



Is There a Better Way?

I had an interesting experience a few weeks ago when attending a University Open Day with my son....“Hi, we’d like to speak to someone about the Advanced Science Program”. “OK, here is a brochure that describes the program”. We mumbled a reluctant thanks as the “helpful” staff member turned on her heel and left us. “Dad, I don’t think she was listening.”

This episode got me thinking. It wasn’t just that she wasn’t listening. She had locked into one mode of communication (reading) and failed to appreciate that we had another mode in mind - an old-fashioned conversation. Then I started to reflect on occasions in business when I may have been guilty of the same thing!

On one occasion my team had spent hours working on a detailed report on a complex matter. I was very proud of their recommended solution and the rationale for their conclusions. When delivering the report to my boss he only wanted the headlines – “just take me through your recommendations”. I persisted with my original intention to explain the complexity of the issue and the clever work my team had undertaken. I soon noticed that my boss was no longer paying attention and was showing distinct signs of impatience. Why had I inadvertently annoyed him?

I was so intent on my communication plan that I had ignored his clearly stated preference. I had not adjusted my delivery, partly because I wasn’t really listening and partly because I was keen to persist with praising my team’s good work. That’s not a bad thing but clearly, in hindsight, it wasn’t the optimum forum. The lesson for us as senders of information is to consider the most suitable mode of communication for the receiver. They may be explicit in their preference (like my boss) or we may have to look for clues.

The mode is not just a choice between written or verbal. There are many variations on the choice. Some people may like tables of numbers and supporting detail. Some people may prefer to start with “the big picture”. Some people would choose to read the full report in advance, before any meeting. Other people are more comfortable with charts or diagrams – and some just want the answer so they can get on with it!

In any case, let’s consider the alternatives and be flexible in our modes of communication.