



Tim Farish

Misconceptions of gravitas in organisations

Recently, we have been working on gravitas with several clients. Some of the common myths are that you have to be male, old, noisy, wizened, senior... or born with it. Not so! Tim takes up the story...

Let me begin with some context. And then I'll explain the misconceptions.

I have been coaching senior executives now for nearly 15 years and I'm starting to see a significant shift in what gravitas is. Whereas, once it stood for a certain behaviour and demeanour, instantly recognizable within most organisations, it appears to have moved on.

Does this mean that our common understanding, experience and seniority, are no longer 'in fashion' and outdated? Not entirely. It simply suggests that new, more modern values are starting to filter through the corporate system and being integrated into the organizational mindset. The traditional definition needs to be challenged, revised and updated.

The days of grey hair and deep voices appear behind us – filed firmly under '20th Century'. Or are they?



Hillary and Bill Clinton

I should make it clear that I don't claim to have empirical evidence for every point I make, but I have noticed a significant change in the mindset of senior

executives I work with, and the people they lead.

So, what do we really mean by gravitas these days, and – what exactly is it? Most simply, in business terms, it is someone you take seriously.

And the more gravitas they display the more seriously you take them. And let's face it, there are certain people you take very seriously indeed. With a constantly changing workforce come changing values, so it's no surprise that a shift in the traditional definition of 'gravitas' might be happening. Here are seven of the most common misconceptions that I have come across:

Myth #1: You just know it when you first see it

There is no doubt that first impressions count for a lot – and there is plenty of research to back this up. However, how about a counter-view that says that those people who surprise you have even more impact? I call it the 'jolt factor' and I believe that people who 'slow-burn' when they impress have even more lasting power. Think about the last person who surprised you in this way: How do you view them now? That's my point.

Myth #2: Age is vital

The most common misconception about gravitas is that it occurs over the age of 50 and kicks in behind closed doors on the Executive floor. Not so. Some of the

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Grant Pearson Brown Consulting Ltd.

The Presentation & Business Development Specialists

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts



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Misconceptions of gravitas in organisations

By Tim Farish

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Misconceptions of gravitas in organisations ... continued

most seriously taken people are well under 35. Just take a look at how analysts and investors swoon at Google and Facebook AGMs.

One of the most serious combinations is 'brains and chutzpah', and these two companies have a healthy share of both in their early 20s!

Myth #3: Experience is essential

I won't disagree that experience is definitely a major factor in being taken seriously. Of course it is. But it's not essential. Attitude is more essential, for example someone who is prepared to stand up for themselves and argue a point - even if it is unpopular. Over the last two years I have been delivering 'Courageous Conversations' - a global programme for a large energy company - and I have lost count how many participants cite 'courage' as being the most important factor when it comes to respecting and following others.

Myth #4: It matters most in the boardroom

Or does it? With our channels of communication becoming even more fragmented and informal, what people say about your 'brand' lower down the organization can be just as influential. Junior people look up to leaders who 'walk the talk' more often than not. Additionally, gravitas can equally be shown lower down in an organization - and often is - it's just typically called something else, like 'impressive' or 'ambitious'.

Myth #5: You get more as you get more senior

Maybe, but not always. What is indisputable (and here there is plenty of research) is that people get far less flexible and adaptable after age 45. The smart executive keeps fresh by staying 'relevant' and this is more valued by today's followers. And by relevant, I'm referring to being aware of the interests and concerns of their team.

Myth #6: The most vocal voice in the room

This is a relatively easy one to dismiss as most people feel resentment at the most vocal especially if that person does not listen well. "Saying less but meaning more" is a catchphrase for gravitas, and a timeless element. It is no co-incidence that one leading energy company recently introduced new corporate values, and 'listening to the quietest voice in the room' is seen as being best practice for their Execs.

Myth #7: Keep your distance - don't get too intimate.

Many experienced leaders will tell you that you do not need to be your team's best friend to have their respect. I certainly agree with this. The smart ones will also tell you that you need to spend some private 1-1 time getting to know each one if you want them to go that extra mile for you.

So, what does all this mean? It suggests a few things. Firstly, that the hierarchy model of gravitas - respect and authority - is receding. There will always be organisations more hierarchical than others (some justifiably by design) but on the whole, most mid-junior employees feel that they now have a right to more participation and inclusion.

And finally, it implies that the information age and Generation Y are starting to grow up and assert themselves. The rate of change is accelerating fast and each generation is experiencing less time between the major paradigm shifts which affect our day-to-day working lives.

This makes those more comfortable with change more influential and those who are not, less so.

Tim Farish
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Teaching old dogs new tricks



Jumping on the 'neuro' fever that has had the UK in its grip for more than a year now, I've been reading a lot of research on 'neural plasticity' or the malleability of the brain. New findings are indicating that our brains remain very plastic well into adulthood.

The thing is we actually know that we can adapt; the evidence is all around us. Not just when we're children, but as adults. Think how our habits and behaviours have changed over the past 15 years. With the advent of broadband, smart phones and ever smaller and more powerful PCs, we have shown our remarkable ability to adapt and learn new skills.

It's probably axiomatic that the brain's plasticity would be important to those of us in the field of training, so imagine how frustrating it is when people – clients in particular – say they can't change their behaviour, or learn something new.

In a now widely published research study from the year 2000 conducted by [neuro] scientists at University College London, London black cab drivers were proven to have an enlarged posterior hippocampus. The average 3 to 4 years' training to pass 'The Knowledge' clearly has a dramatic



London cabbies' hippocampi are larger

effect on their brains.

As Dr Eleanor Maguire, who led the research team, said "there seems to be a definite relationship between the navigating they do as a taxi driver and the brain changes".

She added: "the hippocampus has changed its structure to accommodate their huge amount of navigating experience." We all benefit from that!

This touches on the area of memory, which is what I'd like to focus on in this article. Hopefully, you'll be able to exploit the plasticity of your own brain using the techniques in this article, especially when having to pitch, present or give a speech.

Although our brains are more malleable when we are children, the environment and the techniques used were also designed to help us learn and retain information.

As author of the highly-acclaimed 'Guitar Zero' and psychologist at New York University, Gary Marcus, says, "The idea that there's a critical period for learning in childhood is overrated".

That being said, there are clearly aspects of childhood learning worth carrying into adulthood. According to a study on the acquisition of foreign accents by Yang Zhang at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, we may simply be suffering from poor tuition!

In his article on learning like a child, David Robson of the *New Scientist* magazine asserts that external testing makes a huge difference to retention. So perhaps our tendency as adults to self-test in the workplace should be curbed.

Clearly, working with a coach and rehearsing with trusted colleagues should be encouraged, as this form of 'external testing' can greatly enhance the quality of a presentation.

I touched on the use of the simple mnemonic device of rhyme as a way to improve memory in my article 'Rhyme or Reason' (SpeakUp No. 44). Mnemonic devices are visual or verbal techniques that make it easier to remember seemingly unrelated information.



**Lynda
Russell-Whitaker**

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Teaching old dogs new trickscontinued



Learning to read music as a young child, I can still recall another popular mnemonic device, the acronym, I was taught to remember the notes on the lines of the treble clef:



“Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit”
(or in some versions, Favour).

The notes of the treble clef in music

For contrast, “FACE” seems to manage well enough as a method for learning the notes in the spaces, and for the sake of completeness, mind-mapping is another useful example of the brain’s amazing ability to be malleable.

As a way of bringing dull or dry data to life, mnemonics often work by evoking vivid and unusual imagery and emotions.

Furthermore, many studies show that combining words and pictures in our heads improves our recall as well as our understanding.

These devices will not only help you learn important facts and figures, they will help you retain them longer and recall them quickly. Useful when faced with a challenging questioner on the opposite side of the table!

Of course, the prevalence of smart phones not only shows us how adaptable our brains are, but how lazy they can be too. When was the last time you committed a number to your own memory, rather than that of your handheld device?

A useful technique to recall a variety of data, especially figures with more than 10 digits, is chunking. Separating, or chunking, the figures into groups of 3 and 4 (as we often do with phone numbers), seems to be the most efficient way to memorise them.

Repetition and writing them down helps of course, but the point is to train your memory rather than refer to a piece of paper or your mobile.

There are several habits worth retaining from childhood, including openness and curiosity. Perhaps most important is the willingness to make mistakes – perfectionism being the scourge that truly impairs our progress (and probably our joy too) as adults.

Once we liberate ourselves from the need to get something perfect, we find that we can learn and retain new information in the way we did as children.

Speaking personally, I learnt to read, write and speak Greek to a very high level in less than 3 years when living there, because I gave up trying to construct every sentence perfectly and just enjoyed playing with the language.

“Είναι όλα τα
Ελληνικά μου”

“It’s all Greek to me” (in Greek)

So the next time someone you know says “I’m too old to change” or “I’ve never been able to do that”, remind them that old dogs as well as young ones can be taught new tricks!

Note: The cognitive scientist, Ed Cooke, has a website (www.memrise.com) devoted to mnemonics should you want further inspiration!

Lynda Russell-Whitaker

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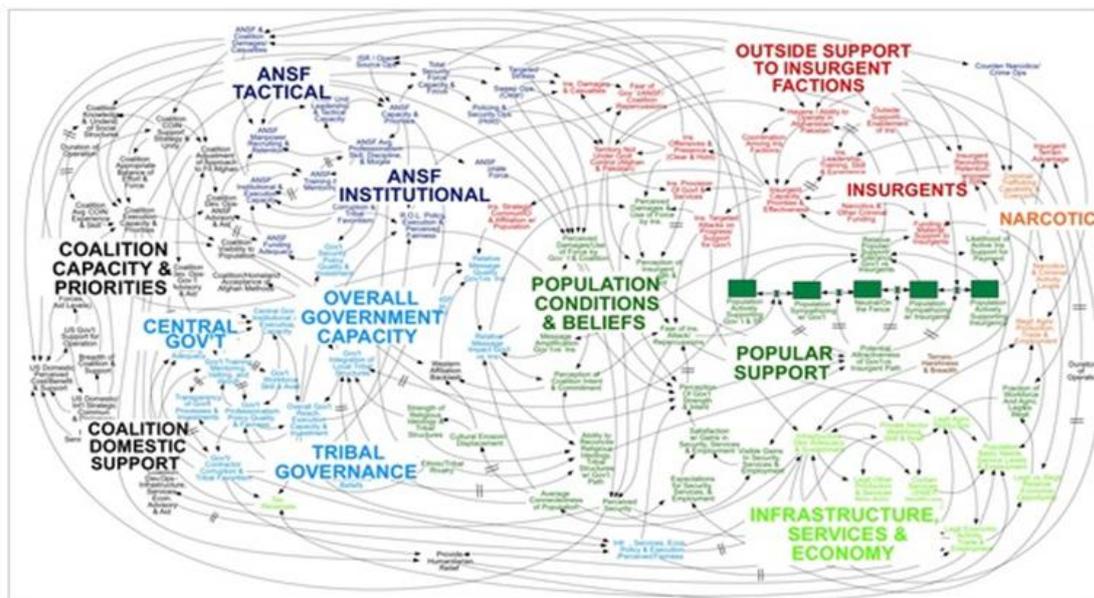


Bullet points can endanger life



Alastair Grant

In the Summer of 2009, Kabul, Afghanistan, a slide presentation was given to the US command. One of those slides has since bounced around the Internet as an example of a military tool that has spun out of control. Like an insurgency, PowerPoint had reached the level of near obsession. Here is that slide:



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"When we understand that slide, we'll have won the war," was General Stanley McChrystal's reaction. The room erupted in laughter. We can all see why.

There have been other much more negative reactions to PowerPoint: "PowerPoint makes us stupid," said Gen. James N. Mattis of the US Marine Corps, "It's dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control," General McMaster said this: "Some problems in the world are not bulletizable." Commanders say that behind all the PowerPoint jokes are serious concerns that the software stifles discussion, critical thinking and thoughtful decision-making.

So, the military has a problem with PowerPoint (PP) and in our experience it's no different in commercial life: Bullet point slides can reduce complex detail to one-liners.

This is not another rant against PP which can be skilfully used to show graphs, pictures and diagrams in a way that would be hard to describe in words. Instead I think there are two quite separate issues: (a) The reduction of complexity into one liners, and (b) The multiple use of PowerPoint as both a mem-

ory prompt, a display to the audience and then later as a hand-out. In short, a compromise.

Part One - Complex Situations

Nothing illustrates this better than the case of the PP presentations to NASA officials making life or death decisions during the final flight of the ill-fated Columbia Space Shuttle. A report by Edward Tufte in 2005 spelt out in detail his views on the effect of PP on the decision making process. To remind you, in 2003, 83 seconds after lift-off, a piece of foam insulation broke off the shuttle and hit the left wing, breaking essential thermal insulation.

You might think 1.67 lbs of foam is hardly dangerous. But kinetic energy = $1/2mv^2$ which meant that the foam had the density of a large rock when the shuttle was accelerating to 600 mph.

Three reports were quickly prepared with a total of 28 PPT slides. The detail level bullet points mentioned doubts and uncertainties but the high level summaries with big bullet point conclusions were quite optimistic.

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Bullet points can endanger life ... continued



So it seems that some high level NASA officials decided that Columbia was safe. But other engineers hoped that the military would photograph the shuttle which might have spotted the damage to the wing. The slides below shows the word 'significant' and 'significantly' 6 times:

Summary and Conclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Impact analysis ("Crater") indicates potential for large TPS damage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Review of test data shows wide variation in impact response – RCC damage limited to coating based on soft SOFI ● Thermal analysis of wing with missing tile is in work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Single tile missing shows local structural damage is possible, but no burn through – Multiple tile missing analysis is on-going ● M/OD criteria used to assess structural impacts of tile loss <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Allows significant temperature exceedance, even some burn through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact to vehicle turnaround possible, but maintains safe return capability
<p>Conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contingent on multiple tile loss thermal analysis showing no violation of M/OD criteria, safe return indicated even with significant tile damage

The meanings of these two words, says Tufte, varies from "*detectable in perhaps an irrelevant calibration study*" to ... "*an amount of damage so that everyone dies.*"

Review of Test Data Indicates Conservatism for Tile Penetration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The existing SOFI on tile test data used to create Crater was reviewed along with STS-87 Southwest Research data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Crater overpredicted penetration of tile coating significantly <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial penetration to described by normal velocity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varies with volume/mass of projectile (e.g., 200ft/sec for 3cu. in) • Significant energy is required for the softer SOFI particle to penetrate the relatively hard tile coating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test results do show that (i) is possible at sufficient mass and velocity • Conversely, once tile is penetrated SOFI can cause significant damage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor variations in total energy (above penetration level) can cause significant tile damage – Flight condition is significantly outside of test database <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volume of ramp is 1920cu in vs 3 cu in for test

So what does this mean for us? A simple point is that a complex subject needs to be spelt out with the skill of a journalist – this does not mean more words on a slide when presenting but to avoid bullet points which save the presenter the need to polish their thinking to put over an analytic, persuasive point. Imagine lawyers presenting arguments in court with slides instead of legal briefs. Imagine a priest in church or a politician making a case with bullet points. Try reducing Lincoln's magnificent Gettysburg address with bullet points!

Part Two -The Compromise

This is a different matter altogether. I see PP being used three different ways:

First: The Prompt. Presenters prepare presentations, often by putting their thoughts and structure into a series of word slides. The presenter likes the comfort blanket of words slides to remind them what to say rather than to be of high value to the audience.

Second: The Handout. The slides are also handed out so that there is a record of what is said – even for those who were unable to attend the presentation.

Third: High value slides. And of course some slides are shown as they provide detail and insight that cannot so well be described by the human voice. Graphs, charts, diagrams, and pictures have direct and beneficial impact on the audience.

This threefold use of PP is a compromise. How can this be more sharply focused? Here are 3 ideas:

(a) Presenters can cut back on detailed word slides and rows of bullet points by using their own notes. These could be on paper but if the slide is being projected then the dual screen use of PP allows the notes to be seen *only* by the presenter.

(b) Handouts do not work well if they are a series of bullet point slides. Here there must be a description of what is going on. This links well with the points made above about the Challenger mishap.

(c) Insert some blank slides on screen. Here the audience has little choice but to listen to the only source of information. This allows a more complex thought process to be developed. At that stage a summary in bullet form makes sense.

Summary

It's easy to poke fun at PPT but not so easy to give helpful advice to those working under pressure to meet deadlines. But be clear that complex arguments may lose cohesion if all is reduced to pithy bullet points that give an illusion of logic and crisp efficiency. Be fully aware of the compromise dilemma.

The main purpose of a slide should surely be to add value to the audience by:

(a) Showing a point/argument/detail more clearly than the speaker can describe, and (b) Making a point more memorable after the event.

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Alastair Grant

Major, Minor keys



Ewan Pearson

One of the funny things about doing this for a long time is that we never stop learning. In music, composers have a simple choice to make at the outset: to use a major key or a minor key. Each can create powerful music, but in quite different ways. It turns out that metaphors can do much the same in the way we communicate.

One of the 'scales to fall from our eyes' this year whilst developing our Content Analysis tool has been the way in which metaphors are used in two quite different levels in a piece of communication, whether it be written or spoken.

We are huge fans of metaphors and other rhetorical tools that help communication, whether spoken or written, to be more easily understood, more memorable and more persuasive. And quote frankly, more fun to hear or read too.

There are many metaphors to choose from - and just to reinforce our advice here, we always prefer fresh new ones - and it turns out from looking at this subject more closely recently, that there are two levels at which these are and should be used within the structure of a piece of communication. We'll call these levels 'Major' and 'Minor' metaphors.

First, define the word 'metaphor'

There are quite a few definitions to choose from, but here is the one we like most:

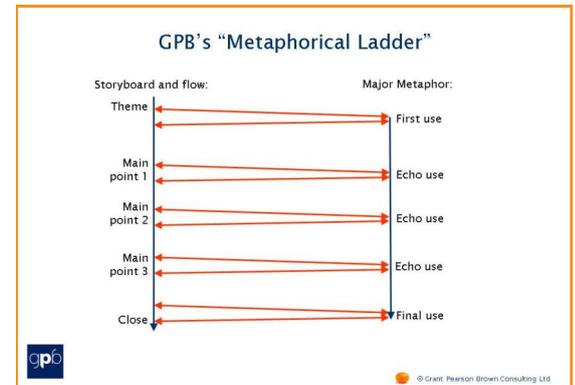
"An implied analogy or comparison between two unlike things that actually have something important in common."

So what are these two types of metaphor?

Major Metaphors

A major metaphor is one that is woven into and all through the fabric of the content, and re-used as an echo. It should be the sole metaphor, and its use is repeated several times creating a structure that can be drawn as a ladder, as shown above right.

A Major metaphor describes a parallel path that the listener or reader can follow, which through its clarity and enjoyment achieved the memorability and persuasiveness goals.



GPB's Metaphorical Ladder

Here's an example of a Major Metaphor: The Head of Department at one of our fund management clients was presenting on his area of the business, Quantitative Analysis (QA), in preparation for a pitch to a client. When he finished presenting, I confessed that I could not understand what he did at all well, and therefore the value his department provided the firm. That was a bit disappointing to both of us!

So I asked him to help think of a metaphor that describes what they do. We came up with the parallel that QA is like piloting a 'plane across the Atlantic from London to Boston: His team could measure key things like the position, course, speed, distance, temperature and humidity, the weather around and away from the plane, so show the pilot - using a sophisticated dashboard of displayed key metrics - whether the current course was the best, or whether to change course.

The key point being to get the passengers to Boston safely.

The connections to the QA topics were then pretty easy: the opening was to state the metaphor (*"It's a bit like providing the data for the dashboard of a plane"*), the fund measurements were on things like risk, return, style bias, and tracking error.

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Major, Minor keyscontinued

Our Services

Grant Pearson Brown Consulting Ltd (GPB) is a respected adviser based in London. We enhance the performance of businesses, helping clients to excel in the use of the spoken and written word, improving the performance of individuals and teams. Over the long term our work improves the way a firm does business.

We coach and advise individuals to perform at their best in the toughest situations including: Presentations, New Business Pitches, Business Development, Negotiating, Media Interviews, Telephone Calls and Document Writing.

We also produce scientific Voice, Visual and Content Analysis reports, then provide content, voice coaching and non verbal communications advice.

Our clients' needs are the only focus of our work; we listen to them and closely tailor our response to deliver first class coaching and advice. In support of this we selectively pursue new ideas and approaches, continually hone our advice and create tools such as Prospect Relationship Management (PRM), Just a Minute, the Fire Bell Test and the Information Iceberg.

The key point related to the investors, who wanted to derive a certain performance (rate of return), without too much risk (flying through storms), or too much deviation from a benchmark (position). We were able to make several other ladder connections and for the first time I fully understood the value his team provides.

Minor Metaphors

A Minor metaphor by contrast helps to illustrate one particular point made, but does not bear repeating as that can become annoying, and anyway it's job has been done.

Here's an example: I was working recently with the CEO of a Private Equity (PE) firm, preparing to give his annual keynote address to his firm's investors (General Partners, GPs). He used several metaphors, once each for a particular point.

"A childlike enthusiasm for birthdays...a proper party to celebrate" used to link to how he is happy that the firm is this year having a significant birthday as an independent business;

"GPs will need to internalise the lessons of last 10 years to fully fulfil the promise" in reference to the changing nature of PE;

"I have ordered my keys to success into 4 buckets" as a way to refer to the 4 topics he then covered.

And this use of new and different minor metaphors just carried on to the end:

"GPs have embraced growth"

"...under the umbrella of these global giants"

"Assumes a real spike in one or more dimensions"

"...a forensic examination of our own track record."

"...wandering through forest of geographically-driven opportunities."

"...two essential ingredients."

"to fine-tune pricing."

"I have had a ring side seat at ..."

"...will have harnessed potent mix"

"Without...these two objectives are uncomfortable bedfellows."

"...a tipping point is approaching."

And then finally, he moved neatly back to his opening metaphor: *"These comments may not be those of your typical birthday party but.."*

This use of several different metaphors would conventionally be frowned upon as an example of "Mixaphors", the use of mixed metaphors, whose main problem is confusion for the listeners/readers.

But it actually worked really well in this case, and in a similar but different way to the use of a Major Metaphor, achieved the style goals of making the presentation easier to understand and much more enjoyable.

There is a strong analogy here with the Major and Minor keys in music: both types are equally valuable to a composer, but are used differently, to equally powerful end effect.

What conclusions can we draw from this?

First, realise how vital the good use of rhetoric (such as the use of metaphors) is.

Second, have a think about how you use (or don't use) rhetorical devices such as metaphors, in your own spoken and written communications.

Third, in terms of metaphors specifically, either go for one major one that you re-use as an echo several times, without switching to other metaphors, or use a selection of new, easy and interesting metaphors, each one simply helping to explain a particular idea.

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