



Topics:

- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Perception.
- Read my lips. Better communicators.
- Rudyard kipling's six wise men.
- The word is mightier than the sword.
- If I've told you once, I've told you a million times.
- Communication. Winning the hearts and minds.
- The power of crystals.
- How the battle was lost.



Beauty is in the eye of the beholder



What did you see when you first read the sentence in the triangle? Paris in the spring? Well, if that's what you saw then maybe you better do what you've been threatening to do for years and get your eyesight checked. Hold on. If you saw 'Paris in the spring', don't panic. It's got nothing to do with your eyesight. It relates to selective perception. By now you will have realized that the sentence above reads 'Paris in the spring'. One 'the' too many.

If you ask people when seeing this for the first time to write what they see, most people will write 'Paris in the spring', leaving out the second 'the'. Selective perception - your mind perceives only that which makes sense to your mind. In this case, your mind is trained to recognise a complete sentence; the second 'the' does not make 'sense' to it, so your mind ignores it.

Relating this to people, you see in people what it is that you want to see in people, which supports your image of them. If you dislike a person, you will tend to see their behaviour in a certain light - unfavorably. If you like that person, you will tend to see their behaviour in a different light - favourably.

Perceptions play a powerful part in the behaviour of people at work. A person's perceptions dictate their behaviour - what they will and will not do. The root cause of most problems in the workplace is frequently the different perceptions of the people concerned.

People hold perceptions about themselves, about their manager, about their team members, about their role, about their priorities, about how well they do their job (everybody believes of themselves that they do a 'good' job), about what is right and what is wrong, about what makes sense to them and what doesn't, about their rights, about your treatment of them, etc.

People's perceptions are formed from their life experiences, their conditioning, their value system, their beliefs, their meanings, etc. and their knowledge or awareness of the issue at stake. We can change people's perceptions by broadening their awareness - giving them new ways of thinking about things - if they have the will to change.

To be successful at communicating, there will be times that you will need to alter or inform people's perceptions

To identify and broaden people's perceptions about an important issue, try the following:

- Explain that it is important that we express and clarify the different perceptions that we all might hold about the issue.



- Explain that we need to suspend judgements about what is right and wrong and that everyone's perception is a reality for them.
- Say that the purpose of the exercise is to make a list of all the possible perceptions that people may hold about the issue.
- Encourage people to be honest and say that no one will suffer as a result of expressing perceptions that conflict with your own.
- Ask all team members to make a list of the perceptions that people may hold about the issue.
- Make a list of the combined perceptions of all team members.
- Go through the list one by one and agree which are based on fact and which are based on assumption or inference.
- Ask people to explain the rationale for or against the perception by providing verifiable examples on which they have formed their perception.
- Check that everyone's opinion is listened to and the distinction between fact and assumption is made.
- Ask people to identify other perceptions that could serve us better.
- Ask how people feel about the issue now that the facts are known.



Read my lips

Is communicating with people a dying art form? Many people, invariably older than younger, think so. And they can argue a case too, citing the impact of countless hours watching mind numbing television or video games and the reduced need for face-to-face contact as computers, electronic mail and other technology relentlessly changes our work lives.

Whatever your opinion, there is no doubt that a manager with poor communication skills is severely handicapped when it comes to leading, inspiring and managing people.

Some people are better at communicating than others. Why is that so? What do they do or say, which makes them stand out as skilled communicators? Why do people pay them more attention when they talk and act on what they say?

These are some of the things the better communicators do. They:

- Look for the best argument, not to win the argument.
- Adopt a perspective, which looks at the whole situation not just the parts of most interest to them.
- Declare if what they are expressing is fact or based on assumption or inference.
- Stay attendant and focused on you while you are talking.
- Allow you to finish your point without interrupting unless you're rambling.
- Show that they have been listening to you by commenting on what you have been saying.
- Pick up on a point which you have made and then expand on it further.
- Combine logic with passion and energy.
- Choose their words carefully and with precision so that what they say is what they mean to say. Avoid over-reactions, exaggerations and generalisations.
- Acknowledge points you have made which they agree with and ask you to elaborate on points on which they are unclear.
- Describe things as they perceive them to be without making any judgement about them.
- Use words which are simple to understand and in common usage.
- Start a conversation with a background statement to give you a context.
- Check your knowledge of the topic or situation instead of assuming that you know.
- Use anecdotes, imagery and their own experiences to create word pictures.
- Relate what they are saying to your situation or experiences.
- Speak up about their rights while at the same time acknowledging your rights in the situation.
- Watch your body language to see if you become disinterested or distracted.
- Stop talking when they see that you are distracted or have stopped listening. (Why would anyone keep talking when it's obvious that the other person is not listening?)



- Seek your opinion about things that they have said.
- Frequently check to see that they are being understood by asking you for your interpretation of the points they have been making.
- Describe the situation to you from your point of view.
- Express their ideas even when they differ from those around them and not get upset when someone disagrees with them.
- Describe the positive aspects of things rather than the negative aspects.
- Ask questions to explore situations rather than making quick judgements. Ask great questions such as: what 'facts' are we using which may be inaccurate or generalisations? Could there be some information missing? What other meanings could apply and be true in this situation? What other beliefs could serve us better and be true? How would you prefer to feel about this? What other intentions could help us? Are we taking the action that serves us best? How could we handle this better than we are?





Rudyard Kipling's six wise men

One rhyme I learned during my student days and have recalled many a time is Rudyard Kipling's six wise men.

Who, what, where, how, why and when.

These 'six wise men' provide a simple, but very useful framework when analysing problems, exploring other's perceptions, writing brief reports or asking questions to obtain information about a situation. The 'information age' is well and truly upon us and managers are required to manage a vast amount of information. In fact, the quality and quantity of the information flowing to you is a key determinant in your effectiveness.

Not all of this information will be accurate, sufficient, and reliable or timely which means the manager has to develop investigative skills - they need to be able to ask the right questions in the right way at the right time.

Here are some points to consider in relation to the art of questioning:

- Identify clearly what you want to achieve by your questions.
- When the situation requires it, prepare a list of questions. Use a variety of questions even on the same theme. A question which elicits a 'don't know' answer could provide vital information when asked in a different way.
- Use 'closed' questions when seeking to confirm facts about the situation which are known to you or which you suspect. These are usually answered by 'yes' or 'no', e.g. "Did you kill that man?"
- Be aware that closed questions are of limited value. They can lead to this situation - "Why didn't you tell me that before?" "You didn't ask me."
- Use 'open' questions when you want to establish the facts about a situation or to broaden your lines of inquiry, e.g. "How did you kill that man?"
- Ask open questions which begin with the words - who, what, where, how, why and when.
- Avoid 'leading questions' which suggest the obvious answer. They may not elicit an honest response. They show your viewpoint and may cause others to simply reflect your view, e.g. "I think I'm managing quite well, don't you?"
- If you are not satisfied with a person's response, ask the question again in another way.
- Be aware that some people in some circumstances will only tell you what they think you want to hear. Explain to people why you need the facts be they pleasant or unpleasant.
- Convince people that there will be no repercussions for telling the truth.
- Use questions which are direct and honest. Trick questions will create hostility and possibly provide misleading information.
- Use words that the person can understand and relate to - listen to their answer to see if they understood your question in the first place.
- Ask people to clarify whether what they are saying is based on fact or assumption or inference.



- When people respond to your questions with exaggerations ask them for specific details. "Look, this happens all the time." "All the time? What, daily?" "Well...no." "Weekly?" "No." "Monthly?" "No." "So when exactly did it last happen?" "Um...about three months ago."
- Check your own understanding of the answers you receive. If you are not absolutely clear, ask more questions.





The word is mightier than the sword

Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.

Rudyard Kipling, 1865-1936, Nobel laureate in literature (England).

But words once spoke can never be recalled.

Horace, 65-8 B.C., Roman poet, Arts Poetica.

Once our words leave our lips, their impact is felt immediately. Retracting the wrong words said in the wrong way may make no difference because the damage is done. It is said that people judge you by what you do, not by what you say. Most judge you by both.

To say the right words in the right way takes a focussed effort and more time. But in terms of developing and maintaining positive relationships, you will be well rewarded.

Watch good communicators. People who are listened to when they talk, who inspire others. They speak in a measured tone. They think before they speak and choose their words carefully. They avoid judgmental comments. They separate fact from opinion. They show that they have considered your world. They use precise language. They check out their assumptions. They maintain the dignity of the other person. They state their views firmly and with passion, but indicate that they are open to challenge. They seek the best argument not to win the argument. They are not dogmatic in expressing their views. They are open to changing their views in the light of new information, new perspectives. They don't rush their words and they pause for effect. They don't use sweeping generalisations.

You will hear effective communicators use expressions such as these:

- I'll be interested to know your reactions to what I have to say.
- This is the view that I have formed based on the information available to me. There may be things I don't know about that I will need to take into account.
- I am interested in your point of view.
- Let's put both sides of the argument factually and then look for the best argument. Is that fair?
- Before we proceed, let's check what assumptions we are making about the situation.
- Look. I don't know that I'm right. But this is what I think. Tell me if I've got it wrong.
- I don't expect you to agree with me, but I would like you to accept that this is how I see it.
- Your opinion is as valid as mine. Let's hear both.
- Look this is a bit delicate to say. But I believe it needs to be said.
- I disagree with you, but I understand your point of view.
- How do you feel about what I've said to you.
- Tell me what you think I need to consider which you think that I haven't considered.
- I'll tell you what I am proposing and why. If you see any flaws in my thinking, let's discuss them.



- Let's explore all the points of view contributing to this situation.
- Let me explain what I see are the limitations in your thinking. I invite you to do the same with me.
- I have a strong view on this, but if you can show me other ways to look at this then I will be happy to change my point of view. I would like you to do the same. Is that fair?





If I've told you once, I've told you a million times

No generalisation is wholly true, not even this one.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 1841-1935, U.S. Supreme Court Justice. Attributed.

There is nothing which cannot be perverted by being told badly.

Terence, c. 190-159 B.C., Roman playwright, *Phormio*

Listen carefully and you will hear many examples of exaggerations or generalisations or distortions or selective perception used in general conversation. Correct interpretation and understanding of communication between managers and staff is difficult enough as it is. Generalisations and exaggerations distort communications and create misinformation. Many people have a tendency to exaggeration, as opposed to a tendency to precision, in their speech.

The problem is that people who may be ignorant of the facts can be moved by the generalisations, exaggerations and distortions of 'troublemakers'. Troublemakers rarely take the time to ascertain the facts or to consider the changing circumstances or to consider the interests of other people. The opinions and attitudes of people in the workplace are heavily influenced by what their peers say and do. It is probable that workers will give far more credibility to what their co-workers say than to what management says. And, unfortunately, too often the troublemakers are the vocal minority so that those people who like to 'sit on the fence' don't get to hear balanced information and can be swayed by this vocal minority.

A manager can improve the quality of communication flowing around the workplace by challenging exaggerations, generalisations and distortions as she or he hears them.

Examples of exaggerations, generalisations and distortions:

- This happens all the time.
- You can rely on management to always stuff things up.
- This is a waste of time. Nothing ever happens.
- Management always make the decisions. They never consult us.
- I've been here for years and nothing ever changes.
- Don't kid yourself. Management doesn't really care about your safety. The only reason that they're doing this is so that they don't have to pay worker's compensation.
- Management don't care about what happens to us. They are only interested in profit.
- Here we go again. We've been through all this before. You'll hear a lot of bullshit and when the dust settles, we'll carry on exactly as before.
- Not again! They are always doing this to us.
- Believe me. They are always trying to screw us.
- Don't listen to them. They haven't got a clue what they are doing.
- Don't believe a thing they say. They never tell us the truth.



- This is exactly the same as what we did five years ago and that was a waste of time. This will be just the same.
- They are always asking us to do these things, but they never do them.
- I've heard all this hundreds of times before.

There may be **some** substance to many of these claims, but when challenged they will often be revealed as unfair and unbalanced.

Challenges

- All the time? When was the last time this happened? Yesterday? The day before? Last week? Last month? The last six months?.....So, that's what you mean by all the time?
- Be fair. Is there anything we've done that we didn't stuff up? What about when we did..... Was that a stuff up? A stuff up for whom? What about.....? They seemed to like what we did.
- Never? You really can't think of one example where we asked your opinion? Remember the change to the roster system that you asked for? Do you also remember that at the meeting on Wednesday the 19th we asked you for your suggestions? I remember you being there. How many suggestions did we receive? None. To say that we never ask you, is that being balanced and honest?

You get the idea. Challenge the words used that are inaccurate, exaggerated or distorted. Probe the person's use of the word to establish the facts. Ask them when was the last time this happened. Ask them the number of times this has really happened. Ask them for the verifiable evidence of what they say. Ask for the basis on which they make their claim. Cite examples that they have ignored and ask them did they consider those examples. Ask them how balanced and fair is their claim. Ask them how is it possible that we both see something so differently. Ask them if an independent observer would agree with the accuracy of their claim.

Push back at every opportunity when you hear exaggerations, generalisations and distortions.

Recognise and acknowledge your people when they make attempts to present a fair and balanced perspective.

Make efforts yourself to demonstrate the balance and fairness of your own views.



Communication - winning the hearts and minds

“The object of oratory alone is not truth, but persuasion.”

Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1800-1859, English historian and author, *Southey's Colloquies*

“Communication is the deep exchange of experience that brings the two parties to a full understanding of each other, including the understanding that they understand each other. People actually go out of their way to not communicate with people with whom they feel out of harmony.”

Kenneth and Linda Schatz, *Managing by Influence*, (Prentice-Hall, 1986)

The first time I recall hearing the expression ‘winning the hearts and minds’ was when an American general was describing the American strategy towards the South Vietnamese during the disastrous Vietnam War. While the concept was sound, the way it was executed ensured that the strategy was an abject failure. In reality, both the people of North and South Vietnam were alienated, if for different reasons.

Managers probably spend most of their time concentrating on winning the minds of their people with logic, rationale and analytical thinking. They probably tend to ignore the importance of winning both – hearts and minds.

Why is this so? Maybe because it is easier and less threatening to do so. We accept that both what they think and how they feel govern people’s behaviour. Thoughts and emotions are **both** powerful drivers. Yet when managers talk to their people, they tend to focus on the cognitive rather than the emotive.

Our discussions with our people tend to be along rational and logical lines which presumes that people always think and act logically and rationally. The fact that they don’t is why we have managers.

How do you incorporate emotions – yours and theirs – into your discussions with your people? It is not easy. Many of us – possibly more so with men than women – find it hard to express feelings. When you ask a man how he feels, you are more likely to get a response that tells you what he is thinking. Men tend to repress feelings.

Here are some guidelines to get at the underlying emotions affecting behaviour:

Be authentic yourself. Practise getting in touch with your own feelings. Try focussing on how you are feeling – block other things out of your mind. Close your eyes and ‘feel’ your body in your mind from head to foot. Write down words that describe how you feel, not what you think. Express your feelings honestly.

Describe your genuine feelings using statements such as:

◆ I feel disillusioned and let down ◆ I feel uncomfortable with this ◆ I’m angry that you did that ◆ I’m disappointed that this has happened ◆ I’m apprehensive about doing this ◆ I feel such great relief ◆ I’m really pissed off about this ◆ I feel very comfortable about your approach ◆ I feel a lot of anxiety about this ◆ What you did makes me feel very confident about you ◆ I feel very encouraged by your efforts ◆ I’m really excited about our plans ◆ I feel sad that this has happened ◆ This just doesn’t feel right to me, etc.



Conversations which involve both thoughts and feelings are more honest, more powerful, more rewarding and, importantly, more likely to lead to the behaviour you desire from your people

Encourage your people to express their emotions by asking:

- How do you feel about this? No. I don't want to know just what you are thinking. I want to know how you are feeling.
- What's happening for you in relation to this situation?
- How do you feel inside about this?
- What does your heart tell you to do?
- What is your gut feel for this?
- Forget all the logic. What does your intuition say?
- What's your emotional commitment to this?
- Would you say you feel good or bad about this?
- Well we've heard from everybody in terms of what we think about the situation. Now I'd like to hear how we all feel about the situation.

Having got the feelings out in the open, we can now explore what's causing them. Ever heard yourself after the event say something like, "I wish that I hadn't ignored my gut feeling."

Many a disaster has been avoided because someone was listening to their feelings and was not afraid to say, "Look. I understand the logic and the rationale. And I agree it all seems to make sense. But something still doesn't feel right about this. Let's go over it again and try looking at it from some different angles."



The power of crystals?

Modern medicine undoubtedly has many benefits and has saved many lives, but despite what some medical practitioners might tell you there are many ailments and diseases that they do not know the cause of or the cure for. And despite what many of the chattering classes might like to believe, doctors are not infallible.

On the other foot, so called alternative medicine or naturopathy has many followers who sing its praises. On the downside, alternative medicine has attracted a plethora of today's equivalent of the good old snake oil salesmen (or women – in fact, more women than men).

There are a number of alternative 'fixer-uppers' that use the power of crystals as an healing technique. The power of crystals in this context I can't comment on. So I won't. But all this preamble is to lead into a derivative of the word crystal – CRYSTALLISATION or in the past tense – CRYSTALLISED. They are nice words when you get to know them and embrace them. And to their power I can testify.

Once again I hear you grinding your teeth in anguish as you question what the hell this has to do with management. And quite rightly, the questioning that is, not the grinding, wears your teeth down.

From the Collins English Dictionary – crystallise – to give a definite form or expression to (an idea, an argument, etc) or (of an idea, argument, etc) to assume a recognisable or definite form. Now can you see where I'm heading with this?

On your position description for your role as a manager, one of your Key Results Areas should be CRYSTALLISATION. A manager is a key agent for the process of crystallisation in the minds of his or her workgroup. Your role is to help shape the mindsets of your people. Not to 'brainwash' your people, but to help inform their thinking.

One mistake many of us still make is to actually think that other people think about things the same way we do. They don't. Their mindsets are shaped by their experiences, their awareness, their learnings, their context, their motives, their information, their beliefs, their perspectives, their interpretations, their fears, etc – not yours. No wonder things often come unstuck when there is an assumption that because we all work for the same organisation or work in the same workgroup, we all have the same view of the causes of problems, the best ways to resolve them and the same commitment to resolving them. We don't.

Your mindsets and the mindsets of your people will be similar on some things and different on others. Yeah, well you know all of that right? But I'll bet you London to a brick that you actually carry on as if you didn't. Well... not you personally, but others you know, right?

The process of crystallisation takes additional time and effort. It is quite hard to actually make the time and effort because it goes against the grain of what we want to do. None of us have any spare time – we're too busy. And there's the rub. Catch 22 – no time to stop wasting time. We don't make the time to address the things that happen, that cause us to waste time.



Staff can become frustrated, confused and inefficient when they are attempting to make sense of things where they don't have all the information, when some pieces of the jigsaw are missing, where they haven't considered the various perspectives applying to a situation or where their interpretation of information or events is lacking.

When the manager takes time out to provide that information or to explain other perspectives or to broaden their interpretations, that's when the magic of crystallisation occurs.

I have seen this time and time again through our Super Thinker[®] process which places great emphasis on exploring the perceptions and rationale for those perceptions of a workgroup. What once were problems and causes of conflict and waste of time and effort, disappear nearly every time that crystallisation takes place. When this happens, new mindsets replace the previously held mindsets and individual motivation and efficiency are enhanced.

A first step as a manager is to convince yourself of the benefits for you and your staff of using the power of crystallisation and removing catch 22.





How the battle was lost

Eloquence is the power to translate a truth into language perfectly intelligible to the person to whom you speak.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803 – 1882, American essayist and poet, Eloquence

Anyone who isn't confused here doesn't really understand what's going on.

Nigel Wrench, English journalist and commentator, Belfastman

I never give 'em hell. I just tell the truth and they think it's hell.

Harry S. Truman, 1884 – 1972, Thirty-third President of the United States, Look, April 3, 1956

Remember the old story about the officer in the front line who saw a weakness in the enemy defences and decided to press the advantage? He ordered a rider to saddle a horse and take a message to the company headquarters safely sited many miles away from the fighting. He ordered the rider to tell the general. "Send reinforcements. We're going to advance." The rider rode until he was exhausted and spoke the message to a fresh rider. This rider took off and rode until he was exhausted and also passed the message on to a fresh rider. And so on until finally the last exhausted rider staggered up to the general and gasped, "Send three and four-pence. We're going to a dance."

Getting communication right within an organisation is a constant battle for a manager. We still rely heavily on the spoken word as a key medium for communication. Is it any wonder that communication breakdowns are daily occurrences when you consider this scenario?

As Professor Morris Zapp intones (in David Lodge's clever, amusing and very enjoyable *Small World* Penguin Books.), "To understand a message is to decode it. Language is a code. But every decoding is another encoding. If you say something to me I check that I have understood your message by saying it back to you in my own words, that is, different words from the ones you used, for if I repeat your own words exactly you will doubt whether I have really understood you. But if I use my words it follows that I have changed your meaning, however slightly; and even if I were, deviantly, to indicate my comprehension by repeating back to you your own unaltered words, that is no guarantee that I have duplicated your meaning in my own head, because I bring a different experience of language, literature, and non-verbal reality to those words, therefore they mean something different to me from what they mean to you. And if you think I have not understood the meaning of your message, you do not simply repeat it in the same words, you try to explain it in different words, different from the ones you used originally; but then the it is no longer the it that you started with. And for that matter, you are not the you that you started with. Time has moved on since you opened your mouth to speak, the molecules in your body have changed, what you intended to say has been superseded by what you did say, and that has already become part of your personal history, imperfectly remembered. Conversation is like playing tennis with a ball made of Krazy Putty that keeps coming back over the net in a different shape."



Verbal communication between two people is compounded by the filters, barriers and distortions both people apply to the messages passing back and forth.

FILTERS, BARRIERS, DISTORTIONS

Preoccupations and anxieties

The listener may be preoccupied with something else or experiencing some anxiety about the subject matter. Either way he or she won't be hearing much, if any, of the message.

Distraction – noise, visual

How much noise and visual distraction is happening at the time the communication is taking place? Any distraction will mean some or all of the message didn't get through.

Attitudes

What are the attitudes of the sender and receiver? Are they open to this communication or to you or are they closed? If closed, you are wasting your time.

Assumptions

What assumptions are the messages of both parties based on? What assumptions have been declared as such so that they may be explored for fact?

Stereotyping

How much of the message of either party has been discarded because one or both parties have stereotyped the other and closed their mind to new or different information outside the stereotype?

Status differences

How much of the message is ignored or dismissed because one party assumes that the other is inferior?

Selective perception

How much of the message is being selectively accepted or dismissed to reinforce the perceptions of either party?

The big message here is don't take verbal communication for granted. Just because the words have been said does not mean that the desired meaning has been understood or accepted.