



## INFLUENCING PEOPLE: PERCEPTUAL STATUS

Communication is a big part of our lives, but how can we get better at it? David Gillespie recaps a talk he gave to ICAEW

Recently, I had the pleasure of delivering a talk on influence, persuasion and negotiation at the Great Hall at ICAEW. When Robert Russell asked me to give this talk it occurred to me that we can only influence, persuade and negotiate well if people have bought into us in some way. After all, people buy into people before information, and if we haven't got that right we stand little or no chance of having the effect we desire.

So, how do we control the way others think and feel about us when we interact with them? Well, it all comes down to one little word - status. The sort of status I am talking about here has nothing to do with power, position, wealth or social standing. It is entirely down to perception. How we perceive people and how they perceive us. And this is physical, vocal and emotional.

If we had a scale of perceptual status from one to 10, one wouldn't be the worst and 10 wouldn't be the best. In fact, they are both as bad as each other. One is the timid apology that closes us off from any meaningful communication and 10 is the aloof arrogance that pushes people away. The area of the scale we need to inhabit is in the middle. Living in the five to seven territory allows us to be open, accessible, warm, approachable and strong; all of the qualities people like to associate with.

### CLEAR, OPEN COMMUNICATION

When we walk into a room full of people and see someone on the far side, long before we hear the sound of their voice or make eye contact with them, we make a judgement on what we see - we can't help it. If their body language is closed off, we are unlikely to approach them. If their posture, gesture and expressions are in the five to seven neutral zone, we will feel comfortable and happy to engage with them. It is speculated that 50% of communication is non-verbal. Get that wrong and you are playing catch-up from the very beginning.

The way we sound also affects the way people feel about what we have to say. Roughly speaking, 40% of communication is in the sound we make. My maths skills aren't as good as those from ICAEW, but I make that just 10% left for the words. The words are, of course, very important but the way we sound when we say those words is perhaps more so. "I don't like your tone, young man," my mother used to say to me. It's not what you say, it's how you say it.

Nowadays, when the conference call is almost becoming the preferred way of holding meetings, the way we sound is very important indeed. Taking away half of communication leaves us guessing and playing detective about what we are hearing and the intention behind the words. Even more reason to examine our vocal status and the vocal status of those we are interacting with.

Good vocal production is a key component of great communication. Getting the best out of how we sound comes down to three factors:

1. Breathing. Being able to maintain the energy behind the voice with proper breathing rather than snatching breaths from the top of the chest.
2. Giving a full and rounded sound to the voice with a variety of pitch and tone. We generally use around three to four notes either side of the optimum pitch when we speak - we have about 30 we could use. We will do it for the children when we read them a story, so why short-change the adults?
3. Clarity and dexterity of speech. The last thing we want to be doing is stumbling over our words. Those fabulous old tongue-twisters should be a major part of our vocal warm-up. We should all pay more attention to our vocal image.

### MAKE IT PERSONAL

Our emotional status is the way we feel about what we have to say. The way we want other people to feel about what we have to say. It's all about feelings. Business is about feelings.

I once worked with a very senior figure from an investment bank who assured me that people in his world made decisions based on facts and figures alone. I asked him if the way we could make people feel about those facts and figures might influence the decisions they make. He said no. I don't know about you but I think people can get emotional about their money and how it is being used, and quite rightly so.

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Maybe feelings of being assured and safe with a little dash of excitement can be part of an investment decision. I think he was missing a major part of effective communication.

Great leaders understand the importance of emotional status. That is because they are attuned to the needs, desires and concerns of the people they lead. People are interested in great leaders because great leaders are interested in people. It doesn't take a lot to show genuine interest in the people we wish to persuade and influence.

In his book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie demonstrated the art of helping people to feel good about themselves with story after story. He realised that if we are able to do that we will create strong relationships and people will want to associate with us, trade more with us or work well for us.

Carnegie's theory reminds me of a story about a woman who had dinner with William Gladstone one night and Benjamin Disraeli the following night. After having dinner with Gladstone, she thought that he was the most intelligent man in the country. After having dinner with Disraeli, she felt that she was the most intelligent woman in the country. Queen Victoria absolutely loathed one of these men and adored the other - no prizes for guessing which was which. We could examine the status levels of our current leaders around the world and determine who is in danger of going off the scale but that is probably best left to another day when we have the spirit for debate and a little more time.

If we wish to get the very best from our communication and allow others to buy into us, we need to constantly monitor how we are perceived physically, vocally and emotionally. Let's think about that strange perceptual status scale and check where we are on it with every piece of communication we engage in. Let's examine how we look, how we sound and how we feel. Most of all, let's take more interest in others and make them feel good about themselves. Happy communicating to you all! ●