



Introduction

The IT Profession has seen huge changes over the last decade. There have been countless adjustments that have permeated our way of working, way of seeing technology and way of doing our jobs. But if I were to put my money on what would win as the biggest change that we have undergone, I would definitely back the rise of the team. Gone are the days when an IT professional sat in a dark room out the back of the office, cutting code, alone. Some would say that we now sit in a dark room, out the back of the office, cutting code with other people. It has become a rarity for us to be the lone IT staff member. Now we work closely with groups, and indeed often lead or supervise groups in our day to duties. As it becomes accepted that an IT Professional needs to be not only technically proficient, but also have 'people skills', it seems the time is ripe to closely examine just how well our communication skills serve us in this era of the team. This paper seeks to explore some of the strategies, tactics and tools we can use to improve our communication, and ask the question: *What are the skills we need to communicate effectively, and what strategies can I use in the workplace?*

The Theory of Communication

Any examination of communication would be incomplete if it didn't consider, even superficially, the work of Professor Skinner. As the father of a branch of Psychological study known as Behaviourism, Professor Skinner's work established groundbreaking theories on how people communicate, and what the tools that we use to get our message across are. Professor Skinner's work suggested that there are 3 main building block to human communication, 3 main tools that we use to pass on and receive a message with another person in a face to face discussion. Those 3 tools are:

- Words:
- Tone:
- Body Language:

Professor Skinner's work suggested that when we communicate, part of the meaning that we deduce from another person comes from the words they speak, part comes from the tone of voice that they use when speaking, and part of the message comes from the body language that accompanies those particular words. An interesting point to Professor Skinner's work however was not just that we use those 3 building blocks of communication, but *how much* we use each one. Professor Skinner's research suggested that when communication, each of these building blocks play a part. This is how big a part:

Building Block	% that it contributes to the message
Words	7%
Tone	25%
Body language	68%

Let's examine why!



Words

Even though words, according to Skinner, account for the smallest component of our communicated message, there is no doubting the power that well chosen words wield. Who amongst us has not weighed their words at one time or another, chosen them carefully and chosen them well. Who amongst us has not revelled in dressing themselves, and their intentions, in a cloak of finely crafted language. Yet, if we are to look beyond wordsmithing and examine our words in light of how we communicate, there are certain words that can help us more than any others. Or rather, there are **ways to use words** that are more useful in helping us to get our message across. If communication is seeking to understand just as much as we seek to be understood, we have a great tool at our disposal.

Questions

Questions help us to understand. Questions help us to communicate. A well framed question can tell our audience just as much about us as their answer can tell us about them. And questions come in all shapes and sizes. 3 of the most interesting categories of questions would have to be:

- Open
- Closed
- Rhetorical

Rhetorical questions are questions in name only. Seeking to have people merely agree with us and not to explore their responses, rhetorical questions are the refuge of a questioner that doesn't really want to get a response. 'Lovely weather today, isn't it?' 'No one has any more questions, do they?' 'That's OK, isn't it?' All examples of rhetorical questions, and every one of them barely questions at all. The rhetorical question is a mere statement (Lovely weather today) with a semi question (isn't it?) tacked on at the end. It simply asks people to agree, not express their true feelings. Where it comes to communication, rhetorical questions are questions that you really only ask yourself, because you're the one already supplying the answers.

Closed questions are questions where the person asking the question limits the possible responses of the person answering the question. 'Are you happy with that?' 'Would you like take-away for dinner?' Closed questions reduce our options to either 'Yes' or 'No', or a much smaller set of options than would normally exist. 'What's your favourite colour, Red or Blue?' Closed questions seek a simple answer, but no further information beyond that simple answer. While definitely a question, it hardly represents a tool for truly empathic communication.

Which leads us on to **Open questions**. These questions seek a more detailed answer and allow the answerer to really open up to us and communicate. 'How do you feel about that?' 'What does that mean to you?' 'What would you do in that situation?' All of these questions allow the respondent to truly tell us what's on their mind. Open questions are the rolls Royce option for effective communication.

Yet here we have a problem. A study completed in 1999 followed thousands of couples for more than a week and classified the questions that those couples asked each other as either Open, Closed or Rhetorical. If you were to consider your primary relationship right now, what percentage of questions that you ask the other person are actually Open questions? Answers typically range from 70% to 30%, but the statistics certainly suggest that that belief doesn't match the reality. The survey that followed thousands of people from all over Australia discovered a startling national average for the percentage of open questions used within a relationship. The percentage of questions asked within these couples that were open and seemed to really seek a response that went beyond the rudiments:

3%

Yes, that's right, 3%. Even within the most important relationships we have, the vast majority of the questions that we ask are Closed. We don't really ask 'How was your day?', we ask 'Did you have a good day?'. We don't really ask 'What do think



about that?', we ask 'Do you think that's OK?'. We don't really ask what people truly have to say, we merely ask them to confirm what we think they have to say. We don't ask many Open questions, we ask a staggering amount of Closed ones.

Stock Epithets

And there's worse news to come. Even some of the Open questions we ask aren't really open at all. They're mere stock epithets. Stock epithets are to questions what auto-pilot is to flying. It's a question that you ask when you don't really want to ask a question.

Stock epithets take their name from a technique used in epic poetry to allow the poem's reciter to say a line while thinking about the part of the poem that is coming up. It's a line of poetry that appears often, therefore allowing the poet to say it without thinking. Some questions can be exactly the same. Here's an example.

The Operations Co-ordinator for the New Horizons Learning Centre and I often talk on the phone, and I recently discovered that I ask her a common 'stock epithet' question. This how our conversation goes:

Tim: 'Hi Antonia, how are you'
Antonia: 'Hi Tim, Good thanks'
Tim: 'Could you tell me.....'

I recently called Antonia when I was in a rush, and that's when I realised I can be quite lazy when it comes to the questions I use. Here's how the conversation went:

Tim: 'Hi Antonia, do I have any messages'
Antonia: 'Hi Tim, Good thanks'

Antonia was answering a question that I hadn't even asked, because I always asked it. I communicated to her with such a regular pattern that the question had ceased to have any meaningful function as a question, acting instead as just an extended form of greeting. If you have ever bumped into a casual acquaintance and asked 'How are you going?', and then been horrified when they proceed to give you a 10 minute tour of their recent knee surgery, marital problems and gardening exploits, then you too have used an Open question as a Stock Epithet, and been caught when the other party really treats it as an Open question.

But what does this mean for us as IT professionals trying to communicate more effectively with our teams? It means that by simply changing the way we ask questions (use Open questions instead of Closed questions) or the way we phrase the questions (avoid stock epithets and ask 'What has been good in your life recently?' instead of 'How have you been?') we can truly start to communicate effectively. If you would like to seek more meaningful responses from your clients, richer and deeper relationships with your colleagues and a reputation as an excellent communicator, the simple step of changing your questioning technique will certainly start you on your way.

Body Language

Yet the statistics suggest that body language might be an even better place to start if you want to become a better communicator *quickly*. Isn't it funny that while we often spend time carefully selecting the right words, we probably never even stop to think about what body language to use. The statistics suggest that body language is by far the biggest source of the message that we get across to people, yet we do nothing to improve at it. The way you frown when you talk to a colleague is more than 8 times more important than the soothing words you use, but we never even stop to consider what we're doing and how we could adjust it.



Did you know that just adding a simple hand gesture can dramatically improve your chances of getting away with a fib? Did you know that your feet tell people more about whether they have your attention than eye contact does? Did you know that just by paying attention to whether or not someone looks at your lips and the base of your throat while they are talking to you, you might be able to tell if someone is attracted to you? Body language is the communication tool that lets us say a lot without uttering one single word, and gather vital information without asking a single question.

Body language is a difficult concept to examine in a written document, but the decision to improve the way you use body language is a profoundly simple one. Let's go back to Skinner. If 68% of the message we give and receive comes from body language, surely that itself is worth further investigation. There are books that cover the subject extensively, videos that show you some of the techniques and even training courses that can demonstrate and help you to practice what could be the most important communication tools you ever use. If we really seek to improve our communication skills as we try to both understand and be understood, body language might just be the next path to explore.

Communication Styles

But surely communication is more complicated than just the words you use and the body language you display when you use them? Surely there's a world of variation out there that adds a complexity to our communication that we need to wrestle with every day?

Yes, that's true. Any thorough examination of communication skills has to address the simple principle that we all have natural communication styles that we tend to use with everyone. Some of us love detail, and so when we talk with others we seek to understand by drilling down into the nitty gritty fine print and explore every aspect of a problem. Some of us communicate forcefully and quickly, pushing our message across to get on to the next issue and solve it, moving rapidly in the quest for results. Some of us communicate on a more emotional level, seeking feelings rather than thoughts, wishing to explore how situations affect the team we work within, not just us individually.

And all of those communication styles are valid ones. There's nothing wrong with communication forcefully. There's nothing wrong with wanting to find out the details. There's nothing wrong with being concerned about the team.

Unless that style makes communication with another person even more difficult. If you've ever been frustrated because the person you're trying to communicate with is vague and hard to pin down, you might need to adjust your communication style. If you've ever been frustrated because the conversation you're having is bogged down in deep level detail you just can't make progress, you might need to adjust your communication style.

ADVANCED INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A presentation by Tim Naylor - New Horizons Computer Learning Centre



Communication is fundamentally affected by whether or not we can present our message in a way that others find easy to assimilate. There's no point talking if the way you're talking just isn't going to get your message through. So what can we do? Thankfully there are a wealth of communication tools out there to help you.

The DISC model is just one of them, and it happens to be one of the best. Based on the notion that there are 4 archetypes of communication and behaviour the DISC model allows us to explore how we communicate naturally, and how to work out what someone else's natural communication style might be. Once we have a degree of self knowledge and a degree of familiarity with how the other person communicates, we can deliberately choose to use a communication style that works for that *particular* person. The whole principle is firmly based on a fundamental tenant of communication theory:

Do NOT do unto others as you would have them do unto you!

The person you're trying to communicate with is not you, they're different. If you acknowledge that, and adjust your communication style to reflect it, you'll truly become a good communicator as you follow the new golden rule:

Do unto others as they would have done unto them!

Conclusion

Communicating effectively is a vital part of our jobs, yet we often ignore some of the fundamentals of communication or put our efforts into aspects of communication that don't necessarily lead to worthwhile returns. By not only exploring the theory of how we communicate (Words, Tone and Body Language) and practicing those skills in a way that takes into account every persons individual style (the DISC model), but by doing it consciously and deliberately, our communication skills should become a strong part of the skill set we use within our work teams.

Next Steps

New Horizons Learning Centres have regular courses in both the theory and the practice of communication. Advanced Interpersonal Communication Skills and Dealing with Difficult People are just 2 of the many hands on practical courses that allow you to explore the theory, put it into practice and then transfer the techniques to the workplace. Contact your local New Horizons Learning Centre for some immediate solutions to your all of your communication needs. Please also feel free to contact me directly on 08 9215 7265 or tnaylor@nhaustralia.com.au if I can help in any way.

Meanwhile, if you have some time free tonight, here's a quick way to test your questioning skills. Go home tonight, and without letting the subject of your test know what's going on, without arousing their suspicions, engage them in a conversation and ***ask them 20 Open questions in a row!*** If you happen to slip up and ask a Closed question, you go back to zero and start again. Given our natural disposition to ask Closed questions, it's harder than it seems!

Good luck.