



Think before you speak

Graham Yemm looks at how to communicate verbally with others to receive the right response

How many times have you said something and realised that the person, or people, on the receiving end have not fully understood what you meant, or headed off and done something different to what you intended?

Have you ever finished a presentation or meeting wishing you had put your point across better?

This article is not about keeping cool or holding your temper before you speak, although that would not be a bad thing for many of us at times! The focus is about improving your ability to influence others, especially when

communicating verbally.

How often do any of us stop to think before we speak? It is probably fair to suggest that most of us tend to decide what we want to achieve or the point we want to put across – then we launch into speaking. If you recognise yourself in this, you are in the vast majority. Taking a short time to consider a few other factors can improve our effectiveness.

One message that can help to improve our impact (and reduce the frustrations!) is to acknowledge that: *“the meaning of my communication is the response I get.”*

When we are in face-to-face communication the generally accepted figures indicate that only seven per cent of the impact of our message is due to the actual words and the balance is made up from non-verbal elements, including tone of voice. Although the words themselves are only a small part, and need to be congruent with the other elements for our message to carry the real impact – they are still vital to effective communication.

It is strange to think how little training we get in speaking and listening as a means of communication! Yet, in our adult lives, the majority of our interactions are based on verbal communication. When you think back to your school days, how much time was spent on learning to read and write? (Although, when we consider current levels of literacy we may want to debate whether this is particularly effective!)

Improve the impact of your message

To improve our impact when we need to deal with people face to face, whether on a one to one basis or in groups, it can help to stop and think of a few things before we launch into whatever we want to say. One of the first things is to consider our audience.

When we are ‘receiving’ any communication it passes through various ‘filters’ before we decode the message. These can include:

- Our own mood and emotions will influence how we receive the message;
- Our impression of the sender;
- Past dealings with that person;
- How the message impacts on us;
- Our level of understanding of the words being used;
- How we process words;
- Our internal ‘programmes’.

How often, as a sender do we ever take time to think about any of these points? Taking some time to think about the listener or your audience will improve our ability to communicate with others. We may find ourselves expressing ourselves differently – and more effectively. You may have heard about the idea of ‘put yourself in the other’s shoes’ or variations on the theme. People who are really good communicators do this, whether they are doing it consciously or not. By considering things from the other party’s position you will get a different perspective. This enables you to consider your message in more ways – yours and theirs!

As we go through life we develop

our own style of expressing ourselves. The key to becoming more effective is to increase our flexibility, so that we can present our messages to suit the receivers.

Take a moment to think about the options here. Suppose we were to describe a holiday resort.

Imagine the clear blue sky, and the lovely sea with the sun's rays reflecting off it in bright spots. The white sand of the beach, the small beach bar with the people sitting around, looking tanned and smiling as they chat together. The view inland is of bright white cottages and buildings going up the hill with the dark green leaves of the olive trees.

Or, is it the idea of the quiet of the bay, broken by the occasional sound of a jet ski? As you head for the bar, you imagine the chatter of the various conversations, the different accents. You can think about the music being played and how you might talk with others about the place and planning what to do for dinner later.

These can all be the same place and the same holiday. Which one appeals to you more?

One key element of communication is the way we process, or 'represent' words. None of the above are 'better' than any of the others. The fact is, we are either: visual, kinaesthetic (feelings based), or auditory. Although we all have a capability of using all three, we will almost certainly have a preference for one of these, possibly with another as a back up. So, when we are remembering events we will use whichever of these is more natural for us.

Someone who naturally uses the visual channel will tend to talk about their holiday experience in language that paints pictures. They can see those clearly in their own minds and, therefore, will use words to share the picture with others. No problem for an audience who can also go into their visual channel. Not so effective for those who are stronger in one of the other channels. I wonder which you are?

What's your preference?

When we are planning to talk to others, whether in your teams at work, potential customers or suppliers, it helps to realise that not everyone shares your preferred style for processing information. The first step is to recognise which might be your preference. It is probable that you will use language that fits this when you are expressing yourself. This is why we are suggesting you need to develop your flexibility.



When we talk about 'think before you speak' we are encouraging you to do a few things. As a first step, think about the receiver, or receivers. What do you know about them, their likely response to your message (given your filters) and their level of understanding? When you have taken the time to consider this information you can aim to pitch your message at the right level for the audience.

The next step can be to think about the receiver and consider where they might be on the visual, auditory or kinaesthetic scale. This is obviously easier when you are dealing with individuals. When addressing a group, it is reasonable to presume that you need to think about covering all three, although visual and kinaesthetic will probably be the majority.

To build up your awareness of others, you can look for some indicators. They may not give you the whole answer, but they can steer you the right way.

Aim to pitch your message at the right level for the audience

Visuals will often talk with language that uses picture-type words. Colours, images and scenes will be in their vocabulary. They paint pictures with their words. They will also tend to talk more quickly, be more animated and their gestures will be wider – using their hands to reinforce the picture. They may well be gesturing from chest upwards and outwards too.

Kinaesthetics will use feeling language. They talk about how they feel, need to grasp things, and so on. Their feeling language may be about

tangible feelings, ie, getting hold of something, how hard or soft it is, or it could be more about emotion. They will often speak more slowly, taking time to think about things and their feelings and checking them before speaking. They do not gesture expansively, and may well move hands towards themselves, especially to their centre and even touch themselves or hold something.

Auditories will enjoy talking about things! They often question a lot, want to discuss things. They want to know that things sound right! Their clues are harder to spot in many ways, as they can be subtler. Listen for words to do with hearing, sounding right. Their gestures might be more rhythmic and are often addressed to the mouth, head and ears.

This might seem like a lot to consider before you speak. The trouble for all of us is that we spend much of our life talking – and it works to some extent. When it does not, we can have a tendency to blame others for not understanding. Well, it is not their fault! As a sender of a message, we have a responsibility to pitch it to be right for the receiver. We need to not only do the basics of considering their level and likely response as mentioned earlier, we also need to do our best to deliver it on their wavelength. We need to remember they may not be tuned in to the same one as we are sending on! By taking some time to think about our own preferences, we can identify which processing styles we might be missing. From here, we can work on increasing our flexibility to use the right language to cover the others.

Remember – 'the meaning of my communication is the response I get'.



Graham Yemm is a founding partner of Solutions 4 Training Ltd. www.solutions4training.com His personal enjoyment comes from helping individuals to take more responsibility for their own actions, freeing them to feel they can make more choices about their lives. He summarises this as helping people to make breakthroughs and be more aligned within themselves – whilst keeping a business focus!