



# Communication – it's a question of how you say it

by **Tim Russell** and **David Neyle**

It is a frequently published truism that engineers are all introverts with unkempt hair and poor communication skills. Both of us started our professional careers as engineers so we have heard the jibes and recognise some of them as valid not only in Australia but throughout the European and Asia Pacific regions in which we work.

Increasingly it is appreciated that successful engineers cannot work in a vacuum but need to be able to influence others. **David Wilson**, quality manager for **Kellogg Brown & Root** (Asia Pacific), summed it up well: "Communication between the client and contractor is obviously important during the tendering and contracting phase of a project.

"But equally important to the successful outcome of the project is the communication between the project engineers and the client during the job. It is too late when a project reaches its end-date to find out that a misunderstanding has occurred that could so easily have been sorted out during the design and construction phases, if only they had talked to each other. For many engineers this type of interpersonal communication does not come easily, especially if it is difficult news that must be discussed."

Wilson goes on to say: "However, that ability to communicate coherently and appropriately, regardless of the message, can ultimately determine whether the client's expectations are met and whether both parties view the project as a success."

Universities and TAFEs are now including communication skills in already



*Tim Russell*



*David Neyle*

over-packed curricula, though the small proportion of marks at examination puts this at low priority for the students. Some secondary schools are also adding a lesson or two a week on communications to the syllabus.

Despite these attempts, we are finding that there is still a very clear omission and this omission is in the detailed microskills of the interaction.

It is the single word, tone of voice or eye movement that can make all the difference.

There are three distinct components to good communication skills – "Why",

"What" and "How".

The "Why" is an understanding of what drives people to behave as they do, what makes them feel good, what stresses them and how they are likely to react.

This is usually covered in business studies through various theories of motivation and behaviour and sometimes by the use of self-analysis instruments for self-reflection and awareness.

The "What" is the intellectual stage of choosing what to convey and what would be the best time and place to do so. This all takes place in the brain as the various factors are weighed up and the decisions are made.

Engineers are typically good at this as problem solving and decision making constitute large parts of their training and practice. Business schools also include case studies to discuss what action to take in different circumstances.

The "How" involves the interpersonal skill of using the precise word, phrase, body movement and tone of voice to carry a message so that the receiver hears and understands it in exactly the way the transmitter intends.

All three components are essential. If people do not understand the "Why", they will fail to appreciate the need for good communication and will not bother to implement the "What" and the "How". If they get the "What" right, but the "How" wrong, they will be unable to communicate a potentially good idea. If they get the "What" wrong and the "How" right, they can convince others of a dreadful suggestion. Such people can be highly dangerous. The "What" wrong and the "How" wrong leads to unsuccessful communication, and it is the "What" right and the "How" right that constitutes success.

However, it is the detailed practical application of the "How" that is so often ignored in the more conceptual formal courses of study.

Following are some examples of getting the "How" right. The difference between "Is that report ready?" and "Is that report ready, yet" can be measured in the amount of cooperation received. "Why is it so hot?" can put a technician on the defensive versus "Why is it hot?". And "Is that really the case?" sows seeds



of doubting the other person's ability or even honesty.

The misinterpretation of a question can lead to uncertainty about the intent of the question. "Are you doing anything this evening?" could be social chitchat or an invitation for a date, raising someone's hopes or deserving a slap. Does "What time do you intend finishing work this evening?" imply that the boss wants you to work late tonight?

Seating and standing positions send huge messages. Standing up means a short conversation; sitting down, a longer meeting. ABC's political interrogator Kerry O'Brien would lose some of his punch if he sat with the same chair arrangement as entertainment interviewer Rove McManus.

Some misunderstandings can have disastrous consequences. The captain who instructed his first officer at V1 (the decision point for aircraft take-off) to "take off power" never had the opportunity

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to explain whether he meant to remove the hand from the throttle and abort the take-off or to accelerate. The crash investigators heard the command on the voice recorder.

With the added dimension of colleagues and customers speaking English as a second language, there is an extra level of accuracy necessary for both content and intention.

The German transatlantic air passenger was beside himself when the seat belt sign prevented him from using the toilet. His eventual outburst, "Tell the captain, there's going to be an explosion", caused a diversion and cost him a night in jail.

Communication by email also requires microsills. A missing hyphen meant two colleagues refused to speak to each other when "I resent that document" should have read "I re-sent that document".

While these examples might be humorous, they show how important microsills are in those everyday situations where engineers have to give or receive feedback, send and receive instructions, handle grievances and complaints, and conduct performance discussions. ●

*Tim Russell and David Neyle are international training consultants specialising in interpersonal skills training. They can be contacted at: [info@TimRussellGroup.com](mailto:info@TimRussellGroup.com)*