

## What Talking Is

Quick: What will this lecture will be about?

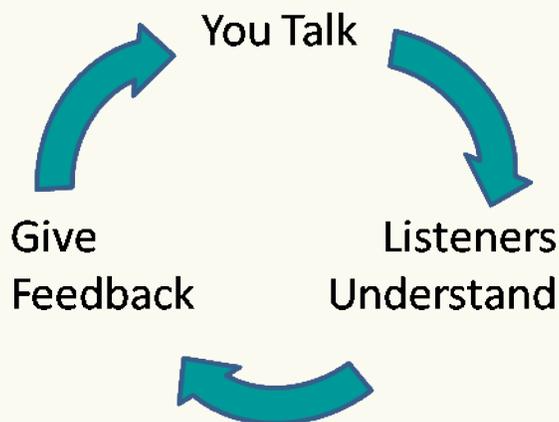
About being effective in your talking, teaching, and presenting? Getting your message across effectively? Yes, of course. But there's another half to talking that we often overlook. Besides giving messages, talking involves someone receiving the messages we send. Two things can go wrong here:

Sometimes there really is no one receiving. We see this when a boss blathers on at a staff meeting and no one listens. The boss may be a disorganized speaker, but the staff may be a distracted audience.

Sometimes what is said is quite different from what is heard. Do your kids talk about what a nerd Mr. Smith, their geometry teacher, is? Then Mr. Smith is actually giving a quite clear message, but he'd be surprised at *what* that message is!

In other words, we're not talking effectively if nobody notices, or if what we aim to say is different from what people hear. Does that boss or Mr. Smith know they're not talking successfully? They probably have only a foggy idea. We can lift that fog by analyzing what successful talking involves.

Successful talking is a loop with three elements:



Notice: "Listeners understand." Of course, this does not always happen. Your "listeners" may not be paying attention. Or they may *misunderstand* what you're saying. Or they may understand something about you, rather than about the topic or issue you are addressing. Or they may understand something *far different* than what you believe you are saying. In any

case, unless you receive “Feedback,” you will not know if your talking is effective.

Not all listeners are eager to give genuine feedback, so it is generally up to you, as the speaker, to ask for it. You can ask whether they understand your point. You can ask what merits they see in your opinion. You can ask them if they agree or not. When you receive genuine feedback here, you can go forward. It may mean modifying what you first said, or acknowledging an error in your thinking, or continuing to develop your line of thought, but these adjustments help the discussion make progress.

However, in my experience, what really counts is the *courage* to ask these questions. We can be afraid of asking for honest feedback that may disappoint us. We might learn that we haven’t make sense, or that our proposal is not feasible. Like changing our clothes, we don't like changing our minds in public.

But remember that intelligent learners notice when they're curious. They are not afraid of admitting ignorance. Active intelligence requires courage. A genuinely open mind does not filter out truth that might hurt one's feelings.

## ***Authoritative Talking***

Being an effective talker first involves the courage to speak from the authority we really have and not pretending an authority we don't. Everyone recognizes rather quickly when public speakers are just conveying information and when they speak with authority. What is that difference?

All of us have authority of some sort. When we're young, we have the authority of *experience*, and we can talk authoritatively about what happened to us and what we learned.

As we get older, we can gain the authority of *understanding* as we comprehend life better through education, reading, and discussion with others. But talking about what we understand takes courage. We open ourselves to disagreement and criticism. Still, what is wrong with that? Either our understanding was faulty or not, but we won't know where it's faulty unless we talk! The authority of a woman who says what she thinks is not because she is always correct. Rather, it's because she is sincerely interested in hearing your opinion in order to reach the best understanding possible.

Still later, we can gain the authority of a certain *wisdom* that may not know all the answers but is acutely aware of the right questions. As you know, some people ask facilitator-questions just to keep the discussion

interesting or provoke a debate. <sup>1</sup> These questions are not real because the speakers are not motivated by a genuine curiosity; they are already convinced about the answers. But wiser people ask real questions—questions they don't know the answers to. Typically, they do not express their questions clearly. They know they have a question, but they search for the right words to formulate it. They seem to grope. They are aware that landing on good answers comes from jumping from the right question. Consider the authority of a man who asks, "What are my essential responsibilities as a father?" You can imagine how a real question like this generates discussion that is rich and memorable, *even if no clear answers emerge*. He talks with the authority of someone who is disturbed by the best questions and who draws you into that wisdom.

## **Intelligent Feedback**

Courage is needed not only in the talker but also in listeners who sincerely want to understand. To seek understanding is to be intelligent; and being intelligent means asking questions. So let me share five intellectually courageous questions we can ask. <sup>2</sup>

1. Sometimes discussions start off on hypothetical situations. Suppose someone in a group says, "What would have happened if terrorists succeeded in crashing a plane into the White House?" The discussion could go on for hours, and at the end no one would know anything real, because the event never occurred. The time wasn't spent on anything true. The people in the discussion are acting as if thinking doesn't have to ask questions about actual experience.

Here, courageous talkers ask, "**What events are we talking about?**" Or else they move the discussion to reality: "**But what about the actual crash into the World Trade Towers?**" This works because it asks a question about actual experience. And it stops the hypothetical meandering cold.

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<sup>1</sup> Don't you hate it when teachers ask Guess-what-I'm-thinking questions? Sometimes this helps draw people into the discussion, but by itself it doesn't generate any understanding. Worse, some teachers refer to this practice as the "Socratic Method." In reality, the questions that Socrates asked were mainly questions he had no answer for. He seldom used the question format just to get people talking. He used it because there were things he wanted answers to. These are genuine questions. That's why we consider him wise.

<sup>2</sup> This material is originally drawn from the work of John Macmurray, in his book *Freedom in the Modern World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), especially the chapter, "On Being Real in Our Thinking," pp. 134-144. There, he poses three questions that intelligent people ask—What are you talking about? For example? So what?"

2. Sometimes you know what a discussion is about, but it gets abstract. For example, someone in a discussion among assembly line workers might say, "What we need is more employee empowerment!" And suppose everyone agrees, even though "empowerment" is an abstract term, which each person interprets in a different way. So they really are agreeing on nothing real, only on an abstraction. When we don't give examples, what may be quite "real" to us is usually "unreal" to others—because the words used are just abstract concepts.

Here, courageous talkers ask, "***Can you give me a concrete example?***" Or "***Can you describe an actual situation where this applies?***" This will probably surface many different views on what "empowerment" means. But when posing this question, it's important to ask for concrete examples.

An example of a concrete example would be, "A month ago, our director gave us the authority to approve refunds up to \$100, based on our own best judgment, and without requiring a prior review by supervisors."

An example of what is *not* a concrete example in this situation would be, "Sometimes customer service reps aren't sure what refund amounts they can approve." Notice that this is general, not concrete. It's a *typical* situation, not an *actual* one. It's better than an abstraction like "empowerment," but not as effective as a concrete example.

Again, to ask for a concrete example is effective because it asks a question about actual experience. What's really interesting here is that when people cannot give a concrete example, then they literally *do not know what they are talking about*.

3. Sometimes people inform us of facts, and we grasp them clearly. But intelligent learners are not satisfied knowing *what things are called* or *where* things are or *when* things happened. They ask what things *mean*, and *why* and *how* and *what for*. The *names*, *whats*, *wheres*, and *whens* are just facts; the *meanings* and *hows* and *whys* and *what-fors* ask for explanations of these facts.

For example, consider this remark a student wrote about a course:

This course brought together the pieces of the puzzle we have spent so much time on.

But that's all. I was getting to know her up to this point. So her remark tells me *that* something happened, but it left me wondering *how* this happened to her and *why* she experienced this "bringing together" of puzzle pieces.

In discussions that share mainly factual information, courageous talkers might ask, "**What** will merging departments **mean**?" "**Why** did that happen?" and "**Why** do we do things this way?" "**How** did this come about?" and "**How** does this actually work?" "**What** did they do that **for**?" and "**For what** purpose do we have time sheets?"

4. Sometimes you need to insert a "checkpoint" to fix what has been said so far. Here, courageous talkers say, "**So what you're saying is ...**" This can assure the speaker that you are following the discussion. It also can alert the speaker that you misunderstood something, and need to get back on track.
5. Sometimes discussions can start off with real experience, good examples are cited, and everyone agrees on an opinion. For example: "Therefore we need a national healthcare insurance system." But often the discussion ends there—in the air. Nobody is about to change behaviors. Everyone's thinking is divorced from acting. They're just agreeing on a dream.

Here, courageous talkers ask, "**So what?**" This works because, again, it asks a question about actual experience. Specifically, it asks how the agreed-upon opinion will affect people's *future* experience of doing something about the dream. A more polite way than "so what?" is to ask, "So what are our next steps?" To avoid the "So what?" question is just wishful thinking. As the adage goes, "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

Here, then, is a summary of these five questions:

Is it real? (An actual situation; not merely hypothetical)

For example? (A specific item or event; not merely general)

Why / How? / What for / Meaning? (An explanation; not just facts)

Am I following? (A clear line of thought; clarification; not confusing)

So what? (Taking responsibility; not just wishful thinking)