



## What Does It All Mean?

After three years of contributing these articles I have decided to free up some space and time. Yes, dear reader, this will be the last of the series in this form. I hope you don't mind, in reminiscing about the first 29 articles, indulging in some broad observations about communication. I think that I have learnt a great deal since 2008....

### How v What

There is no doubt that in preparing any form of communication most people put a strong emphasis on what they are going to communicate. Right from my first column I have attempted to encourage readers to put more emphasis on how they are going to communicate. This is also the focus of my workshops in this area. If anything, in the last few years, I have become more obsessed with the importance of the "how" having seen so many great "whats" ignored or misinterpreted.

For example, I have found that I have changed my guidance to people on their presentations. Where once I was very keen to clarify their key message (eg "How would you summarise the most important points you want to convey?") I am now much more enthusiastic about them clarifying the result they want to achieve (eg "What impact – thoughts, actions, feelings – do you want to have on your audience?").

I am also now very interested in "why" they are doing it. For an inspiring articulation of the interaction of why/how/what I recommend devoting 18 minutes to listening to Simon Sinek on [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com).

### Reminder of Existing Skills v Learning New Skills

It has been rewarding to hear feedback and I have enjoyed a number of conversations about the subject matter. People have often expressed the benefit of these articles as a "reminder" about a particular behaviour. That is great to hear. At the same time, the more I listen to people talking about their own communication skills the greater my unease that too many people believe that they have all the skills that they need and that they just need to remember to use them. I would urge all readers to seek feedback on their communication skills and, in particular, to critically assess whether any sub-optimal communication is a function of "memory" or "skill base". If your diagnosis is incorrect so will be the treatment.



This links to one of my hobby horse homilies, simplified here in the interests of space: *You are not stuck with your current communication style. You can learn and get better.* My regular reminder of this is in my workshop on framing questions. Participants usually start with the attitude of “how hard can it be”, progress to “it’s just about being more aware” before reluctantly concluding that they could learn some framing skills. Not convinced? Think about a closed question that you currently use at work (eg “Any questions?”). Now re-word it and apply it to get a better result (assuming that receiving a question is a better result). Will you need reminders or skill to implement it?

### **Self-Awareness v Awareness of Others**

I think this is one area where my views have evolved more than any other. Most of my columns have stressed the need to be aware of the person we are communicating with: their personal style (eg detail v big picture), their preference for medium (eg verbal v written), their physiology (eg standing v sitting), their tone (soft v harsh) or their language (eg complex v simple). I still believe that these considerations are vital for successful communication. However, on reflection, I now think that more importance should be placed on our self-awareness and understanding our own communication strengths and weaknesses. This extends to awareness of the impact of stress on our communication.

Here is a short exercise to illustrate the point:

1. Think of a recent experience where you have been involved in a communication breakdown...
2. What, in hindsight, could you have done differently to avoid the breakdown?
3. Why didn't you do that at the time?

It is Q.3 that represents the real test of your self-awareness.

It takes self-awareness and skills to know how to communicate effectively and professionally.