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My mission is to help people unlock their true potential through confident verbal communications — Bob Ferguson

Office Communications

How to use communications to be effective at work

Workshop Notes

by

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1. Introduction

Before we start on the main content of Office Communications I just want to go through the two key themes that run through all communications skills so that you're familiar with them, because we will keep referring to them through the text.

The two key themes, which start the notes in most of my workshops, are:

1. We are all different
   We are all different, sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes on obvious ways, but it means as communicators we have to understand how others are different and adjust OUR communication style to suit.

2. Communications is a game of consequences.
   If we want to get our message through it is normally associated with an outcome. It is the outcome that drives changes in behaviour so if we want to communicate effectively we have to consider the outcome.

Here are the notes that cover these key themes.

2. We're all different - personality styles

Figure 1 shows the basic Carl Jung descriptors of our population split into four characters. Each of these four types has different characteristics and therefore different communication needs. Let's look at them one at a time.

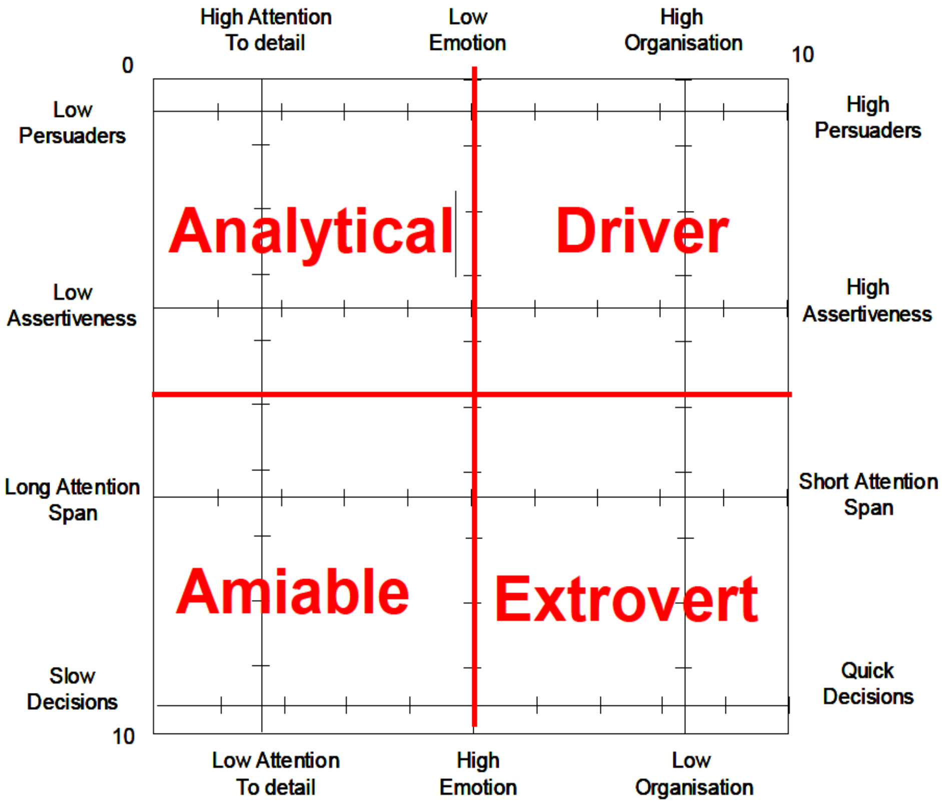

Figure 1– Carl Jung's character types

2.1.1 The Driver:

We all recognise the driver is the ambitious person that were likely to find in management within the organisation. They tend to be determined fast pace and very task orientated so want to get things done quickly. They often have a big picture in their minds so that they work from a visual framework, and they are, in particular top-down people so we want to give them information that allows them to build their own big picture in their own mind. The sort of communication that will appeal to the driver are things like bullet points, executive summaries so that they can get a very quick overview of the whole problem or issue, and then they want to cascade down to the bits that are of particular interest to them. They do not want to start from the bottom and order all the minute details that it takes to understand the problem . They will only cherry picked the bits that are interested in.

So when speaking to predominantly this sort of audience, the sort of structure that works extremely well is to give a brief overview of the whole issue. Give them a short presentation of the essential facts and processes and then ask questions. They will ask the questions they want and you need not worry if you don't cover all information because they will be driving the conversation which is just as they like it.

2.1.2 The Analytical:

There's one thing analyticals love and that's lots and lots of information. I don't think it's possible for you to give an analytical too much information. But they are the opposite of the Drivers in that they work from the bottom up so they like to see the foundation of your argument before you come to the conclusions rather than starting from the top down. They are likely to want to see full evidence of any information that leads to your conclusions so that they can primarily make up their own minds. So when you're presenting to this group be prepared with all the information and start by laying out the basics of your argument and then build it up to a conclusion. It is almost as important for the analytical is to be able to see the process of your decision-making as to see the results.

2.1.3 The Extrovert:

The extrovert's run high on emotion and they love to be involved. Like the driver they are in the top-down group and don't like to listen to the build up of the entire story. So the best thing is to give them an overview and again get them involved. Particularly asking their opinions and what they think will make them feel like they are centre stage which is the position they love to be. They are also heavily biased towards instinctive decisions so arguing everything through in logical terms will not work, you have to engage their feelings.

2.1.4 The Amiable:

As the name suggests the one thing Amiables dislike is conflict. They are a strange group in that they don't have the characteristic strengths that some of the other groups have to bring to a team. However they are very much like the oil in an engine what they will do is smooth out the conflicts that are within an organisation or team. As the name suggests they are very fair and even-handed people and so the principal thing they will look for in their communication or presentation is the fact that you have formed opinions on a fair and even handed basis. So they will want to see both sides of an argument not just the side of the information that you want to present because it supports your argument.

The Amiable is also heavily relationship biased, so they will be more receptive to your communication if they feel you have a good relationship with them.

3. Communication is a game of consequences.

You may have seen the scene in an office where the manager comes out and asks a member of staff to do something. They explode(!) and rant on about how much work they have to do and they can't possibly do anything else. The boss goes to the next person and asks again and they say "OK Boss". So, the next time the boss wants something doing, who does he go to? Yes the second person because they got a different experience dealing with them.

Part of good communication skills is training other people to treat us the way we want to be treated. By thinking of the consequences our communications impose we can improve the way we're treated and the way others communicate with us.

A classic example of consequences are companies that display a sign saying "Abuse of our staff will not be tolerated" and then they give the customer who rants and raves exactly what they want. They send a clear message to everyone that the consequence of ranting and raving is you get what you want so they do! However if you just throw one person out of the store for ranting, everyone else gets the right message.

Now armed with these two key themes we can go on to consider how we can be confident in our office communications.

4. Running Effective Meetings

In order to run an effective meeting we have to work either side of the meeting i.e. there are things that we need to do before and after the meeting, so in planning our time we need to allow for the extra tasks that go with a meeting, but don't worry the extra time is well worth the effort when you see the results.

4.1 Set Objectives (before anything)

When you need to get something done, discussed or agreed and you feel a meeting might be the best way to achieve it, before you call the meeting think!

Firstly think what objectives you want from the meeting. I see many meetings that set off and have an agenda and all the other good things they need, but don't know what they want to get out of the meeting. It means that everyone puts in a lot of effort but may not get and end result.

So, be clear on your objectives, what do you want people to achieve during the meeting and what do you want as an end result.

Secondly, think whether a meeting is the best way to get this achieved. Is there another way such as a voting e-mail that would achieve the objectives with less time and effort?

If you're not clear on your objectives it will be hard to run an effective meeting.

4.2 Produce a written agenda - a list of how you're going to achieve objectives

Having made your objectives clear I suggest you write the agenda next. It may be that the delegates will alter the agenda by adding the items they think they should cover, but it's good to have an agenda that identifies the steps that you think are necessary to get to your objective.

The advantage of an agenda is that when you issue it early it makes it clear to people what they are going to contribute to the meeting. They can also start working out in advance what they think about the subject and perhaps even getting prepared! (Perhaps that’s too hopeful)

Some people will see items missing that they think should be on the agenda. By having time to consider the meeting you stand the best chance of having the right agenda.

4.3 Who should you invite – who will help you achieve your objectives?

Be careful about who you invite. They must all make a contribution to the meeting. I see many events where some people are sat there for the whole meeting and never make a contribution. Think about how much a person contributes to the meeting. Will they be heavily involved or are they only needed for one item. If it’s only part of the meeting you may be able to call them in just for their bit or have them at the end of the telephone.

By asking the questions “What are these people adding to the meeting and where will they contribute?” you will be in a position to judge if they’re fully involved when it comes to the section on controlling the meeting.

You should also consider what sort of personality they are (Driver, Analytical, Amiable or Extrovert) and how that will contribute to the meeting. There is often a big gulf between managers and technical staff in the way they behave in meetings. The managers (Drivers) like information top down, short and sharp, whereas the Technical staff (Analyticals) like to build from the bottom up and discuss in full detail. Consequently if you mix them in the meeting someone will be dissatisfied. I personally split meetings of this type so the managers are only involved in the beginning and the end when we do the summary and wrap up (The bits they like) and get them to leave when we run the deep technical discussions in the middle.

Remember that running meetings is not a precise science and it is unlikely to be perfect, but just by putting in some thought as to who you want, how they combine, and how they help achieve your objectives you will give yourself a massive head start.

4.4 Why you should always start on time.

Remember – Communication is a game of consequences.
I’ve seen meetings where the first one is scheduled and only half the people are on time and the rest of the delegates drift in up to 5 minutes late. At the next meeting no –one is on time because no one wants to sit for 5 minutes waiting, so they arrive five minutes late and the late comers arrive even later! And so the meeting gradually gets later and later.

I personally like to get to the meeting room a few minutes early so I can make sure everything is set up correctly. If I have equipment (overheads, projectors etc) ordered I like to get in at least an hour early so I can check everything’s there and works.

Then I always start the meeting on time irrespective of who is there and I NEVER go back and recap for the people who are late. They have to catch up as we go. By doing this every time people understand quickly that the meeting always start on time and most people will make the effort to be on time.

4.5 Control and log contributions.

When the meeting starts it is my habit to draw a table plan and out each person’s name against their position on the table. This is particularly useful in a meeting when you don’t know everyone at the meeting as it will remind you of their names later (Particularly useful when you get to my age!).

The as the meeting goes on I put a little tick against each person as they contribute to the meeting so I keep control of how much someone is speaking, whether they are dominating the meeting and who is not involved.

If I am running the meeting then I will stop someone speaking permanently in favour of someone who hasn't contributed and I will deliberately pose a question to those not involved to ensure they're engaged in the meeting. This is where it helps to understand what contribution you thought they might make when you wrote the agenda.

4.6 Tell people how the schedule is doing.

I always like to put a time schedule against the agenda if I can so that everyone gets an idea of how long each part should run for. It is rarely accurate and should be treated as no more than a guide. But what it will do is allow you to make people aware if you start to drift off-line.

If you drift off the schedule you're clearly not going to get everything done so you have an awkward decision to make. Is it better for your objectives to let the discussion flow and get to the bottom of the issue or whether you should curtail it and move on. Again there is no right answer, but if I'm in that position I tend to offer the alternatives to the other delegates so they all buy in to the change of direction.

4.7 Finish each discussion with action items and summarise at the end.

When you've finished the discussion on a particular issue tie it up by agreeing the action items, actionee and completion date before you move on. This will be easier while it's fresh on everyone's mind and will save time at the end of the meeting when it comes to finalising the list.

You can summarise at the end of the meeting but it tends to take longer because people have to go back over what they discussed.

Nowadays I find it more common, particularly in the big meetings for everyone to working on laptops and one person to be keeping the minutes electronically so this makes it easier to log everything and distribute it later.

4.8 Ask delegates how you can improve meeting.

At the end of the meeting it's always worth asking everyone if they have any ideas on how you can improve the meeting. Sometimes we get too close to running the meeting and others can see things we could have done better.

Not only does this often yield some really bright ideas that will help us in future meetings, but it allows people the opportunity to air any dissatisfaction they have and helps prevent it surfacing at another time.

4.9 Control and issue minutes discussions, decisions and actions.

Finally one the meeting is over you should issue the minutes for approval.

Again in the major meetings I go to, the minutes are agreed at the end, printed and signed on the spot so there is no opportunity for change or disagreement later.

If it's not a meeting like that I like to stay in control of the minutes. It can be a pain to try and control a meeting and take the minutes but it is quite possible and it means that the information I think is key gets recorded and the actions I want down are there. If you're not in charge of the minutes I suggest you make a note (preferably in a log book which I'll deal with later) of the key points and actions so that you can check them against the formally issued minutes later.

Remember the only thing people will accept later is the information that's in the minutes, so it's in your interest to make sure they're correct.

5. Time management

People are sometimes surprised when Time Management comes in my list of communication skills, but how many of us have been asked to do something, intended to say no and then, find themselves saying yes! That's an assertive communication problem. If you're constantly being interrupted in the workplace and it interrupts your work, that's a communication problem. It is possible to control your interruptions but you have to let everyone know the set of rules you work to and guess what... that's a communications problem.

So communications affects a lot of our time management and below we're going to go through some of the ways we can use communications skills to our advantage to improve our time management.

5.1 You get treated the way you teach people to behave.

Not everyone likes the concept of thinking we "train" other people, but like it or not that's what we do and it's remarkably easy!

Remember my story about Bill the man who suddenly understood his jobs were a question of my priority. We train other people how to behave by delivering a consistent message and consequences for not obeying the message.

The key for me is that you have to be consistent with your message. Some of the tips I'm going to share will work with your work colleagues, but if you allow them to break the behaviour pattern it will just encourage them to break the patter again. So once you've got people doing what you want – stick to it!

5.1.1 Assertive communication

When we talk of assertive communications the key thing to remember is that this is not aggressive communication. The key to assertive communication is that it is protecting your rights WHILE still considering the rights of others. Aggression is when we protect our own rights without consideration of others' rights.

There is rightly no place for aggressive communication in the workplace, or any other place for that matter, but we do have to protect our rights.

There is a special workshop on assertive communications that deals with it fully, but in terms of time management in the office we have to protect our rights, particularly when it comes to people dumping too much work on us.

One of the keys to assertive communication is to let others know what they're doing and how it affects you. We repeatedly talk about how people are different and we need to adjust our communication to suit. But a lot of people aren't aware of the effect their communication has on us and just by letting them know the effect of their communications you can find they don't appreciate what they're doing and will change without effort.

Remember the different personality types above. Well these affect assertiveness too. The people on the right hand side, the Analytical and the Extrovert, tend to be naturally assertive. They're very good at putting their own point over. However the people on the left of the diagram, the Analyticals and Extroverts tend not to put their point over either because they want to avoid conflict or they just don't care.

So the people on the right will have no troubles with this use of assertiveness to protect their use of time.

If you're on the left and don't stand up for yourself as strongly then you need to work on this aspect of your communications.

One of the useful tools is to start expressing requirements in terms of choices. For example if someone asks you to do a piece of work and you're pushed for time with other work, then you can say " Yes I can do it, but I have this work to do and it will not be finished on time if I do yours. Can you go and agree a priority with the other manager?" That way you don't become a ping pong ball between two managers and you haven't had to say no.

When you say you haven't got time for everything people don't always believe you, so one of the useful techniques is to keep a time log and that's discussed below. You'd be amazed how effective it is to have your time allocation down in writing.

5.2 Training Colleagues

I said at the start of this section that not everyone likes the concept of training their colleagues but believe me that it is easy and effective, but you have to stick to your guns.

There are a couple of main area that we have to train our colleagues :

1. Not to interrupt when we're working on important stuff
2. Not to answer the phone when we're in discussion (on work issues!)

Here are some tips to help you deal with both.

5.2.1 Not to Interrupt

There are two ways of stopping interruptions, the informal ad-hoc way, or the more formalised route. Which you use depends on what type of work you're doing. If you're involved in the general work of the day and will allow interruptions, but not the time wasting sort then you can use the informal method. If you have more important work to do and you definitely want no interruptions then you really want a more formal method.

Formal Method
Generally I like to find a way of demarking whether I can be interrupted or not. If you're a manager who has an office then you can adopt an "open door" policy i.e. my doors always open unless it's closed. In other words when the door's open you can come in and interrupt, but when the door's shut I don't want to be disturbed.

Not everyone has an office, particularly in today's more open office arrangements so we need a way to show people that our "door" is closed. One way is to use a flag. This could be a physical flag. I knew one lady who had a red and a green flag on a small stand. When the green flag was up you could approach freely but heaven protect those who approached when the red flag was up. It really did stand for danger!

When Archie Norman took over Asda, one of his first introductions was the Asda red baseball cap. The rule was you couldn't approach an employee when they were wearing a red baseball cap. The other side of the rule was that you could only wear the cap for two hours then you had to remove it and deal with the people who wanted to speak to you.

I used a small white board on the end of the filing cabinet by my desk with a red or green sticker and note that said "When the Red sticker is showing, please don't interrupt but leave your name and number on the board and I'll contact you at ..." and I would fill in the time I was going to be free. Like Asda I only worked on a two hour quiet time in eth morning and afternoon, so I was free and available for over half the day.

Informal Method
We're back to training people again. When people interrupt us we have to make a decision. Is this a valid interruption that I should deal with or is it a time-waster. Whichever way we decide we can transmit the decision to the interrupter via our body language and vocal delivery.

Have you ever been up to someone and asked a question and they've answered in a short annoyed way. My wife has a pet name for me sometimes. It's "Kurt Russell" not that I have the looks of the famous movie star. It was because whenever I had someone time wasting on the phone I would be a little short and curt with them. So short, bored, annoyed type response will send the message very quickly.

Sometimes people are not very quick on the uptake so you may have to be more direct. An engineer used to visit someone on the opposite desk to mine and waste his time in pointless conversation. For some reason he decided I might want to waste my time too, so he would call early in the morning when he knew the other person would not be in and try to strike up a conversation. Being an engineer this could go on for some time. So each time he came round as he drew breath to speak I would say " Is this quick because I haven't got time for interruptions at the moment". Very quickly he got the message and now if he interrupts he'll say " This is only a quick question " then he gets on with it.

Similarly we can all use body language to deliver irritation! Just try letting your shoulders slump in a resigned way, perhaps tilting the head to one side and saying "What is it" . You should also try to avoid eye contact. That's a sure sign of annoyance. Just think of the eye contact you get with someone when you've annoyed them. It's generally non-existent.

The reverse is also true. If you want to encourage the interruption face the person, open your body language (i.e. no folded arms), make eye contact and smile. It's a very warm greeting that is supportive and encouraging.

5.2.2 Not to answer the phone

I have a bit of a reputation from the places I have worked. When I'm speaking with someone and the phone goes, if they answer it I walk away. They sometimes call out "We're not finished yet" and I reply " we finished when you answered the phone. They may even come up afterwards to conclude the conversation and I generally ask them why they thought the person on the end of the phone was more important than me. Even if the call was more important than me, it's hard to tell BEFORE you answer the phone. There seems to be a myth that anyone who contacts us by phone is more important than the conversation with people in front of us. I try to actively discourage this.

I accept there are times when people have to take important calls and there are some jobs which rely on them answering the phone quickly, but I like to reverse the general trend that people think they have to be at the beck and call of a phone just because it's in their pocket.

5.3 Logging tells the truth – we don't always!

For effective time management we should keep a log of how we use our time. A simple daily log of how our time is spent is often very revealing. We can often fool ourselves into thinking we use our time well , but the truth on the log is different.

When I train people in Time Management I ask them to estimate how long they spend on tasks in four categories A, B, C & D from top priority to not important. I get many who estimate they use up to 80% of their time on their top priority. But when the Time Log is done they see that the truth is far away from their initial impression.

Time	Activity	Duration			
		A	B	C	D

Figure 2 – Time Log Headings

You can keep a time log by simply making a list with the headings as shown in Figure 2. In the first column you put the start time and in the Activity write what you are starting. When you change to another activity write the time and the new activity. The duration for the first activity is the difference between the first and second start times. That duration should go in a column A, B, C or D according to the priority of the job you're doing. At the end of the day, total the time spent in columns A, B, C & D and then you'll see just how you spend your time.

The good computer users will see they can easily put this in a spreadsheet.

The power of the time log is not just in its ability to reveal the truth, but in its self-correcting effect. Once we have identified the time wasters, next time we write a start time for a time waster we recognise it for what it is and change activity before the time wastage has started.

5.4 Planning is your communication with yourself and others.

Planning is your communication with yourself and others.
One of the prime ways that we communicate during Time Management is to plan. Not only does this give us a very clear vision of how our time will be used, which can be shared with others, so that they appreciate the level of commitment we have, but it also sends a clear message to us on what we plan to do in the near future.

Planning always takes time and I know some people who feel it's too much extra effort when they're trying to get on with their work! In fact the reverse applies. We should achieve so much more by spending the time to work out what we want to do and what our priorities are before we get started.

Here's the system I use for planning my work and life, and as you might expect it involves my logbook.

Long Term Goal Setting
At the beginning of the year I check my goals are still what they were when I set them last year. I set very few "resolutions" but I do like to check my goals regularly and tweak them as my life or priorities may have changed. Normally these goals are in the front of my log book so I have a permanent reminder during the year of what I am working towards.

In my opinion there is very little as motivating as a very strong sense of direction and that's what goals do for you.

I take a sheet that's split into 13 columns and out the goal in the first column and then what activity I want to achieve in each month in the 12 remaining columns. That way I can easily check each month whether I'm on track.

More of this technique will come out in the Time Management workshop but for now let's focus on how I use my work planning in Office Communications.

Each week, generally first thing Monday morning, but sometimes on a Sunday evening if I want a flying start, I print my weekly diary off Outlook and paste it in one page of my log book. Not only is this a good diary but it also helps me get as strong mental picture of what's happening during the week by writing it down. Then I know reasonably where I am pressured for time and where there is slack in my week.

If I'm asked to do extra work during the week, I see where I can slot it in. If I'm too tight for time to fit it in then I have my schedule to show the person asking and perhaps the chance to discuss trading priorities. Remember if someone wants you to treat their job as a priority then THEY have to go and sort it out with the conflicting boss. It's not your job to be a ping pong ball and get bounced backwards and forwards between the two. Let them sort it out between themselves and you deal with the agreed way forward.

Remember that by writing it down commitment becomes more powerful than if you just tell someone.

5.5 Effective Delegation

One of the best ways to save our time is to get someone else to do the job! Sounds simple doesn't it. Of course it's not quite as easy as that, but to make the most of our time we do need to be serious about delegation.

For me the starting place of good delegation is to understand your value to your company and what you get paid for. It's a critical part of understanding what you should delegate and what you should do. Having separated the two, you should now set about delegating what you can.

The first thing is to have the right attitude towards delegating. There are lots of people who think that delegating is in fact abdicating but it's not. Just because we can delegate some level of responsibility it doesn't mean we can pass the whole responsibility for the task on. We have to remain responsible and we want people we delegate to be actively thinking and looking to provide solutions so I think there are a number of steps we need to take

5.5.1 Set Objectives not methods

George S. Patton said "Don't tell people how to do things, tell them what to do and let them surprise you with their results" and I for one think he was right. It's highly demotivating for people to be told how to do things and yet we still want them to benefit from previous experience and deliver a predictable standard. I think the start place is to be very clear on the objectives we pass on to others to ensure that they have a clear picture of what they have to do.

5.5.2 Let them bring initial plan

Having laid out the extent of the issue let them go away and mull it over for a few days and work out their way of delivering the required results. That way they have to think about the problem and not get spoon-fed our methods (including our errors!). If their plan is good let them run with it. If they need assistance try offering them tips so they can develop as well as produce the right results. Giving good feedback is a powerful skill in business and it can really motivate your staff when done well.

5.5.3 Keep in Close Contact

Having got them off on the right path I suggest you stay in regular and frequent contact so that they get the chance to talk through their minor problems before they become major problems. That way they get the benefit of knowing you support them and still get the kudos of bringing the project safely home.

5.5.4 Make your delegation cover five key aspects

I think there are five key aspects to delegating that we need to get right in order to delegate effectively. There are :

Define the task
A clear definition of what's expected from the task so the receiver has no doubt what they're being asked to do. A good way to test this is to ask them to explain back to you what they think they're going to do. If it matches your belief that's a good start.

Outputs
Tell them what's expected as an output from the task. Is it a note, memo, report. What format is it expected in, how is it to be delivered. It may seem a lot of effort to specify this, but there's nothing as demotivating as putting a lot of effort into a job only for the receiver to say "It's not what I was expecting!". So make sure they know just what to deliver.

Controls
What controls will be placed on the task or output. E.g. is the work expected to follow an established standard, should it comply with certain legislation, are they expected to consult with other people or groups to reach their conclusion. In this section you should tell people anything that you will use to judge the success of their job at the end.

Inputs
Make sure that the inputs that are required to carry out the job i.e. past reports, access to personnel files, are available to them and that they know that this is the information they are expected to use unless they can think of other needs.

Enablers
As well as the inputs make sure that they know what facilities or resources are needed to do the job and that they are readily available and they will have access to them. It's very frustrating to try and do a task where you've been promised resources and they've not been provided.

6. Negotiation

6.1 95% communication based skill

If ever there was a business skill that is communication based, it's negotiation. Almost the whole of negotiation is a communications game. The surprising thing is that rather like a game of chess, both sides know what the other is doing, but success depends on whether you have the right strategy to counter the tactics of the other sides. So below are some of the standard strategies you can use to counter common situations in negotiations.

6.2 Some ploys you can use

6.2.1 Hot potato

The hot potato is a tactic where you make your problem, a problem for the other side. For example if someone asks you to do some work and tells you " I have to have this by tomorrow for my client meeting". That's really their problem they've now dumped on you, and you have to decide whether to deal with it or not. But you don't know whether it's real or not. Their problem is the hot potato.

There are two ways to deal with a hot potato:

1. Test the validity of the problem you've been thrown e.g. "I'm not sure I can make it by tomorrow, so it's not worth me starting?" If they say yes then the time limit is not real and you can fit it into your schedule as best you can. If they say no, it's not worth you starting, then it's a real limit and you have to decide what to do.

2. You can throw back a hot potato of your own for instance in the same example you can say "I can't work on this because I have to deliver this work by Friday". Now the resource problem is back with them.

6.2.2 Withdrawn offer

At its heart a Withdrawn Offer technique is a game of bluff rather than a negotiating tactic so it either gets accepted or not. This is when someone makes an offer to you, you go back to negotiate and they tell you that the original offer was too low and they'll have to withdraw it. Often that produces the response "You can't withdraw it I've already accepted it" which is exactly what they want.

The counter to this technique is to walk away and test the bluff. You've see above, the importance of calculating your walk away point and so you can tell if this is a good deal if you accept their offer. If you think you can do better walk away and see if they come back with a counter offer. Sometimes you have to be prepared to lose the deal to do better.

6.2.3 Good Guy/ Bad guy

Sorry for the politically incorrect title, but it's just what they call it. Women can do it too!
A classic technique,frequently seen in the police films. One person plays the good cop who's the villain's friend and the other plays the bad cop who's out to get them. The objective of the ploy is to make the villain think that one of the police team is on their side. Of course that's not true, but it's the way it seems to the villain.

The same is true in negotiation. One person will negotiate hard, even perhaps storming out of the room in a temper and the other will offer to mediate on your behalf with the other person. It's nonsense of course. They're both on the same side so the mediator is not acting on your behalf at all.

The counter to this tactic is to tell the mediator that you know they're playing good guy/bad guy and that you'" treat them both as the same person and attribute whatever the bad guy says to the good guy.

6.2.4 Grinding/Nibbling

Nibbling is when we agree a basic deal and then, after the deal is fixed we go back to add more extras in. This is the technique of the buyer. You will commonly see it when people ask you to do "a task" but as the job unfolds it turns out that they want more than they asked for.

The counter to this, if someone tries to do it to you is to say "Yes I can do this, but it's more than you asked for originally. Please tell me the complete task so I can tell whether I can do it or not." That should prevent them doing it again to you.

6.2.5 Small Close

Small close is very similar to grinding but it's in favour of the seller. It's where someone tries to get you committed to a task/process on a smaller item, but once you've agreed they try to include higher requirements as part of the agreement. Defence companies use it all the time when selling major projects.

The way to stop this is to keep dragging the negotiation back to the proposal. So every time they suggest an extra item say "Let's have a look at the whole scope and I'll DECIDE IF I WANT TO GO AHEAD" the last bit is important because it implies that the commitment is now in doubt and discourages people from trying to escalate the task.

6.2.6 Conditional acceptance

Sometimes you will get offered a deal that's conditional on you being an expectable client. Of course anyone with the money is an acceptable client, but it makes it seem like the deal is not yet final and so easier for us to enter. The key with this counter is not to sign anything! Tell them that you will consider the deal while they find out if you're acceptable. This makes it clear you're not agreeing to anything until you're fully informed.

6.2.7 Funny Money

If you look around nowadays, virtually everything is quoted in cost per month, week or day. No one quotes the cost per year. It's a technique called funny money that takes a bill and reduces it until it's an almost trivial amount so it appears more affordable. I wonder how many people would buy Sky TV if they were asked for £500 per year!

In time terms, people will split things down by saying this is only a small task it will only take you ½ hour per week.

The counter to this technique is just to reverse it. Put everything you want to buy in terms of an acceptable annual charge and every time someone mentions a funny money quantity to you quote it back in terms of an annual cost. If you want to play the game even harder you can start quoting the cost in 2 or even 5 year terms.

6.2.8 Train yourself in small stages

There are lots of negotiation techniques and often people don't think about them until they have to make a major purchase, a car or a house. Then after a little reading up we take on professional negotiators and expect to win!

I suggest you pick up a technique that you think will be useful at work and go and practice it in lots of situations. Get used to using it. Practice when it doesn't matter whether you win or lose or when you can easily walk away. That way you will develop a good armoury of techniques that are ready when it really matters. You can negotiate anywhere for anything. Just get as much practice as you can.

6.2.9 Key to Win/Win negotiation

Once common mistake is that people reduce everything to money. But the key to win/win negotiating is to have at least two factors in the negotiation so that you can trade one against the other. That may flexible deliver, part quantities, quick payment, cash payment. You're looking for anything that you can offer in return for what you want so that both sides can be seen to win.

6.2.10 The Walk Away point. – work yours out.

Before you start negotiating work out your budget and terms. Fix a price that's your best price, a tolerable price and a walk away price i.e. the price beyond which you're not willing to deal. That way you won't get sucked into a deal you don't want. When you reach your walk away price….walk away. There's rarely a deal you need at any price.

6.2.11 Can't negotiate if you're not communicating

It may surprise you but there's something we can learn from Politicians. That is you can't negotiate if you're not communicating. Politicians may have to negotiate under tense conditions with people that they wouldn't like to deal with if they were given the choice. But they know that if they get up and walk away they will never negotiate a settlement.

So however bad you think the conditions are, be aware that if you want to reach a negotiated settlement you have to keep communicating.

7. Electronic Communication

The era of electronic communications is upon us. We can send messages to almost anywhere in the world in an instant, and that brings great advantages. But it can also bring huge disadvantages. Like the section on people answering telephones there is a misconception that because messages get delivered instantly we have to respond instantly, and because it's easy to send messages we end up being overloaded with messages and so one of the lessons we have to learn now is how to deal with all this information. Below I've offered some tips on how to deal with three modern uses of technology: e-mails, Conference Calls and Management using the Internet

7.1 Dealing with E mails

7.1.1 Turn it off and then on at set times

When Microsoft first started its home worker programme and it sent staff home with laptops and communication software, their biggest problem was not to make sure their staff worked hard enough but stopping them working. Staff felt when an e-mail arrived they were duty bound to answer it whatever the time.

I've had phone calls from people who say "I sent you an e-mail 5 minutes ago. What's the answer?". As if it's our job to respond instantly.

To solve this issue it's part down to discipline and part down to training others again.

I suggest you fix times to answer your e-mail say start of the day, mid-morning, lunchtime, mid-afternoon and before you leave. That should give you roughly 2 hour blocks of time to work between e-mail sessions. In some companies they have fixed times for e-mail in and out. One company lets mail in on the odd hours and mail out on the even hours. That deals with reducing the amount of demand on your time, but what about the response of other people?

Well that is up to us to train others not to expect instant response. If people ask you for response, become like a broken record and say “I answer my e-mail at 9,11,1,3 and 5pm so your e-mail will be answered when I next deal with e-mails”. It won’t always be a popular message, but it will be understood and after a short time people will get used to it and accept it as long as you deliver your promises to deal with it at the next time slot.

7.1.2 Use To and CC properly

Make sure that when you send e-mail you use the To and CC fields properly so that only the people who are expected to act are in the To field. This will minimise the work others have to do. Don’t use the reply to all field indiscriminately as it will annoy others and not set a good example for your e-mail.

As you go through your e-mail look and see whether you’re correctly in the To or CC field and if you’ve been put in the To when you should be in the CC, write and let the sender know and ask them not to put you in the To field. If you shouldn’t be on the circulation anyway or if someone’s indulging in “Death by e-mail” then let them know you don’t want to be included in this .

You can get Microsoft Outlook to automatically place mail on which you’re in the CC field in a separate folder so it doesn’t clog up the e-mails you have to action.

7.1.3 Clear and Simple

When you send an e-mail make sure that it is clear and simple so that people can follow it easily. The general rule is stated as make only one point in an e-mail and never make it longer than a page i.e. no scrolling. However I find in industry that’s rarely possible when people are sending complex information. Instead I recommend that you number every point you make so that

1. The person responding can respond to each point underneath it to make the answers clear.
2. When discussing points everyone can reference the point their discussing clearly.

7.1.4 Use folders for essential storage only.

Organise your folders so that it’s easy to find things. Do it by person or job or client or work subject, whatever suits you, but use multiple folders so you can store information where you can easily find it.

7.2 Conference calls

One of the great ways we have of reducing travel is to use the technology for conference calls and meetings. Video conferences are the best and with the advent of Skype and Microsoft Messenger we can all make video calls. I use them all the time to increase my productive time and reduce travelling time.

When we have to make an audio conference life is very different. We lose perhaps the main communication channel, the visual one. What this generally means is that it is hard to judge the mood and meaning of the people at the other end of the phone. This can make the call seem more impersonal so I suggest you keep making friendly personal comments (if it’s appropriate to the mood of the meeting) to try and add back in some of that lost personal connection.

So here are some tips to make the most of the conference call.

7.2.1 Rules of meetings even more important

If you are going to have any formal rules for discussion e.g. One person as a time, nominate who is the call facilitator/chair so that only one person has control of the meeting.

Make sure the agenda is prepared and delivered in advance so everyone knows when their bit will come up. The facilitator should quickly go through the agenda and ask if there are any additions before they start. Review the progress through the agenda at regular intervals, particularly referencing it to the time allocated for the meeting.

7.2.2 Take a role call

At the start ask everyone to give their name and their role in the conference. This allows you to take down the mock “seat plan” as per a normal meeting, so that you remember who you’re speaking to and you can log the contributions so no one is dominating or excluded.

7.2.3 Post actions centrally

As the meeting progresses log and review the actions at the end of each discussion point and then either post them centrally on a web facility of e-mail them to each delegate for approval. When there are project based actions I like to see these kept in a central register preferably web accessed, so that everyone can get access to them and see the progress in actioning them. The fact that the actions are central often stops the same action coming up at different meetings.

7.3 Management using the Internet

The internet is a great tool when you have fragmented teams. The teams can now be anywhere in the world and still work together effectively. If you have a company intranet then you can use that and know that the work is secure. If you are going to use the Internet then you will need a secure web-site that has login facilities. Either way you can use the web to great effect as follows :

7.3.1 Run from central point has huge advantages

In most of the projects I run a set up a central web site. As I am not a computer web-site developer this is a really simple web site. You can create simple web-pages in Microsoft Word and what they do is act as a central reference point so that everyone gets their information from the same place.

One of the popular models for web based knowledge management is the Wiki. This is a great method for pooling knowledge so that the everyone can share the information, concerns, risks and solutions. It is editable by everyone so it follows the interactive pattern of distributing information like blogs and twitters.

PROJECT X Information

Key Documents	Programme
Specification	Original Workload
Statement of Work (Complete)	Bob’s Project Plan
Design Description	Project Programme
Proposal	
Drawings	
M1 Dummy	
M2 Dummy	
M2M Dummy	
M3 Dummy	
M4 Dummy	
M5 Dummy	
WFS Dummy	
IM Type 1 Dummy	
IM Type 2 Dummy	
PEM Dummy	
	General Information
	PROJECT X Payload presentation
	PROJECT X Payload Views and details

Figure 3 – Typical Simple Project Web Page

7.3.2 Up to date programmes

I found that when people get things through the e-mail system then they keep local copies and sometimes they don’t update them with the latest information. I’ve put an example of a project page in Figure 3 and it really is a very simple page populated with hyperlinks and saves in HTML format. The key to its success is that the key documents are listed and people access them by clicking on the hyperlink. When a document is updated the latest one is attached to the hyperlink so that from now on everyone gets the latest data automatically. So now the control of which document is being used by people is controlled.

I particularly found people would hang on to their favourite copy of the project programme so that when we came to review progress people would be working to different versions. By putting the current version on the web this practice was virtually stopped.

7.3.3 Must train people to look there

We’re back with my old favourite again. If you want people to use a centralised system then you have to train them to use it. I think the best way to train them is not to give them any alternative. Don’t give people access to the files directly and don’t send them copies of documents. Just send them a link in an e-mail telling them the latest version of a document or programme is now on the web, so all they have to do is click on the link to go there. You’d be amazed how quickly they get used to it, and once they do then they’ll think it’s a wonderful system and wonder why they ever bothered storing local copies before!

8. The Universal Way to train yourself

I've mentioned my log book several times already and I regard it as the key weapon in my development.

Log books are great ways to trap vital information, control your time and many other useful functions, but I think they score highest when we want to develop a skill or change a habit.

In this case we may be considering how to develop our office communication skills and here's how we can do it using a log book.

1. Record the personal communications that you have in the office. This may seem like a lot of work, but it's worth it. You may limit it to the major communications you have if you think you have too many, but in particular record all the communications you're not happy with.

2. In some quite place of your own, sit and write against the communication what you think was wrong with the communication, what outcome you would have liked and why you think the this communication didn't deliver as expected.

3. Next write in how you the communication could have been improved, and especially how you could have done things differently to drive the communication towards the desired end. It's like forming a strategy to deal with the issue.

That's all there is to it.

The next time you have a communication that's heading towards the same conclusion you will recognise it and the self correcting part of the log book will kick in. You'll remember writing up the last similar communication and then you'll remember what your strategy is for improving it. All you have to do is use it. Even if the end result is not completely what you want you'll make some big improvements. Then if you go back and write up the communication again, you'll get a modified strategy to better success next time.

Before you know it, you'll find that you're recalling strategies on the spot that will help you deal with any situation and in a short time your office communications will be confident and effective.

If you have any questions as a result of these notes feel free to e-mail me your questions on info@confidentcommunications. co.uk

The best of luck with all your office communications

Bob

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