



# Breaking down the breakdown of communication

Richard discusses the illusion of transparency and the need for clear and impactful communication techniques.



Richard Keith

There is a quote in our business often attributed to George Bernard Shaw: *'the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.'*

USA sums this up clearly: *'Most people believe that they are better communicators than they really are. Similarly, most people believe that their intentions and goals are more apparent than is actually the case.'*<sup>1</sup>

Whilst running a presentation skills workshop earlier this week I found myself saying something that I have brought up many times before: a key part of our job as communication skills consultants is to align what people *feel* they are doing when they communicate with what is *actually coming across* to an audience or counterparty. A mismatch in these two areas can cause various problems: but where does such a misalignment stem from?

Scientists in the world of communication call this the *'illusion of transparency'*<sup>2</sup> - overestimating the degree to which your interior emotional state or objectives can be perceived by others.

This concept has been explored in relation to public speaking and presenting, demonstrating how speakers often feel the negatives of their performance can be seen or heard to a far greater extent by an audience that is the case in reality.

None of us like to think that we are subjective. We see it in others, of course: we look at their purchasing, political and even personal choices, and we can observe how they are either ignorant of - or simply ignoring - the glaring evidence suggesting their decision is wrong. But we surely aren't like that, are we?!



Presenting at work (image source: Unsplash.com)

It must, though, also be thought of in relation to persuasion, especially if we remember the need for congruence (the matching of the voice to the visual and to the content) in order to make your communication as compelling as

possible. If you are nervous, for instance, the research suggests that this will not necessarily come across in the way you think it does; the flip side, of course, is that if you do actually feel happy or excited about a particular topic, client or opportunity, that may not necessarily be what you are communicating to your audience.

The truth is that we all suffer from blinkered subjectivity to some extent, some more than others. This creates certain problems, one of which is that it can lead to the self-centered although possibly subconscious belief that other people will see and understand our feelings and motivation without us expressing them clearly.

It is easy to see how assuming that others can tell how we feel about something can reduce effective communication; one key way is that we may choose not to say something because we feel, even subconsciously, that it doesn't need to be articulated.

Leigh Thompson, Professor of Dispute Resolutions and Organizations at Kellogg School of Management in the

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts



Even if we do decide to say something - in a meeting, for example - we may not do so in a particularly clear or direct way, again probably because we feel such clarity is unnecessary.

This is one contributing factor to another related issue in the world of business: the *'uneven communication problem.'* This is the label given to how certain people can dominate discourse to an unproductive extent:

*'In a typical four person group, two people do 62% of the talking'<sup>3</sup>.*

to quote Leigh Thompson again, *'The evidence suggests that in a typical four person group, two people do 62% of the talking, and in a six person group three people do 70%'<sup>3</sup>, and so it grows.*

Perhaps most striking point in her research is the obliviousness these individuals have to the overbearing dominance of their voice within the room (remember that subjectivity I mentioned at the beginning of the article?). The perception by such individuals that they are giving everyone equal opportunities to speak freely and not unduly influencing contributions.

Such a failure in communication can lead to crucial information not being shared and so can increase the chances of a business making poor decisions. It may also lead to members of a team feeling less valued, and so damage essential rapport between colleagues.

The *'illusion of transparency'* and the *'uneven communication problem'* are barriers to the clear, accurate and timely communication that all firms need. So what can you do about them?

For starters, you can work to develop greater empathy; developing the ability to see the world from someone else's point of view should help reduce the view that everyone can see and feel whatever you see and/or feel.

Secondly, to help ensure people are completely clear about what you think or feel you can use certain rhetorical techniques such as mini-summaries; and you can develop more effective

meeting management skills such as developing clear agendas and stronger facilitation abilities to ensure you receive contributions from all staff in a valuable way.

Finally, in the spirit of clear and direct communication I should also say that you can work with consultants like ourselves! We at GPB have spent years helping clients with this and many other communication problems to help ensure you remain as clear, impactful and persuasive as you need to be.

By Richard Keith



Clear, accurate and timely communication  
(image source: Unsplash.com)

Advice *squeezed*  
straight from the  
experts



1. Leigh Thompson (2013), *Creative Conspiracy: The New Rules of Breakthrough Collaboration*, Harvard Business Review Press; Boston, MA, p.126

2. Savitsky, Kenneth; Gilovich, Thomas (2003). ["The illusion of transparency and the alleviation of speech anxiety"](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. **39** (6): 618-625

3. Leigh Thompson quoted in Matthew Syed (2019), *Rebel Ideas: the Power of Diverse Thinking* (John Murray Publishing: London).