



# Person to Person

## How Well Do You Communicate?

**10 Short Articles to  
Help You Answer**



a question of **success**



## **Preface**

I have written a monthly column on communication topics for the past 3 years. The regular feedback has been along the lines that they have been useful in providing “helpful reminders”. The more I witness miscommunication between consenting adults the more I am convinced that we all need regular reminders about the way that we interact with other people.

Our strong focus on “what” we are conveying is a powerful impediment to considering “how” we are conveying it. Here is a short collection of my thoughts on “how”. The source is real people:

- My own experiences, not necessarily ones I am proud of
- My observations, particularly from clients
- My workshop experiences, experimenting with participants in a laboratory

I have selected 10 columns with an emphasis on one-on-one interaction:

### *Basics*

1. Understanding the Other Person
2. Appreciating their Ideas

### *Questions*

3. Asking Better Questions
4. Questions to Test Understanding

### *Flexibility*

5. The Right Mode
6. The Right Location
7. The Right Medium

### *Emotional and Physical States*

8. Your State
9. Their State

### *Just In Case*

10. Delivering Bad News

I hope the reminders work for you.....

*Martin Mulcare*

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## 1. Understanding The Other Person

A few months ago I was discussing the most important aspects of effective communication with an experienced executive. Her view was that the secret was to understand the other person and their perspective. This is simple advice, yet it is both profound and difficult to deliver when we are concentrating on what we have to say.

If you are genuinely interested in understanding the other person then you might like to invest some thinking time, at a minimum, or undertake some informal research if it is warranted. You may like to consider some or all of the following questions:

### Communication Preferences

- What is their pace of speech like? Do they pause? Use a range of tone and volume?
- What is their body language like? Range of movement and gestures? Eye contact?
- Do they like detail or the big picture? Headlines or rationale?
- Do they like visual aids? Tables or diagrams? Figures or graphs?
- Are they interested in examples or analogies? Cliches or proverbs?

### Current Attitudes

- What motivates them? What is important to them? What do they want to achieve?
- What are their concerns? What do they fear?
- What is their attitude towards you? Your business? Today's topic?
- How receptive to change are they? Are they usually attracted to the new or the old?
- What is the current state of your relationship?

Let's assume that you haven't had the time (or energy) to assess these aspects of the other person in advance. In real time there is still a great challenge – and great value - in remembering just to consider the other person's perspective.

Another executive provided a powerful example, based on his own personal experience. A family member had had a serious health issue which left him in a coma for around two months, with emotional consequences for all of the family. When the family member finally (and happily) returned to full consciousness he asked, with some difficulty, "what's happened?" His brother, understandably excited and relieved at his recovery, proceeded to describe what had been happening in the world in great detail. A nurse gently brought the flow of information to a close by suggesting that the right response was actually "you have been sleeping for a little while".



As illustrated in this example, there are three common problems:

- The emphasis on thinking about what I am going to send (rather than what they might want or need to receive)
- The “one-way” nature of much of our communication (rather than “two-way”)
- A lack of empathy before and during the communication (where empathy is simply a genuine awareness of the other person)

Here are some possible solutions to these three problems:

- Take some time, perhaps as little as 30 seconds, to plan the communication by asking “what’s in it for them?” This may help focus on what they want or need to know.
- Remember to check for feedback during any communication. Are they interested? Understanding? Listening? This may help secure a two-way experience.
- Be sensitive to the other person. What is their emotional state? Look for clues in their body language and tone. This may help remember that we are dealing with a human being rather than an answering machine.

If we are going to be truly effective in our communication there has to be a genuine connection between two parties. That is going to require an active consideration of the other party.

How well do you understand where they are coming from?



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## 2. Appreciating Other Ideas

I love hearing good ideas, don't you? Whether they be in a work context ("I've got this great idea for a new product..") or in a non-work context ("What if the party is a dress-up with a theme of..."), I am constantly impressed with the innovative thinking of other people. However, it has recently occurred to me that ideas, when initially communicated, are like fragile plants.....

We really want these seedlings to grow into strong, healthy, productive ideas but it is very easy to kill them before they have a chance to develop. Consider some possible first responses to the person with the idea: "It won't work because..."; "It's been tried before but..."; "They won't let you.."; or "You know what you really should do..". We may not be deliberately trying to kill them - we are just using our critical thinking skills to assess the merits of the idea. However, how will our well-intentioned feedback be interpreted? Unless the person is particularly persistent, resilient (or stubborn) our critical response may result in the idea withering on the vine.

So how do we convey our legitimate concerns? Rather than state, for example: "That won't fit in with the tax law..", let's nurture the idea first by recognising the good intent behind the idea. For example, a response like: "It sounds like you want to achieve greater sales..." will show that you have understood their objective. This provides more fertile soil so that the idea can survive when you table your concerns. For example: "I am worried about the tax treatment of the product...". It is even more effective if the other person can come up with the improvement themselves. For example: "Have you considered how to ensure that the product complies with the tax rules?"

To give the ideas the best chance of healthy growth they need a good environment. Think about the climate you foster, perhaps using words like "and" rather than "but" and "might" rather than "should". Consider the language that you employ and think about opportunities to use questions rather than statements. You might also review the tone of your communication and look for feedback on whether you usually sound critical or whether you usually sound supportive when people share their ideas with you.

How well do you respond when other people come to you to share their good ideas?



### 3. Asking Better Questions

One of the recurrent themes that I have noticed when attending recent conferences and seminars is the importance of asking good questions. I must confess that I have an interest (some say obsession) in how questions are framed and so today I would like to explore: what makes a question a good question?

I would like to propose the following criteria:

1. It encourages, if not forces, the other person to think
2. It reveals information, if not insights
3. It demonstrates genuine interest, if not care

If you were to accept these three criteria then we can consider the appropriate construction of questions to meet them. What do you think of these tests for framing good questions?

#### Open not Closed

If we are to meet the first two criteria then the question must be framed as “open” not “closed”. Closed questions are those that produce one word answers. Closed questions kill conversations. Consider the difference between asking “did you enjoy the movie?” with “what did you enjoy about the movie?” The former is a closed question whilst the latter is more likely to encourage the other person to think. It may provide more information about the film, and perhaps some insights into the other person’s like and dislikes.

This may look easy but I am astonished how many people find it difficult to convert closed questions to open questions when I conduct this exercise in my Questions workshop. You might like to monitor your personal frequency of the use of closed v open questions if you think that you currently ask good questions.

#### Non-Judgmental

Framing the question to avoid any perception of judgment is important if we are to achieve the 2<sup>nd</sup> criteria and not put the 3<sup>rd</sup> criteria at risk. Using adjectives and opinion in your question is a sure sign of judgment. (eg “What did you do that silly thing for?”). This should be easy to spot but sometimes the judgment is more subtle – and not even deliberate. Consider how you would respond if you were asked “why do you believe that?” compared with “what is behind your belief about that?” In my experience the former is more likely to generate a defensive response which is not



conducive to insights. It also does not position the “asker” as being genuinely interested in the person.

### Using Pronouns

Achieving the 3<sup>rd</sup> criteria is a little more tricky when it comes to framing as the degree of interest and/or care is often conveyed through the appropriate use of tone. However, the use of the appropriate pronoun when wording the question is also likely to be valuable. An enquiry about someone’s business may be illustrative. Consider the difference between these two questions: “how’s business?” and “how’s your business?” Similarly, for an employee, note the difference between “how’s work?” and “how’s your work?” It seems to me that if you used the latter wording you would be implying greater interest than the former wording.

If you would like to ask good questions I suggest that the first step is to become more aware of the structure, wording and impact of your questions. With some self-awareness you can practice some key success factors: use open questions; avoid judgment and deploy the right pronouns.

How well do you employ questions and how well do you frame them?





#### **4. Questions to Test & Improve Understanding**

I recently attended a presentation to a Board. It was a complex matter and the speaker was professional and used good quality slides. At the end he wrapped up with “OK, any questions?” I could sense that there were plenty of unspoken questions but no-one was comfortable enough to actually speak up. I’m sure that this is a common challenge faced by specialists where they are attempting to explain complex or technical matters to a less informed audience. If the communication is to be successful, how might they more effectively confirm the understanding of the other party?

It seems to me that the solution lies in framing open questions to test comprehension rather than adopt traditional closed questions. In the above situation a closed question like “any questions?” or “does everyone understand?” is unlikely to elicit a valuable response from most audiences. It is human nature to avoid appearing ignorant. A more effective question might be: “What aspect would you like me to elaborate on?” If the open question was well-positioned it would put the audience at ease, for example: “This is a rather technical matter. How can I help clarify the key points?” I believe this is a more genuine method of inviting queries.

Similarly, picture a scenario where a consultant is providing a series of recommendations. It is tempting for him/her to jump straight to: “Do you agree with these recommendations?” This doesn’t leave much room for the other party and doesn’t truly test the support for the recommendations. An alternative open question may be: “What concerns do you have about these recommendations?” This allows the consultant to clearly identify the issues and enable him/her to address them.

What would be the benefits of adopting this style? The open question lets the other party know that the expert actually expects some concerns. Rather than risk appearing threatened by them the expert is welcoming them. Ultimately the expert should be more confident that the recommendations are accepted on merit. The expert may well be respected for this open approach.

The same principle applies when people are working together. Imagine a situation where a staff member is providing on the job training, explaining how to undertake a particular task or teaching the use of a new technique. The objective is for the junior person to learn the task/technique and eventually take full responsibility themselves. How might the senior person assess the confidence of the junior person? Two closed questions that spring to mind are: “Do you think that you can do it by yourself?” “Are you ready to take it on?” Frankly I don’t think these are very helpful for the junior person.





Here are some alternative open questions:

- “How would you like me to assist you in your first attempt?”
- “What support would you like from me in taking this on?”
- “What level of supervision do you expect over the next week or so?”

What would be the benefits of adopting this style? Firstly, it provides a great indication of the confidence of the junior person. Secondly, it allows the junior to select a framework for further guidance – somewhere in between sink or swim! Thirdly it should lead to higher quality implementation. Finally, the relationship between the two people should be enhanced from the learning experience.

How effectively are you testing the understanding of the people that you deal with?



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## 5. Selecting the Right Communication Mode

I had an interesting experience a few weeks ago when attending a University Open Day with my son....“Hi, we’d like to speak to someone about the Advanced Science Program”. “OK, here is a brochure that describes the program”. We mumbled a reluctant thanks as the “helpful” staff member turned on her heel and left us. “Dad, I don’t think she was listening.”

This episode got me thinking. It wasn’t just that she wasn’t listening. She had locked into one mode of communication (reading) and failed to appreciate that we had another mode in mind - an old-fashioned conversation. Then I started to reflect on occasions in business when I may have been guilty of the same thing.

On one occasion my team had spent hours working on a detailed report on a complex matter. I was very proud of their recommended solution and the rationale for their conclusions. When delivering the report to my boss he only wanted the headlines – “just take me through your recommendations”. I persisted with my original intention to explain the complexity of the issue and the clever work my team had undertaken. I soon noticed that my boss was no longer paying attention and was showing distinct signs of impatience. Why had I inadvertently annoyed him?

I was so intent on my communication plan that I had ignored his clearly stated preference. I had not adjusted my delivery, partly because I wasn’t really listening and partly because I was keen to persist with praising my team’s good work. That’s not a bad thing but clearly, in hindsight, it wasn’t the optimum forum. The lesson for us as senders of information is to consider the most suitable mode of communication for the receiver. They may be explicit in their preference (like my boss) or we may have to look for clues.

The mode is not just a choice between written or verbal. There are many variations on the choice. Some people may like tables of numbers and supporting detail. Some people may prefer to start with “the big picture”. Some people would choose to read the full report in advance, before any meeting. Other people are more comfortable with charts or diagrams – and some just want the answer so they can get on with it!

In any case, let’s consider the alternatives and be flexible in our modes of communication.

How flexible are you?



## 6. Selecting the Right Location

I popped into a coffee shop last week and I couldn't believe the amount of business being conducted there. The plethora of serious conversations, Powerpoint handouts and pen & paper combos left me wondering – don't these people have offices to go to? Perhaps the business community is overdoing the use of the cafe as a communication forum...

When we are planning an important one-on-one communication we will give plenty of thought to what we are going to say (and hopefully who we are meeting with and the outcome we are seeking). However, we may not give as much thought to the location. And yet the physical environment can be a vital success factor.

Consider a scenario where you believe it would be valuable to provide feedback to a colleague on their role in a recently completed project. Which of the following would be a suitable venue? At their desk? In an office (yours or theirs)? A meeting room? Over coffee (internal or external)? Over lunch (cafe or restaurant)? At the pub, after work? The answer, of course, is "it depends". Every one of these locations could be the right choice – for the right circumstances. Equally, every one of these could be disastrous if it is not congruent with the scenario and your message.

How would you decide? I suggest that you could take into account:

- The style and preferences of the other person (and then yours)
- The purpose of the feedback and the desired outcome
- The current state of the relationship with your colleague
- The perception that might be created by your choice of location
- The culture and protocols of your organisation

When thinking about the venue you might also think about the physical set-up. The seating arrangements can set a subtle yet significant tone: standing or sitting; side-by-side or opposite; close or distant; with or without a desk. If there are more than two chairs it is even more interesting. Do you let the other person choose or do you indicate your preference? For example, there may be a seat which subtly indicates the leadership of the meeting.

By selecting the right environment you can reinforce your message and strengthen your relationship. The key point is to have flexibility in your planning and to think about it from the other person's perspective.

How well do you choose your locations for important meetings?



## 7. Selecting the Right Medium

At a recent workshop I was leading there was a great deal of discussion about the number of interruptions that frequently impact our productivity. Interestingly, when invited to volunteer the most despised type of interruption, some people nominated email, some nominated telephone calls and some nominated visits from other people. For most professionals our one-on-one communication comes down to a choice between these three media. How do we make smart choices when we know that we may risk “interrupting” someone?

Let’s start with a brief overview of some pros and cons for each medium:

Emails (including text messages) are quick and convenient. They provide an automatic record of the communication that is readily filed and retrieved. They suffer from the absence of tone and body language and, hence, are prone to misinterpretation. They can also be passed on to other people (fwd, cc or bcc) – far too easily.

Telephone calls are convenient, particularly using mobile phones with numbers in memory for people who usually have them turned on. There is a personal element, although we may still miss the body language. There is a risk of wasting time, either playing “telephone tag” or indulging in “small talk”, and the call may be noisy.

Visitors have the advantage of enhancing our relationships “in person”. We can clarify and explore issues as necessary or as desired. There is a real risk of wasting time in idle chat or being side-tracked and there is potential for other people to be distracted. There may also be an investment in travel time or waiting time.

Here are some guidelines for selecting the appropriate medium:

- Think of your own personal preference. Some of us are more comfortable, all things being equal, composing emails rather than stammering over the phone (or vice versa).
- Think of the other person’s preference. If we don’t know them well, look for clues. A handy principle is to employ the same medium that they used in making contact with you, if they initiated the communication. So, for example, if they phoned you I recommend that you phone them back.
- Consider the time of day. If it is late in the afternoon, for example, a visit or a phone call may not be as effective as an email if the message can be dealt with when the other person arrives at work early the next morning.



- Consider your track record. If a particular medium is not working, even if it is your favourite, try something else. If a person is not responding to your first three emails I suggest it's time to pick up the phone.
- Check the temperature. If it appears that the quality of the communication is deteriorating, try something else. If you (or the other person) is experiencing some frustration on the telephone it is probably time to meet in person.
- Consider the risks of misunderstanding. If it is an important communication the time involved in a face-to-face meeting may well be worth spending to ensure that both parties are clear and satisfied with the outcome.

It is useful to reflect on the preferences of different personality types. At risk of over-simplification, sales and marketing people like telephone calls and design and analysis people like email. There are clear implications for the seating arrangements in organisations. I am sure that the atmosphere will be far more effective if the “talkers” were grouped together – and separated from the group of “emailers”. It will also be enhanced if each group understood and appreciated their different styles.

The probability of successful communication will be far greater if we can be flexible in our communication methods and then make smart choices as to what is most suitable.

How well do you select from all of the communication options at your disposal?





## 8. The Link Between Your Physical State and Your Emotional State

I was recently working with a client who was expressing his discomfort with his recent conversations with his clients. My client is a friendly, relaxed person and so I was surprised that he was feeling anxious about his client engagements. When we role played a recent client meeting I noticed that he had adopted a different posture to his normal seating position. We soon concluded that he needed to return to his normal friendly posture if he was to feel his normal friendly self. Not everybody accepts this link between physiology and emotional state so I thought I might explore the potential impact that your physical position may have on the quality of your communication...

I understand that there may be some scepticism about this topic and there is some difficulty in testing it because it relies on your self-awareness of your emotional state. Hence, as a starting point, you will need to be conscious of your feelings when you are communicating – something that does not come easy for everyone. Let's consider an example:

Suppose that you are called upon to address the Board of Directors of your organisation. In this example, let's assume that you would like to feel confident and self-assured when you present to them. Let's also imagine that last time, on reflection, you felt nervous and uneasy when you answered their questions. Now, for this purpose, forget about the actual questions and answers, and think back to your physiology at the Board Meeting. Let's say that you recall that you were sitting at the Board table when you were answering their questions. You remember feeling uneasy that questions seemed to come from all directions and that you felt that you lacked authority in your responses. Now think about occasions when you have felt confident when speaking (and again forget about the subject matter). If you were standing up at those times then I suggest that you adopt your preferred, confident physical state (ie standing) when you next address the Board. You may need to seek permission or explain why you would prefer to stand if you are expected to sit. But isn't it better to try something different if you want a different result?

Now I am not saying that it is better to stand than sit. I could have presented a different scenario.... Imagine that last time you felt uneasy standing up in front of the Board. You felt exposed, you were nervous about your hands and some of your notes were left on the table. Perhaps you usually feel more confident when seated at a meeting, on the same level (physically) as the other people and with all of your notes ordered carefully around you. In that case it would make a lot of sense to remain seated at your next Board presentation if you really want to feel confident and self-assured. Again, you may need to seek permission but I'm sure that you can happily explain why.



Physiology is not just about sitting or standing and it is often more subtle. It's not about making judgements regarding body language but recognising that different physiology works for different people. So the key messages are:

- There is a link, often strong (albeit subconscious), between physical state and emotional state
- Become more conscious of how you are feeling when you are communicating and, if you don't like how you are feeling, reflect on your physiology
- If you want to change how you are feeling, you might begin by changing your physical state
- There is no right physiology or wrong physiology – it's what works for you

The corollary is particularly interesting. If we don't like the emotional state of someone we are communicating with we could attempt to change how they feel by changing their physiology. See the next article.

How aware are you of your emotional state? How is it impacted by your physical state?







## 9. Altering Someone Else's Emotional State

In the previous article I outlined some ideas for altering your physical state in order to improve your emotional state so as to communicate more effectively. In this article I would like to explore altering the physical state of another person to improve their emotional state so as to communicate more effectively with that person.

Think about a time when you were attempting to speak with someone but they were just not in the right frame of mind to listen to you. This is often the case when someone comes to see you with a problem. The problem may be generating any number of emotional responses for them. eg Anger, frustration, disappointment, anxiousness, fear, sadness, remorse, grief. I suggest that while they are experiencing that emotional state they are not well disposed to conduct a sensible conversation with you, let alone listen to your advice or consider your solutions to their problem. I also suggest that you are less than comfortable in dealing with them while they are consumed by their emotions. What can you do? There are a number of options but in this article I would like to explore methods to change their physiology with the aim of changing, or at least modifying, their feelings.

Let's say someone approaches you with a matter that they are not happy about. They are keen to "let off steam" and seek some guidance on the matter. They are unlikely to be open to your guidance while they are upset and annoyed so how can you alter their mindset? One simple possibility is to change their physiology by inviting them to sit down if they are standing up. Another approach is to relocate, perhaps to a meeting room or an office. Depending on the person and the circumstances it may be appropriate to invite them to a café, away from the existing environment, to conduct the conversation.

Consider a different scenario. Imagine someone has received some bad news which has distressed them and they have come to see you. Again, they are unlikely to be listening to you if they are immersed in their misery. Depending on the person and the circumstances you could alter their physiology through physical contact – an arm around their shoulder or a gentle hug. More indirectly, a similar result can be achieved by offering a tissue or a glass of water.





The use of “props” to alter physical state can take other forms in a business context. Imagine a person is struggling with a complex problem and they visit you for help. Again, your communication may not be successful when they are stuck in a confused or rattled state. You can change their focus by directing their attention elsewhere. If they have brought papers or a printout with them you can examine the report with them. If you have a whiteboard handy it may be timely to draw your understanding of the problem on the wall – or even on a blank sheet of paper. Often the introduction of something as simple as a pen can distract them from their internal funk.

Why bother? If you really would like to help the other person in any of these situations (annoyed, distressed or confused) it is critical to modify their emotional state. Only then can you effectively communicate:

- In a rational manner that you are more comfortable with
- With a greater probability that they will be listening
- To leverage your wisdom, skills or experience for their benefit

If you don’t have the time or patience to wait for them to “calm down” I would encourage you to experiment with your preferred options to shift their physiology and see what happens.

How aware are you of others’ emotional states? How proficient are you in being able to shift their physical state?





## 10. Delivering Bad News (and Surviving)

“Don’t shoot the messenger!” Sometimes it seems that’s our only defence when we are in the unfortunate position of delivering bad news. It’s normal human behaviour to respond adversely and uncharacteristically when given a nasty surprise. How do we limit the damage when we have to communicate bad news?

There are two types of problems in this context:

The first type is where the problem lies in the process – how we are working. Examples include running late with an assignment; discovering errors in our work; and exceeding initial cost estimates.

The second type is where the problem lies in the results or outcomes – what we are working on. Examples include concluding from our analysis that an idea just won’t work; finding that prices must increase; or that profit will be reduced.

We may find it slightly easier to communicate the second type rather than the first type, particularly if the process problem is our fault!

Irrespective, delivering bad news is unpleasant and undesirable. Here are some principles that may help to limit the pain involved:

1. Don’t wait for the problem to get better or fix itself. It will probably only get worse so it is better to face up to the problem. Don’t delay the communication, as this will only chew up more time and create more mental anguish.
2. Decide whether to behave like a master or a victim. Masters take responsibility and own the resolution. Victims shirk responsibility and blame others. (eg “I should have allowed more time for systems development” v “The IT department has let us down again”). Choose carefully...
3. Recognise that this is an emotional situation. It is normal to feel pain, especially if we have contributed to the problem. If we begin with an acknowledgement of our feelings (eg “I am really embarrassed about this...” or “I feel very disappointed with myself...”) we behave as a person and improve the chances (but not guarantee) that we will be treated as a person in return.



4. People prefer solutions over problems. Hence, without sugar-coating the issue, we should come prepared with a proposed resolution or next steps or at least some options to consider. For example, we wouldn't announce that we will miss an important deadline without either a revised timeframe or an offer of partial delivery within the original deadline.
5. Remember to think about the other person's personality and perspective. There are lots of aspects to take into account under this principle. Consider their preferred communication medium. How would they like to receive the news? Consider how the message might be supported. For example, would a diagram be more helpful, for them, than a detailed explanation? Consider who else they might need to inform as a result of our intervention. How might we help facilitate the next communication step? We might also consider what is important to the other person. For us, for example, running late might represent a serious crime but for some people a few days' delay is neither here nor there if we can assure them of a high quality product.

Remembering these principles is unlikely to make us feel any better before we announce the bad news – it is certainly not easy to “own up”. However, application of these principles may make the communication more effective and the aftermath more palatable.

How successful are you in the (rare) occasions that you have to deliver bad news?

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