Practitioner Toolkit

Communicating

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Are you a good communicator?

Do you think you're a good communicator? Most of us probably think we are, if we think about it at all. You might not think you're good at *grammar* or *spelling*, but that's not the same thing…

There is a huge amount of information and advice published in books and online about clear(er) communication, and a lot of it is great (I'd particularly recommend "Why Don't People Listen?" by Hugh Mackay). But really, to save you a lot of time, it all boils down to **two simple things**. (Yep, 2!)

One of these things you have heard before, and we all know we should do, even if sometimes we forget: ***Always try to put yourself in the place of the person you are speaking to***.

The second one is less obvious, and might even be something you have trouble accepting, and that is that ***Words do not have any meaning***!

"Huh?" (I hear you say) "Words have no meaning?? Nonsense!" Well, actually it isn't nonsense, I'm afraid. Not only is it true, but understanding how words 'work' is essential to good communication skills. Stay with me and I'll explain… but first things first.

Putting yourself in the other person's shoes

There's a sense in which this is simply impossible. You can never know exactly what someone else is thinking or feeling, what has happened to them that morning, what is preoccupying them for later in the day… But that's OK. Putting yourself in their shoes doesn't mean *knowing exactly* what they are thinking. You can't do that.

Putting yourself in someone else's shoes is about <u>trying</u> to imagine what they <u>might</u> be experiencing. It's the effort that counts, and the fact of putting the focus on the other person rather than on yourself. This is sometimes called being 'altercentric' (the opposite of 'egocentric'). A focus on *altercentrism* is a key to good communication.

OK, how can I do that?

Well, there are two things to do: one is to ***try to imagine the other person's general situation***. As an employment services consultant, you are most commonly dealing with people who are in difficulty. It is fair to guess that the situation of the person in front of you is stressful, worrying, scary, demotivating, frustrating… If you've never been in that position, it still isn't hard to imagine situations that do or have made you feel like that (when you're on hold for ages to some service that you need information from; when you've lost your wallet; when you've been in trouble with your boss; or when things have just been going wrong and piling up…)

People react differently to stress. Your job seeker's reaction will most likely not be the same as yours. But that's where the second thing to consider comes into play.

Making reasonable assumptions about another person's situation is helpful as a starting point, but to really put yourself in their position as you are talking to them, you need to **pay attention to them**: look at their facial expression, how they are sitting, where their eyes are going; listen to how they are speaking, and to what they are saying (more on this below). If you have spoken to this person before, then you might be able to compare their behaviour to a previous meeting. If you have not, or you don't know them well enough, you will have to depend on your ability to read someone's state of mind from their body language, but this is something most of us can do quite well if we take the time to be observant.

Body language

There has been a lot published in the past regarding the 'hidden codes of body language'. It's mostly nonsense. Body language is part of our innate communicative behaviour, and we are mostly quite sensitive to it. Trust your instincts. Not everybody will behave physically in the same way in like circumstances. What your instincts tell you is by far the best guide you can use. You won't always be right, but that doesn't matter. It's not about 'being right'. As long as you use your observations as an opening for communicating (rather than as a basis for unchecked assumptions) then you are being communicatively receptive, which is something we all instinctively respond positively to.

If you think someone looks worried, you're probably right. Ask them… if you're wrong (or they don't want to talk about it) they'll say so.

R U OK?

If you observe something worrisome in the other person's behaviour, don't assume, ask: "Is everything OK?" Demonstrate to the other person that you really are seeing them and paying attention to them and how they are feeling. If they are not OK, then the focus of your conversation may shift.

Words have no meaning

What sorcery is this? How can I seriously suggest that words have no meaning? Well, think about it this way: when I'm talking to you, you're hearing what I am saying, and presumably understanding. But what if I suddenly use a word you've never heard?

"I don't think I can do that 'cos I've got jentacular commitments…"
"Wait… what? 'jentacular'? What does that mean??"

I used a word you didn't understand. But if *words themselves had meanings built-in*, then this could never happen: the word 'jentacular' would bring its meaning with it and you would understand it straight away. Clearly this is not how language works!

Or, an even more obvious example: different languages. If all the words in a language carried meaning with them, then we would all understand all the words in all languages. This is clearly not how things work either.

In fact, *meaning* is not in *words*, it's in *us*. You don't understand the word 'jentacular', because that meaning is not in your head (unless you just went and looked it up, or you have an unusual vocabulary!) You have never heard it or learnt it. It's not a problem with the word, you just don't have that meaning in your personal vocab.

Now, if you think about this, then you can see that *all meanings* are like this: in us – in our heads. The *words* of a language are nothing but noises in the air or squiggles on a screen/on paper. Meaning doesn't move between us, it lives quietly inside us, and gets evoked/activated/lit up by words…

So what?

Well, understanding this – really understanding what this means and what it implies – will make you a much better communicator.

Let me ask you, have you ever had an argument with someone that eventually turned out to be a misunderstanding? I think we've all had that experience…

"When you said X, I thought you meant A."
"No, I meant B…"

If words had meaning built-in, and carried it around with them, this would never happen either.

So when I say the word 'job' (for example), I have a meaning in my head, which is ***my understanding*** of what the word 'job' means. All I give you is a noise, and then you think about ***your understanding*** of the meaning of that word. And here's the trick: ***there is no guarantee, nor any easy way of knowing if my understanding and your understanding are the same!*** (Think about that for a bit…)

What about dictionaries?

But wait a minute! Surely, words have fixed meanings! That's what dictionaries are for! If you and I have different understandings of what 'job' (or any word) means, then one of us has to be wrong, or maybe both of us, and all we need to do to clear that up is to look in a dictionary…

Nice idea. Comforting, perhaps. Unfortunately, it's not true…

For a start, did you know that in a normal working day, on average you will say about 16,000 words? How often do you stop to look any of these words up? How often do you use a dictionary to see if your understandings of words correspond? Never, right? Who does that?

We can get into arguments about who is *right* and who is *wrong* about a word meaning if we want (although really, if you ask a linguist like me, such arguments, when they are about word meanings, are very silly), but the fact of the matter is, the vast majority of us use tens of thousands of words every day and we never look any of them up. We don't need to. That's what 'speaking a language'

Dictionaries and meanings

Dictionaries are compiled by people (called lexicographers) who have no more privileged access to words than you and I. Dictionaries don't show the "correct" meanings of words: they show the lexicographers' best effort to nail the meanings that most people attribute to a word at a given time… They are summaries, not rule books. And the summaries change! Look at a dictionary from 1850. Not only will it have words in it that nobody uses any more, and be missing lots of words you do know (like "download"), the definitions of a lot of common words won't line up with what you think, nor – more importantly – with the definitions you will find in the latest Macquarie Dictionary. Meaning changes. Language changes. Dictionaries are at best like hi-res photographs of a river. They might be detailed and great sources of information, but the river itself keeps flowing…

means! You know perfectly well what 'job' means. Your meanings are all there in your head. They are personal, and individual.

How is this useful to me?

You might think you are being very clear: you are choosing your words carefully, you know exactly what you mean, and yet the other person is still not getting it. Why not? Are they stupid? Are they not listening? Are they deliberately being obtuse? Well… maybe, but it's neither compassionate nor rapport-building to simply *assume* that, when there is a much bigger issue that is more likely to be in play: what they are *understanding* from the words you are using is not lining up with what *you* understand, and given what we've just said about meaning being individual, *this shouldn't come as a surprise!*

So, why doesn't this happen all the time then? If our meanings are all personal, why aren't we all constantly misunderstanding each other? Well, part of the answer to that is that even if our individual meanings don't line up perfectly, they do tend to line up *pretty well*: we have learnt them in very similar circumstances, and our understandings are constantly being refined by how other people them. But the other side of the answer is… *we are constantly misunderstanding each other!* Most of the time the fine-grained meaning of what we are saying isn't that important, so the misunderstandings have no consequences and go unchecked. But the more we try to get across a complex specific meaning, the more this kind of meaning mismatch becomes apparent.

I asked you earlier if you could think of a time when you had had an argument with someone that turned out to be a misunderstanding. I would be willing to bet that the example you had in mind was with a close friend or your significant other. Why is that? Because these are the people we tend to share more intimate details of our understandings with, and in situations where exactly what we mean can be much more important to us. The likelihood of meaning mismatch showing up here is much greater, as is the likelihood of arguments as tempers flare through frustration!

Obviously, professionally you are not constantly dealing with close emotional partners, but you are often in emotionally charged contexts, and this issue of meaning mismatch is not something to be ignored.

But the important question is, *what can I do about it?*

Let's imagine a range of possible reactions to someone not understanding something you are trying to say:

reaction	comment
Keep repeating the same information in the same way	The quote *"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results"* is often attributed to Einstein. Apparently he never actually said this, but it really doesn't matter who said it, it's a great comment! Banging your head against a wall is just going to frustrate everybody. If the communication is already struggling, this will only make things worse.
Accuse them of not listening, or otherwise criticise their lack of understanding	This is certainly the worst thing you can do! It shows that you don't understand how communication actually works, and it is dismissive and insulting to the person you are speaking to.

	OK, if they are <u>clearly</u> not listening (looking at their phone or talking over you or to someone else) then you might politely suggest that they really need to be aware of what it is you are saying. But if it is just a question of not connecting, then attacking them will seriously damage any chance of rapport and communication.
Let it go and move on to something else	Doing this will only guarantee that whatever was not being understood will either be forgotten or recalled incorrectly. If the information is important, 'dropping it' is obviously no solution at all.
Allow yourself to get annoyed	While it might be hard to avoid sometimes, a good communicator strives to keep their emotions out of the picture. Getting annoyed is a <u>negative judgement</u> of the person you are speaking with. Sending that message can only damage rapport and impair the communication. If you are getting annoyed, pause. Take a deep breath. Remind yourself that it is *very unlikely* that the other person is *trying* to annoy you (Why would they? What would they have to gain?) Put things in perspective. Maybe go back a couple of steps in the conversation and ask for feedback (see below). **Put the focus back on the person you are talking to** and the message you (or they) are trying to pass. Getting annoyed is also getting <u>tied up in your own emotions</u> and thoughts. Don't do that. It will never help. Good communicators strive to put themselves in the other person's shoes. It's about *them*, not about *you*.
Ask for feedback	While asking for feedback is an excellent idea (see **Talk with your ears!** below), there are effective and ineffective ways of doing it. Asking *"Do you understand?"* (*"Do you see what I mean?"*, *"Does that make sense?"*) is a waste of time. These are 'closed' questions – ones that allow a 'yes/no' answer – which really won't tell you anything useful. People will say "yes" to save face, or because they *think* they have understood when in fact they haven't. And if they say "no", then you're no better off, because you don't know why. Ask 'open' questions – ones that require information in the answer: *"How would you apply this to your situation?"* *"Can you tell me about a time you have experienced something like this?"* *"Can you think of a better way of saying this?"* *"How would you explain that to someone else?"* *"What would you say the 'take-home' message is in all that?"* Genuinely seek the other person's point of view. Try to understand what they have understood. Give them the opportunity to express themselves. This is not only a pathway to better understanding, it is rapport-building in action.

Talk with your ears!

Your most important communicative tools are your ears! Seriously. If someone is talking to you, *listen actively,* and if you are talking, *ask for feedback* from the person you are speaking to (and listen to it!)

Active listening

You've probably heard this term. Maybe you've done a training session on it? It's a very simple skill, and one that will make you into an effective and appreciated communicator. It means paying real attention to what the other person is saying, and checking that the understanding you are building matches what they are thinking.

How do you do that? By stopping them from time to time and offering your summary of what they have said:

"So, just let me make sure I've got that right: XYZ?"
"OK, so I understood XYZ, is that right?"
"Wait a moment, I'm not sure I understood that. You said XYZ?"

It's really important that when you do this, you think in terms of verifying your own interpretations, and that you choose language that reflects that. Compare the suggested comments above with the following ones:

"So, did you mean XYZ?"
"That wasn't very clear. Do you mean XYZ?"
"That doesn't make sense…"

I hope you can see the difference right away. The first set of comments (in green) comments are talking about your own ability to understand and taking personal responsibility for the success of the communication. The second set of comments (in red) are condemning or rejecting the other person's expressive capacity, blaming them for the breakdown in communication.

If there is any kind of misunderstanding or confusion, immediately blaming the other person is egocentric and non-communicative. Assume that any communication breakdown is your own fault, and seek to take responsibility for that and open yourself to understanding. Whether or not is *really is* your fault is irrelevant. In 99% of cases of miscommunication, the "fault" is evenly shared. That doesn't matter. Part of rapport building is showing to the other person that you *want* to understand and that you are *listening* to them. Two people doing this with each other will rapidly come to a clear understanding and will form a good rapport. But even if only one person is actively listening, the communication will still be more successful than if nobody is!
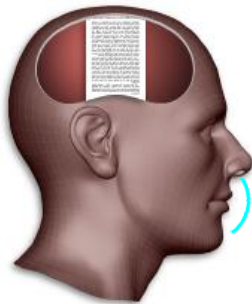
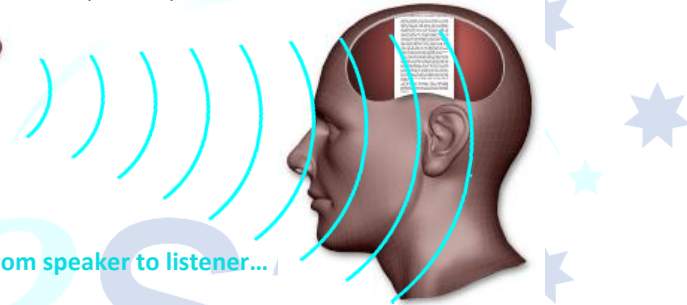## How spoken communication really happens
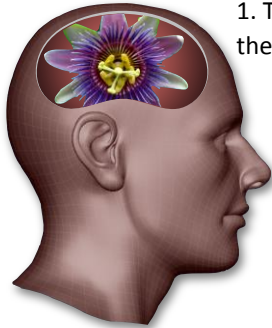
1. The speaker starts with an idea (a "meaning") that they want to get across.
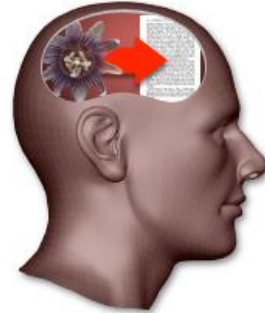
2. The speaker translates that complex idea into language, *(losing a good amount of detail in the process…)*

3. The speaker then converts the words in their head into spoken words (sounds).

Sound is all that passes from speaker to listener…

… not meaning

4. The listener recognises *words* in the sounds they hear, and then uses the words to evoke a meaning in their own head and from *their own mental database.*
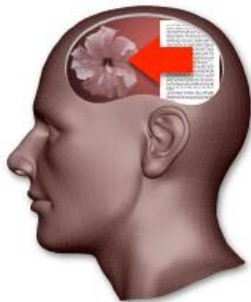
What the listener finally **understands** is a meaning that *they have created themselves* from their own experience, *prompted* by the speaker's words, but certainly not directly *conveyed* by them.

Meaning is in **people**, not in **words**!