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**The Power of Communication**

by

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Introduction

I suppose if you have a look at the claims in the conference brochure, this would seem like quite a boastful claim - No other single management skill will influence your career as much as the ability to communicate. It can act as the high power fuel to launch your career or work as the oil to smooth the way to successful teamwork.

In my opinion those claims are understated. I started delving into the world of public speaking and communication about 14 years ago when as a young - younger engineer I decided to improve my presentation skills. After 14 years I'm still learning the skills of communication and their far reaching consequences. And its not just me. I've coached and mentored scores of people in that time who have arrived timid and nervous and left confident communicators. So yes if you asked me I would say that communication is the key skill. Of course you may think I'm biased. So I've also got independent support.

The University of Stamford recently carried out research for Telecoms giant AT & T into the factors that influence careers. The number one factor in career success was the ability to communicate confidently. I also picked up support from an autobiography I was reading in which the author said the following.

The most important thing I learned in high school was how to communicate.

But once I was elected I lost touch with my constituency. I thought I was a cut above the other kids and I started acting like a snob. I hadn't learned yet, what I know now. the ability to communicate is everything.

The only way you can motivate people is to communicate with them.

You can have brilliant ideas but if you can't get them across you won't get anywhere. I've known a lot of engineers with terrific ideas who had trouble explaining them to other people. Its always a shame when a guy with great talent can't tell the board or a committee what's in his head.

Those words are from Lee Iacocca . He was famous for being the Chairman of Ford in America then he was fired and he became CEO of Chrysler. What's less well know is he started as a Mechanical Engineer.

So some pretty powerful support for the value of public speaking as a career booster but what about my company claims.

Used wisely it is a powerful motivator but without it whole companies can grind to a halt. - Really - Oh yes just ask Boeing.

In 1999 Boeing felt they had to respond to the ever increasing competitive threat of Airbus. As Airbus could offer better financial terms than Boeing they felt that they had to focus on financial saving.

The people at the top brought in new financial executives to oversee the change and that in itself was new because Boeing had previously promoted from within. The new executives issued a series of dictats on the way the company should be run.

This did not please the engineers who felt that their opinions had been overlooked and that they started to question Boeings new values. In particular they wanted reassurance that engineering excellence was still a core value of Boeing.

Again Boeing to chose to ignore the engineers and pursue its top down command style.

Had Boeing been more sensitive to the Engineers concerns and discussed it with them the change of emphasis would have been far more readily accepted, perhaps even blessed as the cost of maintaining world wide industry leadership.

Instead, ignoring their engineers led to the longest and most costly strike in Boeings history.

If its such a powerful tool then why isn't adopted wholeheartedly in every course. I know in my Engineering degree there was just a little written communication on the course. That level of training prompted John Pullen to write an article in Engineering called trained to fail in which he related that Engineers had by far the greatest skills that were most likely to get them promoted to Board level, but once they were there their poorer interpersonal skills meant they were likely to fare far worse that their non technical colleagues.

I know that things are changing now and communication skills form a far larger part of engineering course but one part of the problem is that the full extent of communication skills is not well understood.

In fact if you enjoy speaking in public my advice is - be very careful who you tell! I've noticed that when I tell people I'm a public speaker their eyes glaze over and I know that mentally their putting me in the same category as their other friends who like amateur dramatics. As if communication were all about acting. A bit later we'll have a look at the balance between body language and the skills of written communication.

But when you talk about speaking or presentations people's mind immediately see an image of talking on a major stage or work type presentations but those same skills spread far wider through your life.

For instance two major skills that you learn in public speaking are evaluation and impromptu speaking.

Strangely when we start teaching people to communicate in public we start teaching them to evaluate - give feedback- because the first skill you need in evaluation is the hardest in communication - that's to listen and observe someone else. Coaches have a different word for it its called the concept of giving someone Exquisite attention and I think that's a lovely phrase for it.

But they have to learn how to give feedback in a way that will motivate someone to improve and that does not mean criticism - not even constructive criticism.

But once you learn how to give effective evaluation it has an impact throughout your working life. When you have to feed back on projects and documents or when you have to give appraisals.

The second skill you learn is impromptu speaking. The ability to speak on your feet. Of all the people I admire its the competition Impromptu speaker who stand at the back of an audience of 300 knowing that they're just about to get their speech title and they've got the time it takes to walk to the stage to construct their speech and deliver it to the audience.

But you don't need to go to those lengths once you learn to structure thoughts quickly you'll never be put on the spot again if someone asks your opinion in a meeting or if you're handling a question and answer session.

And even in the subjects that aren't called communication skills communication has a big impact. About 70% of Time management is communication. Its about how we express how we deal with people who ask us to do more work.

Negotiation is about a 95% communication skills. You use the 5% to learn the rules and then the rest is about delivering the right message.

So if great communication skills have a such a big impact in our lives why don't we make better use of it. Well its because its not as easy as we think it is. In fact I've taken to calling communication a Weapon of mass construction and its shares some similarities with its more sinister counterpart in tat everyone thinks they've got it but there is very little evidence.

So lets have a look at just what's involved in a simple one to one communication.

Universal model

Pre-Filters

The pre-filters are the first of three banks of filters and they're the most changeable the other two types are based on who were are and so they change far more slowly.

The pre-filters depend on our judgement of the communication that faces us. They are our response to people's moods so if we go to speak to someone who's relaxed we would give a different slant to the message than if they were very formal. We might think about it twice if we had an unpopular message to deliver to our boss and just as we get to their door we hear them having a furious row on the phone.

If we go with a message to someone whose just packing their case for the night to leave we would perhaps make the message more snappy.

So even before we've started delivering the message we've started to change it. But theirs more to come because we have another two banks of filters to get through.

Now both the next two banks of filters are about our personal types. They are just two I've picked because their simple to understand and use straightaway. But there are lots and that's why everyone is unique. Now just a word about delving into our type or any other vaguely psychological knowledge that concerns us. Sometimes there's a concern that using this information is manipulative. Its no more manipulative than going to France and learning French. We all speak a slightly different language and good communication is about understanding what language someone else speaks and giving them the information in that form. It can't be used to get people to do things against their will just because you understand how they think.

Our second general concern is that we get "type cast" but it is better to think of these types as moods rather than types. We may change type according to circumstances e.g. people under pressure to meet a deadline will often migrate towards a very task focussed style. We can also change our behaviour by developing new habits, although it is unlikely that we can change between extremes of characteristic.

So the first batch of filters relates to the communication style we favour.

There are in general three type of communication style Visual, Audio and Kinaesthetic. and we can pick which type we are

Visual People tend to : Ask if things look right, Say "See you later", enjoy art, Like reading.

Audio People tend to : Say "Something sound right", Say "Speak to you later", prefer music, Like discussing things and like lectures,

Kinaesthetic : (Or Physical) Say does it feel right, Say "I'll be in touch", prefer dance or sculpture, like to be hands on and try things.

And so you can understand that each of them talks a different language. If we were trying to sell them a car we would be wasting our time talking to a visual about anything but the way it looks and we'd be better of not telling them but showing them. The audio person will be best off listening to the engine, the clock ticking the door shutting and the Kinaesthetic will just love the feel of the leather , the smooth bodywork and the thick carpet.

Now I want you to discuss with your neighbour which style you think you are but before I do so You probably won't be just one type you'll be a combination like me. I'm a dominant Audio with a hint of Kinaesthetic.

The second type of filter is the Type filter which refers to our personal characteristics. The Character types I have chosen are based on the work of Carl Jung around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and broadly split our characteristics into four types :

#### The Driver

The name of the driver gives us a good mental picture of the type. A person who is driven, often working at pace and determined to get things achieved. They are very much more task focussed than people orientated and like things to happen quickly. They have good organisational skills and like to make quick decisions and generally have a very short attention span. You would be most likely to find them pushing up through your organisation which they view as one measure of success.

#### The Analytical

The Analytical, as the name suggests loves one thing, lots and lots of data. They with the Driver are the two types you are most likely to meet in an engineering company. They are slow to make decisions because they never feel they have all the data required to be conclusive. No matter how much data you give them they will always think of one more case that you haven't considered.

They have great powers of concentration and will happily spend three days studying a report and think that they still need a further half do to finish the job properly. They are normally well organised and like the Driver make their decisions largely driven by logic and data.

You will be less likely to encounter the next two types in engineering companies, but its quite possible you will see part of them in the people you work with.

#### The Extrovert.

The Extrovert is spotted by their love of an audience and being in the lime light. They are typically in training and sales and are driven by emotion far more than logic. They tend to be disorganised and with a limited attention span have little time for attention to detail. They run on enthusiasm and like large involvement in the start of projects but are often weak at completing tasks.

#### The Amiable

Amiable are often good team members. They're not very decisive, but they can see both sides of a debate and so are good at smoothing conflict within a team and bringing better team performance. They are often calmer quieter types and so can approach anyone in the team in a non-threatening way. They are prone to changes of mind so if you want them to make a decision get it in writing. They also have long attention spans and so will stick at a task until its complete.

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All these character type bring different strengths and weaknesses and we need that for a balanced team. So its good that we have all these different types – until they come to talk to each other. That's when they drive each other mad.

If the Driver goes to the Analytical, they're likely to want a quick decision, take only a summary of data and want to persuade the Analytical to their way of thinking. The Analytical will not like this and want to take their time to make the decision and have all the facts which will drive the Driver mad.

Similarly if the Analytical goes to the Driver for a decision he will want to take four lever arch files of data and will say "This can be over quickly if you would just give me an hour or so of your time". The driver will despair and wonder how anyone can talk for so long on one subject and they will probably give the Analytical the impression they're trying to rush them.

However it is quite possible for the two of them to work together if they understand how the other works.

In the first example, the Driver will have to go to the Analytical with all the data and give him some time to review it to get a sensible solution. The Driver should give the Analytical a deadline to achieve the decision by and leave them in peace. The Analytical will be happy with this and will accommodate a faster decision. But don't push them for a decision too quickly they. If you do they will carry on thinking about the problem after you've gone and come up with objections and changes of mind later.

In the second example the Analytical can take their four lever arch files full of data but it must have an Index, Summary and list of Conclusions right at the start. That way the Driver can review the findings, dive into the data where necessary and agree the conclusions. If he really wants to please the Analytical the Driver can ask to keep the data for half a day so the Analytical will feel the Driver has considered their work properly.

The key factor in all the interpersonal communication is not what we are. It's understanding that we are different and behave in different ways and in order to communicate effectively we need to understand one another "language" and deliver our communication in a way that makes it easy for the listener to deal with.

These Style and Type filters modify our message so that, although we believe we're delivering a neutral message we have biased it by our own characteristics. However before the message can get home we need to make sure the receiver is on the right channel.

Just like a TV, if you want to see BBC you've got to select the right channel. The same is true of interpersonal communication. When we speak to someone we want their attention on what we are saying for the communication to be effective. We can do that by asking for their attention "Have you got a minute to discuss this?" They will normally either agree and focus on us or ask for an alternative time. An even better way of setting the right channel is to use the word "Help". It seems that we have an inbuilt reaction to a call for help which gets our attention quickly.

Once you have the person's attention you can speak – until then it's likely to be a waste of time.

Now we've reached half-way in the communication and it seems like the hard work is over - but it's only just beginning. The hardest part is to come.

The hardest part of any communication is the listening. It may not be so obvious when we all speak the same language but just go back to our French analogy. We can pick up a limited French vocabulary and form convincing sentences in our head asking for what we want. Of course if the French person thinks we can speak French and replies fluently then we are sunk!

They assume we have the same vocabulary and speed of interpretation that they have and of course its too much, too fast for us.

The same is true in our own language. We need to make sure the communication is in straightforward language, delivered at a sensible pace to gain the greatest chance of the listener receiving the message properly.

All this assume that it's a good clear day for transmission, but of course there is normally noise around to distort the message and so its important to have one vital final element – The feedback loop.

We still retain it in verbal communication. When you ask someone to do things they may say “OK” so that we know the message has been received and is going to be actioned. In our e-mail that's not always the case and if we don't make a quick reply to let the sender know we agree with the request the communication loop breaks down. If your e-mailing a request to someone I suggest you finish by asking them to reply telling you if they can meet your request.

If you don't have the feed back loop you can end up with this :

I know you believe you understand what you think I said - but -  
I'm not sure you realize that what you heard was not what I meant.

## Group Communications

Well no we've had a look at just how hard it is to speak to one person so we can imagine how it is with a group. We've already said that everyone is different so when we get them in a group surely we can't please them all. well probably not but we can certainly go some way towards it.

We've just seen the different types of character that we're likely to see in an Engineering company. The drivers typically in the Management, the Analyticals in the Engineers, the Extroverts in Sales and Marketing. You probably won't see too many of the Amiables in a meeting although you may if its one team briefing. But what we tend to do is make them all sit through the whole meeting so invariably they are not fully occupied and their mind wanders. Its already a constant struggle to hold peoples attention if we're just speaking. A normal speaker will talk around 110-120 words a minute. If you had the pleasure of listening to Dennis Beard yesterday he's around 180-190. But the brain is capable of taking in around 400 words per minute. If you doubt me try an experiment. If you've got access to one of those stereos with twin cassette decks that will do high speed dubbing run a spoken tape through the dubbing, which is normally twice the speed and turn the volume up. It will sound a bit Mickey mouse to start with but you'll find very rapidly you can make perfect sense of what's being said.

So we have around 250 word per minute spare capacity and if people aren't involved in your meeting then they'll switch off very quickly.

So the first thing we can try is to fragment out meetings more. If we've got a long meeting try getting everyone together for an overview, agenda and summary at the start, then get rid of the managers while the engineers discuss the detail. Then at the end of the engineering meeting summarise the agreements, actions required, programme effects and call the managers back in and debate those actions. I heard once you've dispersed the managers its like herding stray cats to get them back again, but like all systems it becomes a discipline to turn up when required. The payback is you don't have to sit through the parts of the meeting that are a waste of your time.

So some planning and creative thinking can make everyone's time more effective at a meeting. And that takes care of the different types in your group. But what about when everyone's together - can we have several different presentations to suit everyone. Well again you can't, but you can go a long way towards it.

Remember the three primary channels for communication. Audio, Visual and Kinaesthetic. You can start to weave all three channels into your presentation.

When we talk we deliver in the auditory channel, when we use a slide presentation we contact the visual channel and when we get people to do things we use the Kinaesthetic channel. If you think back to our discussions on the filters you'll have listened to me talking about the filters, you'll have seen the slides covering the filters and then you discussed them with your neighbour and made your own judgement about your type - so three channels hit in one go. But there's a bigger benefit to connecting with multiple channels than just reaching more people. The more channels we use the more people learn. Just look at these figures :

we learn 20% of what we read, 30% of what we hear, 40% of what we see, 50% of what we say, 60% of what we do, 90% of what we see, hear, say and do. . So when you listened, watched, discussed with your neighbour and then wrote it down you stood the greatest chance of taking the information in.

So lets have a few words about PowerPoint. I recently had an article published by the Professional Speakers Association on the ongoing debate as to whether PowerPoint is good or bad. Of course it is neither its a piece of software. Whether its good or bad depends on how good the user is, and in engineering I've seen plenty of bad examples. I don't know about you but I've been past rooms at the start of the meetings at start of meetings at 8.30 the in the morning and they're just turning the overhead on. You go past at 4.30 and its still on abut the audience are sat like rabbits in the headlights by then. So lets just thinks of some of the key pints associated with PowerPoint.

Firstly the slides. People use far too many slides. In most of the organisations I've worked in they can't tell the difference between a presentation and a data pack so they try to use one presentation for both. This leads to the two most common errors.

White slides. It was different in the days of overheads. The presenter would arrive with their lever-arch file full of slides and everyone's heart would sink. Nowadays it's tucked away in an electronic file so you can't tell what's coming. But with the electronic file there's no excuse for a white background. It's tiring on the eyes and it takes attention away from you the presenter. I know that's some people's intention but it's not the way it should be and that ties in with my second deadly sin -

Too many words on the slide.

Firstly it creates a barrier between you and the audience because they now have to read before they can focus back on you. Or even worse you say the words that are on the slide while they're trying to read which confuses them or even worse you say something different to what's on the slide while they're reading which confuses them completely.

The simple guide lines are dark background - light writing because it's easy on the eyes. 4- 6 bullet points - 4-6 words per bullet point. I always work at the lower end if possible except perhaps where I put something up like the saying.

Where PowerPoint really scores is that it's a graphical channel and we can explain things that would be so difficult in words. Here is a simple example - How to assemble a box. Quite often we're asked to show assemblies in engineering and the technology to build it up bit by bit is available so that we can show how all the parts go together. And if you do it like this everyone gets a really good idea of how it fits together rather than just show the final assembly and let them work it out.

The second place it scores is it can show video. Now I have a confession to make - I've spent most of my working life in the stress office - but I think I'm cured now. If we make something strong enough to meet a load case a stress engineer will generally tell you the risky bit is the load case - because we can control and test the strength of a component. So we could talk all day about aircraft heavy landings but if we showed you this - I think you'd all get the message.

The skill of the writer and body language.

Group briefings

Let's just pick up on some of the key things that concern people when they think of speaking to groups.

Firstly nerves : If you feel nervous when you speak in front people don't worry your in good company - just about everyone does. I do - you can't imagine that you can walk out in front of 150 people and not feel anything - Winston Churchill did. Margaret Thatcher was apparently physically sick before each question time but never shows it at the despatch box. The one thing that helps you overcome nerves is stage time. If your serious about improving your presentations take every opportunity to stand in front of an audience and then you'll find that the nerves come under control. Its not because the presentations are any less intimidating but because you find that all the things you imagine can go wrong generally don't . And even if they do you'll be able to cope.

The other major concern people have is forgetting they're lines. If that concerns you take my word for it - it happens. Its happened to me - I've seen it happen to other professional speakers. In 1904 it happened to Winston Churchill. He stood in the Houses of Parliament attacking the government of the day and said "It lies with them to satisfy the electorate....." and no words came He tried again and still no words came - he searched his pockets but found nothing and ultimately he sat down humiliated. From that day he always carried the script of his speech with him so that he had something to fear to if he needs it. I do the same I use a sort of modified mind map to look at if I lose my way. Those of you who saw Billy Connolly will know that he comes onto stage with a glass of water and a piece of paper to put on his table in case he forgets his way.

The important think is to understand that this can happen and to have a strategy for dealing with it. Some like to talk from behind a lectern some like me prefer to be in front of the audience. I think the closer you are to the audience the better you deliver but this is the high risk area - you're at your most vulnerable when your miles away from your notes . But if you're prepared to take that risk I think you get a better presentation for it.

So how can you develop these wonderful skills. The two things you need to know are where to get the information and how to develop the skills.

When I started I went to Toastmasters International. A wonderful organisation with a mis-leading name. In fact Toastmasters has its roots in America where the Toastmaster is the public speaker and this organisation is the world's biggest personal development organisation. The 200 clubs which can be found on the web site that's in your delegate pack are all run on a not for profit basis. Not only does this make it the cheapest training you'll get but it offers one thing that no other form of training does - stage time. Every time you go to a club you get the opportunity to stand up and speak in front of an audience so it isn't long before your nerves are unimportant. All the skills I've described you can develop at Toastmasters and they have huge range of specialist manuals covering technical presentations speeches for management so you can learn special skills for work based communication.

But even if you've got all the information you need to know how to develop these skills. And one group of people already do - the musicians. I know there'll be several here and in fact your conference chair Claire is a saxophone player. Musicians understand just what it takes to be good at using a skill. They start off with very basic techniques, scales and arpeggios and they practice them regularly until they become natural to them. These form the basic building blocks for them to go on and become accomplished players. And its exactly the same fro communications skills. The ability to see and understand what type someone is and what communication style they are and what type of communication will suit them needs to be build up gradually by regular practice and observation. Before you know it will become natural to listen to someone and understand how they want to receive their communication. Then you'll really start communicating. I know some people hope to go on communication courses and have a module fitted, but it doesn't work like that it takes hard work but boy what a reward at the end. If you ever doubt that the effort makes it worthwhile just remember the words of Anne Morrow Lindbergh :

The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted with the old problem, of what to say and how to say it.