



Alastair Grant

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Consulting Ltd.

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Dealing with difficult people

Alastair Grant

“Our client had won the work with an important new customer. They were fulfilling all their targets, even exceeding them in some cases, but all was not well....

The manager at our client’s customer was always complaining and made life difficult for our client. Could we help?

A quick analysis first: What was going on? Many of the complaints were extremely trivial. An unimportant typo would create a hissy fit. Our client was met by diversionary tactics when trying to tie down facts. If this relationship continued to be fractious then maybe the contract would be terminated.

So, what did we do?

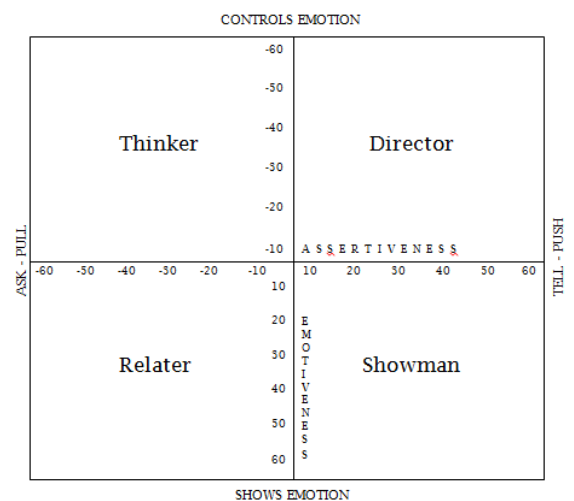
We developed a five-pronged approach:

- First, together we profiled the behaviour of their difficult customer
- Second, we got our client to seek allies who had had similar experiences
- Third, we asked them to keep an imperial grip on who said what
- Fourth, we coached them in objection handling techniques
- Finally, we built confidence through role-plays.

Profiling

We went back to one of the earliest of the psychometric tests: Behaviour Styles¹. Assertiveness levels are shown in the 2x2 box above right, along the horizontal axis. The further to the right, the more assertive the person is; for example we could suggest that Donald Trump is well over to the right. So too it would seem is (or was) Nicola Sturgeon.

The vertical axis shows emotional display. At the top (-60) the person is detached, not very sociable and controls their emotions.



Merrill & Reid's Behaviour Styles model

At the bottom end the person is volatile and shows emotion too readily. Again, we have no difficulty in placing a (teetotal) President Trump firmly in this half but Nicola Sturgeon displays much more control and would be above the centre line. When combined, Trump is identified as a ‘Showman’, Sturgeon a ‘Director’ style. You may think that ‘Thinker’ and ‘Relator’ styles are less effective, but this is not so. Many company Chairs are Relaters: very good at relationships, but able to be decisive when needs must; thinkers excel at risk management and accuracy.

Back to the story: The team at our client each analysed their own style, to learn how it works, and where they might be. After that they each profiled the difficult manager. The finding was a definite ‘Director’ style.

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Dealing with difficult people ... continued

From this we advised on the best strategies e.g. don't waste their time; get to the point; be business-like. Don't try to socialise or be too cordial, or delve into how they are or what they will be doing this weekend. They will want to lead. Allow that to happen for a bit but then start asking open questions. Keep probing if you don't get the answer. If they try to coerce you, be prepared to quietly stand your ground. This is where roleplaying beforehand is so helpful.

Seek Allies

We suggested that, so long as it did not breach confidentiality, they share their observations with others. Advice might be forthcoming and co-operation might be fruitful. It became apparent that others had also found this manager difficult to deal with, including colleagues, others were external: at least one organisation had faced similar difficulties with this person.

Keep a Record

Since part of the problem was disputing facts, or even *Alternative Facts*, we strongly recommended that a tight record was kept of all transactions. If there was a phone conversation, then an email would follow up to act as a summary of what was said. The other party could, of course, challenge the statement but at least a record was there in writing.

Objection Handling Techniques

When faced with an objection most of us try to push back straight away. But a better method is to go through a four-stage process:

Stage 1 Clarify. They make an objection. Perhaps it's rather general. Don't put your case yet, instead seek clarification. What happened precisely? What was the exact outcome? Etc. This gives you some thinking time and winks out specifics.

Stage 2 Classify. Why type of objection is it? Is it to get a price reduction? Are they genuinely annoyed by bad performance? Are they objectors by inclination? Is it about wielding power? Something else?

Our client felt that the difficult manager did like to dominate the scene, and delighted in picking arguments. It was noted that the customer even dominated her boss in meetings! *Classify* is an internal thought process, helping you to understand what might be going on.

Stage 3 Counter-respond. Now is the time to respond to their objection, politely and firmly. They may have a point, but now you understand it better, offer a solution to the problem.

Stage 4 Confirm. This is perhaps the most important part of all. Having dealt with the objection, check and confirm that they are satisfied with what you have said. Matters shouldn't be left ambiguous, they should commit one way or another. Then, follow up with an email/letter to summarise what was said. Even if there is no final agreement, summarise what was agreed and what was not.

Role plays

Going into a meeting with a difficult person can increase nerves and tension, but advance role play of the meeting helps to build confidence whilst learning to take the 4 steps mentioned above. It can also be fun as each in turn play the role of the customer and really ramp it up.

As I penned this article I received an email from our client. Here is part of it.
"Yesterday X and I had our follow up meeting with our 'tricky' customer. In spite of the person pulling all their usual tricks, X handled the meeting with poise and confidence. We went in to the meeting with six intended outcomes in mind, and we left with all of them achieved in spite of relentless challenges (both substantial and behavioural) from our customer."

There is no magic wand when dealing with difficult people or difficult situations, but you can plan for them, recognising that such a plan has several components. This improves your odds and helps to avoid costly mistakes.

By Alastair Grant

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How actively are you listening?

Lynda Russell-Whitaker



“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak”. That quote is attributed to two ancient philosophers: the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium (BC c.335 – c.262), and Epictetus (AD 55 - c.135), an advocate of stoicism.

Whichever one of them it was, their comparison is as relevant now to the relative importance of speaking and listening as it was 2,000 years ago. In the 21st Century, most of us in the western world are on information overload, bombarded from all sides by a variety of online and offline media, attempting to distinguish real news from the fake, and celebrity gossip from quality information.

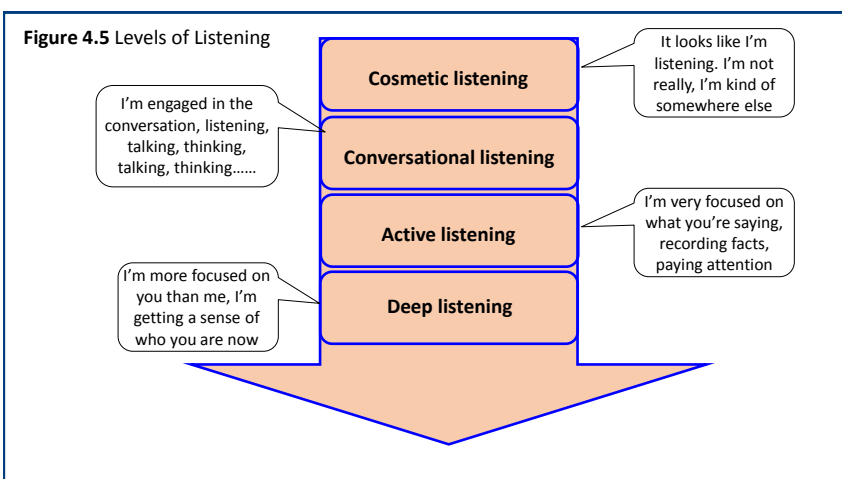
In this environment, listening can become something of a challenge. Executive coach, Julie Starr, argues in her book ‘The Coaching Manual’ that there are four types of “listening”, see fig 4.5:

It is only when we move into the realms of ‘active listening’ (and later ‘deep listening’) that we employ real intention and focus. The phrase ‘active listening’ was coined in the 1950s by Dr. Carl Rogers, a clinical psychologist in the USA who is considered to be one of the founders of psychotherapy. He developed a person-centred approach to therapy, suggesting that humans have an innate tendency “to find fulfilment of their own personal potentials”.

Collaborative coaching operates along similar lines, hence the importance of developing the skills of active, or even



Lynda Russell-Whitaker



deep, listening in a coaching environment. According to Deborah Tannen, a Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University, this is something that women do naturally (and more so than men) in order to create empathy and achieve greater relationship depth.

I’m sure we can all recall an occasion when we’ve been guilty of what she calls ‘cosmetic listening’, which is not really listening at all. For example, I personally wouldn’t want to be tested on the pros and cons of various makes, types and models of motorbikes, following a conversation with my elder brother!

At other times, when we are engaged in a discussion, we bring a degree of attention to our conversation partner. Often we are only partially listening, waiting for that person to finish their point, so that we can make ours. Ms. Starr refers to this as ‘conversational listening’. We call it ‘waiting to speak’ mode...

Clearly, whatever your gender, if you spend a fair portion of your daily professional life working with clients or staff, active listening is worth investing time in to practise and master.

I believe this skill is important for everyone and anyone can develop it. It can only be beneficial, personally and professionally: When participants are listening intently to each other in a meeting, their input is higher quality, enabling collaboration and true team work. Colleagues who experience this level of listening from each other feel respected and inspired by what arises

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How actively are you listening? ... continued

from this level of interaction. The creative thinking it encourages is a valuable commodity, particularly in today's business climate. Any advantage gained in such a competitive market becomes critical for us to flourish.

Active listening requires the suspension of judgement, concerns and opinions, and avoidance of distractions. We need to remain as impartial as possible. Even on the days when your travel time was doubled due to a signal failure, a tube strike or there were leaves on the line! Those irritations and frustrations must be set aside and your attention focused on your conversation partner. Managing yourself and your emotions, staying fully present throughout, is extremely important. Bring your awareness to peripheral signs: what is behind what is being said, i.e. the eye contact, posture and other elements of non-verbal communication. When you can provide this level of observation, you begin to hear the meaning behind the words.



Smith & Jones doing a listening practical? Courtesy of the BBC.

Which brings us to the relationship between quality questioning and quality listening. If you are someone who interviews people or needs to regularly gather requirements, you know how critical it is to ask the right questions and listen intently to the answers.

I worked for many years in a software development environment and learnt the hard way with one client. He was furious that their brief had been ignored by our Creative Director, who decided that his own ideas were better, overriding the Account Director and client requirements. That was an expensive error! Open questions work well when trying to elicit more detail, someone's opinion or to

build rapport e.g. "so what are you up to at the weekend?"

Closed questions are good for concluding discussions or getting a decision made about something: "*Do we all agree these next steps, now that we've got the information we needed?*". The 'Opening Funnel Method' of questioning is useful here. It uses closed then more open questions. My first exercise is useful to practise memory-jogging. It can be used effectively to jog someone's memory and to gradually build up detailed information:

Working with a partner, outline the context: Ask them about a time when, for example, they lost something valuable. Start with closed questions, e.g. 'Were you on your own at the time?' and 'Did this happen recently?' Graduate to more open questions, facilitating them to recall and paint a picture, e.g. "What were your surroundings like?" You might ask them to picture what they were wearing that day, who else was there, etc. In this way, you help them visualise the scene and jog their memory.

The second exercise is to practise active and even deep listening:

Working with a friend or colleague, outline the context: Ask them to tell you about a challenge they are currently facing. When listening, pay attention not just to what they are saying but also their eye contact, posture and any other cues from their body language that might indicate more than their words. Record your questions along with your thoughts arising from what you observe. Share these with your exercise partner. Explore how accurate your interpretations were. If appropriate, swap roles and share your feedback with your partner.

The type of questioning you employ in various scenarios will depend on your objective, as with the type of listening you provide. It may be impossible to listen intently all the time to everyone, but when relevant and important, the effort can yield extraordinary results.

By Lynda Russell-Whitaker

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The irrational is rational

Ewan Pearson

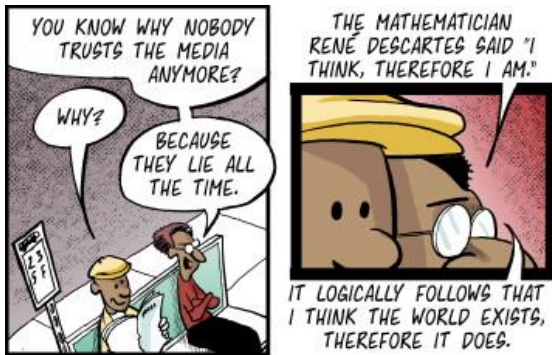


Brexit. Trump. The Oscars envelopes. Football referee abuse. Scotland winning 3 matches in the Six Nations: Why on earth did *that* happen?

Certain major actions and decisions, such as those above, have been hard to explain. There will be others, local for you, perhaps the decision of a business pitch, where you have asked the same question.

'Irrational, emotional, illogical, style over substance, rhetoric over reason, stupid, idiotic, daft'. These are some of the words used when a decision makes no sense to us. Their use has been on the rise. A typical - and I'd suggest good - reaction is to want to know what the reason is for it all going so badly 'wrong'.

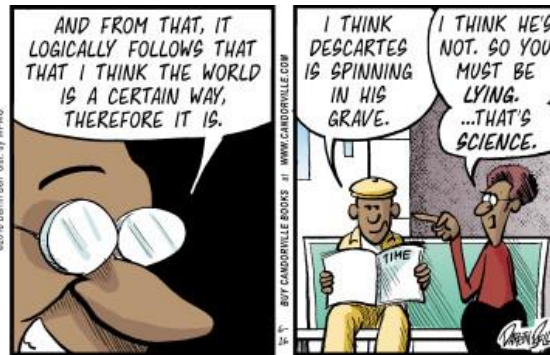
Sometimes we have visceral and even highly emotional reactions when a vote or bid decision has gone against us, or we failed to sell something (a concept, service or product) in an act of persuasion. I want here to enlarge on some of the reasons why these seemingly irrational and just-plain-wrong things occur.



Malcom Gladwell's book "Blink" has a great example of how emotions affect reasoning: The curators of the Getty museum let desire (emotion) affect their judgement (logic), resulting in the purchase of a fake Greek statue. This example reinforces the idea that involving emotions can be bad. But there are many occasions too where emotions have had a positive effect, and it seems that, if you're healthy, emotions are **always** involved.

Antonio Damasio's 1994 book "Descartes' Error"¹ is a good reference. René Descartes' phrase "*Cogito ergo sum*"² (meaning 'I think therefore I am') separated the mind from the body; as a piece of deductive reasoning it held sway for 350 years - and was, Descartes said '*a view that cannot be doubted*'. Wow; strong stuff...

Damasio instead postulated the *somatic marker hypothesis*, suggesting that for



As humans, we like to think to think we are intelligent salient beings who can make largely good decisions, and we think the same of those around us. We greatly value logic and rational methods of reasoning, especially in the Western world. This use of reasoning *seems* to avoid emotion.

Emotion seems 'bad', and we use labels such as 'subconscious bias', and 'over emotional' for such bad things. I have been looking into what science can tell us. 30 years ago the answer would have been 'not much', as investigation into understanding emotions in decisions had not progressed very far. There has been plenty since, too much to try to cover here, so I am going to concentrate on one aspect: how emotion is involved in reasoning.

healthy people, emotion is involved in the loop of reason - that all decisions have an emotional component to them; that there is no separate region of the brain or mind for each, and that the absence of emotion in decision-making (e.g. in patients with frontal lobe brain damage that he and others studied) has been found to be uniformly a bad thing. Phineas Gage was a well-known example of this. Damasio also reminds us that some decisions occur before 'reasoning' has had time to take place fully (intuition). He describes how the involvement of emotions is sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful, but they are always there. For example, emotions may increase the *salience* of a premise,

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giving a positive bias to the decision in favour of that premise. He also found that such emotions could be conscious (such as gut feelings), or subconscious. To say “*I didn’t realise that emotion was happening to me, it was subconscious*”, is not always true.

Emotions in business decisions

How does this affect decisions made at work? The most relevant here is the pitching decision: why does the winner win the business, and the others lose?

The short answer is that the decision-makers have used a combination of emotion and reasoning, with emotions influencing the rational process, either with feelings experienced at the time, or from the past.

It is often considered culturally unacceptable (e.g. in Public Sector procurement) for emotion to be seen to be involved in a specific decision, even though we know now that this produces worse decisions.

People generally prefer logical decisions over emotive ones because of the greater sense of fairness implied, this can make the process sterile leading to poorer decisions. But - as we have said before - decision-makers may use a smoke screen (factual) reason to cover the underlying real (emotive) reason. Those emotions may be conscious or sub conscious, and helpful or damaging to the decision.

So, in order to win business, you have to be mindful of the emotions of your buyers, not only at the time you pitch, but in the pre-pitch communication and even further back into clients emotions experienced on anything relevant to this matter, even back to their childhood.

Likeability and Trust

We know you like simple big ideas, and these two words capture that spirit well. It’s still important to make a good logical case in a pitch, but we have never held that to be sufficient. Likeability is a simple concept to describe but it is a

hard status to achieve with clients, and is also easily lost, often without knowing you’ve done so, and often for ‘irrational’ reasons. For many years we have used the term ‘Hot and Cold Buttons’ for assessing the Features, Benefits or Implications (FBI) when pitch coaching. The audience could have opposing, possibly very emotive reactions to what is said: ‘Hot’ is good content and “excites the buyer to buy”, and ‘Cold’ is bad content that ‘turns them off’. Our use of emotional language here tells us these effects are not solely rational, i.e. beneficial or disadvantageous to the buyer or their organisation, but are couched in emotional language, as that is how such reactions are processed. We want the buyer to *like* and not *dislike* what was said.

Likeability goes further – into how you interact, and thus ‘get on with’ others. It is a core part of trust. Some simple ways to develop likeability are to be the positive version of you - appropriately funny, witty, or humorous, but never culturally inappropriate. This has to be long-term and authentic, as we will see through fakery very quickly and deduce that you cannot be trusted, and is very hard to reverse or even modify.

Back to the odd decisions in the sub title: the answer seems to lie in emotion being involved. And not separate from the logical considerations. Think back to you own (good or bad) decisions: You may think them purely logical, but I would wager there was an emotional element that was important to you.

Perhaps what Descartes should have said (but in much better Latin) is something like: ‘*Cogito et sentio quod ut partem qui sum*’ (I think and feel as part of who I am). But then that would be logical.

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¹*Descartes’ Error*, by Dr Antonio Damasio, pages xvii-xix. Vintage books, London, 2006. ²‘Discourse on the method’, René Descartes, published in French in 1637; and ‘Principles of Philosophy’, René Descartes, published in Latin in 1644.

Towards an understanding of effective metaphors

Richard Keith



There is an undoubted power in a good metaphor

When Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks of his supporters being “battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality” we experience a piece of communication far more powerful than if he had made a point about racial injustice in basic prose. But what exactly is a metaphor, why are they so effective, and how should we use them in our business communication?

What are they?

A metaphor is a comparison of things that are ostensibly unrelated, without introducing them with “like” or “as”.

For example, “*That rugby player is an animal*” is a metaphor that directly compares a rugby player with an animal. The metaphor evokes images of aggression, strength, and primitive savagery, inviting us to see the player in a certain way.

Before we go any further, let’s make one thing clear. Of course, metaphors are used by poets like Shakespeare and Wordsworth, but they are also used all the time by mere mortals such as you and me. In fact, metaphors are so ubiquitous that some scholars have argued that our thoughts and actions are driven by them. How many of you noticed, for example, that this paragraph begins with two metaphorical expressions – “Before we go any further” and “let’s make one thing clear”? What about the indirect metaphor when I described us as “mere mortals” thereby comparing Shakespeare et al. with gods? Or even the sentence “thought and action are driven by metaphors”? You see? Metaphors are everywhere. (Well spotted: “you see” here is also a metaphor.)

Why are they so effective?

Metaphors work by mapping information from a well understood source domain onto the target domain about which you want to elaborate. For example, if I say to my partner “Our relationship has stalled, I just don’t see us going anywhere” I am employing the metaphorical concept of

RELATIONSHIP AS A JOURNEY. Here I have taken what I know about a journey (the metaphor’s *source* domain) and compared it with our relationship (the *target* domain). This allows me to frame the idea that our relationship is not working, but in a particular way.

Metaphors can invite new and, at times, interesting or more complete ways of understanding something. For instance, “I’m drowning in this relationship” is a different source domain, or I could say “Everyday is a battle, I don’t want to fight anymore”: both of which evoke different ideas about the specific challenges of the relationship.

Importantly, by offering specific perspectives through particular metaphors it can become far harder for other frameworks to be accessed cognitively by a listener. This is because metaphors nearly always activate unconscious emotional associations by referring to a source domain of which we have a particular framework of knowledge.

A metaphor can then present certain aspects of the target domain (wished by the speaker to be framed) and omit other negative aspects, which strengthens a particular way of seeing something. If taken up and repeated often enough, we cease to think easily about something in any other way. As Charteris-Black writes, “*When metaphors displace other ways of talking about the same thing, language has acted upon the world by colonising rival ways of thinking about it, and in doing so frames our understanding.*” This gives metaphor huge potential as a tool for persuasion.

Let me give you another example. When Donald Trump stands in front of the Boy Scouts of America and talks of “our *path towards killing* this horrible thing call Obamacare” he is using metaphors. By speaking of a path he taps into the idea of a physical movement in a particular direction thereby suggesting a more

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Towards an understanding of effective metaphors...continued

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tangible sense of progress. When he speaks specifically of "killing", he heightens the emotional sense of the action. There is a finality to the word that you wouldn't get with "stopping" or "preventing". The literal meaning is the taking of a life: against an enemy – as Trump has framed Obamacare to be – this particular metaphor suggests his greater power. The potency of these emotional connections ingrains the idea of repealing Obamacare further into our cognitive awareness, and in a very specific light.



Young beauty or old lady? People often see the same thing in different ways: use metaphors to help your audience to see it *your* way.

Do metaphors really affect our thinking?

There are many instances where we take a source domain based on embodied experience and use it to add a concrete sense of surety to something more abstract. For example, let's return to the JOURNEY source domain we met earlier. How many times have you heard "We've come a long way", "we're on the path to success", "we're moving forward" etc from a political or business leader. From our first few steps as a child, we have embodied various physical journeys that

make it easy for us to relate to this idea. Even though we can't know the future of this company or government, we take encouragement from the cognitive framework that resonates a clear direction and physical movement. After using embodied experience as the most accessible set of source domains, it becomes a simple move to use other domains that carry specific knowledge in their entailments. In this way, our everyday conceptual system has become metaphorically structured; so, yes, is the answer – metaphors do affect our thinking about the world; we just don't realise it most of the time.

How should I use metaphors?

That we think in metaphors can be very advantageous. By offering a particular perspective by which to understand something, your metaphors encourage your listeners to perceive the world in the way that you want them to! This will lead them to import a variety of knowledge from the source domain onto the target domain, embedding further your framework in their mind. So here are some pointers on how to use metaphors for persuasive communication.

Key tips:

1. Know your audience. What sort of source domains will resonate with them?
2. Don't use stale or well-known metaphors if you can avoid them; try to be creative and use new ones to frame something for *clarity* and *in the way you want others to see it*
3. But! Whether the metaphors are old or new, try them out on your colleagues when rehearsing a pitch or presentation to gauge their response, well before unleashing them on your audience.

By Richard Keith

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