

Walking the talk

David Youell
downey youell associates

Communication is a core lifeskill. But it's more than words and messages and technologies. It's a way of being, and we can only teach it by embodying its principles and walking the talk.

This article was published in the Teacher's
Organiser and School Diary, 2000

People in business frequently comment on the poor interpersonal skills of young people entering the workplace. They may have technical qualifications by the truckload, but often fall short on the fundamental ability to relate intelligently with their fellow human beings.

This is largely true, though in my experience the condition is not limited to new arrivals in the workplace. Many of those who've clocked up a lot of mileage are equally lacking and the unfortunate effects of this competence gap are all too evident in the day to day experience at work.

It's not easy to point to any one reason for the deficiency but the fact that most people haven't explored communication in any formal way, never discuss it - except perhaps when it fails - and seldom *consciously* consider it even while engaged in it, is undoubtedly part of the problem.

Communication is a core lifeskill - perhaps *the* core skill, and yet we don't teach it as a formal subject in school.

Young people are processed through a system designed to prepare them for Life, and they come out at the other end full of wonderful facts about all manner of things, but we haven't told them anything about what goes on inside their heads and in their hearts. Lots of software has been loaded but they have no conscious understanding of their behavioural operating system!

And they carry this lack of self-awareness into the relationships and partnerships they form, into the businesses and organisations where they spend much of their waking hours, and into the wider society. When you think about it, it's hardly surprising that the adult world ends up with at best a mediocre understanding of how human beings tick. And at worst, no idea at all.

The popular view is that communication is about talking, and words. Or technology. We can speak, can't we? We can write. Ergo we can communicate, seems to be the assumption.

But communication is about more than words or technologies or messages. When you take the lid off this complex topic, you discover that it is about the totality of our interaction as individuals and as organisations. It's about the attitudes and values that guide our behaviour and what those behaviours say about us. It's about sharing meaning through listening, and its about personal awareness.

In fact, communication is the context in which everything happens. It is to us humans, what the water in the fishbowl is to the fish. We are in it and it is in us.

Today's students will be the backbone of tomorrow's society and while the curriculum will not change overnight it seems to me that teachers and those responsible for the system in which young people begin to form opinions about the world, have a unique opportunity to make a difference to the level of communication awareness in the world. Though perhaps not in the way you might expect.

If you believe that better communication is about improved platform skills, slicker presentations, and more successful negotiation, you fall squarely into the camp that sees 'communication' as a set of competences that can be hammered into willing heads. There is a better way.

Good communication is *a way of being*, and we can only 'teach' it by embodying that way of being - by really listening to others, through our personal level of honesty and integrity and the degree to which we respect diversity of views and cultivate open mindedness. In other words, we 'teach' it by walking the talk.

The culture of any workplace is fundamentally shaped by the attitudes and behaviour of the leaders, and within a school, teachers are the leadership. The human bulletin boards that walk, talk and promote a particular value system.

Whether your staffroom and school culture is built on healthy communication practices depends on how well both the organisation itself and the individual teachers pass their Communication Health Check.

So on a scale of one to ten, how does *your* school rate on these indicators:

- a. People here are authentic, not superficial
- b. Different points of view are respected
- c. Time spent communicating is regarded as an investment, not a cost
- d. We aren't afraid to speak honestly - even about the tough stuff
- e. We're encouraged to question, argue and challenge the status quo
- f. We have the skills we need to communicate in this way

And lest you fall into the trap of pointing 'over there' to the source of all the communication problems in your staffroom, remember, there is no 'they'. Every organisation is simply a collection of individuals, and its culture is the sum total of individual values and beliefs. So give *yourself* marks out of ten for the following:

- a. I always speak in an open and direct way
- b. I see every person as unique and valuable
- c. I'm conscious that friction is the result of different thinking
- d. I spend more time trying to understand other

- e. I try to 'get inside' other people's heads by asking questions about their beliefs
- f. I'm not afraid to change my point of view after listening to someone else

High scores on these indicators are more than 'nice to have'. Increasingly, these are must-have ingredients in the workplace. The nature of work is transforming itself radically and as the move towards a knowledge-based society continues, 'people' skills are moving centre stage.

In the struggle for market responsiveness, hierarchies are out, flatter organisations are in and teamwork, flexibility, trust and co-operation are becoming highly sought-after personal qualities. And communication is right at the heart of this transformation.

Those charged with equipping young people for the world of work would do well to look inside your own hearts, and into the heart of your school organisation, to develop and role model the kind of communicating 'relationship' culture that is fast becoming the hallmark of the most progressive and successful workplaces, and the core skill of successful individuals.

Besides, what could be more rewarding than teaching people how to get on with their fellow travellers on the Road of Life?

About the author

David Youell is a partner at **downey youell associates** and works with individuals and organisations to address issues of culture and change in the workplace and the community.

He is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner and co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic - 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*, a desktop companion of practical communication tips and inspirational wisdom. [Oak Tree Press, 1998]

downey youell associates

is a service for leaders and change agents who want to take a living-systems approach to organisation, culture and change.

CultureWork - for a world in transition

is our unique resource - a suite of concepts and practical processes designed to support the work of transition in organisations and in the community.

Find out more online at www.dya.ie

a: 123 Lower Baggot Street
Dublin 2
Ireland
p: (353 1) 661 2636
e: mail@dya.ie
w: www.dya.ie