

John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

Session 17: The Verbal, the Vocal and the Visual

*“I know you believe you understand what you think I said. But I am not sure you realise that what you **heard** is not what I meant”*

This comment sums up what so often happens in conversation. There is a gap, a **communication chasm** we might call it, between the intentions of the speaker, the communicator, and what their audience, be it one or more people, understands the speaker to have said.

Such a gap can often create confusion, uncertainty or worse. It can prolong as well as start a conflict. I recall mediating in an employment case in which a manager had said something innocuous, so far as that person was concerned, to a close colleague. The colleague took it to mean something else and, long story short, two years and much distress later, we were dealing with a significant claim and a wrecked career.

Why do such miscommunications occur? Well, there are so many reasons. I have covered some in the previous podcasts of which this is number 17 and the first on video.

We make assumptions, judgements, perceptions, prejudices, baggage, prior experiences, fear, shame, the list is endless. We think of cognitive biases, neuroscience, thinking fast and slow and so on. Often it is a failure to listen, or to listen enough. When listening, we can tend to hear only what we want to hear or be deaf to what we fear hearing.

As we discussed in an earlier podcast, we switch off easily, assume we've heard it before, drift into our own thoughts, begin to prepare our response, our rebuttal. We are anxious to get our point of view across, often so anxious that we stop listening to the other, and even cut in on the speaker. Sound familiar?

I am keen that we take responsibility for our communications and that, if it is true that *“the meaning of any communication is the response it gets”*, we do our best to get our meaning across. That applies to all of us whether giving a presentation, seeking to persuade a colleague, negotiating a deal or mediating in a conflict.

So, I am interested in this podcast in how we can ensure, or at least do our best to ensure, that the other person does hear and take away what we want them to hear and take away. If we can achieve that then, as the now Saint John Henry Newman once said (and I paraphrase slightly): *“If we truly understand what each other means, we would see, for the most part, that controversy is superfluous or hopeless.”*

I discussed aspects of understanding in an earlier podcast (someone once said that 80% of conflicts arise from lack of or miscommunication). This time, I'd like to explore what I call **the verbal, the vocal and the visual**.

By **verbal**, I mean the words we use; by **vocal**, how we use our voices – our delivery; and **visual**, how we appear, our behaviour, what others see, sometimes referred to as body language.

There is research from the 1960s which suggests that, when first meeting someone, communication comes from the words we use to only a small extent (7%), from our voices, 38%, and from the visual elements, 55%. The research is sometimes criticised, but we don't need to dwell on the detail or the accuracy to make the point that a significant part of any communication is in the non-verbal aspects. We know that from our own experience. I just need to say the same words in two different ways for that to be obvious.

Whatever the percentages, none of this is to say that the words are not important. I love the idea of **every word being carefully chosen for its task**; great speakers spend hours on selecting the words for the job in hand, but they will spend as long, or even longer, on the presentation of the words.

The key is congruence, alignment. The words, the verbal, need to be supported by the vocal and the visual. If there is inconsistency, people, the audience, will tend to be influenced, often sub-consciously, by what they see and by what they hear in the voice rather than by the words themselves. Again: "I really hope you are enjoying this podcast..." can be expressed in very different ways.

Word choice is important as I say: clarity, simplicity, often brevity, painting pictures perhaps. Short sentences. A good structure. Seeking to express rather than impress. Selecting words which are non-violent as the expression goes. "I feel bad when you..." rather than "You make me feel bad..." That point would take us to the value of reframing, a topic from an earlier podcast.

Turning to **the vocal, how we use our voices**: that takes us to tone or intonation, modulation, emphasis, pace, audibility, the use of the pause (remember the podcast on that topic). Here, pausing to enable the audience to digest what you have said can be more important than merely slowing down the pace of delivery. It's about rhythm.

The legendary Scottish rugby commentator, Bill McLaren talked about light and shade. We all have a range, the ability to break away from monotony (mono-toney) and variety once again is the spice of life. "So, you think you'll make a great mediator?". How many different meanings can we give to that message using our vocal delivery?

On **the visual**, eye contact (not all the time but around 80% of the time, I once heard it said), facial expression (not easy to control but it's so easy to give away underlying thinking with a smirk or a grimace), movement of the head and body, our use of physical space (chairs and tables for example), proximity to others (are we too close? too far away?), our gestures (such as use of hands), posture (slouched or upright?), mannerisms (fidgeting for example) and so on. Just bringing energy to what we do.



And these are conscious decisions we can make. It may even be tiring to apply all of this, as we adopt new habits, new behaviours, move away from our default settings.

Further, of course, our **physical appearance** is not neutral. Whether we like it or not, we influence what others may think about us by how we dress, wear our hair, and so on.

We give signals to others, constantly: through our posture, gestures, mannerisms and movements. We receive signals from others all the time: How close are they? What about eye contact, that glance down before finishing a sentence? What does their facial expression tell us – or at least lead us to ask? If they are fidgeting, what can we do to help put them at ease – if they are ill at ease. What else might it be?

Here, I might mention briefly the concepts of **matching and mirroring, pacing and leading**. They say that opposites attract but only if we are a magnet. To build rapport with someone we can match or mirror their movements, body position, posture. Overdone of course, this will seem ridiculous and obvious. But we can create a natural empathy through the visual behaviour we employ. People like people who appear to be like them. Similarly, if someone is angry or upset, we can lead them to a different place by not replicating their physical behaviour but rather modelling a different way of being.

The overall point is that we give and receive signals all the time. **None of this is neutral**. We can't ignore this and say it does not matter. **Our words, delivery and behaviour affect how we and our communications are perceived - and how others react to them.**

I hope this has been useful. This stuff is not an intellectual pursuit but something each of us must practice. Over to you!