

## The generic skills of Expert Communicators

Expert communicators are adept in communicating clearly in a way that makes it easy for their audience to understand. Would you like to be heard more often and enhance your impact? Here are 5 practical tools that make a tangible difference in communication.

1. Early structuring: the 4Ps
2. Behaviour labelling – signal what you want to say
3. Linking and connecting behaviours: “... which means that ...”  
and “Do you mean that...?”
4. Focus on the key reasons and stop (argument dilution)
5. Commenting on how the meeting is going (process commentary)

### Early Structuring: the 4Ps

Effective communicators set up the earliest stages of a conversation to increase efficiency and effectiveness (i.e. meeting the objectives). They ensure 4 items are covered – what we call the 4Ps. Done well the 4Ps take little time and are worth it.

#### **People**

- Are names known?
- Are your roles known and understood?
- Are the right people (and only those) in the room to achieve the objectives?
- Is there anything which needs to be checked in terms of previous experience, expertise, etc.?

#### **Purpose**

- Is the background or reason for this conversation/meeting understood?
- What is the objective of this conversation – what does each party want to achieve?
- What do you want people to be thinking, saying, doing when they leave the meeting?

#### **Process**

- How much time is there and how will it be managed?
- What topics will be discussed and in what order?
- How will you ensure everyone gets a chance to speak and airtime is shared?
- Are there any roles (notetaking, time keeping, chairing etc.) which need to be agreed?

#### **Permission**

- Are the other three Ps understood and agreed by both parties?

## **Behaviour Labelling – Signal what you want to say**

Behaviour labelling means signaling verbally to others what kind of contribution you are about to make. Research clearly shows that (apart from labelling disagreement) effective communicators do more of this than average communicators. Why? It provides clarity, focus, and helps you to get heard. When you do this, you are effectively saying “listen up” and you give others clarity on what’s coming next. For more shy or reserved people, it helps them to “get in2 to the conversation and come across as more confident and assertive.

Examples:

- “Can I ask a question here?”*
- “Let me summarise ...”*
- “Here’s a proposal.”*
- “Excuse me; Let me interrupt you.”*
- “I need to check that I’ve understood you correctly.”*
- “There are three points I’d like to make ...”*

Behaviour Labelling is useful when you are struggling to get any ‘airtime’.

### **How to do it...**

Take a deep breath (that’s good for you and signals to others that you have something to say); lean slightly forward over the table and therefore into people’s eye line and raise a hand to about shoulder height. Then tell them what’s coming – for example, “I have a question” and then ask it. Give it a go and see how well it works.

## **Linking and Connecting Behaviours**

Effective communicators do more to check (and demonstrate) that they understand the other party correctly. This means they can tailor their ideas and how they phrase their thinking to suit others. This involves:

- Using questions which check that you have understood the other’s position accurately (For example, questions like **“Do you mean ...?”** or **“Is what you’re saying ...?”**)
- When talking about features which strengthen your case, using phrases like **“... which means that ...”**. Really skilled communicators frame this using the language of others in the room – connecting with things that are important to room (the benefits for them).

Asking questions to test you understand works because you

- create shared understanding
- Increase rapport (everyone likes to feel listened to and that their ideas matter)
- As a gentle alternative to disagreeing (giving the other an opportunity to re-state)

## ***Stick to the key reasons – don't dilute your argument***

If you voice all the reasons for your thinking others lose interest and may even have more material to pick holes in your argument. Stick to your strongest arguments (no more than 3 as a rule of thumb). You can bring others in later if needed.

This is important with senior audiences who are often time poor and swamped with information and decisions. Showing in detail how much thinking and work you have put in isn't always impactful (unless someone *really* wants it). Use "Be bright, be brief, be gone" as a guide. Give them only the key points needed to understand and support what you are proposing. If you need to give them more detail than they want, first tell them why. I once witnessed a technical specialist with a 1500-line project plan for a transformation project preparing for a review meeting with the project board. We discussed the fact that the senior leader would need headlines and not the full plan. In the meeting he pulled it out and showed part of it on a dense slide and I saw her rock back in her chair. What she needed was to know how it was going and where the issues were.

## ***Comment on how the meeting is going***

This is simply expressing how you feel about the way the meeting is going. It's a way of giving live feedback on the meeting to ensure it progresses well. Examples are:

Positive: ***"So pleased we're agreed on that"***

Negative: ***"I'm concerned we're getting a little off-track in our discussion."*** This behaviour builds trust and is seen as confident self-disclosure. It helps everyone to stay on track and builds momentum.

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