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How to speak so people listen

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Feature

Mike Clayton offers a model for effective communication



Much of our speech is disposable; we are heard but not listened to. The consequences of this for society and for the world of work are alarming, and range from messages mislaid to conversations misunderstood; from meetings wasted to abject fear of public speaking. As the importance of your speaking increases, so does the pressure on you not just to be heard but to have people listen to you.

In the ten years since I developed my first training programme for business presenters, I have been working hard to understand how speakers can engage listeners in all contexts: from conversations and meetings, to platform speeches and presentations. I want to understand how you can speak, so people really want to listen to you.

Six levels of speaking

The more research I did, the more I realised that speaking so people listen is a pretty tame ambition; just a first step. If you want to speak really effectively, there are six levels to take on:

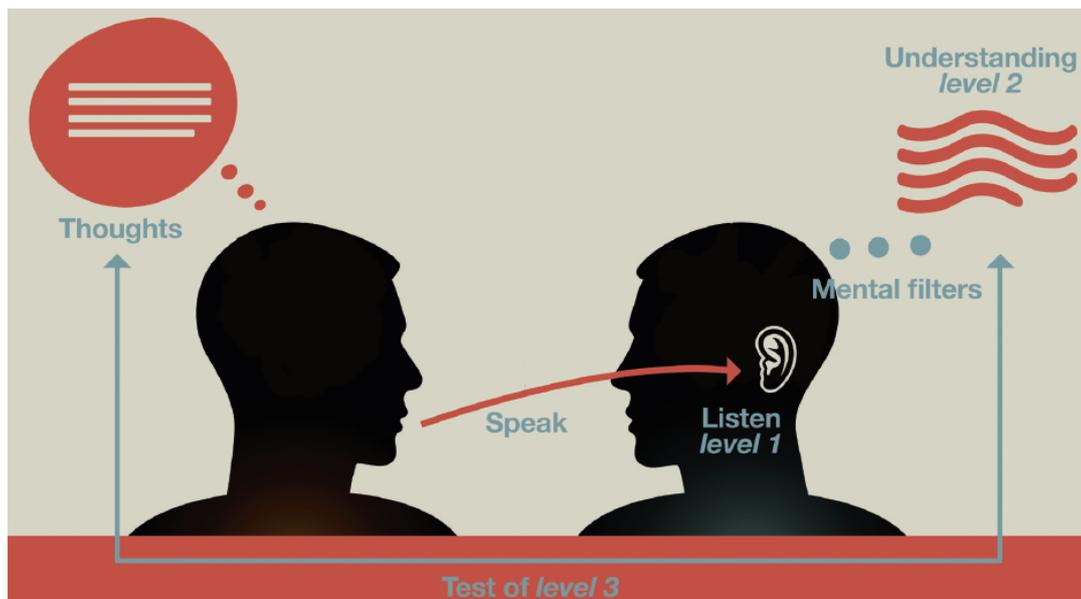


persuade your audience to your point of view

- **how to speak so people remember what you want them to** Powerful speaking sticks in people's minds, so level five speaking is memorable, using techniques that etch your words and ideas into the memories of your audience
- **how to speak so people think or do what you want them to** The power of level six is about change. When you speak at this level, you are using psychological and emotional cues to change the way your listeners think and act.

A commonplace feature of much communication skills training is how our senses and thought processes filter the information we receive, distorting the content so that our perception of the world is not a precise match to reality. Neuro-linguistic programming practitioners speak in terms of the three filters of distortion, deletion and generalisation. As we unconsciously apply these filters, we create an image of the world that differs from what is out there and, when we listen to others speak, what we hear is an equally distorted representation of what was in their mind.

In the diagram below, we can see how the listening process sits at level one of our six levels of listening, while the formation of an impression of what you say is at level two. The test of your speaking at level three is how my impression matches that which you were trying to convey. Now, can I align what you have said to my own understanding of the world? If I can, you will have persuaded me, which is level four. And if you want to speak at levels five and six, you must speak powerfully, so that your message sticks, and has an impact on the choices I will make about what to think, what to believe and how to act.



Compelling, persuasive and powerful speaking

Let's look at the compelling, persuasive and powerful framework and examine examples of the tools that speakers have available for each of the three challenges.

Compelling Compelling speech engages the listener and makes them keep listening. It does so first by grabbing their attention,

then by adopting a structure that is simple and so clear that it makes it easy for them follow, yet that has enough surprise or interest to stop them getting bored. Consequently, they want to hear more - addressing level one - and they understand it easily, addressing level two.

There are a number of powerful ways to structure your speaking, and much that we can learn from the great storytellers. Keeping it simple is one of these things, and it is for a good reason that many stories follow a simple structure that starts gently, introducing characters and situations; creates peril or tension; and then resolves the tension in a pleasing way.

This beginning-middle-end, three-act structure can serve you very well, whether you are speaking one-to-one, in a meeting or in front of a vast audience. What matters is that your speaking follows a strong structure.

Structured response frameworks attract a lot of interest when I am coaching individuals and speaking to large groups. They enable you to make a powerful impact in a meeting or conversation. When you want to make a point, off the cuff, or need to respond clearly and decisively to a question, a structured response framework gives you a simple way to create a compelling response that organises your thoughts and makes your speech incisive and credible. One example of such a framework is in the box right.

Persuasive The next requirement is that your speech must persuade your listeners to your point of view - or at least to accept that your perspective is reasonable and valid. Persuasive speech uses a range of tools to argue your case so that your audience will understand you, as you intend them to. Your goal is for them to agree with you: they may not. At the very least, you want them to believe that what you say has integrity. Persuasive speech addresses levels three and four.

An understanding of persuasive speaking must start with Aristotle, the fiercely logical Greek thinker, who had enough insight to realise that fierce logic is rarely enough to create a persuasive argument. He identified three components of persuasive speech: ethos, logos and pathos. In modern day language, we have:

- **ethos - character** How do we know that we can trust the speaker? It is his character that tells us this, and persuasive speakers know that we need to establish this right at the start of our speaking. It answers the question *why should I listen to you?* Ethos appeals to instinct - to our gut
- **logos - reason** The heart of your persuasive speech needs to establish a reasoned argument that puts your evidence in a logical way. We know that this alone may not be enough to persuade but, without logos, your persuasion becomes manipulation. Logos appeals to reason - to our head
- **pathos - emotion** Pathetic may be a derogatory term today but pathos simply means an appeal to our feelings and values, and so it is what gives your argument its emotional power and moves your listeners to want to act. Use your words and stories to conjure emotion. Pathos appeals to our heart.

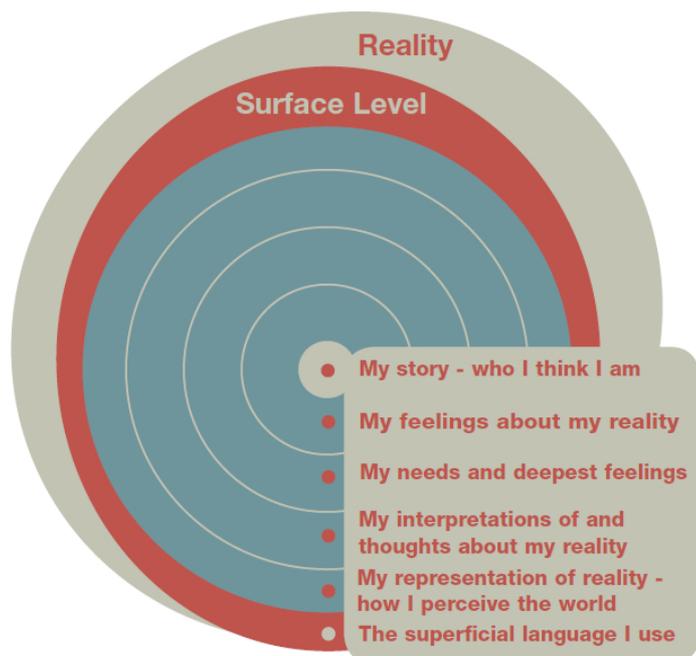
When you build an argument carefully, using all three approaches, you will be effective. It is still possible that not everyone will be persuaded, of course, but many will. Indeed, would we want to be able to use a technique

that could persuade anyone of anything? That would be a worrying development, stripping us of our free will.

The people you persuade are those you convince of your authority to speak on the subject - with your character; who are convinced by the evidence you present and how you interpret it for them - with your reasoning; and who are moved by your appeal to their values, their sympathy and their passions.

Powerful Powerful speech works with our emotions and psychology to deliver your message in ways that change your audience: what they think, what they will remember and how they will act. When you speak with power, you have an impact on your listeners, and address levels five and six.

If you want to influence the way people think and act, you need to understand how words affect people's understanding of their world. The model I use places the superficial language we use at the very surface level of a series of layers of ever-deeper interpretations of reality.



In the diagram left, we can see that our understanding of the world ranges from the surface level of literal interpretation of superficial language, along with all of its attendant courtesies, formalities, euphemisms and other obscuring conventions. At the heart of the model is my inner-most representation of the world: my own personal story of who I am and what motivates me.

The power to get results arises from the six levels of understanding working together:

speaking power = interest + insight + influence + impact + impulsion + inspiration

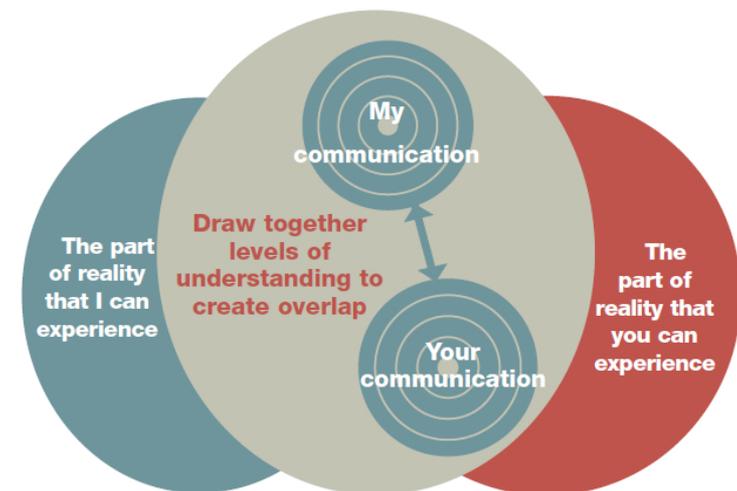
- **interest** Nothing really trumps the power of self-interest to drive behaviour but, to get through the superficial level of understanding, you must first pique my interest
- **insight** Next, you can use the power of insight to help me reconfigure the way I represent reality
- **influence** To alter how I interpret the world, deploy the power of influence
- **impact** We have already seen that the emotions that stories and language can carry can have a profound impact on your emotional level
- **impulsion** At the motivational level, power comes from your ability to tap into my beliefs and values to impel me to make changes
- **inspiration** If you can deploy the power of inspiration successfully, you can inspire me to change who I am.

Communicating with one another

An important part of my thinking developed as I increasingly realised that what challenged many of my clients as much as speaking effectively in public is handling what I call '*complicated conversations*'. These conversations have important consequences yet are dominated by fear, complexity, emotional baggage and polarised perceptions. To start to unravel the tools for making complicated conversations work, we need to see how communication works (see diagram below left).

When we communicate with each other, it is constrained by our different interpretations of different parts of reality. This is made far worse when we speak from the more superficial, outermost levels of our own understanding. This is what I call *'outer circle speaking'*, in which we often find ourselves hiding our true message - what we truly observe, think and feel - behind a mask of social conventions. These protect us from what we fear: exposure of our true thoughts and feelings.

Not only does it mislead our listeners and fail to communicate the truth, but it has a second effect: it undermines our credibility. This is because superimposed on top of the message that we are putting out deliberately is a whole set of other messages that are leaking out of us, below our



conscious awareness. These *'meta-messages'* communicate something of our true feelings, and the disparity between them and our deliberate outer-circle speaking.

People notice these differences from our gesture, posture, facial expressions, voice tone and pace, and shifts in pitch and volume; even through our unconscious choices of words. Examples of this are when we make *'Freudian slips'*.

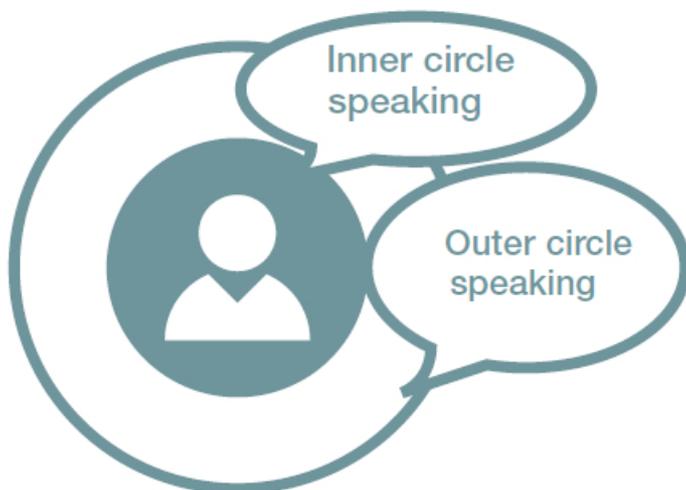
People aren't interested in listening to the social conventions of speech: they want to listen to *you* - the real you: your passions, your feelings, your convictions. When your speech is not clouded by conflicting meta-messages that confuse people, they will listen hard. They will also believe you, because you will come across as confident and congruent.

When you say what you are really thinking, and strip away the meta-messages to expose your true self, this is *'inner circle speaking'*. This is the route to making complicated conversations successful and engaging listeners 100 per cent.

Deep dialogue

The basis of all powerful one-to-one communication is what I refer to as *'deep dialogue'*. This is therefore an essential pre-requisite for holding complicated conversations in an effective manner. We hold a deep dialogue when two people are prepared to engage in inner-circle speaking and intense attention - in which they open their inner circles up to receive as well as give.

Deep dialogue is my term for a conversation in which information flows absolutely freely. Both parties have the courage to examine what is said, and to test and challenge it. They must be prepared to review - even overturn - their own interpretations of that information. This exchange must not be



impeded by euphemisms or unclear language, or by censoring inconvenient truths. The diagram below left illustrates the difference between a deep dialogue that seeks to merge two stories through inner-circle speaking, and a shallow dialogue that is shrouded by outer-circle speaking and censoring of information.

Speaking so people listen

Speaking so people listen is a skill set, and one that is arguably the most valuable for anyone in managerial, professional or leadership roles. It also plays a huge part in roles like sales, marketing, customer service and procurement. All too often, communication skills training, articles and books focus on one aspect, such as

presenting, public speaking, meetings or persuasion. It is only when we start to see the wider landscape of spoken communication that some of the most powerful insights start to emerge. And from these, we can synthesise new and better tools to support anyone who wants to speak so people listen.



About the author

Mike Clayton is a trainer and author of *How to Speak so People Listen: Grab their attention and get your message heard* Pearson (2013). He can be contacted via www.mikeclayton.co.uk [1] or www.speaksoplelelisten.co.uk [2]

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