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"speak up journal"

Exploratory Questioning and Modelling

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The Presentation & Business Development Specialists

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

Well-constructed questions are essential in successful business development and in building strong and enduring relationships with your clients.

We need to pay close attention to the language we use in our questioning and the language used by the client in response to these questions. These responses can give us many valuable yet subtle clues in addition to the information received, if we are focused and observant enough.

As mentioned in my article on Active Listening in SpeakUp #62, questions and listening are inextricably linked. Exploratory questions tend to be mainly Open because they are more likely to encourage detailed answers and provide you with the information you need to uncover from your client, and used skillfully may oven uncover information they had not intended to tell you, or what at GPB we call '*Doing a Hagrid'*.

Given that the primary focus of this article is questioning, a good starting point seems to be to spend some time asking ourselves useful questions prior to an important business meeting.

Frequently used in NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming), this comes under the category of 'well-formed outcomes'. In order to produce a well-formed outcome, we need some well-designed questions. These might be something like:-

"What do I want to have achieved by the end of this meeting?" or *"What would a successful result to this meeting look/ sound/feel like?"*

Spend some time reflecting on what that achievement or success **looks/sounds/ feels** like. How will you know whether it's a successful outcome? What will you see, feel, hear, think? Are there any smells or tastes associated with these successful outcomes? Make a note of all of this information.

Now that you have greater clarity on what you intend to achieve from your client meeting/s, it's time to focus on the kinds of questions you want to ask them in order to uncover their needs (which may be neither clear nor known to them), their desire for one or more solutions to those needs, and how you might become the best fit to meet those needs.

What questions to ask

Those of you who have worked with GPB or been reading SpeakUp for some time will no doubt be aware of our use of Rudyard Kipling's poem about his six honest serving-men.

Rudyard Kipling in 1895 (Wikipedia)

In the order in his poem they are: What and Why and When, and How and Where and Who. It's worth being judicious with the 'Why?' question, because its tone can put someone on the defensive.

'Why' questions can be useful for eliciting reasons, motives and values, but not necessarily solutions. Questions starting with 'How?' are usually more useful in problem solving because they help uncover the structure of a problem.

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Exploratory Questioning and Modelling ...continued

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In my previous article on Active Listening, I outlined the funnel method, where you might (but not necessarily) begin with a Closed or clarifying question. It can be direct, such as '*Do you have a pitch you need to prepare for soon*?' or something like '*In your role are you often expected to present confidently in front of groups?'*

Now that (hopefully) you have some relevant information, you can switch to Open questions, in a probing-style, building on what you've learnt in the previous answer.

You should also pay attention to the descriptive words they use, so that you can use their preferences when constructing your subsequent question. If their words are more visual, and you tend to be more auditory, you should try to adapt your language, for example to say '*I see your point*' rather than '*I hear what you're saying'.*

As you progress in the conversation, gaining more information and insights into your client's needs, and you expand on what has already been said, you can ask more of the Closed questions, based on a choice of alternatives you provide (beware, these can be leading questions). Closed questions can be used well to confirm, clarify or establish the client's desire for a particular solution or plan.

If this is an area where you need some practise, it is worth brainstorming the kinds of questions you might want to use and rehearsing with a colleague. As with pre-pitch calls, this technique of doing 'mocks' can feel odd. But if you haven't already tried it, you'll be pleasantly surprised at the kinds of questions that get unearthed that can be very valuable in the live pitch or business meeting.

Another way of improving your success rate in a business meeting or a pitch is what is known in NLP as **Modelling**. This tool encourages you to analyse someone who is outstanding in the area you want to be successful in and adopt their strategies yourself. Leading international NLP trainer, consultant and author, Joseph O'Connor has outlined[1] the NLP strategy for modelling highly successful people. An NLP model normally consists of:-

- the mental strategies
- the beliefs and values
- the external behaviour
- the context in which the person being modelled is operating.

You can also model your own behaviours from one area where you are very successful to another where you aren't as effective. You can recreate something very vividly for use in the new area.

For example, if you play a musical instrument well and are able to learn and master new pieces relatively easily, you can use modelling to analyse those strategies and apply them to an area you want success in, such as preparing a set of questions to ask a client.

MODELLING EXERCISE

1. Who do you know who is very successful in business development?
2. What kind of questions do they ask clients before, during and after a business meeting, how do they ask and how do they listen and respond?
3. What is their optimal state when in a business meeting (e.g. what do they think, feel, do, see, hear)?
4. What beliefs do they have about themselves and the outcome of their calls or meetings?
5. What other strategies do they use?

Once you've elicited this information, be resourceful in applying it to yourself using the NLP model described above.

To paraphrase what Tom Peters and Dr Richard Bandler, the co-creator of NLP have said, there is no such thing as a non-resourceful person, just a non-resourceful state.

Whether it's in business development, client relationships or brilliant piano playing, here's wishing you joy and success!

By Lynda Russell-Whitaker

[1] Source: The NLP Workbook, by Joseph O'Connor.

International talk: a discourse approach between cultures

Richard Keith

It's easy to think that there is only one way to communicate effectively in the commercial world. The UK's predominant style is "C-B-S", but this may not always be the best way to go...

This UK style can be classed as aiming for "C-B-S" or "Clarity, Brevity, & Sincerity". We at GPB regularly help clients with these key elements when they are presenting, pitching, or communicating with colleagues. Yet, there are occasions when making your communication more direct is definitely not the direction to go.

For example – and allowing for individual differences – a simplistic version of one such difference is that while we in the West (USA & Europe) believe that being direct and unambiguous is nearly always the best way to communicate, indirectness and ambiguity can often be desired in East Asia countries such as China and Japan.

There are several theories as to why this is so. Perhaps the most compelling is that of the differing evolution of the natural discourse approaches. In the 1600s the Royal Society in London began deliberately to employ the C-B-S style for scientific reports and discussions. As progress in science and technology became associated with economic advancement, this discourse approach became the staple of communicating in business.

Coupled with this, political philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham proposed their post-Enlightenment political ideology of Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism suggested that the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of individuals was best to progress society.

The ideology advocated that whatever advanced the material wealth of the individual must be good. Therefore, discourse of "C-B-S" that had been adopted by the world of business became recognised as "good", without it being so necessarily on merit.

Utilitarianism is still a hugely significant part of the socio-political and cultural fabric of Western society; therefore, C-B-S is still thought to be the optimum way to communicate by the people within it.

Contrary to this, discourse systems in countries such as China and Japan have been heavily influenced by Confucianism.

At the risk of oversimplifying, Confucius taught that happiness was not dependent on the economic and material increase of individuals; rather, happiness turned on learning and moral cultivation.

Part of this was a high degree of reverence for your society, especially your ancestors and family, from whom you could learn. The individual was only one small part of a greater network: what was good for society was what maintained the balance of these relationships. Maintaining a degree of harmony is therefore core to the discourse systems of Japan and China.

What practical differences does this make when communicating? Well there are some obvious elements such as a more indirect use of the language in order not to offend. For instance, I know of one Senior Manager (a Westerner) newly arrived in Japan who in a meeting on a Friday morning asked for a specific report to be delivered to him on Monday.

His Japanese colleague paused, as if deep in thought, and then replied "*It is not convenient*".

Mount Fuji, an icon of Japanese culture

To anyone with any knowledge of working with Japanese clients or staff, this clearly means that there was no way on earth that the report could be provided.

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Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

International talk: a discourse approach between cultures ...continued

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

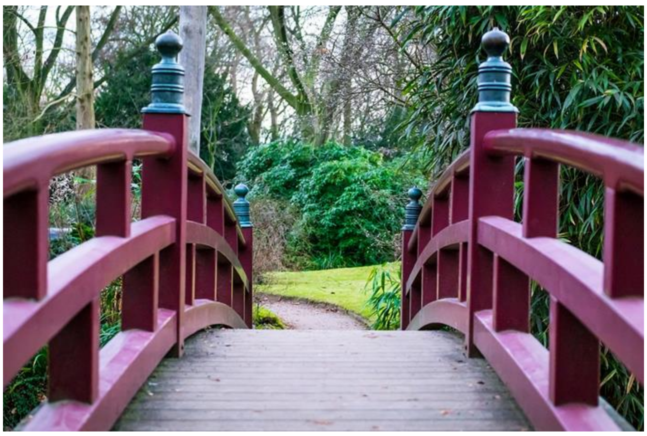
And yet the manager, unaccustomed to this type of indirect comment, took it literally and began to argue for its convenience! The Japanese rarely, if ever, say '*no*'; "*maybe*" and "*possibly*" are usually the closest you get to this.

Maintaining the 'face' of yourself and your interlocutor is key here too. As mentioned, harmonious relationships are important, so often you may find Japanese or Chinese counterparties seemingly agreeing with you, but in reality not truly seeing eye-to-eye with your point.

It is often more important in these instances to appear to agree whilst face to face in order to maintain harmony.

Two further points are worth mentioning: Firstly, any system of language use is simply a code of establishing the signifier and signified: like all codes, messages are only communicated if all parties have learnt and understand it.

This is the core problem with any intercultural communication: even if you are speaking the same language, you may be applying the code incorrectly. For example, you can learn when a 'yes' actually means 'no' by reading other parts of the code such as body language, tone, and context.



Try to cross the bridge between cultures

Secondly, it is essential to understand that when we view another discourse system through the framework of our own, we inevitably don't understand it and therefore find it faulty. However, this is just a perspective of quality and not actually accurate.

The different systems are driving towards the same goal (ultimately, increased happiness) but have evolved through beliefs that there are two different definitions of what this is and how to achieve it.

Neither are exclusively right, neither are exclusively wrong. Both have their strengths and weaknesses.

So, what's the key coaching point here?

It is this: When working internationally, try to understand as much as you can about the other culture's discourse system they operate in.

Sure, you can't know it all, but any attempt to accommodate (in the genuine, and not the insincere and ingratiating way) will be well received as a sign of respect and courtesy.

By Richard Keith

Gestures - the good, the bad and the rude

Ewan Pearson

Some gestures offend, others inspire, and there is an enormous range of good to bad, genuine to fake, small to large and different types of them. Where to start...

We use a simple categorisation of gestures at GPB, into these 6 types:

1. Iconic - for information
2. Prosodic – for emphasis mainly
3. Deictic - for pointing
4. Metaphorical - for non-literal
5. Tells - the ones we don't know about
6. Rude - the ones we shouldn't do.

Our advice is to use the first 4 only, to use them in the appropriate size and more frequently than you may think, to ensure they are always your gestures and not fake, to use them to help with congruence, and to mix up the types of gestures so that they're not all of one sort.

All gestures should have a purpose and contribute to the communication.

Iconic Gestures

These convey information, e.g. a size, dimension, number, or contrast. We count numbers on our fingers, which can be very useful in signposting progress in a presentation. This gesture can also be used to show *precision*, by closing a gap or showing no gap.

A precision type of Iconic gesture

Sebastian Vettel, the F1 driver, as a fine one for these, gesticulating "Number 1" to the camera and crowd with his index finger whenever he wins a race. For scuba divers and sign linguists, these are the only easy way to communicate things.

Prosodic gestures

These are the 'beats and batons' of visual communication. We beat the rhythm and timing, and especially where we want to put our emphasis. This emphatic use goes with the vocal emphasis on key words (or even syllables). There is a scientific link between the brain areas for this type of gesture and vocal emphasis, and they usually work well together.

The man on the left, interviewed in a radio studio, gestures to emphasise a point.

Deictic gestures

These are our pointing gestures, and can be directed at a slide, a colleague (so long as this is done politely, e.g. an open palm shown to one side rather finger tip at their eyes), but they are also those where we point to ourselves (e.g. your finger tip pointing to your chest), or somewhere in space, to a place, or entity (God is usually shown with an upwards point).

This women is pointing at someone and is clearly not happy about something!

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Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

Gestures - the good, the bad and the rude … continued

Metaphorical gestures
These are harder to describe, as they refer to non-literal topics. If you've had a bad client meeting and a colleague later asks how it went, you might say '*a bit so-so*' and gesture with the palm down, tipping it left and right. The meaning is usually quite clear to the recipient.

You might want to describe something in the past, and point over your shoulder, or in the future by moving your index finger over some imaginary bridges to show '*the day after the day after tomorrow'.*

Tells
We are usually unaware of these until some presentation coach comes along and tells us that we are doing them repeatedly, and tells us to stop. We then wait till this coach is out of the room, and start again, as they are (bad) habits.

So what are these tells? They are usually repeated gestures, often where we touch somewhere on our face or upper body, or we rub our hands, or we touch something we're wearing such as a ring or play with or click a pen. They also include swinging side to side in chairs and the nervous swaying and other movements you sometimes see from presenters on a stage. There are many reasons why we do tells, the main ones seem to be nervous anxiety, caused by our negative feelings about the occasion, or the nervous energy of the kind you see from someone who just can't sit still, but instead engages in constant motion or fidgeting.

Our advice is simple: put the hands/body to work by doing something meaningful, with purpose, congruently with the other parts of your communication.

Rude gestures
These are deliberate and designed to cause offence. But they are also quite specific to cultures, and even quite localised, so you can fail to cause offence even when specifically intended! The simple advice is: Don't. But that can be hard to achieve when in a foreign country, where the display rules are unknown to you. As different cultures and countries have their own rude gestures, you had better get to know what they are so that you can avoid causing offence unintentionally. For example, in some Arab cultures, showing the soles of your feet to them is rude, yet is part of a relaxed posture in West.

Showing the middle finger (salute) is generally rude in most countries, but holding up the 2nd/index and 5th fingers whilst holding folded the 3rd and 4th fingers (which creates the horns of a bull gesture) is a gesture that is mostly rude only in certain areas of Europe. Often people are non-plussed by this gesture in the UK (yes I have tested that theory!).

Churchill famously held two fingers iconically in a V (for Victory). Originally he pointed at the crowd then switched, as you can see below, after being told to change it. In some countries people count by straightening out fingers one at a time, starting with the index finger, so the number 2 becomes a rude gesture, quite accidentally.

Oh dear Mr Churchill…

That's better!

Frequency, size and variety
Most people don't gesture enough or make them large enough, and need to gesture more, but always with a purpose. Often they lack variety, or use only one side. Gestures are better asymmetrical, but there should be a good variety among the 4 types we recommend you use.

Congruence with the discourse
Gestures should always be natural, not staged or 'fake'. The best way to achieve this is to be thinking about what you're saying, and adding gestures from your own personal repertoire that match the words you're saying.

By Ewan Pearson

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

Strong starts. The Hook.

Alastair Grant

We were all taught somewhere that we should *"tell'em what we're gonna tell'em then tell'em and tell'em what we told them"*. But….

Whilst that old chestnut seems sensible enough advice, there is a flaw! There is strong evidence that people's commitment to listen depends on how you start, and this bureaucratic, traditional and predictable start won't necessarily have people saying *"Wow, I really must listen to this person."*

We do not think this old adage is best practise, and at best will get you 'average' on the feedback forms. So let's see if we can't do a little better.

Starting well is particularly relevant at a conference. Imagine you are the third speaker on the second day. How can you get the audience to sit on the edge of their seats and listen intently? Here is one way which may not work:

"Good afternoon my name is John Smith, I am sorry I'm late and it's a great privilege to be speaking to you on this august occasion in this wonderful venue. I am indeed honoured to have been asked to speak in the company of so many leaders in this area of web-based process management analysis. It's not the most fascinating of subjects, you some of you probably know most of it already, and I am sorry I haven't had much time to prepare but hope you will bare with me.

Perhaps that's not the best way to start...

Apologising up front and implying the topic is boring is deadly. Of course if you are late then a quick but sincere apology is fine. As for set piece jokes – leave them to comedians. Light hearted humour is fine if the context suits it, although it must not offend or distract.

So what **should** you do? This is where you have, with care, to aim to **keep** their attention. There are a number of ways. These three techniques (Bait, Verbal Imagery and Bottom Line) are well known to speech writers:

Bait

This is the use of a powerful piece of information such as some data that shakes the audience out of their comfort zone. *Good bait leads to a good catch at the end*

of the day.

Here is an example of the bait start:

"*Every 90 seconds someone will be reported as missing in Britain. That produces an annual figure of 350,000. But it's not quite as bad as it sounds, as within 48 hours 90% of them are found. The statistic we need to be really concerned about is a figure of about 2,000 who go missing for prolonged periods or go missing for ever. That is still shocking - almost as many as the number killed in road traffic accidents. We cannot calculate with precision how many missing people are returned to the fold as a direct result of our charity's work, but we know it's many….*

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Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

Strong starts. The Hook ....continued

So why are we asking you to contribute when there is such doubt, and there are so many competing calls, all of them worthy?"

Verbal Imagery

This is where you paint a picture or describe a mental video of a place, a time, and/or an event. An example might be:

"Imagine Hyde Park in London. You see it covered in rubbish to a depth of 15 feet everywhere. That's the amount of rubbish that is fly tipped in London every day. Let me tell you what we are doing about this challenge."

Bottom Line

Instead of a long and detailed argument you cut to the chase, the key point. So for example, instead of talking in technical and/or complex terms about ways of increasing the efficiency of a new plane the presenter started by saying:

"*If we can reduce slipstream friction by 8% then we can reduce noise levels significantly and reduce fuel used by 3%, dramatically improving profitability. Let me tell you how we will achieve this."*

Attention Levels

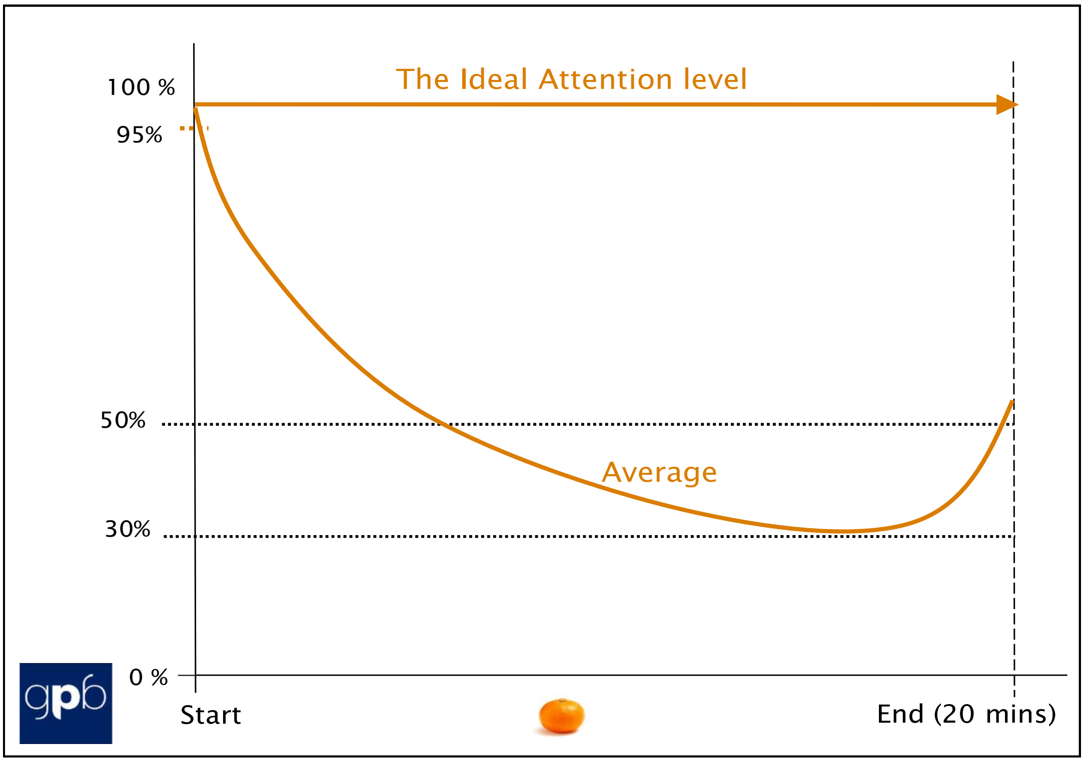
The graph below, summarising GPB's own research, illustrates the different effects of an ideal start and an average one. Whilst attention levels in both cases start at close to 100%, it falls away quickly if the presenter's opening piece fails to pass the test of winning the audience over to listen further.

Summary

Many of us, when we start our talk, are keen to say something nice but unimportant (to warm up), and list what is about to follow.

But gaining and keeping people's attention is about dangling something in front of them that will make them want to hear **more** as well as focusing them on the purpose of the talk. Of course too dramatic a start can cause an adverse reaction and in some cultures would be seen as too pushy. Observe your own reaction to other people's presentations. After five minutes are you hanging in there or is your mind wandering?

By Alastair Grant



Our Services

Grant Pearson Brown Consulting Ltd 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, which are unique to GPB. We then provide voice and visual coaching, and content 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:

- Voice, Visual and Content Analyses
- Prospect Relationship Management (PRM)
- the Information Iceberg,
- Clients' Rights Act
- Feature, Benefit Impact (FBI)
- Buyers' Criteria Analysis, (BCA), and
- Our Q&A Methodology.

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