

Communications Skills for Boards. Really?

To kick off the New Year, Jean Pousson, shares some of his experiences of 'interesting' communication at Board meetings.

I do not profess to be an expert on communication, but the following are simply observations that I have picked up over the years of working with and within Boards. I hope you find them useful and would welcome any of your experiences to enrich the debate, (and learning).

The dangerous, but too predictable, prefaces. Do watch out when Board members begin a sentence or an argument with the following prefaces:

Research has shown: This has near biblical authority. It has to be correct because there is research. Not to appear smug, but on the few occasions when I have asked for the research in question, the respondents did struggle to come up with such research. Board members are not malicious nor do they lie, (ok some do), but someone mentions research in conversation and it is accepted as currency without authentication.

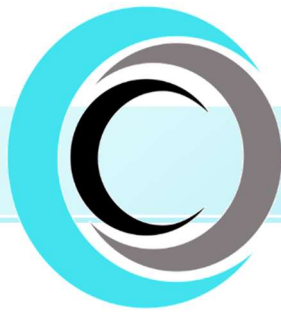
When I was at: We all benefit from the experience of others, but sometimes that experience does not travel to new and different circumstances. We all have our own mental tool kit, which has served us well, but often the context is different, and as with a new virus, existing medication and treatment may not be appropriate. We always advise Directors that unlearning is as important as continuous learning. By that I mean, we have to appreciate that some techniques and beliefs have a sell by date. I call it the curse of knowledge as we allow ourselves to become prisoners of our own experiences.

I think we should: Again, this is borne out of experience, which is not a bad thing. Directors are using judgement and their analytical skills to contribute. Nothing wrong with that. One of my colleagues, a former Barrister, tells the story. At one of his first Court appearances, he begins argument by telling the Judge, "I think." He wasn't allowed to finish his sentence. The Judge told him, "I don't care what you think, just present the argument and the facts!" He tells me that it is a lesson that he has never forgotten in his career as a very successful Non-Executive Director and Consultant.

With respect: Actually, this means, 'with no respect', as I am about to launch a missile in your direction! So, let's not use that phrase.

In our industry: Whilst valid to discuss variables that may be peculiar to a particular sector or industry, this mindset can encourage limiting thinking and restrict the strategic conversation to corridors of narrowness. Industry boundaries are a thing of the past in so many areas and I would discourage Directors to entertain that train of thought.

I am very excited by this proposal: This was the opening gambit of a Chair about a proposed acquisition. No prizes for guessing as to why this is terrible. He had already made up his mind and was unconsciously influencing his other Board colleagues.



I have heard/People are saying: This is just gossip and just another form of terrorism. A good Chair will soon put a stop to such practices. It adds no value and only serves to create disharmony. If indeed there are rumours the obvious professional response is to get to the bottom of such rumours and validate with facts. Just saying, "I have heard" by itself is unhelpful and quite frankly unprofessional.

Some other thoughts and observations:

Listening is not waiting to speak. In the heat of battle, energy can be very counterproductive. Once you've said something you cannot recall or delete. So, we all need to remind ourselves that, at times, we really need to think before we speak. Shooting from the proverbial hip may appear like the right thing to do, but sometimes letting the silence do the lifting is not a bad thing either.

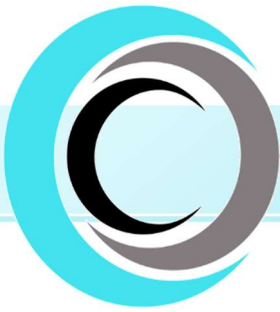
Influence: One of a Director's necessary capabilities is the ability to influence where appropriate, but can you recognise when you are being influenced? What are the telltale signs? Constant flattery is one, folk always agreeing with you is another, the perpetual smile in your direction, etc. Manipulators are craft masters at their arts, they are subtle yet cunning, so do be on the lookout for such behaviours. Do remember that organisation charts lie, as they do not identify where the real power actually sits.

The power of numbers: Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner, in their very good book 'Superforecasting: The art and science of prediction', tell the story of Barak Obama deciding whether or not to sanction the invasion of Pakistan, (an ally), to assassinate Osama Bin Laden.

What was known was that whoever was in that compound didn't want to be seen. (No satellite dish on the roof, curtains always drawn, fence always shut, and only single men walked in and out). The occupants did not seem to mix with their neighbours. But was it Bin Laden? The intelligence on this was inconclusive. After much discussion, Obama asked all of his advisers to give him a % rating as to how sure they were of his (Bin Laden) presence. The numbers ranged from 33% to 99%. Obama admitted afterwards that he took a calculated risk.

This technique, ie asking for confidence %, is really useful and practical to cut through emotive discussions. Asking a Director for such a numerical index does focus the mind and does provide for more rigour to decision making.

The long dance of avoidance: This is the unwillingness, (fear even), of not confronting the real issues and speaking in codes. The conversation takes very general overtones with Board members not prepared to speak their mind, they hide behind sentences like. (its a business decision, it is strategic, this is for another day etc...). This is where a Chair and Independent Non-Executive earn their fees.



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If you would like more information on this subject and would like to talk to us at Platinum Compliance (Guernsey) Limited, or for us to put you in contact with Jean Pousson, please contact lindsay@platinumcompliance.co.uk or visit our website <https://www.platinumcompliance.co.uk/>

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