals, such as manager and subordinate and how these might be expressed. In any job selection interview, candidates are out to impress the panel. They will be carefully tuning in to the 'correct' and appropriate messages as they perceive them. They may not agree with these messages but they will think it is wise to play safe and agree with the organization's mindset and the expectations, as in:

Would you describe your approach to managing teams as participatory?
(Thinks: I'd better agree and sound keen!'*) Yes, very much so.*

Would you want to involve staff in decision making?
(Thinks: 'I'd better say "Yes", it is the expected response after all!')
Yes I certainly would want to do that.

It does not exactly take a genius to work out what the 'expected' answer to these questions would be. We therefore need to phrase questions so that there is no leading element.

Before you read on, please consider how would you rephrase those last questions?

Would these be more neutral and less leading?

How would you describe your approach to managing teams?
What is your view about staff's involvement in decision making?

Such a rephrasing does not eliminate all elements of leading but it certainly helps to reduce it. It opens up the possibility of a wider set of responses.

Three key aspects of listening to remember

1. *We should aim to take in information and try to postpone our judgment of what is being said until we have listened to what the person is saying – if necessary, right to the end of the utterance.*

It is very easy to be unduly influenced by surface features – accent, appearance, manner etc. – and not really listen to what is being said. It is so easy to estimate, before our speaker has finished, what he/she is saying; to cut across the line of communication with the thought: 'I know all about this'. We often anticipate what we think the other person is going to say; this can be dangerous! We have to move from listening and then immediately evaluating to listening, trying to interpret and then evaluation.

2. *We should aim to acknowledge speakers in a way that invites the communication to continue and develop. Such as:*

Maintaining eye contact, but not staring at the speaker. Adopting a comfortable position of not 'over-crowding' the listener. Adjusting one's position to encourage more confidence and a feeling of being safe.

3. *We should provide limited but encouraging input to the speaker's response, which helps to carry his/her and our ideas forward.*

Care is needed here. It is all too easy to send wrong signals: *'Uh .... Uh ....'* may appear to us to be exactly that right kind of limited and encouraging input but to our speakers it may seem as though we want them to get on with it and come to the point (*'Oh, do get on with it').*

4. *An intelligent and sensitive use of questions*.

Those questions that follow up on a point made by the speaker can obviously signal to him or her that we are actually keeping up with the information. It is a good idea to check occasionally to see whether our listening is keeping up with the flow of incoming information.

Can I just check with you that...?
Before you go on, could I...?

We have to be careful that although we want to turn the interview into a conversation, we do not want to keep interrupting the candidate's flow with all these questions.

Asking someone to observe during an interview so that we can get some kind of feedback on our performance as listeners can help us. This person can act as a coach for us – see the final chapter.

If our listening improves then it is just possible that others will make more of an effort to listen to us!

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6

Being Interviewed

We can now draw upon the ideas already outlined, in particular those dealing with listening and aspects of non-verbal behaviours. We concentrate here on selection interviewing but the ideas can be applied to other forms such as counselling, appraisal, disciplinary and grievance interviews. In this chapter we will see how a range of communication skills can be put into practice.

For many people, being interviewed is the closest they get to taking part in some magic ritual – it is a process full of secret taboos, strange rituals out of which the result, success or failure, the job or no job – emerges in some mysterious way with little or no revelation to them; they are just spectators.

You may feel this is a somewhat far-fetched description of what selection interviewing is all about. The author was once interviewed for a job in a Californian bank and as the interview came to an end, a young lady from the panel got up, asked permission and began to feel the back of his head for bumps. Phrenology as this is called – finding out about the individual's brain and its power by examination of the lumps – was then all the rage. Graphology, examining the individual's handwriting, is only used by a small minority of companies in this country but much more extensively in France.

Apart from these examples of 'rituals', there are all the popular theories in the press and magazines which attempt to let the reader in on some of the magic mystery that unfold the dark secrets of what happens in that interview room, with such titles as:

- Being Interviewed: your body language counts for more than you think!
- The secrets of interview success!
- Revealed: what companies are really looking for in interviews
- Unlock your hidden personality for that important interview!

This chapter does not guarantee to provide you with the success promised by these adverts and articles. We offer a summary of ideas on interviewing, plus the views of professional interviewers – all from a communications perspective. We will begin with some background material; this will give you some of the current thinking in human resources on the conduct of interviews.

Why interview? The rationale

Goodworth (1987) suggests that the main purpose of a selection interview is to carry out a comprehensive and accurate background investigation, to seek out and verify the facts of achievement and failure.

Some would accept that, with some reservations; others would also argue that one of the principal functions of any interview is to see how candidates are able to cope with the stress of being interviewed, how they are able to communicate complex ideas, effectively listen and in general answer the question: Why should I be selected? And all in 30–40 minutes.

Another view expressed is that the interview is being held to see if the personal chemistry is right; if there is a fit between the candidate and the organization. This viewpoint has dangers in that organizations simply find clones of existing staff and fail to take risks with appointments. (He wouldn't really fit in! She's not really our type!)

There are other interviewers (not many) who genuinely believe that they can, in 30–40 minutes, make an assessment of candidates' intelligence, devotion to duty, honesty, motivation, sense of humour, resourcefulness and personal integrity. It is a bold claim; very bold!

Whatever is stated about the selection interview, there is one certain thing: it is vital to get it right for both parties. The cost of failure may be very high. Not only is it an expensive business but with The Employment Protection Act and other legislation passed as a result of adherence to the Human Rights Convention of the European Union, it is increasingly difficult to 'move' or remove staff.

If the 'wrong' person is selected it can take a good deal of time and effort and, in some cases, money to sort out the problem. Few organizations want to get involved with industrial tribunals. There is also the fact that those who have to be 'removed' will often go away disgruntled and spread bad news about the organization that hired them. Staff morale can suffer as well.

Let us now stand back a little and examine the whole interviewing process in terms of communication competencies and skills. We will look at a sequence of events from the time that the advert is read to the time that envelope with the result is opened.

Before that interview – preparation

Let us start with the vacancy from the organization's point of view. This is an opportunity to take a good hard look at this and to ask a number of key questions. This is where you need to be assertive and make sure that these questions are in fact answered.

- How does this vacancy look alongside the longer-term aspirations of the organization (i.e. the job might have been applicable in 2004 but now and the future...?)
- If we do decide we need to fill this vacancy, do we have someone on the books who can do it?
- If we fill this vacancy, then let's have a good look at the job description and see if it needs changing.

We must go through these questions if we are to be able to distinguish which are the *essential* and which are the *desirable* criteria. We need to decide on this before we start advertising for candidates. The drawing up of these criteria lies at the heart of the selection process. It is absolutely vital to think long and hard about this in the interests of both organization and candidate. What does *essential* mean? People can be trained in a skill so that someone who looks promising but who does not have one of the 'essentials' might still be acceptable, provided the motivation is there and the willingness to do the job and to make a success of it.

As an example, consider the situation where a company wishes to employ someone to market their goods in France. The criteria list for the job includes fluency in French as essential. Very often, organizations will put such criterion down as essential and then wait to see who emerges from the applications, and if they can't find anyone with fluent French but someone with conversational ability in that language and the right marketing experience, then the *essential* could move into the *desirable*. After all, an intensive language course can work wonders if the learner is motivated to succeed and has some skill. We'll see later on how much negotiation and 'trading' there often is in this process of determining exactly what is essential or desirable.

Assuming we have thought about the criteria, we can then work on the advertisement. Here we are confronted with the problem that there is a limited space on paper or on a website onto which a great deal of information has to be put. The advert should be constructed so that:

- It signals the key information
- Clarifies the boundaries of the job
- Entices those who are qualified, motivated and with appropriate experience
- Discourages those who are not.

What are some of the key words and phrases which we, as readers of the adverts, should decode carefully?

With a minimum of 3 years experience in a relevant field

Here is a crucial gateway. Does the organization insist on three years; will two be enough? What is a relevant field? If the post is in IT, does the 'relevant' experience all have to be within IT or would some time in accountancy, law or management do? Is this negotiable?

The candidate will have had extensive experience.
A minimum of 5 years was considered essential but we might be prepared to take on someone with less if that candidate's experience was of interest: i.e. especially varied, unusual in its range; was with a competitor organization.

The candidate will have a MBA
Suppose we have someone applying who has no MBA but a good degree in business studies, with considerable experience in a highly relevant field, and can offer conversational French. A possibility?

Let us now examine the progress of a potential candidate through this journey and the communication skills he or she will need to employ.

Getting yourself an interview
There may be a variety of ways of achieving this: accessing a website; sending in a CV; making a telephone call; calling for an informal meeting; or using an agency. Let's look at the telephone call. This is important for both parties. As it is important, it deserves having some time and attention spent on it. From the organization's view, it allows for some filtration of applications so that the no-hopers are eased out and the promising ones are encouraged to apply. It allows the candidate to find out more about the organization and perhaps turn a marginal application into a more promising one; so do not rush it. Get yourself prepared: read the relevant advert carefully; underline the key words, such as experience; and prepare your case. This after all is part of your application: if you can sound convincing you may well get called for interview; it is a chance for you to present your case; it may well turn out that you can move your candidature from 'possible' to a 'probable'.

Prepare then for the likely questions, and prepare your replies. Jot down some key facts about yourself; have a copy of your CV in front of you, since you certainly do not want to sound vague or uncertain during this call. Your aim must be to get yourself on that 'possible' or 'probable' list so that when you do actually send in your CV your place has been warmed.

Your CV and the application form

When it comes to setting out your CV (Curriculum Vitae – life story), remember it cannot be, in fact, your life story. You only have a couple of pages or a limited space on the website, so be very selective. Here are a few pointers for you to think about when you are preparing your CV:

- Avoid producing a general CV. Angle it to the organization you are interested in. Avoid the bland, the vague, and the run-of-the-mill
- Highlight recent work experience; avoid a long list of duties
- Bring out your achievements and any challenges you have encountered, and how you have dealt with these. This will be of more interest than school qualifications gained years ago
- Draw out the *essential*s, where possible, that will attract your readers.

If there has been a longish gap since you last 'worked' then reflect on your experiences – family, voluntary, community, sporting, overseas, etc., to see if these can augment your application; these will be part of your claim to have transferable skills.

- Be careful of cliché, management-speak terms: *leading edge; empowerment centred; creative solutions, team player,* etc. These are often meaningless
- Avoid lists.

If you've been on several courses, try and find some kind of thread to link them. You will need to be able to demonstrate that you haven't done a few odd courses, or that they have been done to you, in some arbitrary way.

Where you have some freedom of choice, great care needs to be taken over the structure and layout of this document. Remember this is an exercise in selection. Material must be easy to scan for rapid reading and assimilation of key facts and ideas. It might well be a computer that is doing the initial scanning! To assist:

- Use shortish lines, wide margins, 11/12 point print, and a standard font such as Aerial, Times New Roman etc. Avoid fancy fonts
- Avoid overuse of *italics*, CAPITALS, underlining and **bold**
- Use headings
- Replace long paragraphs with bullet points but avoid too many lists.

Have a close look at these two paragraphs:

A. Since August 2005, I have acted as engineer to a senior partner in the firm of S & B, Civil Engineers. Here I have had numerous responsibilities for completing projects centred round new road construction in the Eastern Europe. These responsibilities were for budget control of the engineering companies, which were subcontracted to the team and who formed part of the project.

A is a very dense as a piece of text and reads 'long'.

How would you redraft it? What do you think of this version?

B. Since August 2005, engineer to a senior partner in the firm of S&B Civil Engineers.

Responsibilities included:
Completing projects for new roads in Eastern Europe
Budget control of subcontracted companies.

Do you think it is too brief?

Personal interests. Think carefully when completing this section. This is an opportunity, and a very valuable one, to show something of you – the person. For many people, it is the experience that they have gained through their associations outside work that has taught them many 'life skills' and developed their characters. Please do not put down a list of bland interests: TV, music, food, going out, socializing with friends. What do these tell about you? Provide some detail, some interesting 'angles' (Indian cookery; player in rock band!) but avoid fiction and wish fulfilment: hang-gliding, scuba diving and reading Tolstoy. You might be 'found out.' Here is one employer's view of CVs.

'Most CVs give too much emphasis on the candidates' factual achievements as described by list of qualifications and posts held than the more indefinable personal elements like initiative and character. ...I firmly believe personal characteristics are so important in defining the contribution that an individual can make that they outweigh most aspects of experience and training.' (A Balfour, M.D of Insider Group of Companies. Interview in Scotsman Nov 6th 2001).

This is only one view; you certainly have to put the facts in front of the reader but imagine reading dozens of purely factual CVs, one after the other.

Check and double check that you haven't made any mistakes in spelling, punctuation, etc. Have someone else check it over for you so that you will be able to eliminate those small errors that will leave a negative impression: BsC for BSc, driving license, (the 's' form is US English), 'my principle (!) reason for taking this course'. Do not trust spell chekkers! Proof read and have a colleague look over the pages just in case you've missed something. Do make sure that your name is boldly printed as a title. Also ensure that your name is placed on the bottom of each page of the CV as a 'footer' – papers can easily come apart when selectors are searching through forms.

When you have finished the drafting, have another read of all the material you have on the company you are applying to. Try and see your application from their point of view. Do a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis on your application.

- Have I angled this towards the specific needs of this post?
- Have I shown myself in the best possible light?
- Have I done my best to counter glaring weaknesses or deficiencies?
- Have I made my strengths obvious?

Do not go too far in getting your CV beautifully produced and bound. By all means make sure that it is a very presentable looking document, but to have it produced on gold-tinted paper and velum bound might actually reduce your chances. However, this advice will depend on the kind of work you are going for. If you're looking to Design/PR for work, then you can afford to be a little more 'creative' with your approach. By all means use a heavier paper than normal photocopying material and place a cardboard backing sheet under it before you post it. Try and use a printer that has plenty of ink left in the cartridge – if it is printed looking rather washed out, it will all but disappear after it has been copied a few times for any selection panel.

The personal profile

This is a short paragraph that sums up the essential 'essence' of what you are – it is a snapshot of you for your reader. If you decide to use this, then it is vital that anything you put down in this profile is something that you can substantiate on the CV, on any web based application and in your interview.

> ***How would you judge this one? How would you edit it?***
>
> I have worked overseas in a number of posts, this has helped me to improvise and be self-reliant. It has helped my communication skills. I am now reasonably fluent in Spanish. I can manage my time and plan projects. I have retained my sense of humour and interest in my work as a forester.

Here is our suggestion. What do you think?

> Working overseas in a number of challenging posts has given me an ability to improvise, make the best of any situation and be increasingly self-reliant. It has sharpened up my communication skills and enabled me to be reasonably fluent in Spanish. I have proved that I can manage my time, plan projects well and yet retain my sense of humour and interest in my work as a forester.

This sounds as though it is coming from a more interesting person. Do you agree? The sentences have more variety of length and 'sharpen up' and 'proved to myself' are both phrases that might appeal.

If so many CVs look the same, and so many good candidates write good letters of application, how can you distinguish yourself? You can do this by:

- Making sure that you are angling your application to the needs of the vacancy
- Showing that you can offer something 'extra' because of your previous experience/qualifications/life experience
- Leaving an impression that you are the person who should be interviewed
- Avoiding the clichéd phrases.

If the job description indicates that teamwork skills will be important, avoid writing: I *am very good at teamwork*. Anyone could say that – think of something a little more creative.

In my current post I led the team responsible for X and learnt much about Y and Z in so doing, in particular.....

If there is an indication that working with people skills will be vital, do not fall into the cliché of: *I am good with people* or *I like people*. Do add some detail; provide examples to back up any general statements.

Layouts of CVs

Increasingly you will be applying via websites where layouts are given to you. And you must follow them. But there may be some occasions where you are asked to submit a personal CV. So here are some suggestions for organizing your material. This is a structure to consider if you *haven't* had much work experience.

Name *(nice and big and bold)*
Address Tel/e-mail (*critical, include all contacts)*
Personal Profile (*if you feel can prove it!)*
Education *(weighted to university/college*)
Qualifications *(spell them out: employers get confused)*
Work experience *(most recent first; casual jobs omit)*
Skills *(do not be vague; state the level)*
Interests *(some evidence that you're alive!)*
Referees *(one work, one personal)*

This format if you *have had* some work experience

Name *(as above)*
Address Tel/e-mail *(as above)*
Personal Profile (*you <u>must</u> be able to prove it!*)
Work experience *(stress current post +responsibilities)*
Skills *(increasingly more important with experience)*
Qualifications *(increasingly less critical; updating yes)*
Education *(less important-only the most recent)*
Interests *(you must have some by now!)*
Referees *(critical- recent employers/clients)*

Writing a supporting letter

With so many CVs looking and 'feeling' the same (many written by consultants for a fee), the supporting letter can make a big difference. Here is a suggested structure for you to follow:

- Para 1 – Clarify the post/reference number that you are applying for
- Para 2 – Give your prospective employer a concise statement of just how you see the post you are applying for. This will be based on your interpretation of the job description and any 'research' you have done on the organization
- Para 3 – Explain concisely why you feel that you could carry out the duties / responsibilities that you have outlined in the previous paragraph
- Final paragraph – Express your feelings and opinions about the post. This needs to be crisp and to leave the reader with a positive impression of your commitment.

Websites and vacancies

Most organizations will post up vacancies and information about themselves on their website. They will encourage you to complete a website application and ask you to upload your CV. In some cases you will be asked to lift certain areas from your CV onto their template. With other organizations it is possible to register your CV in their 'bank' and they will contact you if a relevant job in your chosen sector comes up.

Before your interview

Most of you reading this will have had some experience of being interviewed: some of these experiences will have been uncomfortable, painful even – presumably when you failed to get that job you particularly wanted; others will be more pleasurable – memories of where you did achieve success. You could also call a success those occasions when you might have said 'No thanks' to the job after the interview or even during it, when you felt it wouldn't have proved your 'cup of tea'. If you, as interviewee, have this range of memories, so do the interviewers: they have the same sense of relief when it is all over and the same trepidation when the candidates arrive.

Let us, from a *communications perspective*, see what can be done in the actual conduct of the interview so as to make it as effective as possible – effective in finding the most appropriate candidate for the job. It is surely in the interests of both parties to ensure that this happens. As we've mentioned, conducting interviews is an expensive business: there is the time and the opportunity costs of those involved plus all the admin and support costs and travel expenses to be paid, so here is some advice.

Information on the post

This is an obvious point but sometimes, in the author's view, this information leaves a great deal to be desired. If the organization wants candidates to be aware of its mission, then this should be made clear. It is also important to signal to the candidate where he or she would fit into the framework.

From the interviewee's point of view, it is essential to do more than simply rely on this material: you are advised to do as much as possible to supplement this by finding out about the organization you wish to join. You want to be able to go into that interview with the confidence that you can demonstrate knowledge and the motivation that you can find things out. From printed information, websites, annual reports, reference material in libraries, your local chamber of commerce etc., you should be able to get some grasp of the organization's principal 'business', recent changes in its orientation, status, markets, research and development, etc.

The venue for the interview

This may appear to be an obvious point, but it is a vital one. (We'll see in Chapter 12 just how important such considerations are to the presenter when preparing for the event).

It is in the interests of both parties to arrange that the candidate arrives at the interview without fuss or bother. Even if you are sent detailed information, we would always advise that you check the following:

> If you are driving to the interview, where exactly do you park? This could be crucial; there is nothing more likely to sap your confidence than driving around trying to find a space while the clock ticks on. Likewise, if coming by train, how are you to get from the station? Can you rely on there being a taxi? Should you order one to meet you? What happens if your train is delayed? Both in your car and on the train, have you got a mobile phone and do you have the number to phone so that you can call ahead and warn of late arrival? They might be able to rearrange the interview schedule if it was a genuine emergency. Check the dress code required – smart casual or formal.

These may appear trivial points but failure to get them right can spoil that interview.

At your interview

Assuming you've arrived on time, how can you give of your best in the actual interview? Much of the following advice will also apply if the interview is being carried out on a video conference basis. (Just avoid wearing striped shirts or dangling ear rings – cameras do not like them, and do avoid swaying out of picture).

The most important consideration is to try and turn the interview from being an interrogation (*yes ... no.... yes*) into a *conversation* where both parties are listening hard, and where a genuine exchange of information can take place.

How does this conversation come about? Well, both sides need to work at it. The interviewers need to ensure that the reception is as non-intimidating as possible and that, at the start of the interview, they allow for expected and perfectly natural nervousness on the candidate's part. One useful way for the interviewers to judge the environment is for them to place themselves in the actual position of the candidate. This is a useful exercise, since it might point up the fact that the candidate's seat is so low that it prevents him or her from being able to appear assertive and confident, especially if the candidate is short!

Here is some specific advice for candidates:

- Avoid falling into the yes/no routine
- Volunteer information; do not wait to be 'squeezed'. Judge the moment and then contribute.

A paucity of response makes it very difficult for the interviewers to establish a rapport with you, the candidate. By volunteering information, we do not mean you should gush and swamp your listeners. Here is an example of the different ways in which a question can be answered.

> Did you find your last job interesting?
> *Yes, in part*

This is not a very satisfactory answer, what part of 'in part' was interesting? This is slightly better.

> *I certainly enjoyed the contact I had with members.*

However, it still falls short of a good answer. Remember, in providing a response you are not just giving a series of bits of information, you are trying to make an impression by suggesting the various skills you displayed, the various challenges and difficulties you overcame and the various aspects of your personality etc. Here is another way of answering:

> *I certainly enjoyed the contact I had with members: trying to sort out their difficulties and offering advice as to our services. I didn't so much relish the meetings and the general admin chores but they were part of the job. When the new IT systems came in, I found that side less of a chore and more of a challenge.*

Here the candidate sends out a signal that he or she has been prepared to buckle down to parts of a job which aren't that exciting, and also has some familiarity with operating new IT systems. The underlying message could be: Hire me I'm not afraid of change or of hard work; I like a challenge.

- Establish and maintain eye contact with the interviewers.

Several times in this book we note the importance of this. Research suggests that eye contact is not only vital for developing our relationship with others but it assists us in the transmission of information (Bruce and Young 1998).

- Try and ask questions in the interview.

Questions are a vital part of any conversation. In many interviews the questions are only 'allowed' at the end. This can make it difficult for candidates since they feel they have to ask something, so very often the questions asked are predictable and banal, i.e. they are not real questions and tend to be about 'safe' subjects such as training and career development. We're not saying that you shouldn't ask questions at the end but if we are to develop a conversation then it is important that we should be able to ask questions when it is appropriate, i.e. when we feel we need to ask. Example:

> 'So most of our trainees would move rapidly through a number of departments...'
> '*Can I just ask, would there be any choice as to which ones?*

This is an entirely fair question to ask in the circumstances and, if you had to wait until the end of the interview, you might well have forgotten what it was you wanted to raise. If you ask questions politely and ask permission to do so, as in

> *Could I just ask.....?*
> *Would you mind if I raised......?*
> *Before we leave that could I ask if......?*

then interviewers will not mind; it is rude interruption and taking over the interview from their direction that is not popular!

Stop yourself being 'torpedoed' out of the water. In Chapter 12, on presentation, we note that it is vital in your preparation to prepare *counters* to likely objections. This preparation is important for any interviewee. If the purpose of the interview is to *verify and clarify the facts of failure and achievement* then we must expect a number of questions which will probe and seek to elicit responses to specific doubts and uncertainties that may flow from a scrutiny of your CV or application form, covering letter and from references.

So prepare *counters* to your lack of experience, your patchy qualifications, your decision to change jobs so rapidly, that year you took off to go to Australia, that move from engineering to sales and then back again.

There will inevitably be 'torpedoes' aimed at you. You should be able to detect these, as in:

> *You say you were responsible for two members of staff; both part-timers?*

This question on the surface looks like an obvious attempt to establish the exact nature of your management responsibilities, which may not have been clear enough from your application, but does the question go beyond that? Does it imply some degree of doubt or concern as to how much real management of people experience you've actually had? This 'torpedo' you will need to turn with:

Yes, they were part-timers, but responsibilities also included building them into a team with other part-timers in the department; we found that this was necessary to increase their sense of belonging and to give them a feeling of ownership in what we were doing.

This answer demonstrates that you were pro-active in your management of the staff and that you do, as stated, have some useful experience of managing staff – even if it was only two of them!

Suppose you were faced with this question?

What did you gain from your three years experience of the Middle East?

On the surface it seems like a fairly innocent question, but behind this could well be a certain nervousness and unease as to the relevance and usefulness for the organization of your time in Dubai. You will need to answer in such a way that the relevance of your experience actually comes through and you do not leave the impression of someone who went out there for a change, good money and fun. (All true!)

After your interview

Remember, if you fail the interview – and some very good candidates may fail to get the job – it is important to obtain some kind of feedback on where you went wrong. We've emphasized the importance of using feedback to enhance your communication skills. These days many organizations will undertake to supply you with information, usually over the phone. Take every advantage of this. You may have to persevere to get it but it is often worthwhile. It may be that you have been rejected for reasons totally unconnected with your interview performance – they had a better internal candidate, for instance; however, there may be clues from this feedback which could be very useful for retuning your communication style.

We were looking for someone a little more geared to selling.
(Did you speak up enough; were you assertive enough?)
We felt you were more answering your own questions than the ones put to you.
(Did you actually listen to the questions?)
The interview panel were not entirely convinced as to your ability to manage the team.
(Did you provide enough evidence/examples? Were the answers too general?)

No one particularly enjoys being interviewed, although it can and should be a stimulating experience. Use your interpersonal skills as we have advocated, but above all prepare: prepare as carefully and thoroughly as you would for any examination.

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7

That Favourite – The Telephone

The telephone is such an obvious, ordinary and totally familiar instrument for communication that we scarcely give it a second glance or thought.

The simple fact is that the person who answers the phone is very often at the sharpest end of an organization. His or her voice, manner and style will be crucial in determining whether or not the person calling will have a favourable or unfavourable impression.

We have placed it immediately after listening and interviewing since many of the ideas contained in that last section will apply to our use of the telephone.

Factors in successful telephoning

On the telephone we cannot see the non-verbal communication – the facial expression, stance and gestures, that is until video phones become more common, but we can pick up the *paralinguistic* features of the caller or receiver; these are concerned with:

- Warmth of tone: from welcoming and friendly to cool, cold and abrupt
- Pace: from fluent and assured to hesitant, slow and halting
- Inflexion: rise and fall of vocal tune – from interestingly varied to flat, dull and monotonous
- Volume: from assertive and reasonable to over-strong and uncomfortably loud, or, by contrast, inaudible and fading to a whisper.

These paralinguistic features are important in carrying the message: the words may be forgotten but the impression lingers, and it is the impression that we take away as callers or receivers.

You will probably remember the coldness of a particular voice on the phone and perhaps your associations and impressions about the organization behind that voice – a hotel, an airline, a travel agent, etc., will be coloured by that poor aural experience. Likewise, when you have been received by a warm, friendly and lively voice, more positive impressions may remain.

We should therefore give some time to thinking about our telephone technique – our manner; our style.

Here are a few suggestions for you to think about. If you do not think that they apply to you, then they may well to a colleague or a trainee who might appreciate some tactful support in his or her telephone manner.

Timing the call

We need to ensure that when we phone, it is an appropriate time for the call. We do not want to break into the other's concentration, intrude into their thinking, acting, preparing or interviewing, unless the matter is very urgent. If we are selling, we have to be particularly careful about our choice of time. This is obviously important when we are phoning across time zones. In some cases we will need to make use of our negotiation skills as we outline them in Chapter 7. As callers, we may need to negotiate an appropriate time for our call on the lines of:

> *Hello, this X calling. Is this a convenient time to call? I could phone back…. OK ….after 2.30. Will do. Thanks.*

If we negotiate a time when the other party is free, we will get more focused, attentive and active listening from them. The danger is, unless we do this, when the call does come, their mind is half on something else and we get pretend listening since they are too polite (and not assertive enough) to say. The other danger is that they fail to call back.

A little give and take – just that little negotiation – between the two parties can make all the difference to the quality of the eventual telephone call. There are several other things we can do to improve our telephoning:

- Planning the call. Have a list of topics you want to go through. This is a kind of agenda and again allows you to do some negotiating, i.e. what is important for you and what is for the other party. Also plan the environment for the call. If the subject matter is delicate or confidential, then do not phone from the train or the airport. Wait until you have some privacy
- Summarize the key points at the end of the call. This can help you remember the key ideas and forms a similar purpose to the summarizing that should take place at the close of a meeting. It clarifies what both parties understand has been concluded and those points which will need to be taken forward. This summary helps to demonstrate that you are taking the call seriously. If you make use of something like this, you stand a much better chance than if you rely on scraps of paper – these have a nasty habit of getting lost
- Send a fax or e-mail confirmation of these key points. Use the summary of the telephone call. Such confirmation will impress the other party that you are serious and committed

  As in: *James, this is my understanding of what we discussed. Please come back to me, if possible before 4pm to confirm that this is what you understood. Vicky.*

Here is a simple system for logging your calls:

Telephone Log

Name	Date	Time of call
Organization/designation		
Points arising from call		
Action		To be taken by
Answered by		Passed to

Time management and telephoning

It may help you to make your calls in blocks. There is some evidence from time management studies that you get more fluent and generally sharper if you take a run at your calls, rather than spreading them over a longer period. Obviously it is not always possible or even desirable to do this. If you haven't tried this approach, we would seriously recommend that you do.

Taking some time to think about our telephone manner and giving it a polish, an MOT, may prove to be time very well spent.

The checklist below shows some of the key features about your telephone manner which will influence how others perceive you.

You might find it useful to give this to a colleague who can assess and coach you on your telephoning.

It is through the telephone that professionals will often make their first impression on their clients; it is essential therefore that you do have a check on your telephone skills and approach, which may help you eliminate faults and improve your effectiveness as a communicator.

Audibility	Can you be heard? Do you tend to fade?
Clarity	Is it easy for the listener to understand you? Are the words sharp or blurred? Do you have the mouthpiece too far from you?
Pace	Is it varied or tending to the monotonous?
Tune	Does your voice show interest, or is it tending to the flat and dull?
Stress	Do you stress key words/phrases so showing commitment/enthusiasm?
Introduction/opening	Does it clarify who you are and what you are calling about?
Probing/questioning	Is this done politely yet assertively? Does this reassure the other party that you are in fact concerned?
Clarifying	Is this done tactfully and convincingly?
Summarising	Is it done well, do you include the most important facts etc?
Closing	Do you close politely?
Overall pace	Comfortable? Too rushed? Too slow?
General impression given	Warm? Friendly? Business-like? Or Cold? Bored? Distracted?

This checklist is intended to enhance your skills; it is not here to ensure that you adopt some robotic form of answering phone calls. Make use of your own natural style and personality.

Further reading

Kelcher, M. (1992) *Better Communication Skills for Work*, London: BBC.
Fisher, J. (1993) *Telephone Skills At Work*, Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.

8

Assertiveness, Styles of Communication and Managing Conflict

Assertiveness is a very commonly used term, so often bandied about that there is a danger that it may become too diffuse and loose an expression to be of much use. 'You're not being assertive enough,' might be about as useful as, 'You're not tall enough or slim enough', i.e. something you can do little about!

Here follows a basis for its use and an examination as to why it forms such an important part of interpersonal communication. We've placed it here because assertiveness requires those abilities in listening and interpersonal skills we've previously outlined.

Assertiveness is very much based on *rights* – yours and other people's. It is included in this book since developing one's assertiveness depends very much on one's ability to express these rights, in speech, in text and through appropriate non-verbal communication.

In developing our assertiveness we will often have to be prepared to negotiate our rights to balance these with those of others. We will see how the concept of win–win (both sides being winners) is very strongly embodied in successful negotiation; assertiveness is allied to this, since assertive behaviours help to ensure that both parties' rights are safeguarded. There needs to be a balance; to create and sustain this balance in relationships with others requires a good deal of negotiation.

There is, as we will see, a reference to the idea of the 'bottom line' and the 'walk away position' both terms we will examine in the next chapter. Assertiveness requires that degree of confidence in one's dealing with others, that confidence in your ability to recognize and respect your bottom line and that of others. It requires from our initial model of communication, both IQ and EQ.

A balancing act

We can see the notion of assertiveness as a form of retaining a degree of balance. If we behave aggressively and drive down the other so that they have a painful bump, the other person will often react by doing the same to us. As we will see in the next chapter on negotiation, if we drive too hard a bargain it may bring us short-term gains, but in the longer run we may suffer from a lack of interest or business from the aggrieved party.

The other side of this balancing act is where we fail to do any pushing at all; if we just let the other party get on with it, so to speak, then we are what assertive training calls in the passive state, the very opposite of the aggressive. This passive position suggests that the other person has the rights and we have very few, certainly not enough to bother the other person with. So with both the aggressive and the passive we are very much in a state of unbalance.

Assertiveness is all about finding a means to get things back on the level. It is about protecting one's rights, for information, to be treated decently, not to be harassed or bullied, etc. In real life as opposed to children's games, it is often not possible to easily locate the balanced position; sometimes we go too far one way or the other. The important thing is to be able to reflect on our experiences when we couldn't get things into balance. It might have been because we misread the situation, or because our so-called assertiveness came across as rather aggressive to others. It might have been because we were working in another culture where assertive behaviour as it is carried out in the UK or US might appear over the top and discourteous to our Indian or Japanese guests. They in turn might appear rather passive to us because that is the way in which they deal with initial relationships at work.

Assertiveness training seeks to increase the individual's awareness of this balance, and to provide the person with the skills that should assist him or her to find and maintain it.

This awareness needs to be married with reflection on our experiences and adjustment where necessary in our style of communication. Before moving on to examples of assertive behaviour let us stay a little on this notion of communication style, since this will often have a direct impact on our position on 'the balance'. Research by Casse (1982) indicates that there may be four main styles:

Action; Process; People; Ideas.

These refer to 'agendas'; the drivers behind the style of communication employed. For example, someone who is a manager might well use a great deal of *action style*. He or she will tend to talk about targets, results, outcomes, progress and challenges. In order to get their attention, for instance at an interview, it is best to focus on results and the practicality of your ideas.

The *process style* tends to revolve round facts, procedures, planning, organizing, testing.

Their attention can best be obtained by being precise, organizing your material – as in a presentation – in logical order and by not rushing them.

The *people style* has an agenda dominated by concerns with people, teamwork, communications, self-development, sensitivity, cooperation, etc. When communicating to those with this agenda, allow for small talk, stress the relationship between your ideas and the people concerned, and use a more informal written and spoken style.

The *idea style* tends to favour such expressions as concepts, innovation, grand designs, new ways, alternatives, new methods. To tune in to this style of communication, it is best to allow time for discussion, and avoid getting impatient when he or she appears to go off on tangents.

Now there is no guarantee that by adopting a particular style to suit a particular communication you will be successful, but the research and the author's experience in using this approach does indicate that it will help the whole encode/decode process.

As an example, suppose we have a manager very much geared to the action agenda (it may be that he or she is on a 'results' contract) in a meeting with someone from a HR department with a very strong people agenda. It could go something like this:

Manager: I hope you've got some results for me?

HR staff: Before we get into this could we discuss staff morale? I'm concerned that with all these changes in the organization, morale is suffering. I'd like…

Manager: Fine, we can come to that but I must stress the need for results. We have been specifically tasked with getting the new contract up and running. We're going to need maximum efforts from all staff.

HR staff: I do not doubt its importance but we can't do that without attending to staff needs. Morale is definitely….

Manager: I repeat, I require your help with this contract. Get it and then we can attend to the other issues. But we must get it and soon. Progress this month, this month, is essential.

Here we have a lack of communication: both parties are communicating in English, they understand each other but they are *not communicating*; their agendas are driving them apart. An awareness and appreciation of the other's styles could help keep them together.

This is very much linked to negotiation. If it had been more like this:

HR staff: Now I fully realize that you are operating under a very tight time limit and that you need results, but I must ask you to consider the position of staff in all this – their morale.

Then it is possible that communication might have been better between the two and some agreement reached.

Examples of assertive behaviours

Let's now look at a simple example of assertiveness; it is simple but illustrates a number of key points.

As you read it through consider how you might have behaved.

Suppose you are with a party of friends at a restaurant. You order lasagne and it arrives promptly, looks good, but after the first tentative mouthful you realize that is only partially heated – the bottom layer is only lukewarm. Here you are on your balance. Push hard and give the waiter a hard bump: 'This is not properly heated through, it is not good enough, could you take it back and make sure it is properly cooked… That'll teach them to serve food like this'.

That is what we can clearly define as the *aggressive* position. It may have dramatic short-term results but is it going to result in a win–win for anyone? Many waiters react to this kind of provocation with a deliberate go-slow to that particular table, or something worse!

Then there is the *passive* customer. The meal comes, after that tentative bite you pull a face and your dining companions say, 'Everything all right?' 'Yes ... fine'. You reply without much conviction. They urge you to complain, No, you say you do not want to create a fuss, it is mostly OK and you add, 'I'm not that hungry'. This is the *passive* state – my rights are less important than others'. It suggests, by your attitude and behaviour, that it is not worth communicating your feelings. No one actually benefits: you, as customer, your companions, the waiter, or the restaurant. Nothing is changed.

Then there is the *assertive* position. Yes you are going to take action, but your approach is designed to protect your rights – the customer is fully entitled to reasonable quality food, and the waiter, who after all didn't actually cook the lasagne, has the right not to be embarrassed, humiliated or generally shouted at. So you call the waiter over and say in a firm but calm voice. 'Excuse me; this lasagne's not been cooked all through. Could you please take it away and warm it, thanks '. The waiter obliges, none of your friends are embarrassed. The assertive position has, in this case, rebalanced both parties' rights. It has done something else: it has assisted the restaurant with its quality control. If we receive bad service and unacceptable quality goods and service but do not complain in an assertive way, how will things ever improve? Furthermore, you might get a free drink!

This is a simple, every-day example of what we mean by assertive behaviour. We will see later that it is fairly closely linked with the 'Adult' state in transactional analysis, i.e. the open, grown up, way of communication, as opposed to the aggressive way which parallels the critical Parent state and is centred round the personal and not the problem.

How does the assertive person communicate?

Think of those people you would classify as assertive at work or in their social life. What is it that they do and say which signifies that they are in fact behaving assertively and not passively or aggressively?

Try jotting these behaviours down before you read our list.

The assertive person is likely to:

- Look the other party in the eye, not by staring the other person out, which is very typical of the behaviour of the aggressive person, but by having a generally confident degree of eye contact. This is very important when it comes to interviewing and being interviewed
- Sit or stand in a way that gives off a confident impression, i.e. not slouching or standing erect but in a comfortable but confident posture. This again is important in interviews
- Speak in an audible fashion. Passive people tend to mumble, which is one very good reason why they are perceived as passive. Aggressive people tend to dominate by letting the whole room know they're there
- Realize the importance of adjusting the style to the situation/context
- Make use of the 'broken record' technique.

This refers to the repetition of your point of view until it is appreciated; until it penetrates through to the consciousness of the person you are communicating to. It is called 'broken record' after vinyl records where the needle can get stuck on a scratch. Here are some examples of broken record treatment:

I regret but that won't be possible. We could certainly get it to you by Thursday noon. No that would not be possible. Monday would not be possible. No. As I've said Thursday noon we will deliver it to you. It would be possible to get it to you on the morning of Thursday, but as I said not before that date.

The point (no delivery before Thursday) is repeated. Unless this is done calmly and tactfully it can come across as rudeness. One should always be most careful not to over promise and then have to under perform i.e. let down the other party. Broken record can be a most effective assertive strategy, since the persons using it:

- Makes clear what it is they want – that there is no fudging or ambiguities
- Makes it clear what are the boundaries, the bottom line, the walk-away position – again, no fudging. Passive people often find themselves being pushed into agreeing to something and then find it very difficult to 'escape'. It is then that the temptation comes to over-promise and then most likely to under perform.

Training ourselves to communicate more assertively

We've already looked at how assertive behaviour can be demonstrated in quite ordinary circumstances such as a restaurant. One of the best ways to develop your own assertiveness is in fact to practise these behaviours in such simple everyday situations. Just think now of those times when you could have acted more assertively and perhaps failed to.

Jot down a list of those times and places where you wished you had acted more assertively. What prevented you from doing so?

You may have listed:

- That boring meeting where the discussion was getting further and further from the agenda. Did you assert your right not to have your time wasted?
- That time when you were given the small hotel room overlooking the car park when you believed from your telephone call that it was a bigger room overlooking the lake
- That friend who phoned you as you were sitting down to supper and tried to tell you wonderful things about the holiday she'd just returned from. Did you act assertively or let your meal go cold and your frustration rise?

We're sure you can add considerably to that list. Start with such situations where you do not feel very assertive or where others have told you that you need to become more so. You can then graduate to the really difficult manager and customers that you should be more assertive with! There is no point striding into your manager's office and trying to act assertively over your salary rise, or lack of it, if you can't send a cold lasagne back to the kitchen!

Seize those moments at work and in your social life where you need to act more assertively. Let the moment pass and it is so much more difficult to act. Your very absence from action may indicate a lack of assertiveness and confidence.

Assertiveness is like building a set of muscles: start slowly and keep the exercise moving forward. Then when you feel stronger, tackle the really difficult situations we've already mentioned.

As you can imagine, there is a whole industry out there ready to help you with becoming more assertive: courses, books, online training, self-help manuals. Our advice is to try and integrate the theory into your workplace; think about those situations where you could be more assertive. Then go for it! And do not forget to practise out of work hours. Do not be passive when it comes to poor service.

Many organizations have, or are working on, codes of working practice for all staff, no matter how senior, to abide by. Here is an example taken from a health service trust.

It is, in essence, a bill of rights to protect people and to encourage them to behave assertively in connection with such agreed rights:

> You have a right to be taken seriously – your ideas and suggestions.
>
> You have a right to express your feelings in an open way without being ridiculed, shouted down or harassed.
>
> You have a right to be listened to seriously.

You have a right at work to be yourself and to set your own priorities, provided that those are in line with the work of the organization and its mission statement.

You have a right to say no without feeling guilty, unless you are asked to carry out work in line with your job description and which has been agreed between you and your manager, and is reasonable, within your limits and not in breach of health and safety regulations.

You have a right to ask for what you want. It may seldom be possible to grant everyone's wishes because of the restraints of spending but any request will be listened to and taken seriously. Decisions will be fed back to you.

You have a right to say that you do not understand and to ask for clarification without feeling any embarrassment.

You have a right to make mistakes (and 'it is hoped' learn from these) without being unduly blamed or made to feel guilty, provided you did not deliberately ignore regulations, requests, code of practice etc.

You have a right not to assert yourself or to speak up in meetings etc. if this makes you feel uncomfortable.

Do you feel that this code is helpful for those who work in any organization? Is it a useful and practical set of rights? Do you have something similar where you work? Could you see something on these lines being introduced?

Assertiveness and handling conflict

As we work in our chosen professions (or not so chosen!) we will inevitably come across conflict. When we manage others we will inevitably come across conflict. In our dealing with customers and clients we will also come across conflict. How we deal with it will test out our level of interpersonal skills.

Conflict is part and parcel of our work; we cannot escape from it. There is no point thinking that our charm and charisma will enable us to sail through without meeting conflict. In fact we would argue that if you haven't created some conflict with colleagues, clients and managers, or those you manage, then you probably haven't been as effective as you could have been! You may have ducked out of taking a difficult decision and left it to someone else to pick it up!

The word conflict is so negatively loaded in its modern usage. But conflict, properly managed, can be healthy. We will see in our section on meetings, one of the reasons for actually having a meeting is to resolve conflict.

Some time ago the author worked in Indonesia; it was a time of great forest fires. He was told that the forest fires in themselves were not the danger, they could be put out, it was the fire that went down into the deep roots of the trees which might smoulder on for months and possibly years and then, unexpectedly on the change of the wind, would flare up. Conflict that is open and which can be resolved at a meeting, negotiation, conference or one-to-one interview is not to be feared, it is that lingering conflict which smoulders on and on which can prove to be so destructive to any organization.

The head teacher of a 'failing school' tried her best to turn it round, improve morale and examination results but, according to accounts, she was constantly undermined by a simmering conflict in the staff room. This had the effect of lowering morale, poisoning relationships between senior staff and colleagues and even between staff and pupils. Interviewed on radio, the head realized that she should have taken much more decisive action earlier on to lance that particular boil.

We suggest, then, that we need to be able to manage conflict, to bring it out in the open and resolve it as far as it possibly can be.

Reflect on those situations where you experienced conflict. How did you handle it? Did your method help resolve it or simply drive it underground? Such questions will often come up at interviews so that it is well worth spending some time thinking about your response.

Strategies for handling conflict using your communication skills

Avoid

If there is no good reason for you to enter into the conflict, then do not. Life is too short and there is far too much to do without having to enter into every argument. For example, if you were helping to organize a training course for your organization and one of those present disagreed as to your philosophy of training, then unless it really mattered to you or the group, avoid, simply agree to disagree and get on with the job. See that person later for a chat.

There are many situations when we are working with colleagues or clients when we should do this, say to ourselves: Is this important to me? Do I have to get into this? In many cases it will be much the better plan to avoid entering into an argument. The way to determine if you should avoid or not is to use the importance test: Is this important to me or my work?

If it is, then you will need to think up a different strategy. Avoidance can breed trouble if what you avoid is important to you.

Accommodate

This is a useful approach where the issue causing the conflict is not of any great importance to you, so that you can afford to accommodate the other party's wishes. For example, if you were managing someone who particularly wanted to leave work early two days a week in order to complete a course of study and the only way it could be resolved was for you to alter your work schedule to accommodate this. You might perform such an accommodation in order to resolve a potential conflict. The important thing here is that such an accommodation does not compromise your standards, the procedures of the organization or set up a precedent which could create problems for you later on. If it did, then you should not use accommodation as a strategy. Accommodation normally refers to a short-term arrangement.

In any such undertaking it is a very good idea to have a review so that both parties can resolve any difficulties and niggles before they build up into conflict.

Harry: *I thought we'd just see how things are going with that study leave you've been taking.*
Jim: *Fine, that getting off work early a couple of afternoons a week has been of real help.*
Harry: *I'm glad. I think we should look ahead. I said at the outset, this would need to be completed by the end of March. I'm not in a position to alter your schedule after that.*
Jim: *No that is understood. Just until the last week of March will be fine.*

Compromise

As we will see in the next section, negotiation will often result in both parties having to give up something so as to reach agreement. In the previous example there might have had to be a compromise if no accommodation could have been found, i.e. that person wanting the time off would have had to agree to come in early two days a week to make up for the loss of work time. Compromise involves giving as well as getting; it involves finding some point of balance between what is ideal and what could be achieved in reality. We will see later in this chapter examples of this used as part of a negotiation.

Collaborate

One of the very best ways to resolve conflict is to work with the other party to seek some form of solution to the problem. Again, with our earlier example in mind, if there had been no accommodation and no compromise then it could be hoped that both parties would come together to do some collaboration on the lines of:

Well how can we solve this one: you want to have this extra time for your course, we have to staff the office and there is no one who is willing to undertake extra duties even for overtime. What can we do? Do you have any ideas?'

Notice that the language used here is one of problem solving; so many conflicts can be resolved if people get together round a table and map out a solution. This is where we will find different thinking and problem-solving approaches particularly helpful.

The non-negotiable
This strategy is only to be used when we have exhausted all other ones or where the issues involved are so serious, and of such fundamental importance to us, to our profession and our business, that there can be absolutely no question of avoiding, accommodating, compromising or collaborating.

This is the line which we metaphorically draw in the sand and over which there can be no trespass. In the above situation, if, following a couple of weeks of taking the time off for study, our friend then decides to take four afternoons away from the office, despite having agreed to the previous two afternoons position, this becomes a case where, if you were managing the operation, you would be advised to draw a line and stick to it.

> *Well Harry we did agree that you would only go early two afternoons per week for your course and only until the end of March. That is the position and I must ask you to adhere to that. I cannot agree to your taking off any more time. Is that clear?*

Many managers, for all kinds of reasons, ignore infringements of agreements and then find it very difficult, if not impossible, to redeem the situation. If you have standards, written agreements, undertakings, professional obligations, then these must be adhered to unless there are very good reasons for not keeping them. These are non-negotiable, as with health and safety standards. One of the great advantages in having standards that the majority of staff and colleagues agree to is that it makes it so much easier to enforce the non-negotiable.

> *There is an agreement which we all drew up so as this is against it in both spirit and the letter. I must ask you to stop your actions.*

These are some of the key strategies to resolve conflict. In essence, we need to move to a problem-centred approach where we can deploy our skills of negotiation and collaboration to solve problems and resolve difficulties. There are many conflicts that we need never enter into and many others than can be smoothed over with a little accommodation. The test is: how important is this issue? Is it one where I need to make a stand or should I work out a compromise, or can I let it go? As long as you are clear about the issue, then you can be clear as to the treatment. There is no need to use the thumbscrew if a little gentle pressure will resolve matters. Handling conflict effectively is a very good test – one of the very best – of our skills as communicator.

Transactional Analysis

One of the ways in which we can improve our assertiveness and our interpersonal skills in general is to make use of the insights provided by TA, transactional analysis, a psychological model developed by Eric Berne. Transactions here refer to any communication between people: a handshake, an e-mail, a phone call, interview, negotiation, exchange of letters, etc. What follows here is an outline stressing very much the benefit of this to our interpersonal communications. We refer at the end of this section to some key texts where you can discover more about TA.

TA assumes that all events, emotions and feelings we have experienced are 'stored' within us and can be recalled as though on a tape. Of immense significance are the 'tapes' from our childhood. We can 'relive' the feelings we had of our childish joy and frustrations, and our 'childish' perceptions of 'parental' behaviour.

The main states in outline

We can observe three distinct 'ego' states: the 'Child', the 'Parent' and the 'Adult '. These are not abstract but actual states that we can observe in human behaviour. They are not to be thought of literally: children can exhibit very adult behaviours, and adults very childlike ones!

- The Parent: this state contains the attitudes; feelings and behaviours gathered from external sources, mainly parents or parental / authority figures. The 'Critical' or 'Controlling Parent' is concerned with laying down strict rules, criticizing, punishing; the 'Nurturing Parent' is concerned with fostering, supporting and assisting
- The 'Adult': this state contains those aspects to do with more objective rather than subjective behaviours and thoughts: asking questions, analysing, evaluating, observing, stating, testing etc
- The 'Child': this state contains all the impulsive behaviours that come naturally to a 'Child': joy, trust, love, tears, anger, sulking, hugging, crying, frustration. It is a state full of very strong positive and negative emotions.

TA suggests that:

- When we are acting and thinking and feeling as we observed our parents do, and then we are in our 'Parental' state
- When we are gathering facts, dealing objectively we are in our 'Adult' state
- When we are feeling and acting like a 'Child', we are in our 'Child' state
- There is no prior order of merit in these states; the 'Adult' is not necessarily superior to the nurturing 'Parent' or the 'Child', just very different.

The crucial question for us is how are they used and how should they best be used? We do tend to make use of all three states in our daily lives; hence the concept of transactional analysis. In identifying the states, you will notice from the list below that many of the behaviours under each of the states are opposites. The 'Parent' state has a constructive (OK) and destructive (not OK) side to it. We could show these divisions as:

The OK PARENT	**The not OK PARENT**
Helping	prejudiced
Rule giving	persecuting
Nurturing	oppressive
Loving	can't let go

Sample words and phrases

Parent	**Adult**	**Child**
There, there,	How? Why? What if?	Can't, won't
It could be worse,	Test it, probability,	Your fault
Come and tell me,	Have you tried?	Do it for me
Because I told you	I'm scared	
Gestures & postures		
Arm on shoulder,	Level eye contact	Arms folded,
Holding, nodding,	Relaxed posture	Slumped,
Pointing finger,	Curled up	Tapping fingers
Tone of voice		
Sneering,	Calm	Teasing, playful
Admonishing		

TA suggests that it is possible, with some rehearsal and training, to switch states according to the situation one finds oneself in. TA warns us against being *stuck* in one state. You may have found this kind of person – the one who is a stuck 'Adult': always objective, always unemotional and detached – not much fun to work with. Likewise the permanent 'Adult', who can never ease up, finds it difficult to express joy or become caring when the situation demands it.

Transactions

TA suggests that the 'Critical Parent' state can easily trigger off the 'Child'. We should be very careful of using this at work, i.e. when interviewing for instance.

Parent	*What is this coming in late?*	Parent	
Adult		Adult	
Child		Child	*It is not my fault*

Compare this with:

P		***P***	
A	*I'd like to discuss reports of your lateness*	***A***	*OK but there is a reason let me explain.*
C		***C***	

When someone does address us in a 'Critical Parent' tone we should try and avoid getting ourselves 'hooked' by moving to the 'Child'. We should be aiming at turning the transaction into the 'Adult – Adult'.

This will not always succeed; people get too used to using the 'Critical Parent' and find it difficult to employ the 'Adult'. But TA suggests that we should make the effort. Some people have had very little experience of being communicated with in any 'Adult' tone; they may react with some suspicion to begin with, but persevere. There is also the concept of 'Trading Stamps', which in TA applies to those situations where one person uses an 'Adult' tone only to be given a very angry 'Child' communication in return. This may be explained by the fact that the person being spoken to may have had a bad day and a series of negative encounters and decides to 'trade in his or her stamps', as in the following situation at breakfast:

Could you pass the toast?
Get your own bloody toast!
You may have traded in some stamps recently!

Consider the following pieces of dialogue. A manager is speaking to a subordinate. Which state – 'Parent', 'Adult' or 'Child' – does each illustrate?

A: Bill, haven't you finished that report yet? You're taking ages. I've had to ask you several times for it. Could you please let me have it today? Understood?

B: Bill, could you possibly do me a real favour and let me have that report. I do not like to keep asking you but I'll be in real trouble if I do not have it for tomorrow. Could you, please?

C: Bill, that deadline for the report is getting close. We have discussed its importance. I'm getting concerned in case we do not get it done on time. Could we get together this morning and aim to sort out the best approach. Bring any material you have in draft form.

A is very much 'Critical Parent' in tone. You can almost hear the sharpness of tone behind the phrase: Haven't you finished that report yet? B is on the 'Child' lines: pleading and using the 'Child' tone: Could you? Do me a real favour, etc. C is on the 'Adult' lines: the reason for the meeting is addressed clearly; it is not a personal plea.

Strokes

This is of fundamental importance to TA: people need the stimulation of being 'stroked'. A stroke (which is very seldom physical) is a form of recognition that one person gives to another. According to TA, it is the giving and receiving of positive strokes that develops emotionally healthy people, with a feeling of confidence in themselves – a general feeling of being OK. This concept is very important for all managers and supervisors to keep in mind – saying thank you to staff for good work done is so important. It is one of the key ways in which we are motivated, and by which we motivate others.

We may be giving others 'plastic' strokes, i.e. empty gestures, words and praise, 'Good', 'Fine' etc. We do have to be very careful over this when we do not really mean it.

Berne, the originator of TA, described transactions as complementary – this is when both speakers are getting the kind of stroking they want from each other. A crossed transaction creates emotional tensions and will lead to strong negative feelings.

Consider this piece of dialogue; notice how the transactions become increasingly crossed.

Manager: *Bill, could I see you for a moment later to discuss that report.*
Bill: *Do not talk to me about that report. I'm fed up with it.*
Manager: *You may be but you do not seem to be doing much with it!*
Bill: *Oh really. I do not see anyone rushing to help!*
Manager: *It is your responsibility. You know that.*

The communication is not going anywhere. The speakers are in a *crossed transaction*. One of the parties needs to uncross the lines and move into the adult and away from the parent and child, as in the previous example. If the Manager had replied:

I realize that Bill but let's sit down and see what we can do to get it finished.

Then perhaps the discussion might have moved to a more 'Adult' state.

TA and giving/receiving criticism

One of the ways in which TA can be of use to us is that it can assist during those times when we have to give criticism, for instance, during an appraisal, or receive it as after taking a test. We need to stay in the 'Adult' state and not move into the critical 'Parent'; if we do then it is very likely that we will hook the other's 'Child'.

Responding to criticism

There are three forms which we need to be able to distinguish:

- Unclear criticism
- Invalid criticism
- Valid criticism.

Let us deal with each of these and examine the communication strategies that can be useful in dealing with them.

Unclear criticism

It is vital that we gain clarification over the points at issue; the tendency is for us to rush to deny the 'accusation' and retaliate. There is no point in responding unless we are clear as to what is being said. We need to ask:

> *What is it exactly that you do not like?*
> *I do not fully understand the point you're making, could you explain?*
> *What you're saying is that you think that...... is that it?*

When we are clear as to the criticism then we can begin to respond.

Invalid criticism

If we are certain that it is in fact invalid, then this is where we need to bring our active listening and assertiveness skills to bear. We need to disagree assertively, to stand our ground and keep firmly in the 'Adult'. We may feel angry inside, hurt even, but it could be fatal to our cause if we let our 'Child' out. Count to 10, take a deep breath and reply assertively that you do not agree. You might also give a reason for your stance without becoming defensive, e.g.

> *I do not accept that criticism; I followed the procedures as set out.*
> *I would like to put forward my point of view as to that criticism.*

It is very important that you gain space and time in which to state your case. Do not be rushed into replying; allow yourself time. This is especially important when you are responding to a hostile telephone call. Play for time; give yourself a chance to compose yourself, collect your thoughts. Do not be rushed into saying something you may later regret.

Valid criticism

If we know that the criticism we are being given is legitimate, than the best technique, the most grown-up and adult, is to admit it. To the criticism, *You made a mistake*! It is best to reply:

> Yes I did.

Say sorry once, but do not go on over apologizing, that could be your 'Child' speaking. Avoid counter-attacking with:

OK I made a mistake, but you make them as well - many of them!

It is a good idea to appreciate the other's feelings as in:

I appreciate you are worried over this......

This appreciation is a signal to the other party that you can recognize their position; this really does take the sting out of the encounter.

It is also useful to look to the future, i.e. avoid any repetition of the behaviour, e.g.:

I'll be more aware of that in the future. I now realize its importance more.

We examined the concept of the Learning Organization in the introduction. Being able to admit our mistakes in an open and adult fashion and being able to prevent ourselves from repeating them is one of the hallmarks of such an organization.

Other applications of TA

TA can be applied to whole organizations: the climate or culture of the company; for instance we may ask: is it very hierarchical and very much concerned with rule-setting? Does it encourage the 'Adult' by the way it seeks to devolve power and responsibility? The 'Adult' one will respond favourably to issues relating to personal development and training; the critical Parent one will most likely say no, or place barriers in the way. The nurturing Parent will look after you. The 'Child' will just have a good time!

We will see, later, that TA can be applied to written communication. Consider the tone of any of the memos that you produce or ones that you are asked to read. E-mail, because of its informal style and the fact that it is often sent in haste (angry haste in many cases), can produce material which can be 'Parental'.

TA can be applied to negotiation as we will see in the next section. A negotiation is best approached on an 'Adult'–'Adult', win–win basis. When it is seen as 'Parental' (do the other side down) then this can encourage 'Child' behaviours from the other party. (If that is how they want to play, then....)

TA has been found to be of use in many training programmes. Its aim is to make people more aware of their transactions and those of other people. It seeks to improve the quality of transactions at work. It has been extensively used to enhance inter-personal relationships in such diverse settings as prisons, airports, handling appraisal interviews, doctor/patient consultations and counselling.

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9

Negotiation

To be an effective negotiator will require all your communication skills: active listening, assertiveness and the use of skilful questioning, as well as a clear presentation of your case.

We're talking here about influence, how to get others on side. The word negotiation is often associated with the work of trades unions, government officials in international meetings, etc. We often fail to recognize that most of us in the course of our daily work are, or will be, involved to some extent with negotiation – it is part and parcel of being in a market, of having to sell your skills to people who will want to get the best deal possible from you. Increasingly in the public sector, which at one point was almost negotiation-free, these skills are required. The NHS in England is increasingly involved in negotiations with private providers.

Negotiation should be a creative process: it seeks to solve problems, remove hindrances and get out of states of impasse. There are plenty of books on negotiation, but in this chapter we are concerned with the key communications components.

The best-known phrase associated with negotiation is one we've already come across and that is *'win–win'*. It has almost become a cliché but nevertheless, it is a very important factor. The implication behind this is that both sides in any negotiation should gain. They may not be able to gain all they want – that is the nature of compromise and bargaining, which is the heart of the process of negotiation.

We can see negotiation in the same way as we pictured assertiveness: it is that point where both parties are roughly balanced as far as their needs and outcomes are concerned. If one party squeezes the other, and drives a very hard bargain, then the equilibrium is upset and the other party will, most probably, want to bounce back and get even. This should caution us against that kind of aggressive, 'smash the other guy' approach to negotiation that is based on short-term gains. Increasingly at work, we should be seeking to build longer-term relationships with people. A one-off negotiation may of course be necessary – selling your car – but if we consider for a moment the time and effort it takes to complete most negotiations, then we will take every effort not to have too many to perform or repeat. One of the challenges for the NHS staff involved in the purchaser/provider split in the 1980s was the sheer amount of time that had to be allotted to negotiation and renegotiation of contracts.

Transactional analysis applied to negotiation

We've already seen how transactional analysis (TA) can be very helpful when we consider negotiation. If both sides are to benefit in this win–win situation then we will need the 'Adult' to 'Adult' transactions. As far as TA is concerned, it is much more than just the language used: it is the tone, gestures, relevant written work, even the layout of the negotiation room (we'll seat them over at that end of the table by the window); all these factors are of crucial importance when it comes to building up a positive relationship with the other party/parties.

If we can achieve a positive attitude to the communication, then there is a good chance that we can solve the problems in the negotiation. We will later examine some of the strategies for problem-solving by being creative, using lateral thinking etc.

Stages of negotiation

As we will mention in the next chapter in our section on chairing, it is vital to work out some kind of agenda; this is as important for negotiation as for meetings. An agenda agreed to by both sides provides a platform for the negotiation. It is also a measure of one's determination to do business and be professional in the job; it demonstrates good time management. It is also a negotiation in itself; by agreeing to the agenda you will establish a *climate of agreement*. When considering the items on your agenda, it is useful to place first those that will be less contentious, i.e. where agreement is more easily reached, and then move to the difficult ones. Negotiation is all about building trust, removing suspicion and developing a sense of mutual confidence in the other party. Agree what can be agreed and then move on. If you do get stuck, move on and return later to the difficulty – 'park it' for the meantime.

Finding the appropriate tone in your negotiation

We've already mentioned the importance of tone in interpersonal communication. Where the building of trust is crucial, then great care needs to be taken in how we express ourselves during the negotiation. Any signs of the 'Critical Parent': *'I'm telling you what I want'*, in terms of tone will be counterproductive as far as achieving our goals of a mutually acceptable solution. Negotiation is one area where our 'Child' can easily be 'hooked' and where we have to take every care that it is not, and that we stay in the 'Adult'.

If we are to be confident in our negotiations and stay in the 'Adult' we have to know our bottom line, or as it is often described in books on negotiation, our 'walk-away position'.

If you enter any negotiation, whether it is selling your football kit or negotiating a deal on fees with a client, it is essential that you have this bottom line firmly in mind. We saw in our section on assertiveness that it is very difficult to be assertive unless you have this line clearly established. If you do not, then you may well be pushed into an uncomfortable position by the other party, this can lead to resentment – *That wasn't fair! 'I'll get even over that...'*

Negotiation and problem solving

Negotiation, then, is very much about problem solving and being creative; it seeks to unlock what is blocked, and it seeks to open up relationships not close them down. It requires very careful listening; all those listening skills and approaches we outlined in Chapter 5 will come in very useful. We need to listen to the actual needs as expressed, rather than those we may perceive the other party to have. We should remember that the other party's announced needs may not represent their real wants. This is natural; we may not want to reveal our hand until we have built up some confidence in the other party. We may state that our aims are about reducing prices but our real need is to be completely reassured about delivery and reliability of service.

In any negotiation we need to listen most carefully for these deeper and more hidden needs. Such phrases as:

We haven't done business with you before
We are happy with our other suppliers but…
We're having a review of our existing contacts

These may well indicate a desire to negotiate, and a lack of satisfaction with the existing state of affairs.

If the members of a staff group start talking about earnings, this may be, on the surface, the main issue but behind this may be concerns over the way that members are perceived to be valued, or not, by management.

We saw in our analysis of listening that part of this skill lies in the art of asking questions. It is with the use of probing, clarifying and open questions that negotiators can get to the heart of the concerns of the other party. An example of this could be as follows:

Jane Jones is Training and Staff Development Manager with a large insurance and pensions company. She has worked out her training programme for the forthcoming year and is now approaching various training suppliers with a view to secure reasonable contracts for the provision of certain courses. Let's listen to her negotiation with one of these possible suppliers.

I've asked you to come today to see whether, following your receipt of our training plan, you can work out a programme which will suit us in terms of the depth and

> coverage of the training, the methods of delivery and the costs. I should make it clear at the outset that I'm talking to two, possibly three, other suppliers. We'll be able to make a decision by the end of the month.

Jane is laying her cards on the table; this is a good way to start a negotiation (but remember you may not want to do this until you have established a rapport with the other party!). Think how you would feel, as one of the representatives from this training company, if the information that there were other organizations in the bidding had come out right at the end, or that you had found it out from a third party after your negotiation; not a good way to establish a positive rapport between the parties. The representative for the training company responds to Jane's opening:

> We'd be very interested, as we declared in our e-mail, in supplying your training needs. We'd like to emphasize what we consider to be our particular strengths. Firstly, we've already worked with you and the findings from evaluations on our previous courses were positive.

This is what we call putting your best face forward. It establishes the position and reveals some cards (quality, reliability etc.) which can be played with more force later in the negotiation! Jane replies to this opening shot:

> Thank you, the evaluations have indeed been positive. This contract is however on a much larger scale. As you know we are interested in some thirty courses this year for several hundred staff. And in view of this number we'd be looking at some degree of discounting of your current prices.

Here we have the first move in the negotiation. Jane has indicated that previous good performance won't necessarily be a guarantee to an automatic award of the contract and she has made the first move on price. The training company responds with:

> Naturally for this kind of order we'd be prepared to offer a discount, probably in the order of a 10 per cent reduction on our printed prices.

Jane, like any good negotiator, never takes the first offered price. She will appreciate that the company hasn't reached its bottom line yet; this is just an opener. She responds:

> Good, however, given the size of the order, we would be expecting more of a discount than that.

Here we see the negotiation 'dance' beginning; each party circling the other, testing out the others' intentions and 'bottom lines'. The training company responds:

> Well if those thirty days of training are confirmed, then we may be prepared to re-examine our discount rate.

Linkage in negotiation

Here we have a very important aspect of all good negotiation, which is linkage, linking one aspect to another. 'If you do this .... then we'd do that...' This linkage is the way that good agreements are built up, slowly and with each part linked to the other. The training company has clearly expressed a link between any reduction in prices and the possibility of more than their initial 10 per cent discount. Jane now moves forward. Maintaining a sense of progress in your negotiation is very important.

> Good, I'm sure we can agree to the discount. I'd now like to explore with you the issue of quality, which is, as with price, crucial in our selection process. We'd be most interested to learn what system you'd have in place if you were to get the contract to supply the training; a system to ensure that all your trainers delivering courses are working to a consistently high standard.

We will see in our chapter on presentation that, as we prepare for any talk, it is vital that we prepare counters to likely objections. It would be a foolish negotiator in the training company who had not, as homework, prepared such a counter to a very obvious question on quality-maintaining consistency in delivery.

> We will set up a lead trainer from the team of five who will have the job of monitoring the performance of colleagues and liaising with you on any issues that may emerge from evaluations of the courses. This will be done rapidly. We will ensure that there are no delays in responding to critical evaluations. The details can be worked out between myself and one of your colleagues.

Closing the negotiation

We now move forward to the end of this particular meeting. Jane brings things to a close.

> Well thanks for coming. Let me try and summarize where we've got to. You would be prepared to deliver thirty days training at an enhanced discounted rate off your published prices. The five trainers you intend using will all be experienced. You will appoint a lead trainer who will monitor standards and liaise with us. This liaison will ensure a rapid and effective way of dealing with any adverse evaluations. You will send me a letter, please, before close of business this Friday to confirm all this and to set out your discounted prices. Right?

On our part, should you have been successful, we will send you, two weeks in advance of the training programme, a full list of trainees; we will supply the training rooms and photocopy the masters that you will send to us. When we've met with the two other companies we should be in a position to let you know our final decision by the end of this month. Thank you. Any questions?

Here we are in the final stage of this preliminary negotiation – the close. Nothing can be agreed until everything is checked and agreed. All the various elements in the framework need to come together. A summary at the end is essential. This is where, unless we are very careful, there can be a variety of interpretations, e.g:

I thought we'd agreed... No we said that...
I must have got the wrong impression…..

In too many negotiations parties leave the room without a clear enough understanding of what has been agreed. It is also essential, as soon as you return to base, to send a fax or e-mail stating your understanding of what has been agreed so that the other party can check to see if it is in line with their understanding or not.

There may be several more stages in this particular negotiation before any contract is awarded. Jane will need to be convinced she has the best deal and will negotiate hard with the other companies.

We are all involved in negotiating, whether we like it or not. It is essential that we understand and apply the basic principles. It will employ our communication skills full stretch.

It is essential that we go on learning the skills of negotiation as we advance in our careers and have to make decisions that will affect more than just us and our work.

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10

Communication in Groups

Introduction

So far we have concentrated on communication on a one-to-one basis. We now move to communicating with groups, which pose special problems and challenges. By groups we mean anything from two-twenty people. Let us now take note of the various factors which mark out communication in groups.

- *Because we are working with a group it may be more difficult to work out the attitudes, expectations and motivations of its members.*

In a one-to-one, although it may be difficult, it is usually easier to get 'inside' the other person and tease out what makes him or her 'tick'. It is usually easier to 'read' the non-verbal elements on a one-to-one basis. It is a much more difficult task when we are faced with a number of faces and many different attitudes and expectations. This is especially true at a panel interview. We certainly can try hard to decode the non-verbal behaviours of all those present, but it is difficult. There is just more communication – verbal and non-verbal – coming at us from a group. Conversely there is more energy required of us in our communication. We may have to 'play' harder.

We can think about one-to-one communications that are very stressful and difficult, as in some interviews and appraisals. However, as a general rule, communication to a group will require more effort. In a one-to-one we can (but it is not recommended) muddle through a communication, hoping to negotiate and find some compromise; this process is very risky in a group. We shall see later just how important it is to gain as much information as possible about the nature of the group we are to communicate with – their attitudes, and expectations.

The use of 'warm ups' with your groups can be very helpful, even just to elicit names and roles /designations. We can go in for more elaborate ice breakers, such as asking each member of the group to talk with his or her neighbour, ask questions about why they have come to the meeting/ training session etc. and then report back to the others. You can introduce some interesting dimensions into this by asking people to nominate one like and one dislike. Generally we have a dislike for ice breakers; they can, apart from the gentle ones described above, cause communication to wither and cheerful talk to be replaced by embarrassed silence. There are cultural issues here: what might be stimulating to a group of young Europeans might leave some others, say older people from the Middle East, full of trepidation and acute anxiety, even embarrassment.

- *There is a greater risk of failure with a group communication.*

Apart from the above scenario, this is particularly true of presenting to a group – all those faces up-turned, looking at you. We hope that all this is not putting you off from communicating with groups. There are however some distinct advantages:

- *It may sometimes be easier to obtain feedback from a group rather than from one person.*

This is obvious, really, when you think about it. If, after you've carried out a one-to-one communication, you then ask for some kind of feedback on your performance, it may be very difficult for that other person to provide you with criticism. You know how it is – you're sitting with that other person and he or she asks you, 'Well how did that go?' and then you say, 'It was OK'. Now, that is not a great deal of help, as you can appreciate. With the group, when you ask for feedback, it is a little easier because each member can, as it were, 'hide' in the anonymity of the group. 'We felt…..' 'In our group we thought…'

- *It is often a much more efficient way of communicating.*

Notice we are saying efficient – we are not making any judgements about 'effective'; that is something else. You are able to spread your communication over a number of listeners.

Let us now move on to some ideas relating to how we can improve our communication within groups. But first of all we should briefly analyse some concepts of group behaviour.

Stages groups go through

This question was formulated in the late 1960s by Tuchman who asked why it is that some groups manage to work well and others get stuck and seldom, if ever, manage to compete their tasks?

He suggested that groups may pass through a number of stages. In summary he called these:

Forming: that is when the group comes together, gives itself a name and starts to find its feet.

Storming: this is the time when the ground rules get settled (or not!); when the agendas are sorted out; when roles are clarified; and the remit, purpose, terms of reference of the group are settled.

Norming: This is where the group has settled down to its task or should have. It develops 'norms' of behaviour.

Performing: The group is working with most participants clear as to what the task is all about and their respective roles within the group.

Adjourning: Here the group's work is completed.

There may be an additional stage, *mourning:* that is a sense of loss after the group has broken up. Unless carefully handled, this can even create a feeling of disappointment or resentment, unless there is due recognition of the work that has been done by the group and its contribution to the whole organization. Managers and team leaders need to be sensitive to these feelings, especially when trying to manage change.

For students of communication, an important aspect is the second stage: the storming. This is the point in the life of any group where things can get stuck, and often do. People are often not sure what they should be doing – their role – and unsure what the purpose of the group is – the task. Tuchman suggested that if groups fail to go through this very necessary stage of asking these questions and getting answers to them, then the life of the group might well dry up and it might not be able to accomplish its goals. It is up to each and every member of a group to see to it that the storming is carried through, and not left neglected. We have examined conflict and stated that it can be positive, provided that it is brought out into the open and not left to smolder 'under the table'. We shall see in the next section that, for a meeting to progress, there should be some kind of storming process.

Storming, then, is about getting conflict on the table where it can be talked through and, we hope, resolved. If groups that are beset with confusion and disagreement do not have a good 'storm', then they may never be able to resolve the conflict.

Individually, when we are asked to join a group, we should ask these important questions:

Why are we here?
What are we supposed to do?
How are we supposed to do it?
By when are we supposed to do it?

You may well have been in a group which has got stuck. It may well have been because of a failure to 'storm', to articulate these questions and bring such confusions, doubts and disagreements out into the open. We do recommend that you make use of such questions. Some groups try to storm by going on away days, outings, adventure breaks, conservation challenges, team bonding outdoor adventures, etc. These require careful planning and excellent facilitation; otherwise the 'storm' can turn into a hurricane, particularly under the influence of high spirits and liquid spirits!

Roles we play in teams

We examine in Chapter 11 the roles of chairman and minutes taker and also of ourselves as participants in meetings. One researcher, Belbin (2004), has spent a great deal of his working life examining the roles that people play in teams, seeking answers to this question: Why do groups fail to become teams despite having clear leadership, clear goals, etc?

He suggests that successful teams require a *mix of team types* and that it is only by achieving this mix that groups will flourish. He puts forward the notion that in a team we often play two roles: the first is our professional/technical one, which is fairly obvious; we attend the meeting as librarian, town planner, accountant, pharmacist etc. But we also bring ourselves, so to speak; we bring our personalities, our intellects, our ways of thinking, of performing, etc. This is our *team* role.

Belbin has so far isolated eight of these roles – others suggest more. He provides an extensive self-administered test which enables individuals to discover the role or roles that they most prefer, the ones they could perform if need be and the ones that they would not want to perform unless asked to do so. This is a useful way of looking at these team roles:

- Our preferred
- Our secondary
- The ones we feel uncomfortable in.

As this is a book on communications, we will concentrate on what an understanding of these roles can do for our confidence in expressing ourselves within the group. Here is a brief explanation of the main roles. We do recommend that you read Belbin on the subject; you can also find a wealth of material relating to this online.

The Shaper: The characteristic of this type is that he or she tends to be outgoing, dynamic with a readiness to challenge. The downside of this (the allowable weakness as Belbin puts it) is a certain impatience and irritation with any delay. You can imagine how useful such a shaper is in a group but how difficult it would be with several of them! A shaper's typical remark would be:

Come on, we've already spent some time on this, we must progress.

This raises fundamental questions relating to who should chair meetings. Shapers often make ineffective chairs: they are so keen to push things along that they do not allow time for questions and discussion. They are often not interested in debate – more in action. You can relate this to the 'action' style of communication we've already looked at.

The Plant: so called because Belbin suggests that we may actively import such a person to our group. 'Plants' are persons who are full of ideas, highly creative; their allowable weakness is that for much of the group meeting they may not be with us but dreaming up new ideas. Plants may get put off by strong Shaper behaviours, particularly if that Shaper happens to be leader of the group or chair:

> *Come along Brian not another of those fancy notions. Let's have something realistic shall we?*

The Completer Finisher: that person who attends to the detail, who pays attention to the minutiae. His or her allowable weakness is to worry overmuch about small trifles, but what an asset to any group and how sorely is that person missed!

> *Can I just check that we've booked the room and organized the speaker?*

There are other team types including the *monitor evaluator* who is good at asking the difficult questions, such as:

> Why are we here? What is the rationale for this?
> What are we doing?

The *chairman,* this is a person who acts calmly, is good at getting people to talk and build consensus. We will see more of this role in our next chapter.

> ***You might like to think – from the ones we have so far identified – where your <u>preferred</u> role and where your secondary role/s would be.***

Belbin's work should help us be more confident in our meetings, seminars and conferences. If we can see that, as well as bringing our technical, professional expertise with us into the group, we also bring our preferred role/s then that should provide us with more confidence to speak out, to question, to play an active part in the life and work of the group of which we are members. It can also be very helpful if you are to chair a meeting, as we will see. It can open one's eye to the value of team roles and encourage a wider and deeper appreciation of all members of a team, especially the idea of allowable weaknesses.

The problems of conformity in groups

The distinguished psychologist Asch (1956) spent a good deal of his time investigating the issue of conformity within groups. He noticed how the presence of the group – the peer pressure – caused individuals to change their views according to the prevailing group opinion. You may have noticed this yourself.

> ***Think for a moment of a situation – for instance at a meeting where you have wanted to say something but you realized that your views would have been different from those of those sitting round you. Why, in retrospect, did you not speak out? Was it because you felt awkward and embarrassed, that you might be ridiculed, that your views might give rise to conflict and disagreement, or just ignored?***

Asch pin-pointed this problem: he realized, through a variety of studies, that peer pressure acted like a wave which sweeps across a group, thus reducing the variety of individual opinions to the one 'safe' one.

We will see later how effective chairs can reduce this 'infection' by giving their explicit permission for members of the meeting to disagree and give their opinions. The chair can also stimulate debate in the way that he or she steers the meeting: stirring up the discussion, inviting minority views, ensuring that these are recognized in the debate and in the minutes. However it is also important that the chair stays impartial in the actual debate.

Groupthink

Another researcher we should take note of is Janis (1982), an American psychologist who has studied 'Groupthink' and defined this as:

> What happens when a group of people who respect each others' opinions arrives at an unanimous view, each member is likely to feel that the belief must be true. This reliance on consensus validation tends to replace critical thinking.

Groups with this 'virus' tend to view criticism as disloyalty. You may read about the situation at the Bristol Infirmary in the late 80's where a group of surgeons effectively closed themselves off from criticism as to the worrying number of post-surgical deaths in babies. Other studies on the effects of groupthink have examined the lack of debate on the Foreign Office decision that Argentina would not invade the Falklands in 1982 and the almost unanimous decision by US military planners that Pearl Harbour would not be attacked by the Japanese at the onset of conflict.

You can image the insidious damage that groupthink can do to any group's ability to make wise decisions. Members will tend not to speak out in any critical fashion because that will be seen as 'rocking the boat'. Furthermore because we are all of the same mind, then what we have decided must be OK!

This tendency is exactly why the 'storming' part in Tuchman's stages is so vital. You may well have been a member of a group where Groupthink had set in. It appears from the work of Janis and others that the longer the group works together, the more difficult it becomes for individuals to step out of line and be openly critical. It is a very good idea to have an MOT on your groups so that grievances, niggles and criticism can be thoroughly aired before they are allowed to build up to a major explosion. It is important to take heed of the small shocks so that you are not presented with any nasty surprises.

Your MOT can be simply achieved under the following labels:

What is going well with our team?	*What could be improved/enhanced?* *(are we in fact a team or just a group?)*
--	--
--	--

It is always a good idea to start off by stressing the positive – *what is working well* – before moving into the *what could be improved* discussion.

The cultural dimension to communication in groups

There are differences between cultures when it comes to communication within teams. For some societies, meetings at work are held to ratify ideas and policy and not so much to discuss and argue a case. Any decision has most likely been made well before the meeting. The ‘storming’ is very often done in smaller groups and between key individuals. To begin arguing and disagreeing over policy matters in front of the whole group, as might occur in Europe and the US, would be seen as bad manners in many societies in the Far and Middle East. Meetings tend to be more ceremonial than business in form and intention: tea may be taken, contracts signed, hands shaken and heads bowed, but disagreements kept private.

Even if the meeting is mainly business, we should take great care over such matters as introductions and the use of names. In much of Europe and North America we ask for names or suggest that people write their names - usually first ones – on cards in front of them. In some parts of India and much of the Far East such informal introductions could cause difficulties:

‘Your name is Dr Harri?’
‘Yes’
‘But what do we call you?’
‘Dr Harri is fine?’
‘Dr Harri?
‘Yes, Dr Harri is fine.’
‘Sure?’
‘Quite sure.’

This compared to

> Could I have your name? Dr Heller is it?
> Susan, but please call me Sue.

We do need to be aware of the cultural dynamics, rules and conventions which govern groups in such societies. It requires a keen observation of such niceties and a careful reading of the non-verbal leakage and body gestures. As an outsider one will be allowed to make some errors with respect to conventions but if you want to communicate in order to influence meetings, then you would be very well advised to fine-tune your communication style to suit the prevailing cultural norm. This is part of the EQ (emotional quotient) we mentioned in our initial model of communication.

Compliance in groups

The work of Milgram (2005) showed how an element of fear will affect a group's performance. Individuals will comply with a safe position rather than sticking their necks out. You may be surprised that we talk of fear but in many groups there is considerable unease and anxiety which can be described as fear. There are increasing numbers of part-time staff, those on contracts, those who are working for agencies on very limited prospects, who, when in a group, especially one chaired by an employer/ manager, the person responsible for their hiring and firing, will suffer anxiety and stress. Such an atmosphere is hardly conducive to open and free-flowing discussion.

In order to reduce these fears we have to create a more supportive culture. We noted the importance of safety in communications and the list of safeguards provided by one organization to its staff as far as their communications were concerned.

At work we also need to ensure that, as far as possible, those responsible for hiring and firing leave the chairing of meetings – where they want ideas to emerge – to those less high-profile and seen as less threatening by the group. This is not easy for many managers but such action will often result in a range and depth of debate which would not have otherwise happened.

We now move to consider communication within formal groups such as meetings and to larger groups – audiences gathered to hear our presentations.

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11

Communicating In and Out of the Chair

All of you – yes we can safely predict this – will spend time at meetings. If you get really bored sitting there, you can add up all the hours per week, per month, per year that you are in or out or beside the Chair. The hours will mount up to something that can be quite alarming.

This chapter is to help you, whether you chair meetings, try to participate in them, sit there taking minutes or simply book the rooms, make the tea, or do all of these!

Key questions to ask before your meeting

Before we enter into the details of these various roles, we should set out some preliminary questions, very much on the lines of those we pose in later chapters on writing. It is all about being assertive; it is about being confident and asking those questions which demonstrate your assertiveness. It is not about being passive and just getting on with the job. If we have answers to the questions which follow, we are likely to be more confident in our role/s in any meeting.

Before you read our list, consider your own key questions.

- ***Is this meeting necessary?***

I'm sure all of us have attended meetings where we have wondered what the whole thing is about. Does this sound familiar?

Is this necessary?
Yes, it is Tuesday, we always have a meeting on Tuesday.
Yes, I know, but I was just wondering what the point is?
Of what?
Well, the Tuesday meeting
You haven't been here long have you?
No.

Well, every Tuesday we have a meeting to discus what is happening in the week and what has happened. Always get tea and chocolate biscuits. OK?
Yes...
You'll soon get the hang of it. I've been here for ages and really look forward to these get-togethers. One of the managers threatened to do away with it but we stood our ground.

You might well have had this kind of experience. We hope you have been assertive and gone on asking: is there an alternative to this meeting? Is it really necessary?

- ***What is the meeting about – its remit?***

It is very difficult for us to be confident at any meeting if we do not know what it is supposed to cover and what it is not. A good chair should make this absolutely clear to those present. The agenda and other notices from the organizer/convenor/secretary should also help clarify the purpose.

- ***What is my role in this meeting?***

We need to be clear as to this if we are to communicate assertively and with confidence. Here are some of the roles you might play at a meeting.

Think of the ones you have played, should have played, would like to play.

Chair
Minute-taker
Representative – i.e. you represent some body of opinion, other members of the staff, a group of clients, an organization.
Delegate – delegated by others to take part, vote, make decisions, etc.
An Expert – called upon to give specialist advice.
An Observer /Consultant – there to provide advice on the meeting itself, the way it is organized, chaired, the interaction of the various members, etc.

You may be playing more than one of these roles but, whatever combination of role-play, it is crucial that you do not suffer from role confusion. If you're new to the group, do make sure that either you are introduced by the Chair or you politely intervene and introduce yourself. Do not just sit there!

- ***What is on the agenda and how can I prepare for it?***

When we have received a satisfactory answer to these questions we can move to active participation.

Auditing your meetings

One of the first stages in seeking to make more effective use of time in meetings, whether you are a member or chairing it, is to determine how much of your time is spent in meetings and the value of these in getting things done.

The following is a series of questions to help you identify these issues and begin to determine what can be changed/improved – i.e. auditing. Note that these meetings might be very informal, e.g. your manager asks you to 'pop in for a moment' (which turns into half an hour) or, at the other extreme, formal committee meetings with agenda and structured proceedings.

1. How many meetings do you attend /chair each week/each month? Make a list of all meetings with approximate times so you become very aware of the proportion of your time spent each in meetings – it is useful to do this with your team.
2. Who attends these meetings? Are they the most appropriate ones? Is it clear as to who should attend? Are the lists up to date?
3. What is the purpose of these meetings?
4. Is there an agenda?
5. Are the meetings well conducted? Does everyone contribute or does one person hog it all?
6. What do the meetings achieve – actions? Passing on information? Getting ideas? Problem-solving? Are they seen to be effective and useful for members?

Action following audit

Having now established what the current situation is for you, the next step is to decide what could be changed/improved – such as:

1. *Regularity?* Do you have to meet as you do at present? For instance, could that weekly meeting be held as usefully every fortnight? You may need to negotiate with colleagues on this one.
2. *Membership?* Often people get into a meetings attendance habit (it beats working!). We need to be critical of who is involved. Is it necessary for everyone to be there? If two people go from one section could one go instead and report back? Does everyone have to attend the entire meeting? Could they attend for relevant items only?

   Do keep a check of who does actually attend your meetings. If you have a representative who never turns up then action should be taken.
3. *Purpose*? Are you always aware of the purpose of the meeting and why you are present? One standard here is to ensure there is an agenda and, if it is an informal meeting, to clarify at the beginning what it is about (very politely of course!). Do we need a good 'storm'?
4. *Conduct of meetings*? This is often where most time is 'wasted'. As a member you can do a lot to improve unsatisfactory meetings by setting certain standards, e.g.:

   - Do you have the necessary documents in advance? Is there an agenda?
   - Does the meeting start and finish on time? (It is good practice to have a finishing time!)

- Is time allocated to items in proportion to their importance, or the other way? 25 minutes on car parking and only 5 on the new appraisal process!
- Are people encouraged to contribute?
- Are you clear at the end of the meeting what action, by whom and by when, is required?
- Are minutes promptly and accurately produced and circulated?

5. *Outcome?* Did the meeting achieve its purpose? If it did, fine; if not, try to identify the problems and begin to manage them!

Ways in which participants can assist meetings

This process of auditing our meetings, and making sure that the key questions as to purpose, remit and our role are answered, is something we can all do as participants to enhance the experience. We can also communicate and contribute by:

- Arriving on time
- Reading any background papers and minutes
- Taking action where it says ACTION against our names
- Keeping the chair alerted as to time:
  Excuse me, but if we are to finish by 5 pm then …
- Helping to maintain peace and harmony:
  I suggest we take a ten-minute cooling off break.
- Assisting with the environment:
  Would it help if we moved the table this way, we could...
- Ensuring that everyone is clear:
  Could we have an explanation of..?.
- Encouraging the chair to stay on track:
  I suggest we return to the main problem which is…
- Helping the debate focus by providing a proposal:
  Can I propose that this is circulated to...?

Chairing meetings: some key skills

There will be times when we are asked to chair a meeting. Here are some techniques which should help you in this task. One word of advice before we start, do not try and chair a meeting and take minutes, it is just not possible. Chairing should take up every ounce of energy you have; let someone else take the minutes, you will only have time for the odd note to remind you of key points.

Before you read our list of key skills, you might like to think about those times when you've chaired a meeting or where you've witnessed chairing. What are the key skills you would put in your list?

1. Encouraging participation from as many as possible
We can use the indirect approach as in:

How do we all feel about this issue?
Is there any one who would like to add a contribution?

Or we can be more direct and actually ask a participant – but we must remember sensitivities here; we do not want to appear to be unduly pressuring individuals – there should be a reason for calling them in; so something on the lines of:

Before we go on I would like to hear from Brian on this. He's recently attended the…..
Christine how do you feel about this? You've done some research into this aspect.
Nick, I know you have some experience in this matter, would you like to come in at this point?

2. Paraphrasing
This is where we listen carefully and then check whether we have grasped the essence of the point. We might have actually understood it but we suspect that other members of the meeting are not so sure, hence the paraphrase:

Let me see if I've understood it.
You mean .... are you saying...?
Let me try and see if I've got the point: you mean...?
Sorry Charly, I see some puzzled faces round the table ...could I try and restate what I think is the main point here – please come back if you think I've missed anything.

3. Asking for Clarification
It is very important that we should ensure that everyone is clear as to what is being said. We need to chase clarity at all times, particularly if we suspect members round the table may not be clear. e.g.

The examples you've given seem only to concern ... Do they also refer to...? Could you clarify this point?

4. Asking for a Summary
This is a useful way of controlling a rambling contributor, as in:

Before we move on to your next point, Ali, could I ask you to provide a summary for us of the main argument....

5. Providing a Summary
Where there has been a lengthy and complex discussion, it is the chair's duty (unless this is delegated to the minutes taker) to provide a summary of the key

points. If you are working in small informal groups, the chair or minute-taker can write up these points on a flip chart. This will provide the group with a running checklist of key points which can form the basis of the final minute. Such a summary is very helpful before any decision is made, and certainly before a vote is taken.

Before we conclude this item on the agenda, I would like to sum up where I think we've reached in the discussion...
We've spent a good deal of time on this item. Can I briefly summarize before I ask you to come to a decision.
Before we take a vote on this issue, here are the key points for you to consider...

6. Ask for Expansion

If you, as chair, feel that there has not been a wide enough discussion and that the group have somehow got stuck, then you can use this technique, as in:

Jim, could you please expand on that point a little; give us a little more by way of...........

7. Suggest a Procedure

This is where the meeting is deadlocked and cannot make progress.

Would it help if we reversed the order on the agenda in view of the fact that....
I suggest that in view of the time, we place the remaining items on the agenda for the next meeting.
(If things are getting a bit heated) *I suggest a 10 min break.*

8. Do a Rapid Survey of Opinion

Your aim as chair is to build up a consensus so that a decision can be 'owned' by the meeting. Avoid a show of hands unless you have a 'safe' atmosphere and members are comfortable with each other; if not, conformity pressures will show and some will play safe (they've got their hands up, perhaps I should as well!). Better to ask people to look down at their papers if they are not happy with the proposal and look up if they are.

Can I get the feeling of the meeting as to this one...? Thank you...

9. Question Assumptions

You may feel that the group is not getting 'real' in its debate and that you need to bring them back to the world out there.

Your assumption is that there won't be any... to fill the gap.
What evidence do you have for this view?

10. Check Your Target

Discussion can drift, you have to keep a 'hand on the tiller' otherwise you may find yourselves moving away from the items on the agenda.

Are we asking the right questions here....might it be that...?
Are these the only points ...aren't we in danger of missing something important?

11. Put up an argument

This is where you stimulate the group to go deeper in their thinking; you might want to play the Devil's Advocate if the debate is shallow, or you suspect that people are just playing it safe.

Let us suppose for one moment that ...
Well for the sake of argument, do not increase... what then?

12. Focus on Action, Implementation and Delegation

This is very important for you, the group members and particularly for the minutes taker. Far too often, people leave a meeting without being clear as to what was decided and who is going to do what and when!

Before we end, let's just remind ourselves who is going to carry out the various tasks we've agreed on ... the subcommittee will consist of…….. to report back before...
The next meeting will have to.... deadline must be kept in mind.
We must have the quotations in before .... so that we all have a chance to...

Before we leave the role of chair we should consider the often-vexed question: who should chair meetings? We saw that if you have a powerful figure in charge this can encourage lopsided decision-making and conformity pressure (agree with the boss).

A team leader who wants a genuinely open and free-ranging debate with his or her team will not sit in the chair or even attend the meeting. We know from accounts of eyewitnesses to big decisions (the one to introduce the Poll Tax) that a so-called collective decision was railroaded through by the sheer dominance of one person. It is not impossible for a senior person to chair a meeting where there is wide range of debate, but that person must:

Encourage a spread of opinions
Not give his or her opinion until everyone else has spoken
Rigidly enforce the rules of the meeting so that there is a fair allocation of time for minority as well as majority, conventional as well as unconventional, popular as well as unpopular views.

Minutes taking – your role

Definition: minutes are a written summary of the proceedings of a meeting. They are a summary, not a complete recording of what was said. They normally record:

- The date of the meeting
- The venue of the meeting
- Those present
- Those absent – apologies
- The agenda (the items in order)
- A summary of the discussion
- Proposals
- Result of any votes taken and decisions made
- The resolutions/actions
- Responsibilities for those taking on the actions
- Date, venue and time of next meeting/s (if any).

Minutes must be an accurate and impartial recording of these aspects. They must be accurate in the sense that future meetings can build on the actions and decisions made, and because they may be used as evidence in a legal setting, e.g. an industrial tribunal.

They must be impartial – the minutes taker must not favour one particular side, one argument, over others, one member's contributions over another's, etc. Minutes are written in the past tense and all direct speech is turned into reported speech.

Here is direct speech – what was actually said at the meeting.

> *Can we start this item on office communication. Thanks. I just want to kick things off and then get a discussion going – well as a start there is a suggestion been put forward that we should investigate some method or methods of prioritizing e-mails within this office of ours.* (49 words)

How would you convert that into a minute?

Here is one version.

Office communication
The Chairman opened the discussion by stating that a suggestion had been put forward for a priority system to deal with e-mails in the office. (25 words)

Now how would you edit this draft into a final minute?

We could shorten this:

Office communication
The Chairman opened by stating that a suggestion had been made for a priority system to deal with e-mails. (19 words)

We do not want *the discussion* (it is one!); or *in the office* (we have the title); do we actually need 'opened' – it is the start of the item after all?

Minutes are a *summary* of what was said. They are not the full transcripts. Leave that to courtroom stenographers.

Your role
You must be confident in what you, as a minutes taker, are expected to do. Your task is difficult as it is but is made many times more so if you are not sure what you are doing. So do ask; make sure that you have answers to the following questions:

Readership
Who is going to read these minutes?
Will the readers be exclusively drawn from those who attend the meetings? If so, you as minute-taker will be able to summarize proceedings more tightly. If the minutes will be read by those who have not attended, you may need to expand some of the discussion. You may need to gloss (explain) some of the jargon and abbreviations.

If the minutes are to be read by a very wide audience, you might then like to write a short report of the meeting rather than minutes. This report could be on a single page and list the decisions /actions.

What should be recorded?
There may be a house style to assist you in this. Make sure that if you are new to minutes taking you read previous examples very carefully. Learn from these; in particular note the following:

- What kind of numbering system is used?
- How the topic relates to the agenda, e.g. where the actions are placed in the text
- Whether participants' names are used, or initials /designations
- How much discussion is recorded. Is it just key points or is there some attempt made to record a range of opinions?
- The font used; whether CAPS/ bold for headings, etc
- Who will be editing the minutes?

The writing of the minutes

There is a range of techniques for writing minutes. Here is a selection for you to think about. You may have your own technique, which works for you, but you might like to consider this one of ours:

Turn your A4 sheet of paper (or better still A3) sideways and divide it into 2 sections.

On the left hand side jot down your rough notes, using whatever system of 'shorthand' you use. You might also find it useful to subdivide your rough notes into two columns: the Essential and the Possible.

Under *Essential* you could include:

Key actions
Proposals voted on

Under *Possible*

Elements of the discussion background statements etc

To illustrate this approach, here is a short exercise. Although it is difficult, as you were not part of the proceedings and therefore do not know the situation, make an estimate of what you would put under essential and what under possible. After you've done that, try to write the actual draft minute.

What was actually said?

Can we turn now to agenda item three? Travel expenses. I realize that this has been on the agenda before and that members of this committee have strong feelings on the matter. Brian could you kick off.

Yes, thanks, I was asked to undertake a review of travel expenses. At present we pay 27 p a mile for all staff working on our business. This rate has now been unchanged for the last four years. Several staff have complained to this committee and I promised to undertake this review. I checked with a couple of other companies in our field and in this area and they pay between 30 and 40p per mile. I suggest that staff do have grounds for complaint.

Thank you Brian. Anyone else like to comment. Susan.

Chairman I think we should note that petrol and general motoring costs have risen quite rapidly over the last four years – when we did the last review of expenses. I'd like to suggest a rise to say 35 pence per mile as soon as possible. I know, running my own car, that it certainly costs a great deal more. The last servicing bill – a tremendous increase, and we know that in the last few months petrol's shot up...........

Thanks Susan – Yes Harry

Could we not adapt a policy, which many organizations have, which is to pay more per mile for the first x miles and then a reduced rate thereafter. So that you could have 37–40 pence for the first 1000 miles on company business and 35 pence for any subsequent travel.

Thanks. Any other comments? Brian?

I think we should go for Harry's suggestion but I'd suggest 40 p for the first 1500 miles because of what Susan pointed out – the big increases in petrol, oil and servicing.

OK, are we getting near a decision? Are we happy to accept Brian's modification of Harry's suggestion? So we agree that 40p per mile will be paid from the beginning of the financial year for the first 1500 miles and thereafter 35p for subsequent mileage on company business. How do you all feel about this? Fine, thank you. I shall write to all staff informing them of the Board's decision.

You could have separated the material as follows:

Essential	**Possible**
Brian's reviw of travl expnses	on agnda bfore
Prsnt rate 27p/m last 4 yrs	strng feelngs on mattr
Gen in motrng costs	Staff complnts to com'te
Unan agreemt for	othr comps pay 30 - 40p/m
Frm strt of new Fin Yr	Harry propsd slidg scle
40p/m for first 1500 mls	37p/m -1st 1000m
35p/m for followng mil'ge	29/30 for frther mls
Action: lettr from Chair to all stff	

The important thing now is to write up a first draft as soon as possible. You might like to consider this way of doing it. Rough notes with all your scribbles, shorthand forms etc on the left of the page and then across the other side your first tentative draft.

Rough notes	**1st Draft**
B rpt'd rev rcnt trvl expns Othr cos pay 35–40p/m	Brian reported on review of travel expenses. He had found that other companies are paying 35–40p/m

The first draft minute could be written as:

3. Travel Expenses
Brian reported on his recent review of travel expenses; these had remained unchanged for the past four years at 27p per mile. He had checked with other companies in the area and found they were paying more. It was pointed put that motoring costs had risen with recent rapid rises in petrol prices. It was unanimously agreed that from the start of the next financial year travel expenses would be increased as follows: 40p per mile for the first 1500 miles and 35p for further miles. The chairman would write to all staff to inform them of the changes.

(Action Chair)

Notice in this version the discussion between Brain and Harry has been considerably summarized. You could easily add more detail and feature much more of the discussion between these two. It all depends what you want to capture in your minute – how far you consider this discussion to be of importance.

Would you edit this draft for a final minute? Stop a moment before you read what was actually produced.

3. Travel Expenses
Brian reported on his recent review of travel expenses; this had been asked for by staff in view of increases in motoring costs. The rate at 27p per mile had remained unchanged for the past 4 years. He had checked with other companies in the area and found they were paying more. (30–40 p/mile). It was agreed that from the start of the next financial year, travel expenses would be increased, again following the example of other companies: 40p per mile for the first 1500 miles and 30p for further miles. The chairman would write to all staff to inform them of these changes.

(Action Chair)

In this final version, the Chair felt that some mention should be made (internal politics) of the staff's views and the reason for the review. He also thought that some explanation should be provided why more was to be paid for the first 1500 miles than the rest. This is an important point. Suppose this item comes up again. No one at the meeting remembers why there is this differential and there is no record in the minutes? Puzzlement. It is important that your minutes do set out not just the decision but also, very briefly, why such a decision was actually made.

It is, however, often very difficult to separate out the essential from the possible. This is where:

- The longer you stay as minutes taker with a particular group, the more you will appreciate what they regard as essential
- The more you can ask for feedback from them (and from the chairman) as to what they require in the minutes, the better able you will be to make your selection.

Why not ask your chair or convenor if, on occasion, you can have minutes placed on the agenda, not just so that people can make suggestions as far as their accuracy is concerned. The feedback you want is whether they would like more detail in the minutes, a different way of setting them out, a list of actions at the end as well as having them in the text, or whether they want the minutes e-mailed as well as hard copies.

Other tips for writing your minutes

- If you do not have shorthand then make up your own system: use commonly accepted abbreviations, e.g.

compared with	*cp*
information	*info*
approximately	*approx*

For rough notes you do not have to use vowels – just use consonants, e.g.

Senior management recommend adoption of marketing plan.

Could be written as:

Sn mngmt rcmnd adpt'n of mrktng pln

- You can also leave out unnecessary words - as follows:

A simple spreadsheet system could assist trainee auditors

smpl systm cld asst trinee audtrs

- Remember long words can be shortened, as in:

preliminary prelim
department dept
unnecessary unnec

- Make use of lines, diagrams, mathematical signs etc., e.g.

more than > less than <

- To repeat: do not leave it too long before you write up your notes. Try and do it the same day.

The longer you leave it the more difficult it will be to remember – those abbreviations, squiggles, arrows, crossings out just become meaningless after a few days.

With a very small and informal meeting you might like to jot up the main points on a flip chart as the meeting proceeds. You can then get the participants to 'agree' to these points; take away the flip chart papers and work up your minutes from these.

So as a minute-taker, remember:
- Be assertive. Ask questions about the minutes and their readership. You are there to help the meeting but you cannot fulfil the role of minutes taker unless *you understand* and are *comfortable* with what it is your committee wants of you
- Remember, you cannot and should not record everything. When you have been reassured as to those key questions, work out a system for yourself that allows you to capture the essentials and the possible
- Experiment with different ways of recording the information. Try to sit next to an experienced minutes taker before you plunge in solo
- Never leave the writing up of your notes for more than a few hours. Try, if possible, to get a first draft minute written up from your notes before the end of that working day
- Check the draft minutes with your chair and other members of the committee/ group/panel. Ask for their advice.

Remember, the longer you do the minutes for a particular committee, the more indispensable you become, so you shouldn't find them unhelpful when it comes to answering your questions!

Summing up

So whether you are in the meeting as participant, chair or minutes taker, you must know why you're there, be clear about the purpose of the meeting, and your role within it. If you can do this, you will get so much more out of your meetings and they won't be such a waste of your time and energies.

Although we may have been critical of meetings in this section, we need to remember that they can be of immense benefit to any organization.

What do you feel are the benefits of meetings? Jot down your list before you read on.

Here are some benefits as we see them:

- We have noted in our section on assertiveness that meetings can help to bring conflict out into the open and, under the rules of the meeting, provide a reasonable and courteous way of resolving difficulties
- Meetings can also provide protection for people who might otherwise be harassed, or put upon in some way, on a one-to-one basis. The fact that each member at the meeting is 'protected' by the Chair and the rules of debate (one person speaks at a time, no interruptions or shouting down), and are, therefore, empowered to have his or her say, is a very important benefit that should not be lost
- Coordination of different teams, sectors, partnerships. A meeting can have the effect of drawing the various inputs together, providing a chance not only to coordinate but to improve morale by building a one-team approach
- People at a meeting, and arriving at a decision, are more likely to implement and support that decision than if everyone acted individually. Collective responsibility is the term given for this. We are all responsible for the decisions that we have made
- In these days, where people working alongside each other will tend to send e-mails rather than converse, meetings also perform a very crucial social function by allowing people in any organization to meet, talk, network, have coffee and just feel part of a team.

Teleconferencing

Concerns about travel costs and the sheer amount of time, effort and carbon that is taken up with attending meetings make this an increasingly attractive option. You may have experienced this yourself. The technology is getting better and better: the pictures sharper and the sound quality enhanced.

What users of this approach have found, however, is that an initial investment is required before you start up the system: people need to be brought physically together first, to meet, to see each other, shake hands and look into each others' eyes. If this is done, then the teleconferenced meetings have a much better chance of working. 'Hi Lucy, we met in Aberdeen last month' 'Ah yes Scott I remember'.

Do not forget the usefulness and cheapness of using a telephone hook-up between members of a committee who are scattered around the country. Again, the same condition arises: encourage them all to meet up face to face before starting the telephone link up.

Further reading

Dibble J. & Langford, B. (1994) *Communication Skills and Strategies*, Cincinnati: South-Weston.
Janner, G. (1988) *Janner on Communication*, London: Century.

12

Communicating on your Feet: Presenting Yourself to Others

One of the key communication skills is the ability to present ourselves to groups of people, whether at a meeting, to a panel for an interview, or to a gathering of over a 100 at a sales conference.

One way of looking at presentation skills is to analyse what it is that those who are good at it – the very competent presenters – actually do. What is it, we ask, that makes them so good?

> ***At this point you might like to jot down those criteria you would select for the competent presenter. Try to do this before you read any further. Think of those people you have heard give presentations who you thought performed well. Consider why you thought this and why the reaction of the audience was positive (that is unless you were the only one who enjoyed it!).***

What would go on your list? Here is our analysis; we will start by following a trail from the invitation to the completion of the talk and the follow-up.

The invitation to give a presentation

Inexperienced presenters are usually amazed, flattered or bewildered by the invitation to do much by way of analysis. Their first thoughts are usually: 'My fame is spreading', then after a few minutes of reflection comes the doubts, 'Can I do this?' and 'What shall I say in this talk?'

Experienced presenters, after reading the invitation, put a number of questions to themselves:

- Are there any alternatives to a presentation? (teleconferencing?)
- Is it worthwhile from my/the organization's point of view?
- If yes, am I the right person to give it?
- Is this the appropriate time to give it?
- Is the title fixed? Can it be altered?
- Is the theme/subject fixed? Can it be negotiated?

Only after asking these questions and analysing the answers will the experienced presenter start thinking about accepting the invitation. This decision, whether to accept or not, is not a sign of arrogance but a sensible attitude to adopt. Given the work involved, is this really a sensible use of your time? Presentations are expensive in terms of time: it is not only the direct costs of your preparation of the materials and the going out and giving the talk plus your travel time, but also the opportunity costs i.e. what else you could have been doing if you hadn't been spending your time on it? We will come up against the very same questions when we look at report writing in Chapter 15.

Analysing and clarifying the remit

For experienced presenters, usually as a result of bitter experience, now begins the task of analysing the request. Inexperienced presenters are more or less content to accept the title and remit in the invitation, as in:

We would like you to speak to ... on ...at...
We would be grateful if the talk could be ... and if you could concentrate on...
Could you just give a brief review of recent developments?

This is not enough information for the experienced presenter. He/she writes, faxes, e-mails, phones, better still, goes to meet the organizer/convenor face to face – all this in order to seek answers to a number of key questions:

Expectations: what do the organizers actually want?
Is there some hidden agenda here?
Is the title of the talk meaningful?
Would it be better to change the title?

Negotiations: the more experienced you are as a presenter, the more you should be able to enter into negotiations over the talk. This advice applies equally to invitations to appear on radio or TV. The inexperienced speaker will seldom, if ever, try to negotiate the terms of the talk. The fact is that most talks are negotiable; the initial remit may well be open to some movement. The aspects that can be negotiated include:

- The title
- Introductions
- The areas to be covered
- The depth of coverage
- Any particular angle to be taken – politically, ethically?
- The duration of the talk
- The type of visuals to be used
- The timing and nature of any breaks (refreshments)

- Handouts and their printing/distribution i.e. online
- The environment – you may not be able to alter the venue (but do try if it appears to be unsuitable); you may well be able to alter the arrangement of seats, tables, lecterns, display boards, screens and flip charts/boards.

Other aspects to be negotiated could include fees, travel expenses or hotel accommodation.

Attitudes: it is always difficult to judge the attitudes of an audience but the experienced presenter has his or her antennae up and ready to detect any signals. A little bit of empathy can be very helpful. By putting yourself in the position of the members of that audience, it is possible to get a little under their collective skins. The inexperienced presenter can easily misread the signs and, taking the indications to be favourable, enter the hall expecting a positive welcome. This can lead to a nasty fall: the so-called positive audience becomes much less so as the talk goes on. This can turn into a truly horrid experience (Tony Blair and the Women's Institute) and in some cases may put that person off public speaking for years (that certainly didn't!).

The experienced presenter has probably been caught this way before and is very sensitive to audience attitudes. Such a presenter realizes that in any audience there will be some positive members, perhaps a few, the bulk neutral, waiting to be convinced and, in some settings, a number who are negative – and on occasions the odd one, two or five quite hostile to the subject, and perhaps also to the presenter.

One of the first lessons to be learned is that no one presentation, no matter how brilliant and how charismatic the speaker, can hope to turn those negative members of the audience in the presenter's favour. There will usually be a residue that will not budge in their attitudes, one inch or one millimetre.

Experienced presenters aim to counter likely objections by the way they deliver their talk and by the skill by which they marshal the arguments and display the facts. We noted the importance of this when we looked at being interviewed. We'll supply examples of this later in this section.

Detailed preparation

Novice presenters attempt to write down the whole speech, even including 'Good morning ladies and gentlemen'. They produce several sides of closely drafted text, each line filled, with very little space left, as in:

> Good morning. I would very much like in this talk to examine with you certain aspects of the development of new software systems to handle the particular problems that we all witnessed in the last few years. These problems seemto have centred round certain difficulties... I list these on this slide

Experienced presenters have evolved their own style of notes, but never fill the page with text; they know that to carry this up to the podium, lectern, or rest it on their knees is asking for trouble. They appreciate that presentation is all about making contact with the audience, keeping this contact during the talk and using the questions, answers and the after-talk coffee break to extend this contact. Such contact cannot be generated if, all the time, the presenter has to scrutinize the text, head bent down and voice often muffled by the papers.

However, our experienced presenters know that on occasions – such as when the press may be there, or where the subject material is risky in legal terms or when they are operating in a second language or where the material is dense with references and tight logical arguments – a fuller text is called for. This, however, will be prepared as a *speech text* and not just printed out line by line from the computer.

Such *speech text* will be carefully prepared, especially for when an autocue device is used.

To achieve suitable speech notes, our advanced presenter does a great deal of preliminary drafting – brainstorming ideas, listing themes, jotting down key words and linking them into categories. Then, after this has been done – keeping the remit for the talk firmly in mind – the speech notes are produced. At this point, he or she may contact the person who issued the invitation just to double check on the remit. Too many speakers get the bit between their teeth and forget about the actual remit and head off on their own. It is very easily done.

Notes for your talk

There are very many ways of organizing speech notes; it is very much a personal preference. All we can do here is to outline those which we feel could be helpful.

The speaker in this example is a transport consultant who has been asked to give a talk to local government officers in her area. She has tried several ways of organizing speech notes. She has come up with the following arrangements:

> She uses heavy paper (so that it does not shake around in a nervous hand!). She has found cream or light yellow paper is best, white paper tends to flare under certain lights. She writes key phrases on it with a black felt tip pen or in bold 14-point print. (Please avoid water-based pens. The author witnessed the scene where the chairman knocked over a glass of water and reduced the speaker's notes to an unreadable pulp of ink!) She takes care to space out these phrases using the centre of the page. This is important because she wants to be able to focus as she glances down at her notes. Notice how much she uses abbreviated forms so that there is a minimum of reading and a maximum of scanning. These phrases are there to trigger a memory of what has already been prepared. These notes would be suitable for a short (10 -15 min) talk where the speaker already has a good deal of knowledge and, therefore, can rely on such skeletal notes.

Transport in cities – Options for C21st

Cars must be controlled – parking fees, wardens
Different licences – diff purposes
Singapore experim't – started in the late 1980s
Devlopm'ts in computis'd signalling
Money generated from licences/ fines put back into local system,
Dutch systems – Amsterdam – reliable systm
Bus lanes nec for faster + reliable trspt,
Edinburgh trams case study. Cost benefit analysis – carbon issues/ climate change
Future is green – has to be.
Oil never going to be cheap again

This is only one way of putting down notes for a talk; it must be emphasized that there is no one perfect way of doing it. You will, as your experience of giving presentations grows, develop a system that works for you. We strongly advise that you do experiment and that you do not get hooked on to one way of writing notes.

Note that in this example, the lines are laid out in an irregular form. Winston Churchill used this and called it his psalm style – lines laid out like psalms in the Old Testament. He found it useful when looking down to see which line he was on. You might like to try it.

Some presenters swear by cards in the hand; they have found this method to be one that works for them. The same advice applies as before – write in bold and in the centre of the card so that you do not have to peer. These are particularly useful when you have to walk about while you are presenting, as when you want to move from a lectern to point to a screen or where it would not look right to be holding pieces of paper such as at an informal gathering like a colleague's leaving do, a vote of thanks, and that most difficult of all tasks, a Best Man's speech or female equivalent!

Whether we use cards or sheets of paper, the key point to remember is that the notes must be of use to you. If you are unhappy with your notes, then this will add to your sense of nervousness. Your notes must *support, not distract you*. If you feel that the kind of speech note illustrated above would just be too brief for you, then you can always expand to suit. The following example shows how the basic skeleton of notes can be amplified – the lines have still been laid out for rapid reading. The psalm approach is used again.

These notes are more detailed and yet retain the essence of simplicity and conciseness. Whatever you do, do not pack too much into your notes – they are, and must always be, a distillation of your preparation, not a text of all that you have prepared.

Transport in cities - Options for C21st

Cars must be controlled; UK one of most rapid
car growths in Dev World – enforcement **slide 1**
Different licences – diff purposes
Time to move from one overall lic. Singapore experim't
5
Full lic – v expensive – all week
off peak lic – suit retired/ freelancers special weekend only lic
Electron systems now v sophist'd works by recog
lic plates, auto debit bank tech'ly now possible
Devlopm'ts in computis'd signalling **slide 2**
12
Money generated from licences/fines
put back into local system – London congestn charge
Dutch systems – Amsterdam **slide 3**
Bus lanes nec for faster + reliable trspt
Edinburgh trams case study **slide 4**
20
Cost benefit analysis – details **slide 5**
Conclusions. Ways forward Green issues
Carbon reduction
Oil price upward movement

We suggest some embellishments to this layout. On the right hand in another colour - bold red for instance – you might like to place a reminder to yourself of the various visual aids you had planned to use. With all the nerves generated before and during the actual presentation, it is very easy to forget what you had actually planned to do and the slides you had particularly wanted to show!

On the left-hand side, it is not a bad idea when you are rehearsing the talk to jot down how long you intend spending on each section and so how long the whole talk will take. Try to do this properly; as if it was the real thing. Talk out loud, put on the slides, if you have access to the equipment, and, in general, allow sufficient pauses as there would be in any live presentation. Pencil these timings along the left-hand margin of your notes. They will give you an *approximation* of the length of your talk. This can be a great help in reducing those two anxieties mentioned earlier:

Have I got enough material? or,
Have I got too much?

It is a very good discipline after the talk, while its reception is still fresh in your mind (and hopefully in your ears), to review those timings to see just how much or how little they corresponded to reality!

There will be times when you may need a fuller script; where these short notes will not be enough. Such an occasion may be where you have to give a paper, or as mentioned earlier, where the press, the law, or your relations will be attending and you need to stick to your script.

If the script is fuller, then do keep in mind the previous advice about layout – do not clutter up your page. Remember to put in some markers when you can pause – paragraph breaks – and do segregate out your visual aids. Here is an example of a fuller script as used by our transport consultant:

Transport in Cities Options for the C21st

Car growth must be controlled.
If car ownership in the UK
was to equal telephone ownership we'd need to build another:
5000 miles of motorway
9000 miles of rural roads
not to mention another 12000 large car parks. **slide 1**

5 The UK has one of the most rapid increases in car ownership
in the developed world & one of the smallest land masses.
Governments of all persuasions have over the last decade been
examining ways of tackling this problem.
The only consensus that has emerged is the need to control cars
in cities – hence enforcement systems.
In this talk tonight I would like to provide you with a personal
8 view and offer certain suggestions for partial solution – notice
I say partial.
Unless we stop being a democracy and simple order people not
to use cars *confiscate* cars from them then any government will
only be able create partial solutions. In my view it is not enough
to simply control cars in cities
we need an **integrated transport policy** – that Holy Grail
that governments have been looking for since the
12 1960s – looking for and ……..never finding! **slide 2**

First to Singapore.
Since the early 1980s the Singapore gov't has introduced
number of specific schemes to limit the use of cars in the city.
Let me remind you of the geography of that state **slide 3**

Here, as you can see, the notes are fuller yet the speaker has attempted to keep the lines short, with key points separated from the main body of the text. She has also retained the left margin for timings and the right for visual aids.

You may, in your preparation for the talk, like to write it out in this fuller way and then distil these notes into the skeletal form we saw earlier.

Visual aids:

Novice and inexperienced presenters often rush on at this stage to think of what visual aids they want to use. They reach for the PowerPoint display. The more experienced presenter thinks through very carefully what the purpose of talk is and how best to illustrate it. He or she may decide that very few or no visuals will be needed (redundancy in our opening communications model) – it is more the direct face to face approach. On the other hand, because of the need to illustrate a process or system, some kind of visual representation may be required. The important point is that these visuals are *complementary* to the talk and not just bolt-on extras.

Preparing counters to likely objections:

We've mentioned that the attitudes of an audience will range from the positive, through neutral, to hostile. In the detailed preparation of the talk, our experienced presenter will think through possible counters to any objections. (We looked at this issue during the section on being interviewed).

It will seldom, if ever, be possible to counter all the objections; some will be so buried that no amount of detailed pre-talk preparation will be enough to unearth them. But if we do try and put ourselves in the position of our audience, we should be able to prepare some 'countering'. Here are a few more obvious ones:

Objection:	*This is all very well but what about me?*
Counter:	Particular examples that relate to people like 'me' to help demonstrate the immediacy and appropriacy of the talk.
Objection:	*This is all very well but you would say that wouldn't you!*
Counter:	Be open: Yes I would say that but I also do believe in it. Personal enthusiasm and commitment in the talk will certainly help counter this kind of objection. You will also have to select your examples and illustrate with credible facts.
Objection:	*We're just small; what you say only applies to the 'big ones.'*
Counter:	Evidence to demonstrate that small organizations like 'yours' have actually benefited from the process, system etc. Again, you will need to select your examples with care.
Objection:	*Well it is fine but much too expensive*.
Counter:	Something on the lines of: 'You need to think of the quality you're getting here. The more expensive the product the less likely you are to need servicing and spare parts. Given the use you'll be making

of the product these should weigh as important factors in your decision.'

Objection: *Well that is OK but it wouldn't do here.*

Counter: Provide examples where the transfer would work, that there might have to be some adaptations but the essentials could be transported with benefit to 'here'.

You can see the drift: the more experienced presenter will be sensitive to these counters and will realize that the more sophisticated the audience, the more the counters themselves will need to be sophisticated. Simple rebuttals will not suffice with such an audience; they will only antagonize or bore them.

Coping with nerves

Before we get to the actual delivery of the talk, the experienced presenter will know about how to cope with nerves. Notice we use the word cope; it is impossible to master nerves.

Even if you are a very experienced presenter, there will still be those moments when you stand waiting to start when you wished you hadn't agreed to the invitation. Your hands may be shaking a little, a cold sweat begins to break out on the forehead and your mind goes blank about what your first point is.

What the more experienced presenter does is to learn to cope with nerves. He or she knows that some nerves are a 'good thing' in that they stimulate performance by the production of adrenaline. The day when you stride up to the podium with no nerves and zero apprehension is the day when you may come a cropper!

So what are the ways that help us to cope? What ways have worked for you when faced with a presentation?

Be positive about yourself

Avoid apologizing for yourself. There is nothing that puts an audience off more than someone beginning their talk with the words:

'I've never done this before',
'I'm not very good at this' or
'I haven't had much time to prepare this'.

Your audience will not be very impressed by such statements. Be positive, not apologetic. We do not mean be arrogant and glare defiantly at your audience, but you have been invited, you have something to say and you have some material prepared. So do not apologize, and even if you weren't given much notice or you haven't spoken on this before, keep that to yourself.

The audience will want a success

There are very few audiences that look forward to a failure with eager anticipation. Members of any audience have had to get to the place, use up time that they could spend doing something else in being there, are often seated on hard chairs, usually without the chance of a decent drink, so they do not want a flop. They want something useful, something that can assist them in their work and life. By success we do not mean the kind of dramatic speech which rocks the audience back on their feet, stuns them with amazement and provides you with a standing ovation at the end (we can't all emulate Martin Luther King). We mean that the audience have had a structured talk, which has been audible, of interest, relevant to the title and has kept to the time allotted.

Do your preparation

The more you prepare you more you are likely to succeed. And knowing that you have prepared will reduce your nerves. As a rough guide, it is suggested that for every minute you are on your feet when presenting you will need *an hour's preparation*. That may sound excessive but, if you think about it – the searching through sources; making notes; preparing your slides; rehearing the talk; checking on the length; selecting your quotes; and double checking your facts and figures – you can see that the ratio is not so preposterous. The ratio will decrease when you've had experience at presenting, especially if you are reusing some material for different audiences.

Get to the venue early

You are not likely to be that successful at coping with your nerves if you have to hurry into a hall already full of people and then be watched as you sort out papers, arrange slides, drag screens into position, have no time to find a glass of water or discover where the toilets are. So, get to the venue at least half an hour before you are due to start. Sort out your papers, check the equipment, especially PowerPoint and microphones; find out where the essentials are.

An experienced presenter knows the importance of getting to the venue early and, where possible, having a good long look at it. If you're on a stage, get up there and get the feel of it. This is also the time, before the audience is settled, to make all those adjustments which will help you be more confident. These could include:

- Opening/closing windows
- Adjusting light levels
- Moving lecterns
- Practising with mikes and adjusting amplification levels
- Testing out your slides
- Adjusting the layout of the seating/height of podium
- Making sure you've got a jug of cold water and a clean glass.

Delivery

There is a body of research into presentational skills that suggests that we can enhance our ability to a) gain and b) to hold the attention of audiences if we:

Use a good deal of eye contact

One way of spotting inexperienced presenters is to see how they focus on a small group, usually in front of them and usually those giving off positive expressions of interest or encouragement. This focusing has the effect of rather embarrassing those people while, at the same time, losing contact with others in the audience. Those who started with rather negative feelings towards the speaker will be unlikely to have such feelings ameliorated if they are never looked at, seemingly never included in the occasion.

An experienced presenter, such as Tony Benn, has mastered the art of moving his or her gaze from face to face long enough to make a very brief contact and also to be able to gain a general impression from the non-verbal leakage – the various expressions that we give off without being aware! When Ronald Reagan used the autocue when speaking to both Houses of Parliament in 1982, British politicians were enthused by it. It enables speakers to look at their audiences throughout their talk rather than looking down at notes.

Be audible

One of the ways in which inexperienced presenters betray their lack of skill is that they fade in volume. They may begin their talk with reasonable audibility but this decreases as they forget to project their voices in accordance with the size of the audience (the more bodies, the more the sound is absorbed) and the acoustics of the room. Good projection should not be a matter of straining but of being aware of where the voice is going, and making effective use of breathing to support the voice. Presenters who fail to project are usually too busy peering at their notes and being worried by what is coming next.

It is very important that you try and breathe deeply and get your breathing under some kind of rhythm. Try also to breathe from the bottom of the lungs rather than from the throat. If you use too much throat your voice will sound thin and rasping and will make you sound less assured (see Rodenburg 1992).

Taking care of your voice

If you speak in public or do a lot of teaching/lecturing/demonstrating, and therefore make demands on your voice, do consider careful use and maintenance of it. Here is some advice, not only for the maintenance of your voice but also its enhancement:

- Do keep hydrated. Drink water before you talk, sip it during the talk and have a good swallow afterwards
- Avoid coffee and tea (and spirits) before speaking; these tend to dehydrate you

- Try to eliminate muscle strain. Do some neck and shoulder shrugging before you speak
- Wear clothes that are comfortable but appropriate. Avoid tight collars and belts
- Sit quietly before you stand up to speak; sigh in some deep breaths, think about your breathing, try to get it into a gentle rhythm
- Do not rush your opening. Get into a comfortable, upright stance; avoid shoulder sag. Stand balanced on both feet
- Check ventilation. Avoid speaking in a stuffy, airless room. Open some windows
- Avoid atmospheres where others smoke. Smoking and passive smoking dry out the throat and larynx and impair the efficient use of lungs
- Do not push a tired voice. If possible, rest it.

Making use of microphones
If it is at all possible, try to use your natural voice without any amplification. Very often, with just a little more projection, you will be heard. Amplification can reduce the quality of your voice and its tone colour.

However where you need to use a loop system and where the room is large 'and the audience are many' then you will need to use a mic.

Here are some suggestions for you to consider.

- Always get into the room/hall early and test out the system in advance
- Speak some words into it and, if possible, have someone who will sit in different areas of the room/hall to give you feedback on audibility
- Ask this person such questions as:
  Is my voice too loud or soft?
  Does my voice sound thin?
  Does my voice sound clear?

If you are not using enough breath support the voice will sound thin.

If you are standing too near the mike the words may sound fuzzy and unclear. If you are standing too far away then the voice will not be amplified.

If you are sounding the 'p' and 'b' with too much effort the sound will be amplified, producing a popping effect.

- Always take your time when you start to speak into the microphone. It is important to allow an extra second or so to let the ends of your words resonate around the space
- Allow your audience to 'tune in'

- Have confidence to finish a sentence; allow for that to end before anything else is said. It is similar to the silence after the orchestra has sounded the last note of music
- Do have a good look at where the speakers are placed; it may be possible by moving these slightly- turning them into your audience – that you will improve the quality of sound.

Sound enthusiastic
There is nothing like a speaker who has fire in the belly, who appears to believe in the message and is not just spouting out lifeless phrases with little zest or sparkle. As we have seen, the inexperienced speaker has so much to worry about, like the learner driver, that enthusiasm is often left behind as he or she struggles to overcome the apprehension and get to grips with the basics. This is a great shame as it leads to an audience not being convinced and probably bored. How do we signify to our audience that we are enthusiastic and that we do believe in our message?

As we have seen, eye contact is crucial, as is the ability to vary the pace and tune of the voice. If we are enthusiastic about something, then the tune of voice becomes more varied, there is stress on the words we think are important and there is an intensity in the pace. When we are bored, the tune is flat, there isn't that intensity in tone and the pace tends to drag.

Start slowly
The inexperienced and over-anxious speaker often starts too fast; everything about the opening is rushed. There is a sense of hurry; not only is it difficult to make out what he or she actually says but there is just too much fussing with papers, notes, equipment, adjusting lecterns etc.

A slow steady start reassures your audience. Remember, your listeners have to tune in to you, your voice, your appearance, and your subject matter. If you rush these first moments, they will not be able to tune in and some will never 'find the place'. Watch experienced speakers and you will probably see them pause for several seconds before they start; they will gather themselves ready, get their breathing under control, look up and out towards the faces in front of them – and then start only when everyone is quiet.

Effective opening or point of entry
It is important to get a good beginning. Apart from introducing yourself and subject, you should think carefully about what point of entry will stimulate your listeners and at the same time, form a springboard into the main themes of your talk.

An example of this would be to find a statistic or quote which would stimulate your audience and make it easier for you to launch into your talk. Here is an opening for a talk to a Chamber of Commerce meeting on 'Exporting: the Challenges and Opportunities'.

I can transport a bottle of Scottish whisky to Japan, unload it at the docks, carry it 500 miles across country, deliver it to a local store, and still sell it for half the price I could buy it at my off-licence round the corner here in Glasgow!

That should get their interest and it also leads into one of the key themes of the presentation – that understanding the international market and its complex pricing systems is a must for the would-be exporter.

When thinking about your openings, keep your audience and their 'needs' very firmly in mind. A good opening can make the talk; a poor, inappropriate, lame one can seriously weaken it. Do be careful of starting with a joke; make sure that it won't cause offence and that it isn't too well known. Consider any cultural considerations and sensitivities. Effective speakers often start with a well-judged aside or a light-hearted comment on the introduction they've received.

Provide a structure and keep to time

As we listen intently to an experienced presenter we may be aware that the talk is structured, that we are being led from point to point and then into a conclusion, and all this is done within a couple of minutes of the allotted time.

Inexperienced presenters will find it difficult to keep to time. On the one hand they have prepared too much material and then have to 'toboggan' to their conclusion, rushing over key points and running the risk of leaving their audience bewildered, especially if they show 25 slides in 3 minutes! On the other hand they have under-prepared and have to face one of the most embarrassing of all public speaking experiences – running out after ten minutes with your audience expecting the full half hour.

Well ...I think at this point ... I'll...
Are there, are there ... any. .. questions?
Questions relating to what I've just said...?
Anyone ... Anything...?

Should this happen, more experienced speakers will be able to bluff their way through.

Before I go on to the rest of my talk (of which there isn't any)
Did you all agree with my premise ... Anyone not?...There must be someone…?
Yes, the gentleman in the front ... (who hasn't actually said anything but has leaked an expression of concern).

What happens now is that the second part of the talk is made up of answers to the various questions posed and the discussion that the presenter generates. He or she winds up with a summary of the key points that have emerged and comes to a speedy, snappy conclusion. Do keep your eye very firmly on the clock – time can run away very quickly when you make use of this strategy.

We are not suggesting that you should make a habit of this kind of approach but if you do, for any reason, find yourself running short of material, it is a very useful gambit to employ.

Using visual aids appropriately

We've already said that any visuals should be complementary to the presentation and not as extras. Make sure that you like using them; that they appeal to you.

What kind of visual aids appeal to you in a presentation. Think of occasions when you've been impressed. What lessons are there?

Here is our selection:

Visuals used are clear.
The audience does not have to squint to see them.

The print is bold and sparse.
Inexperienced presenters often make the great mistake of copying pages from books and manufacturing these as slides – the print is far too small and the text too dense.

Slides are kept to the minimum
We've all sat through talks where we are subjected to endless slides, one after the other, until we emerge from the gloom dazed and bewildered.

PowerPoint and other computer aided displays

Such displays are particularly suited to showing processes, movement, flows, statistical data that can be changed before your eyes. They are less useful for text. Too often, in our experience, the audience can become bored by endless words moving across the screen. Critics such as Tufte (2006) worry about the effect of this:

A PowerPoint slide typically shows 40 words which is about eight seconds' worth of silent reading. With so little information on one slide many, many slides are needed. Audiences consequently endure a relentless sequentially. One damn slide after another.

More recently Tara Brabazon (2008) has added her criticisms:

PowerPoint is a crutch for poor speakers. Once they start using the programme, they rarely stop using it. If they do not have access to the software – as we have seen at conferences when the laptop/memory stick fails or the computer system is password protected and all the technicians have gone for a cigarette break – there can be no presentation. The software must speak on a delegate's behalf. Although the shaking conference attendee has a mouth and brain, without their slides they are left devoid of a voice or ideas.

> *PowerPoint has not only corroded public speaking but made conferences bland and boring. Most speeches are structured through the same repetitive template. Few bother writing a considered talk, assuming that constructing slides is all that is required. They align a few bullet-pointed phrases, import a couple of animated gifs and add a quirky cartoon, assuming that their efforts have magically morphed into a speech.*

In general you would do well to use PowerPoint for graphical displays and keep the text limited. Try to avoid having yourself as presenter blacked out as you speak. There should be some low light on you otherwise all the audience will hear is a disembodied voice.

Computer systems will let you down one day so have a back up, always carry some flip chart/white board pens!

A word of caution on humorous slides. The cartoon humour that comes from downloading clip art should be avoided. What used to be funny a few years ago has become routine and 'naff' these days. If you want to use humour in slides, then hunt around for cartoons and pictures that appeal to you and which are easily seen from a distance.

Making PowerPoint work for you – Key tips

- Reduce your slides to a minimum – do not bore your audience, or overwhelm them
- Never try to compete with your slides. Explain them first and then show them. Remember your audience can't read and listen all at the same time. If you talk and show then they'll stop listening
- Exploit PowerPoint to show graphs and maps – in fact complex information; it is good at this
- Do avoid fancy effects. Your audience has probably seen them before
- Build variety into your show
- To keep the attention of the audience on you for an important part of the presentation – a key message – use blank slides or switch to standby. This will encourage them to focus on your words
- Please do not have slides which say 'The End' or 'Goodbye' or 'Any questions?'
- Consider how other visual aids – white boards, flip charts, posters, OHP slides, etc – could be used to complement your slides.

Building a rapport with your audience

Although we are there to provide information, we are also aiming to build a positive relationship with the audience. There will be those who will remain negative to you and your information so you hope, by using the various techniques we've listed above, to be able to build up a positive relationship with those faces out there.

One of the best ways is to allow the lighter moments to be expressed. Inexperienced presenters see humour as a matter of planned jokes, carefully rehearsed stories and anecdotes, and cartoons put on slides. These techniques are not without merit but they have to be planned with care, thinking of the needs and make up of your audience. Plan your off-the-cuff remarks with care!

The 'best' humour is very often that which emerges from the nature of your presentation, of your being up there and in front of that group of people on that occasion. This is the spontaneous kind that can bubble up quite unexpectedly. The important point is that you, as the presenter, have to be aware of the possibility for humour and allow it to escape – this means that you have to enjoy those moments of lightness and smile and chuckle along with the audience. Humour is infectious; use your smiles and chuckles to infect your audience.

If the topic of the presentation is essentially serious it is important for there to be the lighter moment that will provide some contrast for the audience; the serious side will appear to even more so if there has been this slight variation in mood. A funeral oration needs a moment of lightness; otherwise it is all unrelieved gloom.

Coming to a conclusion

Inexperienced presenters often allow their talks to peter out. A strong conclusion is important because it sets the scene for the question and answer session, and it can help to reinforce a few key points in the mind of the audience. One of the oldest pieces of advice about presentation is:

Say what you're going to say (your introduction)
Say it (the main body of your talk)
Say what you've said (the conclusion)

Recap on the key points. Always leave your audience with a key idea, a central theme for them to take away. And always make sure that you and not the questioners have the last word.

Handling questions

The inexperienced presenter can flounder here. If he or she has not put in sufficient counters to likely objections, this is where handling the question session can be a torture: your weakness in argument and factual accuracy can be mercilessly exposed. The question and answer session can, however, be the best part of the presentation: it can enliven proceedings, help build your credibility with your audience and ensure that your key points are hammered home.

If members of your audience ask you questions, then it is a fair bet that they have found something of interest, something to challenge or a point that requires further expansion. They may, of course, be just being kind to you because the presentation has fallen a bit flat!

Too many speakers make little or no effort to prepare themselves for questions; this is dangerous. As you prepare your material consider:

Who is in the audience, and their likely ‘take’ on the material.
What are likely to be the difficult, contentious, points raised?
Am I going to say anything that might shock or be uncomfortable for my audience to hear?
Are there any facts I intend using which might raise doubts?

Managing questioners

Many speakers state at the start of their talks that they are very ready to take questions. Some even say:

‘If you want to ask me anything, just stop me as I go along, OK?’

If you do say this then you must mean it. You will need to be very certain of your material and your ability to time yourself to be able to keep this promise. Some speakers say this and then look decidedly uneasy when that first question hurtles to them from some inquisitive person eager to take up the invitation!

Do think very carefully if you do actually want to take questions at any time. It is fine if there is no hurry and it is just a small audience, but you can get yourself easily side-tracked by taking questions in this way and this can lead to the familiar result of having to scramble to your finish.

You may now be thinking, but surely offering this ‘facility’ to your audience is a good thing. Well yes, but better to provide definite breaks in your talk when you can come to the end of a particular section and know that is where you’ve reached in your plan.

The longer and more complex the presentation the more your audience may appreciate the chance of asking you questions at certain intervals rather than having to wait until the end. The other advantage of having questions at set intervals in the talk is that, if you leave them until the end, many of your audience will have to rush away to feed parking meters, go to their next engagement. On the other hand, there is a danger that the flow and rhythm of your presentation could be broken if you have too many stoppages on the way.

Being your own chair

It is a great advantage to have a chairperson who will take the strain of spotting the questioner, watching the time, balancing the various ‘interests’ and being stern with any troublemakers!

Assuming that you do not have a chair and that you have to be your own, here is some practical advice:

- Keep your eye on the time
- Take a couple of questions only from one individual (say you’ll take more if there is time)

- Try and balance the sides of the room (i.e. not all from your right or left or straight ahead)
- Try also to balance different categories of your audience, such as, in a university audience:

'Are there any questions from students on the courses?' i.e. we've only had questions from staff!

Be sure to announce that there will time for one/two more questions and stick to that limit.

Answering the question
Here are some strategies for you:

- Answer directly as possible and then check back with the questioner:

'Is that clear?' or 'Does that answer your point?'

Answer it in part and then present it to the audience as a question so that other views can be collected. You can then act as chair during this session.

Well, that is how we see it; does anyone else have a view on this issue?

You can then supply some further clarification or amplification. Do be careful that you do not get drawn into an elaborate conversation; remember there well may be others wanting to ask questions.

- Say that you can't answer it now, because the question raised is too narrowly focused to be of interest to the rest of the audience and that you'll see that person after the talk
- Say that you haven't got the information to hand and that you will send it on if they leave their contact details. This is the appropriate tactic when you really haven't got the answer.

There is absolutely no point in trying to bluff your way through an answer if in your own mind you are unsure.

These are all tactics that you can use if you have questions but what should you do if, at the end of your presentation and the call for questions, there is a complete silence? Well you can ask open questions which may serve to trigger off responses, as in:

Can I ask, would most of you accept the view I've been advocating on.......?

Or you might refer back to an earlier point made in the talk when you detected that you had stirred some members of the audience into agreement or disagreement, as in:

> *I noticed in the middle of the talk when I mentioned the problems with...... that some of you appeared to disagree. Would anyone like to raise a question on this?*

There is no guarantee that any of these tactics will prove 100 per cent successful but at least they provide you with some chance of stirring up a question.

- *Ask a question yourself.*

  This is to stimulate the audience. You could say

  How many of you, have found that…

The awkward type
If you do receive a rude, hostile or discourteous question that appears to be an attack on you and those who you represent, then do try and stay calm. The audience will be very much on your side if you can stay calm and not be provoked. It is very tempting to retaliate and bite back. This will play directly into the hands of the questioner. Stay calm, count to five and respond on the lines of:

> *'I think it is best for us to discuss this later'.*
> *'You're fully entitled to your opinion. Can I respond to the general point you've made'....* (Thus ignoring the personal attack!)

Final point about handling questions
If it is a formal meeting, always check with the organizer of the session before you start your presentation about the ground rules for questions, and any time limits you need to be aware of.

After the presentation

The inexperienced presenter is so glad to finish that he or she will probably scuttle off the stage and away from the hall, or only stopping briefly to grab a cup of coffee or something stronger!

Our more experienced colleague realizes that this time is crucial for developing further contacts with the audience. This is when, if you can spare the time, individual queries can be discussed, e-mail addresses exchanged, meetings arranged, etc. It is very foolish to arrange another engagement straight after a presentation. Many organizers do try and arrange sandwiches, coffee or a canapé after such an event and although there will be times when you have to dash off, avoid making this a habit. If you do, you will lose out on some very fruitful developments.

As we have said earlier in the section on attitudes, there will always some who will never be moved by what you say but there will be a few who might just be persuaded if you can meet them face to face. Still others might come a little way to meet you if you could visit or telephone them after the talk, so stay around and make contacts.

Conclusion

We've mapped out some of the differences between the inexperienced and the experienced presenter. Because of the limitations of space this has been a very condensed survey. Please refer to the suggested follow up reading.

Presentation is a skill and, like all the communication skills outlined in this book, requires much practice and feedback. One very important form of feedback is that of self-reflection, so try and do some reflection and analysis after you have given your presentation. After the event treat yourself to something nice, sit down with a cappuccino and a slice of cake, or whatever is your idea of a treat, and just run over what happened and what your feelings were. Have a look at those notes you made for that presentation and, while the memories are fresh, jot down a few thoughts as to what, if anything, might have been done differently, what extra visual aids might have been used, what examples could have been introduced. Jot down also what went well and what can be reinforced if you were to give the presentation again. Think back to the questions that were asked, what did they indicate about the contents, the pitch, and the style?

Giving a presentation is a challenge; if you do it well it can be a very satisfying experience and one that can enhance your reputation with colleagues, clients and yourself.

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13

Communication via the Keyboard: The Ingredients of Effective Writing

No one can pretend that writing is easy; for many people it is an extremely difficult business, full of reminders of school exercises and the sheer drudgery of having to get thoughts down on paper clearly, concisely and rapidly.

Before looking in more detail at the actual processes of writing, we should at this stage examine the key criteria – the effective ingredients that go to make for successful writing.

> ***What you would put down as your chief criteria. Think of those reports and memos and letters that you have read, or tried hard to read, what made them readable, what could have made them more readable?***

Here are ours. Some of these we have already met in the introduction.

Being concise

This is a major ingredient of most writing – that is being able to write what you have to in a reasonably brief time. By concise, we mean avoiding waffle and getting to the essential point without flab. Bernard Shaw once replied to a friend: 'I'm sending you a long letter because I haven't got time to write you a short one', and there is some truth in this. Most of us can fill a couple of pages with flannel but when asked to distil our thoughts into a single paragraph, we will inevitable struggle since every word has to carry meaning.

Although being concise is a vital ingredient, we must be able to balance it with the need to be comprehensive. There is little point in being concise if crucial elements, key facts, key costings, are left out. Texting is a brilliant way of sending brief messages but the communication, however short and abbreviated, has to mean something, has to communicate, otherwise it is simply a puzzle, an annoyance, an interruption.

There is another issue and that is that certain readers make a correlation between the number of pages produced and the perceived merit of the text. So if you hand your reader a couple of paragraphs as the fruits of your labour, he or she may very well glance through it having 'weighed' it in the hand, and adjudge it accordingly. Making judgements according to the weight of documents is understandable, given the fact that in the academic world one requires some 25,000 words for a BA/BSc dissertation, 50,000 for a MA/MSc and over 80,000 for an arts/social science Ph.D., hence a connotation that weight equals rigour. We can see this in the following phrases:

- A good thick book
- A weighty tome
- A substantial text
- A good long read.

All these phrases denote the positive value that is attributed to heavy texts whereas the words associated with conciseness – slim report, short text, brief note, etc. – often imply a lack of depth, of rigour and of serious application.

We, as writers and readers, have to resist this negative impression and praise those who provide us with crisp documents. This is why we should produce summaries for our 'customers' so as to give them the essential information. Most people do not want to be submerged with detail; they want the facts and figures. We should help them in this and 'at the same time' we should resist the demands for everything to be put into bullet points; some complex issues cannot be reduced to this extent: it can lead to dangerous simplification.

Over the years the author has carried out a number of communication audits and found that, often, one of the stumbling blocks to flows of communication in organizations is the sheer amount of paper, despite promises of the paperless office. Summaries should be made of key texts and these circulated. For those who really do need to have the full text, there should be provision. Such a system might avoid the practice of mass photocopying and mass electronic distribution of substantial texts that often end up unread and unmarked, or left on computers because they are just too bulky to be easily printed out.

Large organizations might consider appointing specialists to perform this abstracting service. Obviously this person would need to be familiar with the material and the needs of the audience.

Being clear

Writing is a constant struggle for clarity unless we think of poetry, which is often constructed so that it can remain ambiguous and open to various meanings. In the writing we are concerned with in this book, we are seeking to carry meaning from us to our reader, who will construct – decode – meaning from the words we write. We have to remember that clarity is in the eye and ear of the reader. We may feel confident that what we have written is clear and unambiguous but the crucial test is can our reader understand it; can our reader make sense of it?

One way to check on this is to show a draft to others, if possible those who are as similar as possible to your actual readers. This will never provide a perfect test because your reader cannot fully simulate the reactions of your target audience; he or she may say that the text is clear in order to spare your feelings, or may just not be bothered enough to give it a serious read. Remember the quote from Gowers ([1948]1987): 'Put yourself in your reader's position... '. That is perhaps the best advice we can give; try and stand back from your writing and ask yourself: 'Will my reader understand this? Am I making assumptions that are unjustified?' When we think of ambiguity we tend to think of the more obvious kinds, such as:

> Dogs, please shut all gates before you leave
> Remove all clothes before giving this doll to a child under three.
> I have been driving for over thirty years. I must have fallen asleep when the accident happened.

Or one the author puzzled over recently at a main line railway station:

> Platform staff are available to dispatch trains.

The ambiguity in these examples is fairly obvious and unlikely to go unrecognized, in fact a good deal of humour is generated by such ambiguities. The really dangerous forms of ambiguity are those where, after a first, even second reading, all seems clear and there appears to be no ambiguity. Here, for example, is an extract from a manual on the installation of a complex radar system. What would you understand this to mean?

> The panels used in this system contain several circuit components; they have been specifically designed to withstand very low temperatures, i.e. those in excess of –30C.

Is that clear? Are there ambiguities? Is it for instance obvious what the word 'they' refers to? Is it panels or components? We might suggest that it is more likely to be components because that noun is closer to the 'they' than the word panels but it is not certain and therefore, an element of doubt is created. Would you be entirely happy with the final phrase, in excess of –30C. Does the word 'excess' create a difficulty when placed next to a negative amount? Do two negatives then make a positive?

These doubts could prove troublesome for the reader who has to make precise judgements and calculations, who may have to give up extra reading time and effort in order to clarify what is unclear, and deduce what may be hidden. It is just not possible, except in isolated cases, to phone or e-mail the writer and ask for clarification; this kind of concealed ambiguity creeps through undetected and can have serious and often expensive consequences.

In the world's worst air disaster in 1977, two Boeing 747s crashed on the tarmac at Tenerife, killing more than 580 people. A phrase used by one of the pilots: 'We are at take-off' was a contributory factor. It was thought that the controller understood this to mean that the plane was ready for take-off. In fact, the pilot meant that he was actually taking off!

Here is another example, an extract from a building society's letter to customers who intend taking out personal loans.

> ***Loan Agreement***
> Please sign and insert the date of your signatures in the box provided on the Agreement marked SIGNATURE COPY in the top left corner.

At first reading, this may appear clear but the author found it ambiguous and so did several of his friends and work colleagues.

How would you re-write it so as to make it easier to read?

Is there for instance some indication that the signatures should go in the top left corner? Is this how you read it? What might have helped would have been to divide the sentence into two separate ones and make it clear what each was about, as in:

> ***Loan Agreement***
> Please find the agreement marked SIGNATURE COPY, this will be found in a box at the top left corner of page 3.
> Would both of you please sign and insert the date in the appropriate places at the bottom of this page.

Do you find this easier to read? It separates the place (the special paper) from the action (the signature and the dating); these were placed together in the same sentence. Is the term 'appropriate' clear? It is to sentences that we now turn for the next ingredient.

Being readable

With today's computers, with their sophisticated software programs for spell and grammar checking, it is surely possible, one might think, to find a method of testing written material.

This is not the place to go into detail on readability measurements but, briefly, most software programs make use of the work of two researchers, Flesch and Gunning. They made use of two variables: the average length of sentences in a given sample and the number of syllables in a 100 words. Here is a system developed by Flesch and used widely by organizations to assess readability.

READING ESTIMATION GRAPH

No. of syllables/100 words

		112	116	120	124	128	132	136	140	145	148	152	160	164	168	172	176	180
Av	4																	
Sentence	5																	
length	6	Very easy																
	7																	
	8		100															
	9																	
	10				90													
	11																	
	12					80												
	13																	
	14																	
	15																	
	16						70											
	17																	
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	27																	
	28																	
	29														30			
	30																	
	31																	
	32																	
	33																	
	34																	
	35																very hard	

Gunning examines the number of polysyllabic words (of more than two syllables) while Flesch counts the number of syllables. Gunning is careful to suggest that the sample of text for readability measurement should not to be taken from the opening section. He notes that writers are on their best behaviour and are conscious of the need to be readable, whereas, once they get into their stride, they revert to their bad old habits!

When you access a readability score on your computer – you will normally find these under the grammar check option – you will receive a numerical score: the higher the number the better the readability, so, for instance, *Ladybird* books will be up in the 90s since their sentences are not normally more that ten words in length and they use plenty of short words. Compare that to an academic monograph on Interepistemological Paradigmatic Communication Flow Analysis, which may contain sentences of 25 words, each full of polysyllabic words. In this case, the score on the readability index could be 35–40, which comes out as a very unreadable text.

There are various difficulties with such measurements. Firstly, there is sufficient research into readability to suggest that some longer sentences are, in fact, easier to read than some shorter ones; secondly, that there are many short words of one or two syllables which are easier to read than longer words. Stasis *(sta/sis*), a two syllable word, is more difficult to read for most people than governmentally *(gov/ern/ment/al/ly),* a five syllable one. Thirdly, when making use of such readability measures, we need to remember that they are using only two variables, whereas we shall be listing many more than that in this chapter.

For instance, we may be scoring well in terms of readability – shortish sentences and not too many long words – but is the text clear and free of ambiguity? There is also the point that short sentences in themselves may be useful, but if that is all that we write, we may not only appear to patronize our readers but also bore them. Have you ever tried to read a text full of short sentences? Many people have got hold of the Plain English message, one that states that long sentences are not good, which is sensible advice but there is no need to reduce all your writing to short staccato sentences. What is needed is *variety of length*: some longer sentences, some shorter. There is no doubting the difficulties posed for readers when they are presented with a whole string of long sentences (i.e. those of 25 words and over).

In the 1970s, the *Sunday Times* carried out a readability analysis on the memos sent by the senior staff at the then British Leyland Motor Corporation to its staff. They discovered that the average length of a sentence was 35 words. They concluded that this was part of the reason why staff/management relationships were often so poor. Here is a sample of what they found:

> The Managing Director has made it clear to all Plant Committees in his recent visits that neither he nor his directors will be submitting any major capital expenditure for their final approval to either the British Leyland Board or the National Enterprise Board unless he has commitments to the necessary improvements in productivity from employees' representatives of all sections and all management involved in the respective project.

How could this be redrafted to make it more readable?

This was the *Sunday Times* suggested redrafting:

> The Managing Director has just visited all Plant Committees. He made this point. All employee representatives and all management involved in the new project must promise to improve output as much as is needed. If not, nether he nor his directors will ask the British Leyland Board or the National Enterprise Board to approve any major capital spending plans.

We can introduce variety in our writing if we use a range of sentences. Writing a shortish sentence amidst longer ones can create emphasis for that shorter sentence, as in this example:

> The introduction of this new readability checker will provide writers with a valuable tool. It is the first such aid on the market. It will assist all those who have to write for a wide audience since, with the detailed advice available in this program and the many examples provided, writers will be more able to pitch their material so that it will be more readable.

Notice how the second sentence, much shorter than the others, underlines a key selling point. The third sentence is quite long and certainly could be broken into two, but that might run the risk of making the whole text too jerky and broken up.

The moral here is, do not put too much faith in readability measures. Keep a watchful eye on longish sentences. For instance is this readable?

> Too many people are dependent on spell checkers to verify their documents when using this function on their computers, since research points to the fact that it is wise to give all texts a thorough read through, an old-fashioned proofreading, that is taking nothing for granted and subjecting each word, each comma, each phrase, to the closest possible scrutiny.

If you think this is readable, then you must have a good digestion; for most readers there are just too many separate bits of information to be ‘swallowed’ in one chunk.

> ***Before reading on, you might like to consider how you would rewrite this sentence so as to make it more readable – for instance how many separate sentences you would create out of this specimen?***

Here is our suggestion:

> Too many people are dependent on spell checkers to verify their documents. When using this function on the computer, it is wise, according to research, to give all texts a thorough

> read through. This old-fashioned proofreading means taking nothing for granted and subjecting each phrase, word and comma to the closest possible scrutiny.

Here we have changed the long sentence into several shorter ones. We have tried to observe a key principle that every sentence should have one main idea in it and not the three or four apparent in the original version. At the same time we have tried not to make the text too broken up.

Finding the right tone

There is a sense that what we write is what we mean, i.e., because we have committed to paper these thoughts then they must have been meant and intended. We compare this to speech, which many feel is a more ephemeral media; it is off the cuff. 'Well it just came out and wasn't deliberately meant', we may say. We know that it is not really possible to make such a distinction. Some spoken 'texts' are as deliberately constructed as any written ones (the amount of time that JFK put into his inaugural address for instance) and we know that many e-mails are just rapidly thrown together without much in the way of preparation. However, the popular notion is that written texts – even e-mails – are deliberate and this means that we have to be very careful about the tone we adopt. Here, for instance, is the opening of a letter to a candidate who has been rejected after interview:

> It is very much regretted that you have not been selected for the above post. The company wish you good fortune in your search.

This, we think you'll agree, is cold and impersonal. The use of the passive structure: 'It is regretted', is not appropriate for such a letter and more suited to objective reports and requests for payment. The use of the impersonal 'The company' also gives it a remote distant feeling.

How would you have phrased such a letter? How about this version?

> We are sorry to inform you that you have not been selected for the above post. Thank you for your interest; we wish you all the best for your future applications.

No matter how pleasant the letter, the nature of the disappointing news means that any such text is unlikely to more than glanced at. However civility costs nothing.

There are certain words and phrases that can trigger reader resentment by the tone adopted. We've already looked at transactional analysis in Chapter 9, which depicts how, if we use a critical 'Parent' tone, we may well trigger an angry 'Child' response. We need to be careful about sending off e-mails when we are in a bad mood. By so doing, we can trigger many 'angry children' in the organization; remember we have to live with them afterwards. It is good advice to 'sleep on' a letter written in anger and look at it in the cold light of day; we may well then decide not to send it. With e-mails being sent at the touch of a button, there is much less chance that these will be 'slept on' and much more likely that they will be sent hot down the line to smolder on a colleague's or client's PC. Here is an extract from a memo that was e-mailed throughout an organization. What do think about the tone?

Dress at work

On my last tour of inspection round the office I was surprised, to put it mildly, how many of you were rather slovenly in your turn out. Every member of the staff should be wearing smart uniform, that is clean and pressed. We do have agreed company guidelines on this matter. Read them!

Remember the impression of smartness and efficiency that we give to our customers is vital. Please act. NOW. I expect to see a marked improvement during my next tour.

MD

Would you like to underline what you consider to be the triggers in this memo, i.e. those words which are 'Parental' and are likely to trigger a 'Childish' reaction in the readers. You might have selected: 'inspection'; 'slovenly'; 'NOW'; 'I expect' as having a 'Parental' tone to them.

You might like to try your hand at re-writing this memo, trying to keep it in the 'Adult'. Here is our version.

Dress at Work

Can I remind all staff of the importance of keeping to agreed company guidelines on dress at work. The impression of smartness that we give to our customers is vital.

These guidelines were drawn up last year after discussion between management and the staff association. They can be found in full on staff workroom notice boards.

Your cooperation please.

MD

Notice, in this second version, the reason for the dress code is placed first, not the inspection or the phrase 'I have been extremely surprised'. Although it is much more adult, the strength of the message is still the same: please act on these guidelines. We can be assertive and still behave as 'adults'. We are not saying that one cannot be frank in one's opinions, it is just that we should avoid being personal, wounding and parental in tone. We've already seen the importance of this in our section on listening and interviewing. As e-mails become so much part of our working lives, we need to be as alert to the effect of *how* we communicate as well as the actual information we transmit. See Chapter 15.

Being Consistent

This ingredient is particularly important when one is engaged in a lengthy document; readers will become irritated and even alarmed if you fail to show consistency in your approach to such things as spelling, punctuation and grammar, as in:

- 1990's or 1990s?
- Driving license (US English) or driving licence (British)
- Active: I interviewed all the staff, or Passive: All staff were interviewed
- E mail or e-mail or email?

You, as writer, may be provided with guidance about 'house style': the way things are done in your organization or in your profession. Often there will be no guide and you will need to seek advice. The important thing is to be consistent: try to avoid having different forms throughout your text; make use of the search and replace facility on your computer to ensure that there is a consistency.

Being relevant

We will see in the next section that we have to ask, and have answered, key questions about what it is we are supposed to write. Such questions help us to explore and clarify our remit. This then provides us with a 'map' of what it is we are supposed to do. The danger, having asked these questions and established this map, is that we get stuck into the task and, being so absorbed, forget what it is we've 'promised' to do. We then move out of the map and into our own 'country'. This is where so many writers (and speakers) fall down: their text become increasingly irrelevant. They go on long asides and byways and forget what it is they're supposed to be actually communicating. This explains why so many promising exam essays do not gain good grades – candidates have wandered off the topic set and moved into the topic that they want to write about; dangerous, very dangerous.

So the message, here, is: check your title/topic/remit and stick with it. Take a few backward glances as you bend over the computer and check that you're still on target. Asides and rambles can be very pleasant but they can easily lose your reader (and yourself!).

Finding a suitable structure

We've mentioned maps and maps provide routes. Your readers should be able to see the structure – the backbone – to your text; they should not get lost as they read. We will be examining this aspect in more detail when we look at report writing.

Readers like to know where the text is going; they do not like to become confused. A confused reader can become an annoyed reader, one who stops reading. Your aim as a writer is to 'seduce' your reader into reading through your text from start to final full stop. You, therefore, need to supply a structure that is easily recognizable. However, no matter how good your seduction techniques, there are some readers who will drift, skim and scan. This is why the use of headings and subheadings can be so useful to your readers.

Think of your main titles your **A** headings – for example:

14 POINT UPPER CASE

Then your **B** headings:

12 point bold lower case.

C headings:

12 point and underlined and

D headings:

11 point italics.

In this way, the reader is provided with clear typographical cues as to the structure of the text – from major to minor; from motorways to cart tracks.

Apart from supplying headings for our readers, we also need to think carefully about how we structure the data, the facts, the essentials of our text. We have a number of options.

Here are some possibilities. Remember they can be very useful, not only for written texts but also for presentations.

- *Generic*

All the material of the same kind is placed together. This is the most common form of structure: like with like. Inevitably, there will come a time when the categories do not quite fit so neatly. If there is a great deal of this overlap, so much so that we fear it will distract our reader, then we may well consider another form of structure.

- *Sequential*

A sequence dictated by the system in operation, the requirements of the client, etc. This is where a flow chart pattern can be very helpful to our readers so that they can follow the pathways, as it were.

- *Chronological*

Here we place the text into some form of time structure. It may not appear as smooth as this:

> 1970s.......... 1980s.......... 1990s.......... 2000s..........

- *Very important to less important: a priority sequence*

A logical way of organizing your material

- *Spatial*

Here you lay out your material in some spatial, zonal, geographical arrangement which you will make clear to your reader, as in macro spatial:

> North ..... East .... West .... South

or micro spatial:

> The DNA in this cell as opposed to that one

- *Comparative*

Here we compare one set of information with another, as in: UK systems of social work training vs Holland's

- *Pros and Cons*

The 'for' and 'against' are laid out for your reader

- *Familiar to unfamiliar*

> Shetland Isles………. Fetlar… ……..Rams Ness

These structures can be used in combination, i.e. very important to less important (VIP > LIP) with a generic structure running alongside.

Apart from these forms of structuring, there are these:

- *The deductive*

You proceed from the general statement (idea or thesis, which we've underlined) to the particulars and illustrations, e.g.

> Sugar is particularly harmful to one's teeth. It attacks the enamel and appears to encourage the formation of plaque; this is turn causes further bacteria to attack the teeth. Many detailed tests have been conducted (British Dental Association 2005) where it has been conclusively shown that those children who have less sugar in their diets have fewer dental caries and stronger, healthier teeth. Furthermore, in those

countries, particularly in parts of the Third World, where there is very little intake of sugar, dental caries is almost unknown. True, there are many specific disorders of the gums and much in the way of broken and ill formed teeth, but the lack of sugar, together with much chewing of meat, vegetables and nuts, makes the general dental condition far superior to that found in more affluent countries where the intake of sugar in sweets and cakes is on the increase.

- *The inductive*

Here you proceed from particular details, examples etc. to a general statement (idea or thesis) which serves as a conclusion:

> In those countries, particularly in the Third World, where as yet there is very little intake of sugar, dental caries is almost unknown. True there are many specific disorders of the gums and much in the way of broken and ill-formed teeth. But the lack of sugar, together with much chewing of meat, vegetables and nuts, makes the general dental condition far superior to that found in countries of the affluent North and West, where the consumption of sugar, in the form of sweets and cakes, is increasing year by year. Many detailed tests have been conducted on children's teeth (British Dental Association 2005) and these have shown conclusively that those children who have less sugar in their diet have fewer caries and stronger, healthier teeth. <u>From this evidence we can safely assume that sugar in diet is particularly harmful to teeth.</u>

This structure can make your writing and presentation more likely to be influential with some audiences – ending on a climax, revealing the truth after the build up, is a ploy often used by politicians and other persuaders.

We will be examining structure again when we look at report writing in the next chapter.

Appropriate use of graphics

We refer here to the use of tables, pictures, diagrams, maps, histograms, pie charts, x & y graphs, flow diagrams, Gantt charts etc., in fact every possible visual approach to the conveying of information. We are looking at the use of visuals in written texts such as reports and manuals.

You've probably heard the expression, 'A picture is worth a thousand words'. It implies that there is some extra special worth in visuals as against mere words. We are sure that you have seen various forms of graphical representation being used which only serve to add 'interest' to an otherwise dull text. There is a mindset at work which says that if you do not pepper your reports with visuals, some of the readers will think that you've rather let them down. However, as many of you will know, there is always the risk of swamping your readers with unnecessary graphics.

Graphics can be extremely useful and, at times, absolutely essential. Can you imagine explaining company accounts without use of tables and charts, or progress reports on engineering/science projects without flow charts and graphs? However, this acknowledgement of the desirable nature of graphics should not hide the fact that they can be easily misused, sometimes intentionally but more often than not through ignorance or carelessness.

Some general hints
It always pays to ask yourself the following questions:

Why am I using this graphic? Does it add to the communication?
Do I understand the graphic and the information it contains?
Will my audience understand the graphic?

To help you answer these questions, it is often a good idea, before you get into elaborate work on your computer, to do some experimenting with pencil and paper. Try out various possibilities: do a trial run of your graphics, if possible with a few of the audience that will be reading the graphics. This might give you some useful feedback.

Your audience may not find the graphics as easy to understand as you do; possibly for some of these reasons:

A number of people just do not want to see graphics. They build up a mental wall against tables or graphs ('I'll never understand this approach' they say, 'It is too mathematical and looks difficult'.)

However, for most of the time you will be communicating with people who have had some kind of technical, scientific, financial or other professional education. But there will be times when you will wish to communicate to a wider audience, so you might want to minimize the technical aspects. Make sure that the pathways are clear, i.e., it is obvious what the sequence is, which 'bits' relate to which. Pay particular attention to x and y axes in the graphs, and the way that certain assumptions to do with scale are made explicit.

There isn't the space here to go into detail on the use of graphics; we recommend that you consult the references at the end of this chapter.

What are some of the advantages of using graphics to communicate? Think carefully before you read our list.

Take a step back if you do make use of graphics in your writing, and ask yourself these questions about their use; whether they can:

- Simplify very complex events e.g., power surges
- Show trends more easily than words, i.e. rises/falls in productivity
- Dramatize particular effects – sudden shifts for instance
- Complement the written work – so that we have a written explanation of failures in an operating system that is then followed by a graph highlighting these.

Consider reports etc. that you have read and the graphics that they contained. What have been some of the disadvantages for you the reader?

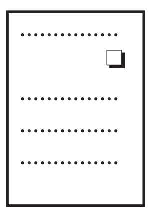
- Graphics may distort the picture. For instance just showing the last few years' trend on our graph may distort the longer more 'real' picture
- Graphics may actually lie: the factual basis may be inaccurate
- Graphics will not make poorly-written, ambiguous, text easier to read
- Graphics may overwhelm the written word.

Some principles in the use of graphics
We cannot lay down any precise rules for the use of graphics; much will depend on the style of the organization you are working in – the house style. We suggest:

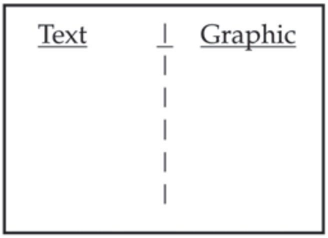
- Graphics need to be planned for in any written text rather than simply plonked in
- Graphics will not rescue poorly written texts
- It is vital to quote the sources of your material and the date. Your credibility may well be determined by the acceptability of the sources you quote
- Think carefully of the nature of the scale of the graphics. You do not want to overwhelm the text with your graphics
- Be bold. If you are using colour, then avoid purples, light blues and yellows. It is highly likely, even with the cost of colour copying becoming more reasonable, that any copy will be in black and white and if you use these faint colours then much of your handiwork will disappear. Remember that a proportion of your readership might not have good eyesight. Consider just how readable your pale yellows, greens, and blues may actually be (access the RNIB website for advice).

Placing the graphics in your report
There are a number of ways in which a graphic can be inserted into a text. Here, for instance, are some to consider:

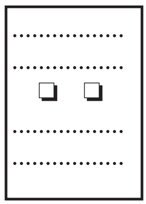
1. Placing the graphic in a corner/margin of the text, and in small scale, but putting the detail, or an expanded version of the graphic, in an appendix at the end of the document, as in:



2. Writing a text on the left-hand page and using the right for graphics. The difficulty is that you need a reasonable balance between text and graphic.



3. Removing all graphics from the text and putting them into an appendix. The danger here is that most people won't be bothered to find and read them.
4. Placing text and graphic in a complementary position, so that the text enables the reader to understand the graphic and the graphic enables the reader to have a better understanding of the text. This would be our recommended method.



Finding the appropriate register

By this we mean finding the right approach in terms of formality or informality. We will address this issue in letter writing (see next chapter). Appropriate register depends very much on the relationships between sender and receiver. We can go from the cold and formal, Dear Sir or Madam, to the less formal, Dear Mr/Mrs Smith, to the more friendly, Dear Jack/Emma, and to the more intimate. 'Jack Darling. Hi Sweetie!' or whatever takes your fancy (and theirs!).

In general, it is always better to start a little more formally and then you can ease your way into the less formal. It is very difficult to go the other way round.

Register is very much dependent on the culture in which one is writing. We have already said in our section on presentation that in many countries, India, Japan and much of the Far East, for instance, it is often appropriate that you start with the formal. We would certainly recommend that, if you are writing to someone from one of these countries, particularly if he/she is someone in a similar profession, you should start with their title: Dear Dr, Dear Professor, Dear Mr, and only after you have developed some kind of professional relationship should you become more 'intimate'. There is, throughout the world, a tendency for younger people to make use of less formal styles in their writing.

Many older people can be somewhat disturbed when they are greeted by a casual writing style in letters and e-mails from those they have never heard of before. We all need to be that little bit more sensitive to the perceptions and expectations of others. We saw the importance of this when telephoning.

Finding the right language

Language should be a bridge between people, but sometimes it can be a barrier. We've already noted in various places in this book the importance of tuning in to the others' vocabulary, and of thinking carefully about others' language needs. It is no use writing 'discrete' (separate in statistical terms) if our readers are only going to know 'discreet' (keep it to your self). We should follow those excellent words of Gowers (1987): 'Put ourselves in our readers' shoes'.

There is nothing wrong with using 'jargon' if we have a reasonable idea that those reading our text will also share this specialist language; it would be so much more difficult for doctors to write to doctors, pilots to speak to pilots and vets speak to vets (never mind their animals) without.

It is when we move outside our professional writing zones that we have to be that much more careful to gloss (to explain) our terms. 'How many staggered green man facilities have you in this section?' might be a question put by a traffic engineer, whereas we might ask: 'How many green man crossings have you?' So do gloss, and put all your glosses into your glossary.

Making sure we're accurate in our writing

It almost goes without saying that in all our writing we have to check most carefully for accuracy. We will look at proofreading but there is also the need to check dates, numbers, prices, names, titles, order numbers, systems, etc. When, in the late 1980s, the NASA Mars Lander exploded 40 miles above the surface of the planet, the cause of the disaster was found to be that one manufacturing company had been using metric and the other imperial measurements. The space craft thus was programed with contradicting information! $128 million was lost in a cloud of smoke, debris and puzzled Martians!

Getting the Nuts and Bolts right

By this ingredient, we refer to spelling, punctuation and aspects of grammar. This is such a large area that we could easily take up the remainder of this book with details on each aspect. Here are some key points for revision. Apologies if this is familiar to you.

Spelling

We have already examined some of the problems associated with grammar checkers when we looked at readability. Spell checkers raise similar problems: they recognize words which are in their dictionary. The question is, what kind of dictionary do you have? You may posses a Webster's dictionary (Noam Webster was one of the pioneer dictionary makers of the 'American Language' who believed that the new Republic needed a new form of the English language). This means that you will have US English spellings, as in the previous example – license for licence and defense for defence.

There is some evidence that with the advent of the Internet, US spelling is influencing users to spell program as programme, center for centre and donut for doughnut. Even if you have a dictionary based on British English, your spell checker will face a real challenge when it comes to homophones – those words with similar sounds but very different meanings, e.g. practise, practice; stationery and stationary; two, too or to?

Here is a little exercise to test your powers to distinguish between homophones. Answers over the page.

1. Shall we accept/except her invitation?
2. His words effected/affected me greatly.
3. He decided after punishment to amend/emend his ways.
4. Can you insure/ensure me that the brakes are OK?
5. That is a classical/classic example of his behaviour.
6. She was very complimentary/complementary about his new suit.
7. Could you please test the current/currant on this wire?
8. I council/counsel you to accept his advice/advise.
9. China's economical/economic growth has been spectacular.
10. He immigrated/emigrated into the UK.
11. This lock will insure/ensure your safety.
12. He saw a flair/flare of light in the distance.
13. It was a historical/historic first journey to Mars.
14. The book has lost its/it's cover.
15. The boats moored at the key/quay.
16. Lightening/lightning his burden he continued up the mountain.
17. I license/licence you to sell drugs.
18. She was the principle/principal conductor for the orchestra.
19. The prophecy/prophesy will come true.
20. He practices/practises his golf swing in the garden.
21. He was a sceptic/septic as far as religion was concerned.
22. The truck was stationery/stationary when we hit it.
23. They/their/there book is their/there/they're on the table.
24. Two/too/to people went to/too/two the cinema and watched the film; it was too/two/to long.
25. The waste/waist left after the meal was appalling.
26. Your/You're the only person who can succeed.
27. Its/It's you're/your turn now.
28. As a referee you must be uninterested/disinterested in the final result.
29. The police search was exhausting/exhaustive.

Punctuation

Punctuation is a very complex matter; there are certain rules and there are many instances where you can make a judgement. The important advice here is be consistent.

We've set you a little test. Take a piece of paper and a pencil and see how you get on.

Each of the following sentences requires some punctuation, put in the commas, full stops etc. that you think should be included.

1. The customers letter included a cheque for £5000 do not cash it.
2. Although we installed the new laser printer fuses are still blowing.
3. Mr Fred Jones the general manager of Jones Electronics gave a talk on safety.
4. Remember to check the following
   - ice axe
   - climbing boots
   - gaiters
   - rope

Answers to spelling test - homophones

1. Shall we **accept** her invitation?
2. His words **affected** me greatly
3. He decided after punishment to **amend** his ways
4. Can you **ensure** me that the brakes are OK?
5. That is a **classic** example of his behaviour.
6. She was very **complimentary** about his new suit.
7. Could you please test the **current** on this wire?
8. I **counsel** you to accept his **advice**/advise
9. China's **economic** growth has been spectacular
10. He **immigrated** into the UK
11. This lock will **ensure** your safety.
12. He saw a **flare** of light in the distance
13. It was an **historic** first journey to Mars
14. The book had lost **its** cover
15. The boats moored at the **quay**
16. **Lightening** his burden he continued up the mountain
17. I **license** you to sell drugs
18. She was the **principal** conductor for the orchestra
19. The **prophecy** will come true
20. He **practises** his golf swing in the garden
21. He was a **sceptic** as far as religion was concerned
22. The truck was **stationary** when we hit it

23. **Their** book is **there** on the table
24. **Two** people went **to** the cinema and watched the film but it was **too** long.
25. The **waste** left after the meal was appalling
26. **You're** the only person who can succeed.
27. **It's** your turn now.
28. As a referee you must be **disinterested** in the final result.
29. The police search was **exhaustive.**

Answers to punctuation test

Question 1

The customer's (1) letter included a cheque for £5000 do not (2) cash it (3)

(1) We need an apostrophe before the 's'. These show who or what owns something, e.g.

the worker's tools
the dentist's drill
the footballer's boots etc.

When there is more than one person who owns something, the apostrophe comes after the 's', e.g.

workers' tools (i.e. many workers)
dentists' drills
footballers' boots

With people, children, men, women the apostrophe always comes before the 's', e.g.

people's safety
children's shoes
women's clothes

With people's names that end in an 's', such as the author's, Ellis, you can either write:

Ellis's books or Ellis' books, but be consistent.

There is no need to use apostrophes when writing short forms, e.g.

NVQs not NVQ's.
VDUs not VDU's

Never use an apostrophe for plurals of words. e.g. Craft trades not craft trade's

pensionable occupations not pensionable occupation's
All paints at half price, not all paints' (or paint's) at half price.

(2) We do need apostrophes, as in the question when we leave out a letter. e.g.
don't for do not
can't for cannot
we're for we are
couldn't for could not
shouldn't for should not etc.
The accountant's coming today for the accountant is coming today.

(3) Full stops. These are needed for the ends of sentences. They should be followed by a capital letter.
There is no need to put full stops after initials R.J. Bolton write as R J Bolton.
B. B. C. write as BBC.
Be very careful when writing down e-mail addresses that you only put the full stops (dots) in the right place, e.g.
Johnsmith @ records.flash.net
If you place the dots in the wrong position the message won't get sent. Do not put spaces after the dots!
Never put a dot at the end of the address.

Question 2

Although we installed the new laser printer (1) fuses are still blowing.

(1) We need a comma here after an 'although' expression. The same would be true after the following:
Therefore, we have to buy more tools.
However, she did pass the exam.
Lastly, he pulled the plug.

Other uses of the comma include:
Providing emphasis in what you write. You can do this by underlining or using bold. However, a more polite way is to use commas: e.g.

Please apply, before Thursday, if interested in this post.

Compare this to:

Please apply before Thursday if interested in this post.

By putting commas round 'before Thursday' we are reminding the reader to hurry up. Compare these two statements.

Please deliver outstanding money in cash before end of the month.
Please deliver outstanding money, in cash, before end of the month.

The second version has more of a punch, don't you think? It implies, do not send a cheque or bring along your credit card – just bring the money!

We also use a comma after

Dear Mr Smith,

In a handwritten letter. There is no need to use it when word processing a letter.

- Use it after a 'so' expression, for instance:

There were few CDs in the shop, so she went into town to buy her present.

- Asking questions when writing in an informal style. e.g.

This is the right program, isn't it?

- Separate out descriptions. E.g.

The wall was long, badly maintained and in danger of collapsing. (i.e. it was very close to being a complete disaster).

Normally you do not need to place a comma before the final *and* in a list. However, if you really want to emphasize the *and*, then you can.

The wall was long, badly pointed, and in danger of collapsing

- To separate out parts of dates, addresses etc.

Wednesday, July 14th, 1999, was a public holiday in France.
He lives at 145 High Street, Elborough, Cheshire.

- To separate out sets of figures e.g.

In 1998, 30 new houses were built.

- To separate out parts of numbers e.g.

1,456 or 1,350,000 (most printed texts do not use this).

- To separate out identical repeated words e.g.

Whatever is, is right.
Try and tap in, in the hole.

Question 3

Mr Fred Jones, the general manager (1) of Jones Electronics, gave a talk on safety.

(1) Capitals. We need capital letters for General Manager as this is a title. We need capital letters for beginning a sentence and people's names.

Smith, Jim, Ali

- Places

Birmingham, Essex, New York

- Titles

Mr. Miss. Head Teacher. Dr. Senior Architect. Chief Planner

- Copyright trade names

Coca Cola

- Short forms

BBC. TUC. FA.

Again, our advice is: be consistent in your use of capitals.

Question 4

Remember to check the following (1)
ice axe
climbing boots
gaiters
rope

(1) When you introduce a list then use a colon: the two dots. When you write a list then start each item with a capital letter (except for bulleted lists) e.g.

Ice axe
Climbing boots, etc.

There is no need to put in full stops at the end of each line in a list, only at the final one.

Did you get all those? Now let's briefly examine some other aspects of punctuation.

The semi colon;
This is used when you have two parts to a sentence and you do not wish to break them with a full stop. The sense is continued across them, as in:

> Jim was late today; his car broke down.

Now you could put a full stop after today, as in:

> Jim was late today. His car broke down.

but you might wish to use a semi colon to continue the sense across – his lateness is, after all, a consequence of his car breaking down. You could <u>not</u> use a comma as there is no conjunction – joining words which link these two, such as 'and', 'but', 'however', 'if', etc.

The question mark?
This is used at the end of a statement put as a question.

> Did the architect see the plans?

The exclamation mark!
This is used to indicate strong feeling, or humour e.g.

> I'd like that money – how about a Christmas present!

The dash -
These are used in informal writing, short notes, e-mails, friendly handwritten letters. E.g.

> I hope this reaches you on time – if not give me a call.
> The architect's coming on Tuesday 11 am – could you be here then?

They can be used in more formal writing to indicate a change of thought.

> Looking at the philosophy of love – and that is not just on Valentines' day – we need to keep our emotions separate from our thoughts.

The hyphen (a dash (-) between parts of words)
There are some words that always need to be hyphenated as

> re-cover (your sofa) compared with
> recover (getting better from illness).

You should also use a hyphen with such expression as off-putting, in-situ (in place). There are hundreds of words where you can use hyphens if you want e.g.

co-operation and co-contractors (it prevents the double o and double c)
mis-spelling (preventing the double ss)
sub-contractor compared with sub contractor

There is also a need for a hyphen where there is a specialized meaning of a word, e.g.

In the space below draw a view of a hop-up. Compare this with, just hop up on the lorry and get some bananas.

This has been a rapid tour round the nuts and bolts and the main ingredients of writing. We now examine the process of writing.

Further Reading

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14

The Process of Writing

Writing, for many people, is the most difficult part of communication. They often have bad memories of their English teachers, of seeing their written work covered in red ink with the ominous words 'See Me' written underneath. At work, their confidence may not be helped when managers peer over their shoulders at their screens and check the quality of work on them. Very few of us can write well under such scrutiny.

There is also the fact that writing is a very public matter: one's handiwork is exposed to others' view and this can lead to embarrassment. If you've ever made a silly error in a letter or document, which has been passed around your colleagues for comment, you will no doubt remember the awkwardness that followed.

A number of people have a lack of confidence in their writing caused by these, and other, negative experiences; others are more confident, but still find there are gaps that can let them down when it comes to the more formal side of writing. This chapter is designed for both categories, and if you are a confident writer, then we hope that the advice provided and the various techniques illustrated will help you to be even better.

At this point we should clarify the term 'writing'. For many people these days, writing, apart from the shopping list and signature on agreements, has been replaced by the computer or Blackberry. We still use the term 'writing' when we should, perhaps, be using 'texting'. Anyway, writing will be the term used in this book to cover everything produced using a pen or pencil, text from a mobile phone, to that written on a keyboard of a laptop computer and in various voice recognition software programs.

What are the processes of writing? If we look at what professional writers do, there is a wide variety of approach. Some believe in very detailed planning before starting to write, others reach for the pen or switch on the computer and get stuck in. Still others plan a bit, then tear up the plans and write whatever comes into their heads.

If there is one thing that all writers have in common, it is that they are prepared to go through a number of drafts before they get to the one they are prepared to submit. There are very few professional writers who can make do with the one draft; constant polishing is required by most. James Joyce used to think he'd done quite well writing half a page in a day with constant drafting and redrafting, but then, not many of us try and write *Ulysses*.

Your readers

We've outlined key points relating to knowledge of one's audience. Any writer should take time to think very carefully about the nature of his or her readership. It is easy to do this at the start of a piece of writing – to have this target audience in your mind in line 1, paragraph 1 – but it is easy to lose sight of them as you get to page 25.

The first question that you, as a writer, have to answer is: who is my reader or readers? Behind this simple-sounding question is a whole set of others needing to be answered. These could include:

- What do they know about this subject?
- How technically expert are they?
- What expectations can be made about their previous reading/study of this subject?
- How will they be using this material? For instance, will it be a main text or will it be subsidiary to others?
- How are they likely to be reading this? Will they skim the contents and go for the conclusions? Will they be interested in the detail?
- What is their competence in English? Is English their first language? If not will my text need to be simplified/adapted?

The more we know about our readers, the more it can make our writing task easier; this is particularly true when it comes to pitching the material. There are other equally important questions that need to be asked and answered.

Questions you need to ask and have answered

Why write this text?

In other words, is there a suitable alternative? We've already noted the importance of this question in our section on meetings. It is a crucial question in all communication tasks when we calculate the costs – direct and opportunity.

Why write this text now?

Would there be a better time to do it? How does the writing of this report fit into current business planning, the pattern of meetings, and presentations to clients?

Who is the audience or audiences?

We've already looked at this important question on the previous page. Remember though you may be writing for audiences, plural – a technical as well as a nontechnical group. You may have to appeal to a group that is very IT familiar and, in the same document, appeal to others who are not. What is the answer? Well, you could supply an annexe to the report, which is written for specialized readers, or you could supply a summary in plain English for those non-specialists.

What is the remit for this text?
This is perhaps one of the most important questions to be asked; it is already come up a number of times in this book, particularly when we were preparing to give our presentation. You should never start a writing task, any communication task, unless you have clarified the remit; that is the scale of the task, what you are supposed to cover and with what weighting, i.e. more effort in the statistical analysis, perhaps, and less in the background and overview. This issue must be clarified before you begin.

What else has been written on this subject before?
You certainly do not want to waste your time doing a lot of preparatory work only to hear from one of your colleagues that Lesley, your colleague, did something like that a few months previously. What a pity.

When is the deadline for this text?
It is absolutely essential that (a) you get some information about this and (b) try and negotiate the best possible timing for your needs. As in all project management, and this is certainly that, you need to be able to work backwards from your goal. With a large report or similar project, it would be worthwhile drawing up a planning chart as on the lines of:

mid Sept	Oct	mid Nov	Dec 1st	Dec 15th
Clarify remit research………		check against remit		submit
initial outline	*first draft*	*edit* *second draft/edit*	*proof*	*celebrate!*

The more massive the task, the more such planning charts are essential. You must keep a firm eye on deadlines; this is not some sadistic exercise, there is considerable merit in having such targets. Most writers admit that without such, they would not be able to complete their work: drift sets in; you put off writing that draft; ‘It can wait’ you say: procrastination and so to doomsday!

What is the format of this text to be? This refers to the look of the document, how the print is supposed to be set out on the page or electronically on the screen. You will need to ask about such matters as print size, print type – the typeface, length of line, width of margins, spacing between lines, placing of illustrations, use of headings and footnotes.

If there is no house format, you will need to make up a page and submit it to some of your readers/colleagues for their approval and suggestions. Research into readability suggests that the print size should be between 11 and 13 with larger size 14/16 for headings and that you should adopt one of the standard fonts such as Times New Roman, Helvetica, Arial, etc. Avoid fussy 'artistic' typefaces for your general text; these can distract your reader. Try to have reasonably wide margins so that the text does not look too cramped.

What is the house style for this text? It is important to know whether you should adopt the impersonal third person:

> The materials were collected and tested.

or is it permissible to write in the first person:

> I collected the materials and tested them to...

In general, most reports and documents will be written in the third person. A personal style may however be appropriate if:

- The writer is an expert and is giving his/her view
- Has been provided with a personal remit
- It is a personal investigation.

Questions on copyright and confidentiality: These questions must be answered before you begin. There is little point in embarking on a major writing task if much of it will have to be rewritten in order to escape issues of confidentiality or copyright.

The actual writing process

Writing is a very personal process and what we outline here are some suggestions that might help if you get stuck and find deadlines approaching with awful rapidity.

You may find it helpful to draw up a rough outline before you commit yourself to the actual writing up. Take a large sheet of paper (A3) and a pencil and just sketch out the various components of the report and how they might link together. At this stage, this is very much an outline and not a fixed plan; you may well want to change it as you go along. An example is shown:

1st Outline

Remit/Introduction	______________________
Background/literature review	______________________
'Data' collected	______________________
Method	______________________
Discussion/Findings	______________________
	______________________
	______________________
	______________________
Conclusions	______________________
Recommendations	______________________
Appendix	______________________

As you map out your outline, think of some kind of logical sequencing for your material – that is, logical to your reader. A report should be accessible; your reader should be able to see where you are going; the material shouldn't be laid out in some kind of haphazard brainstorm! Your arrangement might be along the lines of:

- Most important topic to least important (VIP > LIP)
- Grouping of material in terms of what belongs to what
- Sequencing of some kind – time/process bound etc.

As you outline, consider where the best place would be for any graphics. This is where *storyboarding* can be very helpful – a technique for expanding your outline into a section-by-section visualization of the material. You can use large sheets of paper, for example, flip chart sheets, and on each sheet place:

- The main theme of the report/document
- The section number
- The various sub themes
- The key graphics that you wish to make use of.

You can build these up by sticking various drafts on to them/alongside. Pin them up on a wall, or lay them on a large table, so that the whole document can start to take shape before your eyes. By doing this, you will be able to integrate text and illustrations. You can also make use of a desktop publishing program that will allow you to integrate text and graphics.

Report

Introduction

Background

Development

Conclusions

Recommendations

You will be able to see at a glance whether, for instance, your findings do tie in with your conclusions and your conclusions do, in fact, come naturally from your recommendations.

It may be that, as you write up, you will find you need more graphics. As a general rule, it is better to have a few really useful graphics which complement the text, and help your reader see what it is you're doing, than a whole lot just put in for effect and as a space-filler!

Going for it

Once you've collected your 'data' and you've drawn an outline, we suggest you then 'go for it'. This means that you write or type (write if you are slow on the keyboard) a first draft. We suggest that it is often better to *write* it; this way you have the various sheets laid out in front of you; with a computer it is so very easy to lose track of where you are in the argument – you need to take hard copies and keep scrolling down to find where that particular point started and how it leads to the next. Treat your computer as an electronic typewriter – do not be tempted to 'play' with all the possibilities on offer in your toolbars; they can be very distracting.

Do this rapidly and do not stop to check on spelling. Make an estimated spelling, put a '?' against the word and look it up later. If you stop in mid flow and look the word up in a dictionary or on your spell checker, you may well lose the thread of what it is you're writing. You can do the spell-checking and proofreading later. Aim at this stage to get a draft down on paper. Do not keep putting it off. Motivate yourself with rewards – that cup of tea and chocolate biscuit when page 3 is finished; that visit to the pub when you've reached page 8!

Do not throw away the first scribbled draft; it may be the best you'll do – not in accuracy of English but in flow and in quality of thinking.

Edit and edit

When you got that draft, then you will need to do some editing. This is a process whereby you cut and polish the draft until it is where you want it to be. Here is an example of editing. If you look back to the beginning of this section you will notice the opening paragraph.

You might like to compare it with the first draft

For many people writing is the most difficult part of communication since they may have negative memories of school when they were told off by English teachers, their work commented on with 'Must Do Better!' Their confidence may not be helped at work by having managers who peer over their shoulders to sample their writing or checking the quality of their work. Few of us can write under such observation.

The second draft with several edits:

- Two sentences at the start of the paragraph rather than the long one
- The addition of 'pages covered with red ink' to make it more emphatic
- Having 'a manager' singular rather than managers
- Changing 'very few' for 'few' and 'scrutiny' for observation.

> For many people writing is the most difficult part of communication. They may have bad memories of school when they were told off by English teachers, of seeing pages of their work covered in red ink with the comment 'Must Do Better!' written underneath. Their confidence may not be helped at work by having a manager who keeps peering over their shoulders to sample their writing or checking on the screen the quality of their work. Very few of us can write well under such scrutiny.

And so to the third and final draft.

> Writing, for many people, is the most difficult part of communication. They often have bad memories of their English teachers, of seeing their work covered in red ink with the ominous words 'See Me' written underneath. At work, their confidence may not be helped when managers peer over their shoulders at their screens and check the quality of work on them. Very few of us can write well under such scrutiny.

Here, in this third and final draft, the words order has been changed, the word 'ominous' has been included; the grammar has been changed from 'having a manager who keeps peering over their shoulders' to 'when managers peer over their shoulders at screens'.

You may prefer the first or even second draft; the author went for the third. You might like to have a go yourself!

Editing will seldom, if ever, take the text exactly where you want it to be but time is limited and you have other things to do. So the time will come when you've got to stop editing and give it a thorough proofread before printing the final copy.

Check and check again

Before handing in your text do proofread it. Never rely on spell checks! All they can do is to locate the word in their dictionary – if it's/its there/their/they're or passed/past – the best spell checker can't help you. So for these kinds of words, and for all the an/ands, too/to/twos, you will need to proofread, that is, check it with your own eyes (it is a good idea to borrow a colleague's eye as well, ask him or her to look through your text); you'll probably be amazed at all the mistakes you've overlooked.

Proofreading

Try this little proofreading exercise. Take a light pencil and see just how many errors you can spot. Remember proofreading is not just about spotting the spelling mistakes, it is also about checking punctuation, inconsistencies in usage, etc., etc. We've laid it out with double spacing. It is much easier to proofread in this format. It gives you space around which to make your corrections/additions.

The occurence of a misspelled word in print is totaly unacceptable. The affect is disastrous an embarrassment to the printer, a distraction to the reader and a slur on the writers competence. Misspelling is a a sign that the role of the proofreader has been slighted or misunderstood, Although the proof-reader is principly committed to see that the proof follows the copy accuratelythere is further committment to prevent the author, editor or or printer from looking rediculous. a proofreader is never presumtous, in correcting and incorrect spelling. Let no conscientious proofreader wholley acquiesce to the rule of the 'fellow copy" in regard spelling

How many errors did you spot?

The occurence of a misspelled word in print is totaly unacceptable. The affect is disastrous, an embarrassment to the printer, a distraction to the reader and a slur on the writer's competence. Misspelling is a a sign that the role of the *proofreader* has been slighted or misunderstood. Although the proof-reader is principly committed to see that the proof follows the copy accuratelythere is further committment to prevent the author, editor or or printer from looking rediculous. a proofreader is never presumtous, *in correcting an incorrect* spelling. Let no conscientious *proofreader* wholley acquiesce to the rule of the 'fellow copy" in regard spelling

Occurrence – spelling
mis-spelled – the choice of hyphen is up to you, but if you do decide to hyphenate then be consistent and use it throughout the text. The same would apply to proofreader. Mis-spelled can also be spelt mis-spelt. Many words in English have more than one spelling e.g. focusing or focussing. The important thing is to be consistent in use.
Totally – spelling
affect – this should be 'effect', the noun, another homophone. Hope you all spotted that!
disastrous, You could replace the comma with a colon as though introducing a list.
Slurr – spelling
a a sign- repeated 'a': you must have got that one!
Principally – spelling
Accuratelythere – spacing
Commitment – spelling
or or – you wouldn't believe just how many miss this
ridiculous – spelling and capital 'A' following
presumptuous – spelling . No comma needed after this word.
Correcting etc- this is a clumsy construction it would be better to write – when correcting…
Wholly – spelling
'fellow copy" – inconsistent use of inverted commas – UK usage is single quote marks, with any quote within a quote in double quote marks, with the reverse for US usage. Ironic or contestable statements can be in single quotes, but be consistent. Did you get the absence of a final full stop?
If you've got all these mistakes you did well.

Consistency has been achieved between proof-reader and proofreader – we've decided to go for proofreader.

So the fully proofed version now reads:

> The occurrence of a mis-spelt word in print is totally unacceptable. The effect is disastrous, an embarrassment to the printer, a distraction to the reader and a slur on the writer's competence. Mis-spelling is a sign that the role of the proofreader has been slighted or misunderstood. Although the proofreader is principally committed to see that the proof follows the copy accurately, there is further commitment to prevent the author, editor or printer from looking ridiculous. A proofreader is never presumptuous in correcting an incorrect spelling. Let no conscientious proofreader wholly acquiesce to the rule of the 'fellow copy' in regard to spelling.

We now move to specific forms of writing: the report, the letter, e-mail and the article.

Further Reading

Cutts, M. (2007) *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gowers, E. (1987) *Complete Plain Words*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

15

Specific Types of Writing

In the previous chapter we examined some general issues relating to writing; in this one we provide specific advice on such matters as writing a report, handling letters and memos.

Reports

No one really likes writing reports, although to produce one that is actually read and taken notice of can be very satisfying (and very exhausting). The following advice is designed to help you write reports that are taken notice of i.e. they are read, fully digested, and acted on.

The writer of 'successful' reports has to bear in mind the needs of the readers of the text. In this respect, the task is very much as we outlined in the chapter on presentation skills – keep your audience very much in mind. If you do not bother with your readers' needs why should they bother reading your work.

What is a report?

A report can range from 1 to 1000 plus pages. It is one of the most important means by which you will communicate the results of your work, or that of your group or section.

A report is a structured text with headings and sub headings. It is designed to be read quickly and easily. It could look like this to your reader:

Title

1. Introduction ______________________
2. Method ______________________
3. Findings ______________________
4. Conclusions ______________________
5. Recommendations ______________________
6. Appendix ______________________

Your reader, you hope, will start at the beginning and work his or her way through the text, but readers are perverse, they sometimes start with the appendix and go on to the introduction. Sometimes they read one line and skip twenty pages to find another. They may only be searching for a few references or key terms. It is our job to assist them skim and scan, although we do hope we can encourage them into giving our work the close read which it deserves.

A report normally has:

An introduction

This sets out what the report is about and why it has been written – its purpose and scope.

This report analyses the...

The purpose of this report is to investigate causes of the...

A background section

This seeks to place the reader in the context. Writing a background presents very real difficulties. We must know who our readers are, otherwise it is so difficult to pitch it appropriately. In general, a background should be concise, relevant and unbiased, i.e. we do not wish to 'contaminate' our readers into one way of thinking before they've had the opportunity to discover the material for themselves and make up their own minds from the evidence presented.

Method section

This should indicate the manner by which you gained the data/information, the way in which you analysed and sorted this (the experiments carried out, the statistical methods used etc.). The test for this is whether someone reading this could repeat the experiment by simply reading what you have written. If not, then you have not made your approach sufficiently clear, such as:

> The data was analysed using a coefficient correlation; this ...
> The opinions of staff were obtained by using a questionnaire (see appendix 1) and by the use of two focus groups (see appendix 2).

The Discussion or Findings

Here you comment on the results and discuss the various findings, e.g.:

> There were indications that the move towards the Investors in People (IiP) award has improved attitudes to training. This was apparent throughout the organization.

Conclusions

Here you draw together any outcomes that emerge from this discussion of your findings. Sometimes the conclusions will leap out; at other times you will only be able to present very preliminary conclusions that will require further work to prove or disprove them, e.g.:

From these results, it is concluded that the combination of internal training with the occasional use of outside specialists does provide a good base for improved customer care.

Notice that most reports are written in a certain style. We examined this earlier on, but to recap, if we write 'It is concluded' as opposed to the active 'I concluded' it is because we wish to highlight what has been done rather than who has actually done it.

In the sentence '*I analysed all concentrates of potassium*', the emphasis falls on the subject I. But are we as readers that interested in the person who carried out this experiment? Not usually, unless we wish to closely study their methods, e.g. 'Show us how you did it'. Normally we want to know what happened – in this case that the concentrates were analysed.

Recommendations

Not all reports have recommendations. You, as a writer, might feel that you have not had enough time over the investigation, have not been able to explore deeply enough or gain enough experience of the organization/system you are researching to be able to write recommendations. Suggestions or 'Ways Forward' may then be more appropriate.

If you do write recommendations, remember they must be firmly linked to your findings and your conclusions; they can't appear from nowhere. Remember also that you will help your readers if you can provide them with some idea as to the priority behind this list of recommendations – priority as in:

- *Cost:* the most expensive to the least, or *vice versa*
- *Time:* the one that can be done quickly to the ones which will require time for completion
- *Complexity:* the easiest to achieve to the most complex.

Before starting

We have already listed those questions that need to be asked before we started the writing process. Nowhere is this more important than before commencing a report. There is absolutely no point putting pen to paper, fingers to keyboard or plotter to graph until you have found out:

- The remit?
- Who is going to read it?
- What is it supposed to look like – the format?
- When it is supposed to be handed in? The deadline.

Getting started

We've examined various ways of writing. For reports we suggest that you do seriously consider drawing up an outline before you commit yourself to the actual writing up. There are various ways of doing this.

For instance, take a large sheet of paper and a pencil and just sketch out the various components of the report and how they might link together. At this stage this is very much an outline and not a fixed plan; you may well want to change it as you go along.

As you map out your outline, think of a logical sequencing for your material – that is logical to your reader! A report should be accessible; your reader should be able to see where you are going; the material shouldn't be laid out in some kind of haphazard mind map! Your arrangement might be along the lines of:

- Most important topic to least important (VIP > LIP)
- Grouping of material in terms of what belongs to what
- Sequencing of some kind – time/process bound, etc.
- Moving from familiar to unfamiliar.

As you outline, consider where the best place would be for any graphics. It may be that, as you write up, you'll find you need more graphics. As a general rule, it is better to have a few really useful graphics, which complement the text and help your reader see what it is you're doing, than a whole lot just put there for effect.

If you do not like the outline method, then you might like to draw yourself a tree diagram, each branch represents a possible topic and how they 'hang' on the tree will determine their placing in the overall structure.

Example of a short report:

Title
Remit
Method
Discussion/ Findings
Conclusions
Recommendations
Appendix

You could also use a mind map technique, similar to the one we recommended to start planning for a presentation, or some kind of flow chart system.

Going for it

Once you've collected your 'data' and you've drawn an outline then, as we suggested on page… you should 'go for it'.

Check and Check again

Before handing in, do proofread the text. Remember, never rely on spell chequrs/checqers/checkers!

Write a summary

A summary is an overview of the report. Within a paragraph or two it should provide your reader with the essentials of the report. The test of a good summary is if, after reading it, can he or she now understand what the report is all about (not the detail) but the main idea? If the answer is NO, then you will have to make your summary clearer and perhaps add a little more detail.

In some cases you will be asked to write an *abstract*. This is a summary of a summary. It is usually no more than ten lines, 100–150 words, and puts into a nutshell what the report/document is all about. It contains the key words, which, when entered into data base, can be used to retrieve the text and complementary information.

Add an appendix

Use this for all the detail that you do not need in the main body of your report, for example, replies to the questionnaire.

If the material is important put it in the report, since few people ever read appendices unless they are particularly interested or suspicious. (What has been hidden?)

Add a title page with your name, date and main/sub title in bold print, e.g.

The Chemistry of Real Porridge
Report by J Hardy Stir. Spurtle Associates
Submitted Oct 3rd 2008

Number each page and bind it so that the pages won't come loose. Hand it in before the deadline.

Example of a short report:

What changes would you make to it? Do spend a few moments on this exercise before you read our suggested changes.

Possible Housing Developments Hilldean Borough Council

The Planning Committee of Hilldean Authority has had three meetings to discuss the following matter and a number of reports have been received from the Surveyor and the Legal Department re Greenside.

The Legal Department reports that there are no restrictions, i.e. no rights of any kind and no encumbrances that would prevent building. But the site does have some problems. It is a triangular block and this would mean that those houses built close to the apex will have much smaller gardens than those on the other side. We understand too that a few of the contractors in the town are not busy and we should expect some competitive tenders in the near future.

Consequently we do suggest that the Council should proceed to find out what grants will be available and what the cost of building would be by taking some provisional tenders. The site (near Greenside) does seem to be suitable for building and all the indications are that it would take two or three-storey houses. We have been informed by the water, gas and electricity authorities that three services are all readily available. We would recommend therefore that the Council proceeds and decides to build here because we have heard that private developers are interested in the site.

Here are our criticisms. Do you share them?

- The title is vague (what kind of housing, where, whose, when?)
- There are no subtitles to help direct the reader's attention. Remember that your readers will want to make their way through the text in the way that is important to them. Signposts in the way of titles can be immensely helpful
- There is very little cohesion in this text. Cohesion is about how the text sticks together and how the reader is carried forwards from point to point and from paragraph to paragraph. For instance, if we examine the start of paragraph two it looks as though that paragraph will be mainly about the legal department's view of this proposed development, however, as we read, we notice that we get into gardens and site considerations, very much the same as is discussed in paragraph three
- The recommendations are buried in the final paragraph; these should be set out as a separate heading so that the reader's eyes can be rapidly drawn to them. Remember, the recommendations might be the main target for some of your readers.

What do you think of this as a redraft?

Proposed Housing near Greenside Meadows

Introduction
The Planning Committee of Hillsdean Borough has been asked to report to the Council on whether or not an estate should be built near Greenside Meadows. The Committee has had three meetings to discuss this matter and a number of reports have been received from the Surveyor and the Legal Department (ref papers 12/45/OD/08).

Legal Considerations
Our Legal Department reports there are no restrictions, i.e. no rights of any kind and no encumbrances that would prevent building.

The Site
There are some problems: the site is triangular and this would mean that those houses built close to the apex will have much smaller gardens than those on the other side. But this is not a major drawback and it does seem possible to build two or three-storey houses. We have been informed by the water, gas and electricity authorities that these services are all readily available.

The Contract
We understand that a few of the contractors in the town are not busy so we should expect some competitive tenders.

Conclusion
We would recommend that the Council proceeds and decides to build here because we have heard that private developers are interested in the site.
We thus suggest the following steps:

- The Council should find out what grants may be available.
- The Council should ask for tenders at the earliest opportunity.

J Hardie
Chairman, Housing Committee
12 April 2009

This draft does provide the reader with a more meaningful title; the sub headings are designed to guide the reader's eyes through the text (always remember that some of your readers may only be interested in one section of the report so do your very best to help them find it).

We have tried to group like with like, i.e. law with all legal issues, site with all site issues as opposed to the original draft where topics where scattered around and the text had little by way of cohesion.

The longer report

Let's look at the longer report. Here is the material that forms the report.

Have a go at drafting your own version before you see what was done by the report writer, then you can criticize the result.

The situation

Megan Smart is an Investors in People (IiP) Assessor. She has recently completed a survey of Hazel Nut, a small charity which specializes in assisting young children with learning difficulties. Here is a summary of her findings in note form. Using these please complete a formal report with headings for the Managers and Trustees of the charity.

Material for the report

Very enthusiastic senior managers for IiP aims. Real commitment. Records of staff training kept up to date. These show evidence of structure and planning. Much improved since interim visit. Spoke with Chairman of Trustees. No training planned for Trustees – this was specifically noted in interim report. Action required.

Interview with sec/receptionist – she appeared not to be aware of IiP and seemed vague about any training she had received. This is disappointing considering managers' enthusiasm for IiP. It raises some disquiet about communications between staff and managers.

Written plan identifying organization's training needs well administered and shows good measure of planning. However some doubts about specific actions to be taken. Good on broad areas but needs to be strengthened in detail – specifically it needs to show better sequencing of training. Disappointed to see that training and development objectives not clearly linked to external standards. Would recommend further work on this. Interview with computer operator – evidence of induction did not match up with agreed induction plans as set out by organization. Some discrepancy here.

Attended team meeting between managers and staff – positive atmosphere. Well chaired. Previous minutes of such meetings did not reflect training and development issues. Need to note these more clearly. Doubts concerning the quality of communication between Trustees and management of charity. Strongly recommend that more managers attend such meetings and that Training and Development was more regularly placed on the agenda of such meetings. Minutes of such meetings could do with expansion – rather bald at present.

Strongly suggest more be done to improve communication between the charity and its client groups. A review of such links was promised but little progress seems to have been made. Urgent! Trustees' own training and development not actioned despite suggestions from external IiP consultant. Would strongly urge moves in this direction. A number of companies do run courses in Strategic Planning etc. and would welcome attendance from a small number of Trustees. Local TEC might reimburse 50 per cent of costs.

Some work been done on costs of training and staff development. Much improved budgeting but refinements and improvements needed. Suggest obtaining help from local TEC consultant. 50 per cent of costs might be met. General recommendation: award to be withheld until these specific points attended to. Suggest next assessment in six months time.

Here is the draft report as submitted by Megan:

List what you feel are its strengths and consider how, given the material she had to work on, it could be improved *(we have not included the appendix).*

Draft

Investors in People Assessment
Report on Hazel Nut by Megan Smart IIP Assessor
Jan 11th 2008

1. Introduction
The purpose of this report is to assess the suitability of Hazel Nut for the IiP Award.

2. Background
Hazel Nut is a small charity (fifteen staff) which specializes in assisting young children with learning difficulties. This report summarizes the findings of a survey carried out by IiP assessor Megan Smart during the week 16–21st Nov 2007. The survey consisted of interviews with staff, managers and trustees, attendance at staff meetings and discussions with external clients. (see appendix for details).

3. Findings
Trustees – having spoken with the Chairman, there appears to be no planned training for Trustees. An interim report (Dec 2006) specifically noted this matter. This issue needs to be addressed.

Staff – Management at Hazel Nut are very enthusiastic about the aims of IiP and demonstrate real commitment to these. Staff training records are kept up to date and show evidence of structure and planning. This is an area which has much improved since the interim visit.

There is now a written plan which identifies the organization's training needs; this is well administered. This plan requires strengthening in terms of specific actions and would benefit from a more detailed sequencing of training.

An area which requires further development is that of linking training and development objectives to external standards.

Additionally, there appears to be a discrepancy between the induction plan set out by the organization and the actual induction training given to staff. This was revealed by an interview with the computer operator.

Since the interim visit, the organization has improved budgeting techniques in relation to costs of staff training and development. Refinement of these techniques needs to be activated.

4. Communication

4.1 Internal

One member of staff who was interviewed did not appear to be aware of the organization's desire to achieve IiP status. This person was vague about what training she had received. This lack of awareness would suggest that communication should be improved between staff and their managers. This is particularly the case given the enthusiasm for IiP demonstrated by management.

The Assessor attended a team meeting between managers and staff at which a positive atmosphere was prevalent. The meeting was well chaired. However, minutes of previous meetings did not reflect training and staff development issues. It is suggested that these be more clearly noted.

Throughout this survey, it was unclear as to what the quality of communication was between Trustees and Management.

4.2 External

The charity conducted a review in 2006 which recommended efforts to be made to improve communication between the organization and its client group. To date this has not been carried out. Immediate action needs to be taken on this.

5. Conclusions

5.1 While the management of the organization is very enthusiastic about the aims of IiP and is fully committed to attaining these standards, the problem areas identified in this report require resolution before any award can be made.

5.2 The problems identified relate specifically to training and development of Trustees and Staff, together with both internal and external communication issues.

5.3 If these problems can be addressed within the timescales given, there remains the possibility that the IiP award could be made following a brief final visit. It is suggested that this visit takes place in six months time.

6. Recommendations
6.1 Trustees be **given training in strategic planning**. The local TEC would be prepared to invest 50 per cent of costs incurred.

6.2 Improvements to be made to **internal communication between staff and managers**. This should take the form of improved clarity in the way that minutes of team meetings are written up. In particular there should be direct noting of staff training and development issues. Training and development matters should be replaced more regularly on the agenda.

6.3 **Managers should be encouraged to attend meetings** more frequently.

6.4 **Communication links with client groups** need to be improved. Recommendations on this in the interim report should be carried through.

6.5 There should be **refinements to the budgeting for costs** of training and staff development.

6.6 That a further and final assessment be carried out in six months time (July 2008) and **IiP accreditation be awarded** <u>on condition</u> that these specific recommendations are met <u>in full.</u>

Signed Megan Smart IiP Assessor

What are the merits of this report? What did you think as you read it through.

We could list these as:

- It is structured for rapid reading and assimilation – the use of headings and sub headings; the spaces between the paragraphs, etc. The material is clearly set out and should appeal to the browser, the skimmer and well as those who read closely
- The purpose behind the report is clearly stated
- The background is sufficient for the reader who is familiar with the situation; naturally a longer and more detailed background would be necessary if one was writing for an outside audience.

However, are you satisfied that the conclusions tie up sufficiently with the recommendations? This is a very important consideration. With such a small staff, is it reasonable to mention the person – the computer operator – who gave the 'wrong answer'.

Are you happy with the use of bold and underlining in the recommendations? Are these necessary? One could argue that if the recommendations are written clearly then there is no need for such embellishments. Finally, does this draft rather repeat itself – the various points about meetings and communication might have been better structured?

Letters

Introduction

You will be familiar with letters – so many pour through letter boxes each day. In these days of e-mail, letters become of even greater importance – they are 'redundant' in our model of communication, and therefore more eye-catching. So, it is worthwhile taking the time to write them properly.

The word 'influence' should be on your mind as you think of letters – and we are referring here to business letters – for instance, from professional to client. Naturally letters carry information but they do a great deal more: they also carry influence. A letter is part of your personal relations – your PR and marketing. Consider, when you have read a letter from some organization and it has been poorly produced, perhaps mis-spelled (or mis-spelt?) and it was difficult to fathom what the writer was getting at, what it did do for your estimation of that organization? We suspect not a great deal!

Here is the opening of a letter that was given to the author – the name of the organization has been changed for obvious reasons but the material in the text is genuine. What do you think of it as a specimen?

Dear Mrs Malik,

I write with reference to your correspondance dated 6th Feburary 2008 regarding your PC, as always I was very concerned to receive this type of letter from any customer.
I must firstly apologise for the delay in getting your computer to you, it was an extremely busy period before and just after the Christmas break. Certainly the sales team were working through the night so that we could honour our scheldues, however a small percentage of our customers did experience a delay such as yours for which the company is very sorry about. We enclose vouchers to help compensate for the inconvenience you have been caused in this matter.

Yours sincerely

Did you spot all the errors?

- Spelling of correspondence, February, schedules!
- Misuse of the comma for the full stop, 2nd line paragraph 2
- The odd grammar, i.e. 'for which the company is sorry about', final line.

You can see the effect this would have on any reader. The aim of this letter, remember, is to apologize for a lapse in service; you would think that the writer would be on his or her very best writing behaviour. A well-composed letter in response to a complaint which is correct factually, clear of all errors and adult in tone, might not only put matters right, as far as the immediate complaint is concerned, but also might start the 'healing' process so that the reader gains an enhanced impression of the said organization and may, just may, return as a customer, and even recommend it to friends.

Any letter written for the attention of one person may well get passed on to others, so that the paper, or electronic letter, is an ambassador for you, and for you and your organization. Here is our suggested re-write.

Dear Mrs Malik,

Late delivery of Personal Computer

Thank you for your letter of 6th February 2008. We are sorry that you experienced such poor service from us and would like to offer you our apologies.

Although the Christmas break is a very busy period for us, you should have received your computer by the 15th of January. We have since found out that your order was incorrectly filed with others; this explains the delay. We regret this has happened. We have as a result of this error reorganized this part of our system for recording orders.

To help compensate for the inconvenience you were caused, please accept the enclosed vouchers, which will entitle you to discounts off your next purchase from us.

We look forward to being of further service to you.

Yours sincerely

Does this revised letter provide enough information, i.e. why the product did not reach the customer? It states that 'we are a good organization to deal with even though we do occasionally make mistakes, at least we learn from them and have the interest of our customers firmly to heart!' You could argue that it is a little over the top in its apology and that the final sentence could be removed without any loss.

Structuring your letter

The reason for supplying a clear structure in a letter is very much the same as we stated earlier in the section on reports. Our readers want to get the gist of what we are about; they want to be able to abstract the key ideas without having to plough their way through a thicket of language.

One way we can aid our readers is by putting the topic we are writing about in bold at the top of the letter. This normally comes after the salutation (the Dear Sir, Dear Mrs Jones etc).

We can, by doing this, also provide a very definite structure for our subsequent paragraphs. Think **TRAP** (Topic-Reaction-Action-Polite Close).

T for TOPIC – our first paragraph after the title should establish exactly why we want our reader to read our letter. In many business letters it is often one main topic divided up into several sub topics.

It is important to read very carefully any previous correspondence to establish what exactly are the various topics that need to be addressed. You know how infuriating it is when you have taken the time and trouble to compose a letter setting out your views, your complaints, etc., only to read the answering letter and find that few, if any, of these points have in fact been answered. This is one of the problems of standard letters – precisely because they are standard, they cannot be flexible enough to provide a satisfactory answer to many letters of request, complaint and inquiry. Here is an example of a topic in a letter.

Do you think it clearly sets this out? What changes would you make?

The Contracts Manager
Cut Up Rough Legal Advice Centre
Leeds
L20 4PA

Dear Mr Burns

You were kind enough to come to the Young Civil Engineers Assoc. of West Yorkshire last month. We very much enjoyed your lecture.

You did say that it might be possible to organize a follow-up visit to your firm to talk through with you and members of your team some of the particular issues that you didn't have time to cover in your talk. As representative for the Young Civils I have been asked if it would be possible to arrange such a visit. We would be particularly interested in looking at some details of contracts with local government that you said were particularly awkward.

Would any of the following dates be suitable March 3rd, March 11th or March 15th. 2008. The late afternoon would suit us best.

Yours, with best wishes.

Did the writer set out the topic clearly and concisely so that the reader can gain at a glance what he or she has to do ? Compare this possible re-write:

Dear Mr Burns

I am writing as representative of the Young Civil Engineers Assoc. West Yorkshire Area to ask you whether we could take you up on your kind offer you made after your lecture to us last month.

You invited us to............

Do you feel that this better sets out the topic – the intention of the letter?

R this stands for your response. Having made sure that you send a clear signal to the reader that you have understood the position, you will then need to spell out exactly what kind of actions you and your organization propose to take.

A stands for action. Sometimes these two paragraphs or parts of the letter would be joined together, i.e. the response is the action. However, there may be a separate response section. The important point is that this is the stage where you set out the action or conclusion so that your reader can be in no doubt what is to happen. Such phrases as 'we intend'; 'therefore, we can now'; 'we are prepared to offer you'; etc.

P stands for the polite close. No matter how upset and annoyed you are with your correspondent, this must not show. Keep cool. Use this part of the letter to reassure your reader: 'If there is anything further I can help you with please do not hesitate to contact me on...'

We are not saying that this structure can be applied to all situations, for instance it might be possible to move from Topic to Action without any consideration of response.

Here, then, is a complete letter written to this structure, and in reply to the letter we quoted earlier. (Note we do not usually put TRAP down the side of the letter, this is for demonstration purposes only).

Dear David

T. **Follow-Up to Lecture on Engineering & Contract**

R. Thank you for your letter of February 13th 2007. I should be very pleased to welcome you and your colleagues to our company.

A. I will expect you and your party at reception at 4.30 pm. We shall then have a short tour of the organization. I have asked our contract managers to join us and lead this. We can then offer you coffee and sandwiches before the talk at 5.30pm. We would expect this and any follow up questions to last about an hour so you can book your coach to collect you at 6.30 – 6.45pm

P. Thank you for your appreciation of my talk. We look forward to you being our guests on Feb 13th. I've noticed in my diary that it happens to be a Friday so these timings might go slightly awry!

All best wishes to you and your colleagues.

Do you feel this is a well-structured, clear and friendly letter?

Style in Letters

Layout and structure is reasonably simple compared with the complexities of style. The most important thing to remember is that the style should be appropriate to the situation, and the context in which you are writing, e.g. Hi Bill. Remember that the culture you are working in will affect the style.

'Having a great time', is a most appropriate style for a post card but not for a business letter. 'Dear Sir' would not be very appropriate if you were corresponding with someone in an organization you had developed some kind of on-going business relationship with.

Examine this opening to a letter. The context is that the recipient has recently been interviewed for a job and has failed to get it. Would you make any changes?

> Dear Mr Thomas
> It is regretted that the Board were unable to recommend that your name go forward for appointment. We thank you for your application.

We said in the introduction to writing that *tone* was very important when it came to all aspects of written text. In letters, your reader will be reading between the lines and therefore it is very important to read the text as if in the position of your reader. Try and imagine to yourself how he or she would feel as they opened that envelope.

For instance there is no point in writing, 'we were very distressed to hear about the problem that you have had with your electricity supply,' if it is obvious to the reader that the quality of the service provided means that the provider could no way be 'distressed'.

Here is a possible re-write of that letter of refusal:

> Dear Mr Thomas
> Thank you for attending the interview for the Post of ...... on July 24th. We were impressed with your application but do not feel able to recommend your appointment to the Board. We realize that you will be disappointed. The choice was very difficult.
>
> Thank you for your interest in the organization. We wish you well with your future.

Selecting the appropriate tone is crucial. It takes us back to the advice, '*Put yourself in your reader's shoes!*' This is relevant whether you send a letter or compose it as an e-mail.

Specific issues in e-mailing

We can approach the subject of e-mailing from the sender and the receiver's point of view. Firstly, as receivers. We noted in the introduction that people at work were being deluged by e-mails. We have to find coping strategies. In a recent audit of a large organization, the author found many staff who had absolutely no method of dealing with the flood. E-mails were just dumped into a large folder called MISC instead of being prioritized and 'catalogued'. What is often required is a little training/ coaching on how to make the best use of the office system which handles the e-mails. It is all about having systems for retrieval that work and which can save time.

When sending e-mails, it is obviously vital that they are *headed* in a clear way so that the recipient will have some idea of what to do with them and where to file them. We also have to be very careful to whom we send the e-mails. There have been some notable cases in recent years where e-mails were broadcast to a wide audience, with much embarrassment caused. Then, as we have noted earlier in this chapter, we have to be particularly careful that we do not either start an e-mail war or contribute to it. If we receive an angry e-mail, it is much better to sit on our reply and let our feelings cool before replying. In this example, a frustrated and angry team leader had been e-mailed by his manager to get something done about travel requisitions. Feeling sore he 'banged off' this e-mail to the team:

> There have been a number of instances of late where Travel Requisitions have arrived on my desk after the required date. Let me make it quite clear to you all – <u>no one</u> can travel without prior approval from myself. Individuals who bend the rules will not be tolerated and examples of such individuals will be made.

This is an angry e-mailer! However this message, far from putting an end to the problem, only made matters much worse – his team took an almost perverse pleasure in handing in forms without prior approval. This stimulated another shoal of even angrier e-mailing and counter e-mailing, which was neither efficient nor effective communication.

There are many issues relating to style of written English in e-mails. In general they are less formal than letters; however, we have to put ourselves in our reader's shoes. A style which is too informal can cause annoyance, despite it being an e-mail. Suit the level of formality to the reader. The best advice is to take your tone and style from the sender's own. If you are initiating a communication, aim for the friendly, yet business-like. It is certainly permissible to make use of dashes and other informal punctuation marks, but do take care with spelling. Although e-mails are often composed at speed, it is still good advice to check them before you 'ping' them away. And do be most careful who you ping them away to! Beware of the *Reply All* function.

Writing for the web

You may be asked to write an article for a website. Here are a few pointers to help you. The first thing to remember is that your reader will be accessing this material off a screen and not on paper (unless he or she prints it out). Reading text on a screen is a very different challenge to reading it on paper.

On the whole, people find reading from a screen much less pleasant and a greater challenge than reading from paper. However, developments with the e-book might make this increasingly attractive, particularly for those on the move who do not want to lug a number of books around with them.

So if we're writing for the screen, try to make this task as easy as possible.

- Do not use long lines; keep your margins wide
- Break up the text; space out the paragraphs and keep these short
- Make it crystal clear at the start what the text is about
- Use short subheadings to help guide the reader
- Avoid underlining – it might be confused with hyperlinks
- Use bold print sparingly and do not use Italics (very difficult to read on screen as they 'swim')
- Use a *sans serif* font, i.e. without 'curly bits', such as Arial – easier to read on screen
- If you use of colour, remember that light tones – yellow, pink, green – won't show up well.

Writing for journals

Professionals, as part of their continuous personal development, should be reading journals; they might also want to contribute to them. If you do, it is absolutely vital that you read and follow the instructions for submission of articles. Remember also that, apart from main articles, journals are on the look-out for short snippets, letters, reviews, work in progress, etc. Here, for instance, is a typical set of instructions (in summary) for submission to a journal:

> Type/word process the manuscript double-spaced, including title page, abstract, text, acknowledgements, references, tables, etc. Each manuscript component should begin on a new page in the following sequence:
>
> title page
> abstract and key words acknowledgements references
> tables (each table complete with title and footnote on a separate page)
>
> Illustrations should be of good quality, unmouted glossy prints, usually 127 x 173mm but no larger than 203 x 254mm
>
> Submit the required number of copies of manuscript and figures in a heavy paper envelope. The manuscript should be accompanied by a covering letter, as described under submission of manuscripts and permissions to reproduce previously published material or to use illustrations that may identify human subjects.

Having read and understood the summary instructions, you are then thoroughly recommended to read carefully the detail. Here, for instance, is the section relating to the title page.

> The title page should carry: (a) the title of the article, which should be concise and informative; (b) first name, middle initial and last name of each author, with highest academic degree(s) and institutional affiliations; (c) the name of department(s) and institution(s) to which the work should be attributed; (d) disclaimers, if any; (e) name and address of the author responsible for correspondence about the manuscript; (f) name and address of author to whom requests for reprints should be addressed or statement that reprints will not be available from the author; (g) sources/s of support in the form of grants, equipment, drugs, or all of these; and (h) a short running head of footline of no more that 40 characters (count letters and spaces) placed at the foot of the title page and identified.

This will give you some idea of the care needed in submission of material for many professional journals. Do not let this put you off. These are the guidelines, which have been agreed on for a particular journal, and, as there is competition to get published, the editors know that such will be followed. Such guidelines are updated regularly. Do check on the latest instructions from editors on their websites.

If you are actively involved with research in your profession, you should seriously think of getting published; not only is there immense satisfaction in seeing your work in print, but you are contributing to the wider pool of understanding amongst your colleagues. And do not neglect those letters and short articles which editors are constantly hunting for. Consider such themes as:

- Changes in professional/client relationships
- Developments in communicating between professional and client (ongoing work on plain English for instance)
- Marketing your work to clients
- How the Internet is assisting continuous professional development in your field – Mentoring systems for young professionals etc.
- Widening the pool of applicants to your profession from ethnic and 'non-traditional' backgrounds.

So what is stopping you?

Further reading

Dunleavy, P. (2003) *Authoring a Ph.D.*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

van Emden, J. & Easteal, J., (1993) *Report Writing*, London: McGraw Hill.

Turk C. & Kirkman, J. (1996) *Effective Writing*, London: Spon.

16

Creativity in Communication: Being Strategic

You will come across those situations where you get stuck in your communications – there does not appear to be any way forward. You've probably experienced this kind of thing:

'I keep telling him and telling him but nothing changes.'
'She does not want to say anything and I'm desperate for news.'
'These meetings just go on and on – nothing ever gets decided.'

These statements represent deadlock; the various sides are stuck and there is none of that ebb and flow which we saw earlier was essential for effective communication.

What is needed here is a change in strategy; there is little point in plodding on, hammering away, if there is no progress. The Law of Diminishing Returns does not just apply to economics; it is very relevant to human communications as well.

If you do find yourself stuck in your communications, then be creative and think tactics.

Before reading ours, think back to any time when you were in a communications 'hole' and had to dig your way out. What tactics did you make use of? Did they work? Why?
Here are our suggested tactics. How far do they compare with yours?

- ***Back off***

In other words it is not worth your while going on with this communication. After a time, the more effort you seem to put in, the less 'reward' you seem to get out of it. It is time to cut your losses. Obviously, you would only make use of this tactic if the communication was not valuable to you.

- ***Change the direction***

Instead of hammering away at telling, start asking questions. Very often a change in direction will provide a chance for the parties in the communication to find a way out of their difficulties. Turn yourself round, face the other way, see your communication from a different angle.

- ***Change the mood, the tone***

You might soften it, reduce its intensity, make it quieter, less personal, less 'Parental' more 'Adult'. It can be the tone which is acting as a block to communication.

- ***Change the environment***

Try moving the chairs around, draw down the blinds; move from a corridor to a room or *vice versa*. The wrong environment can rob a communication of its life and vigour. Think of all those meetings that just died because the room was small and stuffy. In 1985, President Reagan carefully prepared a cabin by Lake Geneva for his meeting with the, then, Soviet leader Gorbachev: the open fire, the comfortable armchairs, the pot of coffee – nothing was left to chance to ensure the right environment to remove the barriers between them.

- ***Change your posture***

If you are standing up, try sitting down; try moving closer. There is enough research into non-verbal communication and other aspects of body language to show that how you appear to the other person in terms of your gestures can determine the success of your communication. A great deal of work has been done to train doctors in appreciation of the importance of getting the 'posture' right in dealing with the patient. In Chapter 6 we examined the crucial importance of adjusting our posture to encourage the other party in an interview.

- ***Change the language***

Make it more informal: use less jargon; make it more human by using analogies, examples to bring it closer to your listener. Language should be a bridge and not a barrier.

- ***Change channels***

If you're using visual aids, stop, turn off the PowerPoint, move forward and speak directly to the audience. If, on the other hand, you have been speaking directly to the audience, then, as a change, move across to the PowerPoint and show a slide. In other situations, stop texting and e-mailing and go to see the person face to face. We've seen how important face to face communication is; it seems to be even more important in these days of instant electronic communication. Make use of Facebook but do not forget the actual face!

- ***Change the pace***

If you always provide instant replies, cool it down; allow yourself time for pause and reflection. If you've been rather recalcitrant in replying, then surprise that other person by replying straight away.

- ***Change your audience***

You may find that you have been communicating with the wrong audience – the people who would really appreciate your message have been hidden from you. At work, carry out a review with whoever you communicate most with.

These are some possible changes to your communication that you could think of making if you're in that stuck situation where you do not appear to be making any progress. These are all possible strategic moves (like a game of chess). There is no absolute certainty that any of these strategies by themselves will do the trick, but remember that saying of the public speaker, 'If you're not hitting oil; stop boring'.

There is absolutely no point in just hammering away using the same old channel, the same old system, the same old or new technology. Let's now see how some of these strategies could be used in reality.

As you read these scenarios consider how you would have acted.

Scenario 1

The presentation is not going well; the audience is looking bored, there is a good deal of restlessness, the message is definitely not getting home. The speaker drones on:

> *'you can see in this next slide the budget forecasts clearly show that unless we can make savings on.......'* Yawn, yawn.

But suppose he now changes tack. He switches off the PowerPoint, comes forward to the audience and away from the podium and says.

> *Now let me give you an example which I think will bring home the seriousness of our position. ...'*

Now he has them listening; the bored look has changed (on most faces) to one of interest, and concern. His example obviously strikes home to members of this particular audience. His voice, unadorned by the bright light and large screen necessary to the display of the slides, comes as something of a change and a pleasant relief; the presentation now has an immediacy and an increased impact for the audience.

Scenario 2

The appraisal interview: this is not going that well. The appraiser, Mike, has got stuck with the appraisee, Sean, who has pretty well clammed-up. The questions relate to Sean's performance in his job as team supervisor, but it is like drawing teeth. 'God', thinks Mike, 'another 45 minutes of this'.

A change of strategy is obviously called for. There is little point in hammering away at diminishing returns. Mike moves his chair away and goes across to the coffee pot; he pours out coffee for two and offers one to Sean, he also passes across a plate of biscuits, and as he does, he asks:

> *Why not ask me some questions for a change. I'm sure you've prepared some.*

Sean thinks hard as he dunks his biscuit in his coffee.

> Well now you've mentioned it, I was going to ask about the future of my section; I mean, will it stay together now that the Appleyard contract has been cancelled.

A brief exchange of views takes place; the situation has been effectively transformed – the relationship has been improved. What was needed to break the logjam was a simple change of direction. The move to the coffee pot and the opening up of questions to the appraisee enabled that to start happening. The two 'players' had been caught up in the formal rules of the game – the appraisal. One of them had to break free of this restriction, and to communicate in a more humane and informal fashion.

Scenario 3

A meeting: There is silence round the table; all fifteen people look down at their notes.

> *Well*, says the chair, *who has any ideas as to how we could improve this situation?*

Silence

> *No ideas? We really must come to some kind of decision over this matter.*

Some one at the end of the table speaks up:

> *Chair can I suggest that we break into smaller groups; with so many round the table it may be that individuals do not wish to put their views on record. I suggest that we break into groups of, say, four or five, using different corners of this room, and then come together in plenary to pool our ideas – say, within thirty minutes?*

The chairman asked if it was a good plan. The meeting thought that it was and they all went off in various huddles to 'buzz' away!

The groups processed all kinds of ideas and in the subsequent plenary discussion some kind of consensus emerged. It became a much more productive meeting; something tangible emerged. People had felt less shy about of giving their opinions in the small groups of three and four than at the table, with all fifteen looking at them.

Scenario 4

The Head of Security in a large retail organization has to submit quarterly reports to the Board, and in person. He hates writing them. He is sent on an effective report-writing course by his boss. At the course, he moans about his task to his fellow participants. One of them suggests that he carries out a photographic report, that he goes around the store with a digital camera and presents a visual report to the Board. He can always back this up with a very short written report.

He tries this. It is a success. The Board members now find themselves really concentrating when he speaks. They are able to see the problems. He finds members of the Board much more enthusiastic about his plans. And they agree to release more money to enhance security. An all round win–win.

These four scenarios illustrate the point: if you're stuck, be creative, think strategy, and alter direction, if needed, to get yourself and your colleagues out of a hole.

Scenario 5

Sandi in Sales and Marketing has been sending a monthly report to her manager on her performance. This has been on going for some time. Sandi has never received much feedback from her manager, apart from the occasional memo which starts: 'Keep up the good work'. This situation needs to be changed. Sandi really deserves more feedback on her work.

What is needed here is a change of tactic; she should stop 'boring' and find another tack. She makes an appointment to see her manager. She points out the amount of time that she is spending on these reports and how she would like to receive more feedback. They settle down to think through a more cost-effective and efficient process. The solution emerges as a summary report followed by a short meeting between the manager, Sandi and her sales team, once a month, and after the manager has read her report.

> ***Now consider a situation where a change of tactic has worked. What were the essential ingredients behind this? What can be learnt from this?***

Inertia in our communication

The subtitle of this chapter is 'Being strategic'. One of the deepest holes in communication is that caused by inertia: a failure of will to try something different; just sticking to the same old formula; an unwillingness to experiment; and not applying the basic laws of diminishing returns when the situation obviously calls for it.

So think strategically; refuse to become locked into a position. Put on your 'thinking hat'. For those of you who haven't come across de Bono's (2000) *Six Thinking Hats*, here is a very brief synopsis of his approach. It is based around the notion that we can all be more creative, especially at meetings, if we allow ourselves a chance to use the resources of our various thinking styles. These are the six 'hats' (each 'hat' represents a different thinking approach).

Red hat thinking: Wearing the red hat encourages thinkers to express how they feel about something, e.g. ordinary emotions like fear, dislike and suspicion, and the more complex feelings in making judgments such as the well-known nurse's 'intuition' or the explorer's 'hunch'.

Blue hat: This thinking involves organizing the thinking process, defining problems and shaping questions. With your blue hat on, you think of summaries and conclusions, monitor progress and ensure that rules are followed.

White hat: This thinking deals in facts and figures, is logical and objective. It is neutral, offers no interpretations or opinions and is disciplined in approach.

Yellow hat: This thinking is positive, constructive, optimistic and concerned with making things happen. There is a search here for values and benefits, and a seeking out of opportunities to exploit them.

Green hat: This is the creative hat. The colour symbolizes the fertility and growth of seeds, or ideas. The fundamental aspect of green hat thinking is the search for alternatives. It is this thinking hat that is most powerful in challenging the mindsets.

Black hat: The black-hat thinker points out what is wrong, why things will not work, what the risks are and what the dangers are. It is a devil's advocate hat. In a more positive sense, it is the source of evaluation, constructive and critical thinking.

There are many other ways of liberating our thinking. We would recommend Von Oech's (1990) 'Mental Locks and How to Break Them' approach. He suggests that we need to escape from typical locks to creative thinking. Some of these include:

> *It is not the right answer* (but think of all those creative solutions that at first sight didn't look like a right answer – the Mini for instance).
>
> *That is not logical* – well, was the first computer mouse thought of as logical? Many thought it was a daft idea.

But that is not following the rules. Well, how many great inventors did that? Sorry Mr Brunel but your concept of an iron ship – it'll just sink.

But be practical. Think of how many great ideas that are almost killed off. 'Computers will never be small enough, they'll never be on people's desks'.

Do not be foolish. 'You say you want some cardboard tubes, adhesive tape and string that will save our Apollo 13 astronauts from carbon monoxide poisoning? Are you guys serious?

You can see the drift. We have to seriously challenge these mental locks, often set by others and often without any intention to stifle creativity, but their effect can be deadly. By using these hats, avoiding mental locks and becoming more strategically-minded in our communications, we may well be able to get out of those communication black holes more easily. It is not going to be that easy in all cultures: where there is empowerment, devolved authority and an open communication culture, then getting out of holes will be that much easier; where there is an hierarchical, tightly controlling, culture with little autonomy provided to staff, then it will be harder.

The moral from all this is clear: avoid getting stuck. Each of your communications is different; every audience is slightly different. A particular strategy that was effective with one 'client' might not work with another. Be creative in your approach. This explains why we have placed such emphasis in this book on reflection and experiential learning. If you can spend some time after a success or failure in communication reflecting on why it went well or badly, then you will be on the way to becoming that tactician we so recommend.

We realize that in some situations it is difficult to be 'creative' in your communications: set limits are laid down as to what you can and cannot do; initiative is severely curtailed. Our advice, if you are in this situation, is to point out the 'costs', your time for instance, of not changing tactic, and the potential benefits of making changes – for instance, through increased client satisfaction.

Successful communicators are seldom those who just have a set of skills, they tend to be those who have some insight into situations and strategies that might fit a particular scenario. They also know how to be pro-active in making use of these to suit their particular needs and those they communicate with.

References

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von Oech, R. (1990) A *Whack on the Side of the Head,* London: Thorsons.

17

Keeping up the Progress

Reading a text on communication, no matter how much it is geared to your needs, will only be at best a transitory experience – the print on the pages soon fades, the ideas cool, and the advice dims.

So how can you follow up this book and keep the advice alive? Here are some ideas.

Ten ways of keeping up progress

1. Find a coach

Find someone who can work up your skills, rather as someone might help you improve your tennis, football, ice-skating, judo, or guide you through the intricacies of the Advanced Driving Test. There are several important aspects to finding a coach:

- The coach does not have to be an expert – merely competent in the communication skill/s you wish to develop. The greatest sports coaches are seldom brilliant performers themselves – they are often from the second flight; highly competent but not international stars
- The coach must be someone whom you can trust and who can offer criticism without fear or favour. For this reason we suggest that it is not your manager or team leader. Such people may well do some coaching with you but their position in authority can make it difficult for them to offer you the free and impartial range of suggestions and criticism that you really need. You may find it equally difficult to discuss 'in a completely open way' your worries and doubts, especially in relation to your future
- The coach must be someone who (a) can observe carefully and (b) communicate these observations in a clear way so that you, the person being coached, can understand and then put them into practice. The coach needs to be with you for some time so that he or she can monitor your progress.

We need to remember the difference between a coach and a *mentor*. Mentoring is not simply about skills development; it takes on a much wider nurturing and supporting role. A mentor relationship is about being there when advice is sought. For instance, a managing director of a firm may find someone in a similar capacity in a non-competitor organization who will act as his or her mentor. In this relationship there may be a small coaching element – working on one particular skill – but mentoring has a width of counselling, advice giving, and testing out of ideas, all carried through in a confidential way.

Example
A group of engineers have been asked to form a quality monitoring team. Andy has been elected convenor. He is unsure of his abilities to control the meeting of his colleagues. He fears that he keeps missing something important during the discussion. He realizes that he is very unlikely to get much useful criticism from those sitting round the table: either they are too well mannered or find the business of giving feedback embarrassing, awkward and therefore probably best avoided.

However he does manage to find one member of the firm who has been convenor of a similar group some month previously and is prepared to come along and observe the meeting and act as his coach. At the end of the meeting, his coach sits down with him over coffee and offers this advice:

> *'I felt you didn't include those at the end of the table nearly enough – it is very easy to forget this, OK? I also felt that during the second item on the agenda – budgets it was – you might have brought the discussion to a head rather earlier – it rather dragged on. We didn't actually get any clear-cut decision. I saw Bob, taking the minutes, give you rather a worried look at that point; he was obviously unsure what had been decided. I used to find it very helpful to say something like, "Right now to summarize where we've been on this item", or words to that effect'.*

This kind of advice can be so important if our communication skills are to develop. Coaches are very useful because we can never see ourselves as others see us. We may feel that the meeting is being well-chaired, but a coach who is actually sitting in the midst of the participants can see hear and 'feel' what is happening. Remember, as we said several times in this book, what really matters is not what we think about our communications but the perceptions and feeling of those we communicate with. So find yourself a coach. Even if you think you are highly competent, you may benefit from having someone whose opinions you can trust provide comments to you.

2. Obtain feedback from your audience

We've noted several times in this text that successful communicators are able to tune in with their audience. One of the ways to do this is to be able to 'read' them. This 'reading' can be done in several ways: by looking at the non-verbal behaviours;

listening to the tone and tune of their voices; and being aware of the nature of the questions asked (or the lack of them), etc. We saw in the section on report writing the importance of obtaining feedback from our readers so that we can re-tune or fine tune our product. If we do not get feedback, or fail to recognize it when it comes, we may be fooling ourselves as to our success or otherwise. The challenge is how to get this feedback – evaluation fatigue is a very real problem, people get tired of filling in forms and replying to questionnaires and surveys. So keep your questionnaires short and explain why you need this feedback.

3. Reflection after communication

We saw in the opening chapter that the Kolb model of experiential learning provided us with a way of building from our experiences towards greater understanding.

If we have had an experience of poor communication, one that gave us concern, embarrassment, anxiety, then we should spend some time reflecting on this experience in order to do it better. But we do not want to become paralysed by such analysis. If we have had success in any communication – the presentation that went particularly well, that interview which really got to the heart of the difficulty, etc., then again we should take some time to reflect on this success. If people do reflect after an experience, it is usually those ones which were not successful; this is a pity since we should spend time on our successes. There is no point in being modest; if we are really good at something we should recognize that we can use this success to build further good results or assist others in their development.

4. Observing others

We can learn a great deal about communication by becoming more aware of what others do: their styles, their approaches, and the methods they use to get out of difficulties. You really never need to be bored again in meetings and conferences; there is always someone to watch. By being observant, you can pick up all kinds of cues about tactics that can be employed. We are not suggesting that you can simply copy another person's communication style and make it your own; no, that is not desirable – it will seem fake and others will see this as acting. It is much better to try and *adapt* another's style so that it will fit in with your personality and way of doing things.

5. Taking note of communication – TV, cinema and DVD and on radio/ internet

We are not suggesting that you go around and deliberately model yourself on your favourite film star or TV personality; no, but the media is full of examples of communication – successful and not so successful. There is a good deal to reflect on in these examples. If you want to hone your interview skills, make a conscious effort to watch, and perhaps record for further analysis, programmes such as *Sunday AM*. Listen to *Today,* on Radio 4, where the interviewers manage to extract a great deal of information from their guests in three minutes or less. Think of all the good lessons in communications learnt by those managers who went *Back to the Floor* or those participants who brave *Dragons' Den* or *The Apprentice.*

6. Reading
There is a huge list of books in print at present which embrace every conceivable aspect of communication. From this vast number we have selected some which we feel will complement this book. There is no one text that will provide you with all the answers. The list at the back includes general reading on communications as well as more specific texts on particular aspects, such as presentation, interviewing and report writing. Professional organizations will increasingly be making available databases online; from these you will be able to access a great deal of recent information and research on communications. Look out for 'taster' pages, even chapters from books, released by many publishers.

7. Rehearsal
This is the way we most often develop skills. Remember, though, what we said about this: rehearsal by itself is seldom enough to enhance your skills. You need to have feedback in the form of a coach, a digital recording, photographs, evaluation from others such as comments from readers of your report, etc. What tends to happen in all skills development is that you make some progress and then it tends to level off. This period may last some time and then you'll find things will improve; your progress will head upwards. The important thing is not to get depressed if this levelling out happens – it probably will.

8. Take courses
Reading this book and reflecting on your communication may have stimulated you to go further and deeper. You could consider taking Open University courses; modules at local colleges, universities, etc. There are also specialized courses in public speaking, report writing, etc., run by the WEA or your local educational authority as evening or day courses. If you work for a small firm where it would not be viable to bring outside specialist trainers, you might be able to attach yourself to the courses run by larger organizations in your town/city/area. Very often, they have a spare space due to cancellation/illness and you could, for a fee, join their group. This can be a very valuable way of meeting new people, networking, as well as finding stimulation and enhancing your communication skills. If you've found this book helpful, you can approach the publishers at Intellect info@intellectbooks.com to be put in touch with the author, his training programmes and other texts that will prove useful.

9. Take up some different but complementary activity
By this, we mean have a go at debating, amateur dramatics, creative writing evening classes, calligraphy, yoga, the Alexander technique. Such courses can not only boost your self-confidence but provide valuable techniques for presenting

yourself and enhancing your interpersonal skills. That pottery class may make a real difference to your sense of self worth and confidence, even if you never found much use for the strangely-shaped pot that finally emerges.

10. Come back to this book again
How many of us have gone back to a book and found we had either missed sections or found that, on a second or third reading, we could understand more of the text. Then try and experiment with some of the techniques and ideas outlined in this book.

Conclusion

We've travelled some way since the start of this book. What follows are a few pointers and reminders about communication for professionals – the essential stepladder for career and life development. It attempts to summarize the essentials of the book in ten questions.

1. Is this communication really necessary?
We've posed this question many times in these pages. There is so much communication flying about these days, so much that gets thrown straight in the bin, that we should ask ourselves at the very start: *Is this letter, fax, notice, e-mail, meeting, telephone call, presentation necessary?* We're not saying that the occasional social telephone call/visit isn't a good thing but, increasingly, people are more and more time-conscious and will resent their time being wasted. Remember, it is not just the direct cost but the opportunity costs.

So make sure that any communication is necessary and is therefore less likely to end up in a real or electronic waste-paper basket, and that it does not clutter up your work time or that of others. The following questions are designed to help you towards that goal.

2. Is this communication targeted?
We've seen just how important this question is both in written and spoken communication. A key first consideration when it comes to successful communication is: aim it at the right person/s.

The communication must reach the target to succeed if it is to have real impact. It is so important for you to know who your customers are, their needs – not to mention important details like their names, designations (the jobs they do) their business and home addresses, telephone, fax numbers, e-mail numbers, websites. Finding your target customers and suppliers, and keeping them in your sights, is part of that detail. Neglect this at your peril. Successful communication is often about how you build up and maintain a good relationship with customers, suppliers, colleagues and team members

Good marketing can assist you in this targeting. But so can your own good sense and effective record keeping. With so many people moving in and out of jobs, taking part-time work, going on study leave, having time off, secondments, sabbaticals, completing MBAs, travelling the world, etc., it is even more important for you to gather and update this information.

3. Is this communication timely?

Does your communication come at the right moment? There have been several examples in this book of communication coming at an inappropriate time. In most cases the advice should be: strike while the iron's hot! Do not delay. A rapid response will add a positive image to you and your organization. Any delay might be thought of as a lack of enthusiasm, that you couldn't be bothered or that you do not have very efficient systems. On the other hand, in some circumstances a delay may be very necessary and extremely desirable; it will provide you with that necessary reflection and pause for thought. Watch those angry e-mails! Play for time.

Do not put off answering that letter or request for information. These small seedlings may grow into a substantial part of your future.

Do not neglect those opportunities for doing business that often present themselves on trains, planes and when sharing taxis!

4. Is this communication in the right language?

This has been one of our principal criteria in written language. We're not talking about you writing your leaflets in Chinese or making calls in Italian (if you can speak another language, then take advantage of it). No we're referring to English. But which English?

Think of the times you've sat and scratched your head when trying to understand some bill from that building society, solicitor, etc., trying to work out what they mean in their language. If only they could put this into plain English, you've thought. Well, let us be sensitive and aware of the need to do this translation and explanation for our readers and listeners. At the same time we have to be very careful not to patronize our readers or listeners.

5. Is this communication clear?

We've seen how a muddled communication often gives the impression that our actual work won't be that great. Sloppy communication often implies that a sloppy job will be done. The customer may well think: if they can't get that detail right, then can I trust him over that other aspect of his or her work? We need to apply that famous test: put yourself in the position of your 'readers' and judge the results from their standpoint.

6. Is this communication accurate?

We've dwelt on this point several times. You may have had the unpleasant experience of your bank giving you the wrong information about your account. You go to the hole in the wall, enter your bank card and punch in your PIN and then stand back amazed at either how little or how much you've got left.

It happens so easily – little mistakes which cause enormous problems, like the fact that, apparently, no one could find the binoculars for the lookouts on the Titanic so, when they finally saw the iceberg, it was too late to turn the ship! A simple mistake which had enormous consequences! So do get into the habit of checking and double-checking your work.

7. Is this communication brief and to the point?

Being concise was an important ingredient in spoken and written communication, provided we didn't become terse and abrupt. Your reader or listener is usually busy; he or she will not want to plough through lengthy letters, reports or proposals, nor will your rambling phone call be welcome.

It is important to ensure that all our communication at work, with customers, suppliers and colleagues, should be as concise as possible. However, we should take care that it is not so short that it can become abrupt and rude.

If the key material is put into a summary or an abstract, then we may want to provide for the users of our communication extra support in the form of supplementary materials, annexes, appendices etc. This may be necessary to reassure them that we haven't skimped on the work.

8. Does this communication cover what it should cover?

As we aim to be concise, we have to be careful to make sure that all the key points have been covered.

Isn't it frustrating to open that envelope and to find that only three of the four pages relating to the job that you are applying for has been enclosed, or part one of the quote is there but no sign of part two. Even worse is the situation where the firm has at last paid up but inside the envelope, believe it or not, is their remittance for only half the amount due! So always check that what you do covers what you've been asked to do.

9. Will this communication get a response?

We've noted just how important this aspect of communication is. There is little point in just hammering away at communicating with people if you do not have a clue if anyone is actually receiving, listening and attending.

Effective communication is about checking that the message has gone home. This means taking trouble to find out if there is a response, and if there isn't, then ask for one – in the nicest possible way. You have probably been at the receiving end of those remarks:

'Well I thought she'd understood that we'd have to scrap it'.

'As you never said anything, I thought it was OK to go ahead'.

So many problems in communication arise because we do not bother to get feedback/response to our message. We often assume that, because the message has been sent, all is well; it has been received. It is a very dangerous assumption, especially with the sending of e-mails. Do not assume. Check.

10. Is this communication reasonable as far as its tone is concerned?
'It is not so much what you say, it is the way that you say it'. We have seen what happens when we become 'Parental' in our tone; how it can drive our respondent into a 'Child' mode. It is so often the tone of voice in that curt dismissal in the letter that leaves the listener and reader feeling cold, rejected and angry.

Tone of voice, tone in the writing can make a very big difference to how we understand and remember the communication.

Here, then, reduced to ten questions are some of the basic ingredients of all successful communication; themes which have run throughout this book. Whether you are studying, working for an organization or working for yourself, you will find that your communication can be improved if you respect these key ideas and be aware of them whenever you communicate. Let's summarize these key questions in a form of a checklist.

- Is this communication necessary?
- Is it targeted?
- Is it timely?
- Is it in the right language?
- Is it clear?
- Is it accurate?
- Is it short and to the point?
- Does it cover what it should cover?
- Can we get a response?
- Is the tone OK? Adult not parental.

We hope that you have found, and will continue to find, this book helpful in enhancing your communication skills and in your careers.

Further Reading

Somers, M. (2008). *Coaching at Work,* Chichester: Jossey-Bass.

General Reading on Communications

Adams, S. (2000) *The Dilbert Principle*, London: Boxtree. It is not just the cartoons but the wonderful e-mailed examples of appalling communications from readers which make this such a stimulating text.

Berger, J. (2008) *Ways of Seeing*, London Penguin. A classic study of visual communication – based on his 1972 BBC television series.

Bragg, M. (2004) *The Adventure of English*, London: Sceptre. An excellent guide to the history and development of the language – very readable.

Bryson, B. (1991) *Mother Tongue*, London: Penguin. He explores with skill and wit the various varieties of English, has plenty to say about 'good English' and the future of the language.

Cialdini, R. (2007) *The Psychology of Influence of Persuasion*, New York: Collins. A stimulating account of the ways by which one's messages can be tuned to the needs of your audiences.

Culbert, S. (2008) *Beyond Bullsh*t: Straight Talk at Work*, Stanford: Stanford Business Books. A study of language in the work place and the strategies and subterfuges that lie behind communication.

Dunleavy, P. (2003) *Authoring a Ph.D.*, Basingstoke: Palgrave. Though targeted at post-graduate students in the social sciences, the chapters on planning and redrafting a lengthy text will be useful for those writing reports and articles.

Fox, K. (2004). *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*, London: Hodder. An interesting, humorous and lively account of verbal and non-verbal signs, symbols and customs.

Gowers, E. (1987) *Complete Plain Words*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. First published in 1948 and still going strong in numerous editions and full of good sense about written communication. Excellent examples.

Hoggart, R. (1960) *The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. A classic work on the uses and abuses of the English language in a consumer society. See also:

Hoggart, R (2003) *Everyday Language and Everyday Life*, New Brunswick: Transaction.

Jardine, L. (2008) *A Point of View*, London: Preface. A model of how to write short (12–15 minute) radio scripts; beautifully argued and full of wit and wisdom.

Moran, J. (2008) *Queuing for Beginners*, London: Profile. An insightful and entertaining examination of 'everyday life'. Chapter 7 on the informal 'rules' relating to e-mail and Chapters 3 & 4 on office life and communication are particularly relevant.

Markham, U. (1993) *How to Deal with Difficult People*, London: Thorsons. A useful book full of practical advice.

Orwell G. & Crick, B. (2000). *Essays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. Those interested in the art of writing should read 'Politics and the English Language' in particular.

Ostrov, R. (2003) *Power Reading*, North San Juan: Education Press. The other side of the equation from writing. This book provides a great deal of helpful advice as to how we can become not just speedier readers but also more effective ones. Contains useful exercises.

Rowntree, D. (1991) *The Manager's Book of Checklists*, London: Corgi. A useful set of checklists, many of which are directly concerned with communications, such as giving a presentation, carrying out interviews and writing reports.

Semler, R. (1993) *Maverick*, London: Arrow. This is about business and a revolutionary way of running an organization; it is full of implications for how to stimulate communication between staff and managers.

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