

The power of skilful communication in consulting

Skilful communication leads to improved decision-making. However, it requires a shift in perception from using communication as a launchpad for personal intentions to a bridge that connects people and empowers them to achieve common goals.

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Communication makes it possible for human beings to collaborate. Through communication we make connections and align our efforts, and suddenly we can move mountains or build a bridge.

However, we do not always think of communication as a bridge to connect. Instead we use it as a tool to launch our own intentions, hoping and expecting the world to adopt these. In this case, differences in perspective, as seen in the tree swing cartoon in Figure 1, lead to miscommunication, only all too obvious in hindsight. Instead of bridging us, communication has become one-way traffic on a dead-end street.

The value of skilful communication

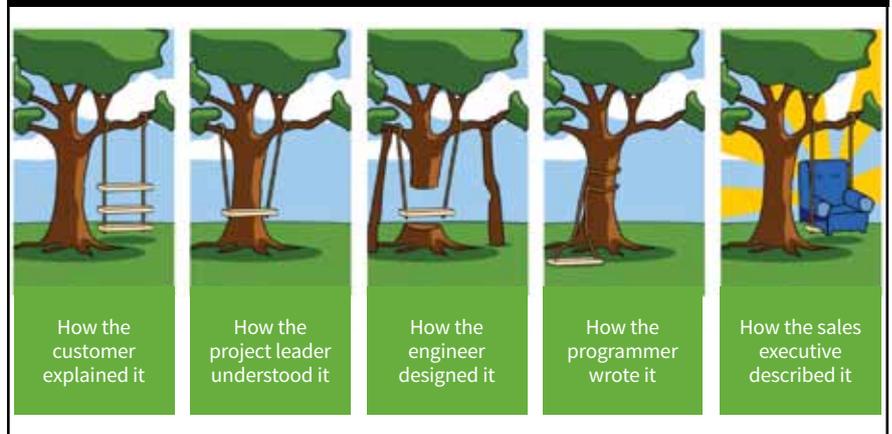
However, when communication is a two-way street, collaboration becomes successful, leading to sustainable step changes in performance and cost efficiency. Fundamentally, it builds on our ability to shift from one perspective to another and understand what is of importance to our co-workers.

For example, from a design perspective, one parameter to minimise the equipment cost is the selection of the smallest-possible size motor for each fan across a production line. However, seen in terms of the daily operations by the maintenance team, the additional cost of keeping spares

“The greatest barrier to communication is the illusion that it has been achieved.”

William H Whyte

Figure 1: “The greatest barrier to communication is the illusion that it has been achieved” – William H Whyte



in stock for all different motor sizes is higher than the savings obtained by the design team.

Skilful communication encourages us to coordinate purposes and weigh our priorities against each other, rather than being lost in our own point of view.

Moreover, it has consequences for the way we interact. Words are no longer used just to convince of one's own point of view. Instead we use our words carefully to gain insight and create mutual understanding.

With this insight into the specifics of a field, our ability to navigate improves. And once we know how to navigate, we can begin to create the beacons to make us all align efforts and pull in the same direction.

Decision-making power

To be truly efficient, complex organisations require good decision-making for each step of their activity. Skilful communication fosters the empowerment needed to achieve this.

In the ideal, when an organisation is bound together by skilful communication, each member sees himself as a filter of

information. He understands that the observations he makes in his field may be valuable to someone else and therefore shares these. In the back of his mind, an employee, who feels empowered in his job, continuously uses his own sound judgement to decide if a matter can be solved immediately or should be kept under observation, if he should discuss it with someone else or notify a colleague, or if, maybe, it has to be elevated through the management structure.

With efficient decision-making in place from the bottom-up, management will be presented with less noise and more information that is essential to the decision to be taken. Management now has an improved basis to make good decisions, which benefits clarity in decision-making and consequently, the clarity of the decisions.

With still clearer guidelines from management, the virtuous cycle is completed, improving everyone's intuitive understanding on how they should efficiently deal with upcoming issues and what type of improvements to look out for.

Management decisions are becoming the beacons that guide action.

Encouraging skilful communication

One reason why skilful communication is difficult is because it is up against the strong human propensity to appear certain. When we do not feel sufficiently secure, we experience not knowing as a sign of weakness, instead of the first step of becoming wiser. For skilful communication to function, it has to overcome the fear of asking questions that might exhibit our personal limitations.

Skilful communication is a mindset to be encouraged and it is important to continuously train the ability to shift perspective and the courage to risk being wrong.

Teambuilding events are one commonly-used way to increase understanding between colleagues. But silo walls are in many organisations a real barrier to internal collaboration. To overcome barriers and harvest the value of efficient collaboration, training in skilful communication should be facilitated also on a broader scale with cross-field participation.

Consulting as skilful communication

How can technical consulting provide support for an organisation to encourage mutual understanding through skilful communication? Among others, it may set an example of how to create the clarity of direction in a noisy world.

Let's look at consulting as the skill of providing useful advice in four steps:

- 1 – Understand the purpose.
- 2 – Gain insight.
- 3 – Create understanding.
- 4 – Reinforce implementation.

1 – Understand the purpose

The first and very important analysis a consultant makes, is the pre-proposal analysis of why the client is seeking support in the first place.

Consulting is rarely an off-the-shelf commodity. In this early phase it is important that the consultant stays open-minded, listens attentively while asking the relevant questions to identify the technical issue to be investigated. To understand what solutions to look for, it is key that he also receives an understanding of the client's commercial challenges.

In what ways should the solution help the client become more competitive? Is he operating in a sold-out market or looking to save costs, or is he, maybe, impacted by new government regulation coming into force?

This early alignment of expectations in a scope definition between client and consultant is crucial to make a solid foundation for the work to be carried out. In the tree swing example, it is to reach an agreement that the tree swing we are talking about is specific and precisely-defined (see Figure 2).

2 – Gain insight

The strength of a consultant is that he brings with him the view from a distance. He has the knowledge of similar equipment operating under a variety of conditions, and by comparing operation and performance he can identify weak spots and evaluate the potential to improve operation of the given equipment.

However, to investigate the origins of the issues and arrive at best-fit solutions and practical recommendations, he also deeply depends on the experience and knowledge from daily operation, that people like field operators, control room operators and inspectors may provide him.

The consultant's job is to observe and study the clues to identify the verifiable facts upon which he can base his analyses.

Figure 2: early alignment of expectations in a scope definition between client and consultant is key in building a solid foundation for work to be undertaken



Diving into the details of complex technical and operational issues is time-consuming and requires patience, but there is no other way to arrive at reliable solutions.

3 – Create understanding

Confidence in a solution is created through understanding. Once it is understood why it is important to do something, it never again becomes a waste of time to do it.

Communicating the result of his findings, the consultant has to think in two different directions simultaneously. One is to explain to technical staff why a given observation is important and support the technical recommendations with practical how-to recipes.

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The other is to explain to management the commercial significance of the technical conclusions. These are two very different – yet closely intertwined – filters that the consultant has to apply to his technical findings.

The main steps of improvement summarise the technical findings and provide the overall beacons for navigation. An action plan supplies a practical tool to structure implementation and follow-up of the technical recommendations.

4 – Reinforce implementation

No matter how right a solution may be, the solution in itself is never more than half the game. The other half is the confidence that it is the right solution and the determination to follow through. Most solutions are not an instant remedy, they need to persevere for a time or be modified in a collaborative approach, before their benefits will begin to show.

The consultant can be of immense importance to reinforce the chosen solutions and keep implementation on track by including follow-up sessions to discuss progress and preliminary results into the scope. ■