

The importance of communication in business: taking a closer look at conversation and writing

Nick Peters talks to Alison Donaldson on Share Radio, 25 September 2015

NP: Many people think that Twitter and Facebook are changing the way we speak and write to one another. What do you say to that?

AD: Conversation is much, much older than writing. We've had conversation ever since we had language – and we're talking about tens of thousands of years. Writing is a much more recent invention. I think the most important thing in organisational life and in business is that people stop and think about when it's the right time to talk – have a conversation – and when it's the right time to write an email, write down some thoughts on paper or write a report.

NP: Do you believe that people think that, once they have written something and sent it out, their work is done?

AD: Yes, nearly every day I meet people in business or in public organisations and I hear about a report that was written or published but then never implemented. I hear about strategic plans which were also not implemented. I was talking to somebody in a hospital recently about the 'rubber ceiling'. This is the ceiling that prevents ordinary people in the organisation from being able to speak to the leadership of their organisation. So often, senior managers will send out an email or they'll send out instructions and expect people to follow them. And of course that's not how human beings work.

NP: There's a quote you use in your writing, from John le Carré, who says "A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world". I think he was talking about life being a little bit more dangerous than inside corporations – he was talking about the world of espionage. But I suppose that is absolutely true – if all you do is sit at your desk and write things and send them off into your corporate ether, you're really not going to achieve anything other than tick boxes to say "I have written all the reports I was supposed to".

AD: Exactly. And I think that the habit of writing something and then assuming that the writing will have some influence, and that people will respond to it, is very deeply ingrained for many of us. People are different of course. I've got many good colleagues who much prefer the spoken word, and they're the ones who don't write books, who don't write emails. They're much more likely to ring you up. But I think there is a deeply ingrained habit in organisational life, based on some unconscious assumptions about how communication works. For example, in the 1940s, there was some work done on what we now call "sender-receiver communication". It arose because of the advent of various technologies like radio and telephone and television. That model – the idea that you send off a piece of information and the receiver receives it and then something happens – goes very deeply into our unconscious.

NP: That really puts the responsibility for taking action onto the receiver, even though the sender is the one whose job it was to communicate properly?

AD: Yes, when I worked for McKinsey & Company in London in the 1980s as a Communications Specialist, what I was looking to do all the time was to improve the quality of written communication (and, for that matter, presentations). It was only much later, when I went back to university and studied organisational communication at post-graduate level, that I began to realise that quality of written communication is just a tiny part of what we need to pay attention to. To my mind, people in business, and especially in public organisations, would do much better to focus on how people are *using* the written word.

NP: So what can you say to somebody who wants to improve their written communication?

AD: I would say, by all means try to improve your written communication. Look at ways in which you can become a better writer. For example, you can become better at structuring your writing logically, which is part of what I have earned my living doing. But don't stop there. It's so important to think about who you're writing to (or for that matter who you're speaking to), and which is the best medium. This takes us back to the beginning of our conversation: when is the right moment to write an email, and when is the right moment to speak to people? And I think for senior managers, there is quite a lot of difficulty in choosing the right medium. For example, one chief executive I knew, it was said of him that he never got involved in operational details. And I think that's fine – if you're running an organisation, you need to have the big picture in mind – but on the other hand, if you refuse to talk to anybody about any operational detail, you're just out of touch. And I think that's where, for me, John le Carré's phrase resonates.

NP: I suppose if one was to draw a lesson out of this, it would be to say that, if you have written something of any substance, the way to follow up effectively is to converse with somebody one-to-one to make certain that they got the gist, that their understanding of what you're saying resonates with what you were trying to say.

AD: I have this phrase, which I think I coined – you never know, because sometimes phrases appear in different parts of the world at the same time – and it's "the social life of documents". As a writer, you don't just make sure your writing is good quality, but you really think about "who would I need to have a conversation with after this piece of writing is finished?" And that applies if you've written an important email to somebody, it applies if you've written a report, it applies to many different types of writing.

NP: What about conversation itself? Is it something that you can actually teach people, or is it just innate – you're either good at it or not?

AD: Well, my answer to many questions is "both-and". Some people are naturally really good at conversation. Some people are good at monologues, and that's a big problem. But people can definitely learn to be better at conversation. The most obvious aspect for me is listening. And actually if you look at the corporate training world, there are lots of training programmes that address the question of how you can be a better listener.

NP: So, in terms of conversation what you're saying is that it is teachable, and that the key element is listening. But nowadays people communicate so badly and in such a truncated fashion – I've already referred to Twitter and Facebook. It's almost like we're going backwards, that the art of conversation is dying.

AD: I said that listening was really important, but I think there's something else which for me is just as important: that is, people's attitude to conversation, what people think conversation is there for. And I make a distinction between transactional conversations and exploratory conversations. What I've noticed in my working life is that occasionally I have the frustrating experience where I realise that I'm dealing with somebody who simply never understood the potential creativity of conversation. They think that every conversation has to be efficient and as short as possible – you have a goal and you want to get some information out of somebody, or you want to tell somebody what to do. And what they miss there is giving it a little bit more time. If you give it a bit more time, it can become an exploration together. And I know this sounds a bit idealistic but I really don't think it is.

I wrote a report for a non-profit organisation a few years back and I was taking my own advice and trying to give my writing a social life. So, after I'd delivered the report to the person who asked for it, I suggested that we sit down for an informal meeting or chat to talk about what needed to happen next. This senior manager, who was an incredibly bright person, just never responded to my request to talk about the implications of that report. And I heard from other people who were working in that organisation – they all had the same problem. They said "You write a report and it goes into a black hole. You never hear what happened to it."

NP: You've made an interesting point there about the fact that a conversation can either just be a direct exchange of required information and that's that, or in the case of the chap you wrote the report for, nothing at all. Or, if you go into a conversation with your ears and eyes wide open, your brain wide open, an awful lot more might come of it than you anticipated.

AD: Absolutely. Conversation and writing are two aspects of human life that we take completely for granted. If you look at conversation, there are some things which perhaps we don't think about on an everyday basis. So, for example, when you enter a conversation with another human being, you never know what is going to emerge, because you've got two different minds working together. By nature, conversation is unpredictable. It's also ambiguous – all human communication is ambiguous. And I'm conscious that many communication professionals and writers want to reduce ambiguity, but for me the real insight from studying conversation and writing more deeply was that there is no escape from ambiguity. When you have a conversation, you've got two people who are responding to each other, and whenever you have two people responding to each other, something new will emerge which neither of them could have anticipated.

This is a slightly edited version of an interview on Share Radio

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