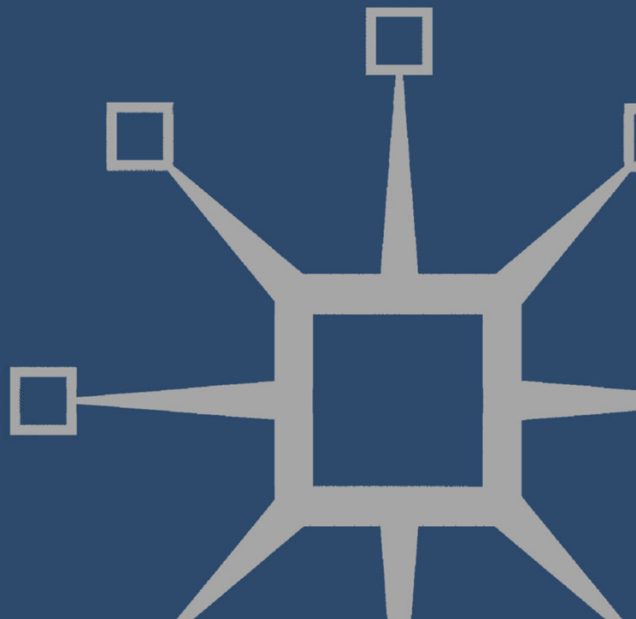


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Shut Up and Listen

Communication with Impact

Theo Theobald
&
Cary Cooper



Shut Up and Listen

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Communication with Impact

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&

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21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>		vii
Section 1	Insight	1
Chapter 1	Revelations Honesty, charisma, storytelling and more	3
Chapter 2	What kind of a communicator are you? Individual style	27
Section 2	How to...	43
Chapter 3	All about reading How to, when to. Getting the most out of what you read	51
Chapter 4	All about writing Context, grammar, tone of voice and use of plain English	59
Chapter 5	Persuasion Learn through advertising – read the case study – try it for yourself	79
Chapter 6	Writing – the rules of the tools How to write email, text and web copy	97
Chapter 7	New technologies – new rules, old adages Where is communication going?	114
Chapter 8	Listening How and when	125
Chapter 9	Talking How and when	133
Chapter 10	Listening and talking – the rules of the tools	139
Chapter 11	Feeling First impressions, body language, culture	167

Section 3	Planning for Success	187
Chapter 12	Planning Auditing, ditching the time wasters, targeting and achieving	189
Chapter 13	Six strategies Ways to implement your plan	207
<i>Appendix I</i>	<i>Further Recommended Reading</i>	211
<i>Appendix II</i>	<i>A List of Contributors</i>	212
<i>Index</i>		213

PREFACE

If you're in a position where people are relying ever more heavily on your ability to articulate your ideas, marshal your resources and achieve your joint objectives then better communication is critical. Wouldn't it be good then, if you could learn the lessons of those who had gone before you, without having to go through the pain?

Amongst other things, this book contains the collected wisdom and experience of over a score of individuals who have become experts in communication, from business, academic life and beyond. We used their input to test the validity of many of the current ideas about effective communication. We wanted to be sure that this is how real people really communicate in real situations. Along the way, they shared with us interesting and unusual stories of their own communication styles, as well as considering what the future might hold in this technology driven medium.

As authors, our own communications experiences vary widely, which is something that has benefitted us both, even when we didn't necessarily agree about one aspect or another! Cary Cooper is a professor of Organisational Psychology who has spent his academic career studying and researching both the things that make us tick, like motivation, and, maybe more importantly, the things that don't, like stress. What has run through his study, as a common thread is the need for effective communication in the workplace.

Theo Theobald is an ex-advertising copywriter and former BBC executive who spent much of his career trying to solve the communications problems of his own organisation and other peoples'. Since turning freelance in 2001, he has continued to work with a wide variety of organisations, both as consultant and management trainer, and as an advisor on internal and external communications, including a number of high profile campaigns.

In coming together, to co-author this book, we hope to bridge the gap between rigorous academic study and the practicalities of life in today's workplace, giving you insight into what

underpins great communications, as well as a host of great practical information, to help you deliver it.

During the research and writing phases, there were a number of surprising discoveries about some key aspects of communication. Perhaps the most intriguing paradox of all, is that despite the impact of technology, which has changed some communication channels out of all recognition there remains an astounding simplicity within the core principles, which have stayed the same for generations.

As we embarked on the process of updating the original work, it turned out our instincts were right. Since its first publication in 2004, the principles of *Shut up and Listen* have remained unchanged. Of course the world of communication devices and channels has altered almost beyond recognition. Back then none of us had heard of Twitter, ‘social networking’ had not been coined as a term and who would ever have dreamed of the iPad (except Steve Jobs, of course!).

This new edition includes insight into the changes, both from us and some new contributors. We also debate the impact of technology on the culture of communication, the rules may not have changed, but perhaps we are adapting to the devices and methods which are now available in a completely new way.

With all of the practical issues we cover, we’ve tried to take a step back to find what’s really going on. So just what is the significance of email, what are the risks of text messaging, or even the expectations others might have of us when it comes to spelling, grammar and use of plain language?

Ultimately, we don’t think that great communication is that difficult and yet despite that, an awful lot of people still seem to get it horribly wrong, you will find some interesting examples of this as you read through the text.

More than anything we hope you enjoy the book and benefit from communicating more effectively. We have done our best to write it in an accessible, conversational way, because, being true to the principles we champion later on, we believe this is the right tone for modern communicators.

How to enjoy this book

‘It seems that if you get an organisation with more than about 7 people then lines of communication get extended and messages get confused’.

Michael Broadbent – HSBC

We are much better communicators when we **know** more about ourselves, **think** about how and what we communicate and **act** according to the changes in our circumstance and environment.

These are the main principles of the book. To make life easier up front, here is a shorthand road map of what is coming up. There are three main sections, starting with a short course in self awareness, giving you time and space to reflect on who you are, so you can find out more about your favoured communication style. It’s a sense check of where you are now, which is really important, firstly, if you’re going to better understand how your various ‘audiences’ see you, and secondly in deciding what, if any changes you want to make to the way you send and receive your communications.

The middle part of the book (the second and largest section) is all about ‘how to...’

Lots of business books talk a lot about strategy (the plan), but leave you feeling hungry for tactics (the day to day things you have to do to implement it). We take it as read, that you have some kind of plan for your future and that in work, there are some expectations upon your shoulders, in terms of how you communicate, so all we’re attempting to do here is give advice and offer you options on the best way to put it into practice.

There are five main subsections within ‘how to’ looking at reading, writing, listening, talking and feeling where you’ll find tips on everything from how to persuade your boss to give you a company car, through to the best use of PowerPoint in a formal presentation. The tools and techniques are part of the story, but how you change your mind set and attitude to the way you communicate is equally important.

As well as the considerable contribution of our expert panel, which we gratefully acknowledge, we have added lots of our own case studies and stories collected during our careers in business and education. So we equally express our thanks to the many unsung heroes whose anecdotes and experiences help to consolidate the theoretical learning.

All that ‘how to’ advice is great, but what about getting started on the implementation? Help is at hand, towards the end of the book, in the third section, with a guide to planning which is simple enough to take the pain of the process away, but still effective enough to ensure you implement your own changes.

Features

That’s the basic structure, but we’ve also included a number of features that complement the main text, which are explained below.

‘According to...’

We conducted in depth interviews with experts, to get a wide range of input and opinion about the elements of effective communication, so throughout the book you’ll find quotes taken from those discussions which support the theories.

Apart from top business leaders and academics we looked at communication in other spheres, such as medicine and politics, to see if the challenges were greater, or even just different, and if we could learn something that could be adapted to our work place.

A full list of the contributors can be found in Appendix II.

The Expert Panel

In addition to the short quotes that you find under the title of ‘According to...’ there are some more fully developed stories that stand-alone. These you’ll find in separate panels of text, interwoven with the rest of the book.

Pearls of wisdom

During the course of the interviews our contributors sometimes came out with unmissable one-liners that summed up a particular aspect of communication. Where it's appropriate, we've applied them to particular sections of text to reinforce a point. There are definitely some that are worth committing to memory, for use at an apposite moment.

Short summaries

Some golden nuggets of information are priceless, but it's hard to remember huge passages of text, so, we've tried to capture our unforgettable gems in a short bullet point form.

Try this

Having a go at something new can be a great way of refreshing our outlook on a subject. There are lots of practical suggestions of things you can do to make your communication better. It's up to you how many you adopt, but don't be afraid to have a go, it might prompt you to think up your own list of things to try.

A Good Story

From time to time, we hear a tale which perfectly illustrates a business situation we've been in. Sometimes they're things that really happened and sometimes urban myth, but still with a relevance to the problems we face. Whether they are true is less important than whether they are memorable. We learn lots from stories, and by recalling their teaching, we can avoid pitfalls in future.

The Elevator Test

Top firms of consultants use this technique when they're working with their clients. They prepare themselves to report succinctly on

progress at any time, by imagining they're caught in the elevator by the CEO and they have just a few floors to summarise where they're up to. We've applied a similar test at the end of each chapter to précis its contents. Each provides a snapshot of the preceding text.

Ready to start? Before we do, a final few words about the importance of communication. More than any other management discipline, this is the one we must get right. Whatever we are attempting to achieve, it cannot be done without clarity of thought and word. As the whole nature of work has changed from the days of a manufacturing economy, to a service led one, the thread which runs through all successful organisations and individuals is the ability to communicate effectively, succinctly, powerfully.

Beware too of those who use communication as a blunt instrument to de-rail your 'best laid plans'. The universally used excuse for any business ill is 'a breakdown in communication'. This can only ever happen if our 'sending' or 'receiving' is flawed. Sometimes it's good to remember we need to 'Shut up and Listen'.

SECTION 1

Insight

We're never too old or experienced to discover something new about the world, working life or ourselves

CHAPTER 1

Revelations

We begin with some fundamental principles which underpin communication. We have called them ‘revelations’, not because they have lay undiscovered until now, but due to the fact that ‘raising consciousness’ is one of the running themes of this subject. There are many aspects of business where we instinctively know the right thing to do, and yet problems and issues continue to arise because we fail to follow that instinct.

Going back to basics, gives us the opportunity to consider these core principles and think about how we can apply them on a daily basis to improve our communication. So, with the help of the experts, we will examine the role of the truth, the unfathomable quality called ‘charisma, some characteristics of great communicators and the ‘lessons from childhood’ which we may have since unlearned.

Revelation 1 – Telling the truth

It seems odd to begin by talking about telling the truth, surely we all do that most of the time don’t we? It appears in business this is not the case, there are versions of the truth which we bend this way and that, to satisfy our own needs, those of our customers or the organisation as a whole. We often have the best of motives when not being entirely truthful, but we need to understand that a lack of truth affects the clarity of our communication.

Allied to this term is ‘trust’. For relationships to work effectively (in or out of work), we need to be able to trust each other. If the boss is duplicitous we are guarded, when a supplier breaks a

promise we feel let down and a colleague who is two-faced is ostracised.

Good business practice relies on trust, and what is that without truth?

So we set out to get to the bottom of what the truth is in the workplace. It wasn't always easy. Not surprisingly we failed to uncover anyone who advocated lying as a way of getting on in business, but that didn't always mean people were entirely truthful in all their dealings.

What was interesting was the range of views about what constitutes the truth – it seems that getting the definitive version of the facts can sometimes be more complex than you might think.

Here are the views of a number of contributors to give you a balance of opinion to compare with your own.

We start, not in the world of business, but medicine, with Doug Simkiss a Consultant Paediatrician at the Birmingham Community Children's Centre.

'At diagnosis I don't hide behind terms like a growth or a nodule or something, if it's cancer, it's cancer, if it's cerebral palsy, it's cerebral palsy. I use the medical term because if you try and spare people the medical terms, they can't find any information afterwards, and anyway, if you don't use the proper terms someone else will, at some stage.

When it comes to the *whole* truth, in terms of the medical consequences of a condition, we're rubbish working that out at diagnosis anyway, because children are all different. You can use the same terms about a child, like cerebral palsy for example but the consequences can vary greatly.

So I guess I'd say we have to tell the truth as far as we know it, but the consequences become clearer over time, and there often has to be a re-adjustment of what the truth means'.

Telling the truth, as we know it, is very important, but even with the best of intentions, it might not be possible to explain the whole truth. In a medical situation, if we are diagnosed with

something serious, we want to know the path ahead, what will the outcome be, what are the timescales, the chances of full recovery, the after effects of the illness? Even seasoned professionals like Doug are not able to accurately predict these things, because sometimes the truth relies on better data than we currently have. At best we are guessing on the basis of what has gone before. Medical professionals are often circumspect for these reasons.

In a business context we may also have good motives for not telling the whole story all of the time. There are occasions when the whole truth might be commercially sensitive or plain tactless, or you may encounter circumstances where people simply don't want to hear the truth, like in a redundancy situation.

Equally, the truth can be different according to where you're viewing it from. This is never more so than when two parties can't seem to compromise, each clinging dearly onto their version of events.

According to...

John Akers – Relationship Counsellor

'In Birmingham there's a telephone tower which we could see from our offices, so I used to say to people if you look at that tower from here you know exactly what it looks like, but if you look at it from somewhere else in Birmingham it's different, because there are different satellite dishes you can see, but it's still the same telephone tower.

And, in the same way, your perception of this situation that you're in now is different, because you are only looking at it from one place – the truth is we have a problem here, but what the *facts* are is very much harder to find out because it depends on which position you are viewing from'.

So the truth may be partly defined by your angle of vision, literally your point of view. Things get even more complicated sometimes and our next contributor believes there is an extra layer of complexity, he thinks the truth is contextual, that's to say it is of its time and place.

BACKGROUND

In the 1980s, Britain's political scene was dominated by the conservative party, under Margaret Thatcher. In a move against this, voters in Liverpool elected Derek Hatton, as deputy leader of the council. Hatton was not only a member of the Labour party, but also belonged to the leftwing Militant faction, which eventually brought him into dispute with his own party members as well as the ruling Conservatives.

According to...

Derek Hatton, Broadcaster and former Labour Politician

'People often say to me if you had your time over again would you do the same thing and I say if it was May 4th 1983, the day we took control, I wouldn't do a single thing different. If it was May 4th 2003 I wouldn't do a single thing the same.

It's not about truth, it's about what is relevant at that time, and at that time, there needed to be a passion, there needed to be an understanding of what was going on, there needed to be support around, you needed to know how to motivate that support. You needed to know how to mobilise that support, you needed to be absolutely committed to what you were saying, it was not a case of truth or non-truth, you can play games with that if you want, but it's really about context'.

Hatton is correct in one regard, we often re-write the truth of our history, not just in political terms, but as individuals. We may exaggerate our triumphs or disasters when we look at them retrospectively. Over time our nostalgia kicks in and the grass looks greener, the skies bluer when we look back, how hard is it then to get to the real truth?

In organisational terms, truth is desperately important. Integrity is one of the values espoused by many managers and appears in all the glossy corporate brochures, but it's something which must be lived, day-to-day, by everyone in the company, or it ceases to be credible.

Organisations now talk about their ‘employee brand’. This is the version you will see in the recruitment pages, where they are trying to portray themselves as an employer of choice for prospective talent. Here, being truthful is critical as successful applicants, who have bought into the offer will eventually get to see ‘below stairs’, when they will make their own judgement over the truthfulness of the promises.

According to...

Lynn Rutter – Oxfam

‘A lot of organisations haven’t caught onto the need for honesty, they do this great external PR, put a lot of time and money into their advertising style and their brand image, and then on day one, the person starts and thinks “hang on a minute, this isn’t what I thought, where’s the company I joined?”’

In recent years, many large organisations have started to debate this issue by looking at the ‘employee brand’ of the organisation. What this means is that the workforce inside a company has a view of the values of the organisation, and increasingly the evidence points to a need to make this internal brand consistent with the consumer brand. So if your customers see you as standing for high ethical values, you must treat staff in a way which is consistent with this.

The days when organisations could say one thing and do another are long gone. The swell of support behind ethical issues, now under the broader banner of Corporate Social Responsibility, make it essential for brand values to be lived out on a daily basis.

So, what can we conclude about the truth? We have a medical man who thinks that it can vary according to individual circumstance, and a counsellor who believes that the angle of view changes the perspective. All of which is consolidated by the ex-politician who says that timing and context are paramount, plus a business leader who thinks that ‘consistency’ is the key.

So although degrees of truth may vary according to who you ask the question of, there is general agreement on one point, ‘the truth matters’ and never more so than when we are communicating. Consider this across the board from the things we say, to the more subliminal messages we give out where actions speak louder than words. Before we appear to be holier-than-thou on this issue, we should offer a word of warning via this salutary tale.

Getting the balance right

Honesty is a key plank of effective communication, but presenting a warts-and-all view of yourself at every opportunity is unlikely to endear you to everyone.

The most famous case of foot-in-mouth disease was that of jewellery tycoon Gerald Ratner, whose stores were once a feature of many British high streets. In 1991 he made a speech to the Institute of Directors and joked that one of his firm’s products was ‘total crap’, before going on to boast that some of their earrings were ‘cheaper than a prawn sandwich’.

Ratner mistakenly believed he was addressing a closed audience of his peers, not realising there were journalists present. His words had been intended to amuse the audience of well off business people (in which he succeeded), but in so doing, he was ridiculing the loyal customer base who bought his products. The journalists present picked up on the story and the company dropped in value by £500m.

According to...

Keith Harris – Seymour Pierce

‘Forget about the damage to the business, it was really about individuals who’d saved up to buy something from his shop, to give to somebody with all their heart and that was the real damage – that was truly awful’.

Ratner made the big mistake of believing he was simply talking to an audience of his peers, not realising there were journalists in the room. An added lesson from this story is the requirement

in public to treat everything we say as ‘on-the-record’. The advice given to many rising stars of the entertainment world is ‘remember, every time you step out of your front door, you’re on stage’. Whatever our business profile, it is advice worth heeding.

As technology has moved on, now everyone is a potential journalist, with a recording device and camera as standard on every mobile phone. Politicians and pop stars alike have since been ‘caught’ in similar unguarded moments.

Revelation 2 – The definition of charisma

‘It’s not all down to your natural personality because personalities don’t change. I’m very clear that you can improve communication skills’.

Professor Chris Brewster

The possibility that great communicators possess a mystical quality called ‘charisma’, is really quite scary. After all, if they have it and we don’t, then how can we ever be like them? In the spirit of busting some of the myths that surround communication, we chose to examine the issue of charisma in some more detail.

To the rescue came a number of authoritative figures who themselves excel in the art of communication. We start with a University professor.

According to...

Professor Chris Brewster

‘I am extremely personally suspicious of words like “charisma”, first of all because I don’t know what it means and, secondly, because you might look at someone and say they’ve got great charisma, and I’d say they look really boring, so I think the whole concept is flawed.

I don't dismiss the importance of other traits, like "empathy" and a kind of understanding of where your audience is coming from'.

As John Akers said earlier, when talking about truth, it depends on where you are looking at it from, so it appears charisma is a similar thing, we don't all interpret it in the same way.

We stay in the academic arena for another view that helps to reinforce what Professor Chris Brewster thinks.

The Expert Panel

Professor David Clutterbuck

'When it comes to charisma, I was told that originally it meant "caring". It seems to me to have the ability to project the fact that you care is really important – so all those words like passion are replaced by that.

We think, 'does this guy know what he's talking about, and does he care about the subject?' If you do then you'll get people's attention, but if either of those two things is missing then you won't.

I think that what you see as charisma is driven by those two things. There are people who are good actors, but mostly the people who communicate well are those who care and the passion that you see is just an external expression of what's going on inside them.

We did some work and found a number of organisations were concerned about the way people were appraised on their verbal communication skills.

It was the area where people most often disagreed with how they were appraised, so we did some focus groups (with Birkbeck College), and found the assumption that good verbal communication is just related to personality is bunk. It is, of course, partly related to that, but many other factors come in.

“Awareness of context” is fundamental, as is “speed of communication”, for example, if you put a Finn and a Columbian together they’re going to struggle, because one speaks very slowly and the other very quickly.

So the critical quality of a good communicator is the ability to adapt to the other person you’re working with. Whatever the message, you have to structure it around the other person’s ability to receive’.

The really good news about charisma is that we don’t have to try and seek it out as a holy grail, nor do we have to emulate the people who supposedly have it. In fact, it may be that there are elements of it we can develop over time, according to our circumstances and status. By concentrating on the elements outlined by Professor David Clutterbuck, like caring and empathy, we should become better communicators. Beyond that, people may begin to attribute charisma to us. Our next expert agrees.

According to...

Derek Hatton – Broadcaster and former Politician

‘David Beckham appears on television around the world with the most unbelievable amount of charisma, he’s a working class kid, he’s not the most articulate of blokes, there’s nothing special about him but because of the way he’s been built up, all of a sudden charisma oozes out of him. So I don’t think it’s necessarily what you’ve got, sometimes it’s what other people give you.

Okay, there are people that are born with it, there are people that naturally have it, they ooze that self-confidence and passion and everything that goes with it. I don’t believe however, that’s the only form of charisma you can have, I think there are many forms of charisma that you can actually acquire, or other people can acquire for you’.

We asked some experts of their view on charisma, as it seemed an important character trait of the universally recognised great