

# 9 VOICES

OWN YOUR CONVERSATION



BY **KEVIN EYRE**

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In words are seen the state of mind and character and disposition of the speaker.

Plutarch's Morals: Ethical Essays 46-120 CE

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# FOREWORD

This book is based on the learning and experience of working in organisational settings, in groups and with individuals, figuring out the impact that words can have on the people around us.

Just words. A bead-like string of these silence-shattering, inert little things, spoken out loud, can affect us in the moment and for literally years to come in ways that might inspire or subdue us. We can all recall verbatim something that was said to us in the past that has had a lasting and pronounced effect on how we feel. But surely, it's 'just words', not 'sticks and stones' ...

I've always loved language. My academic background is in the field of political theory where precision in the use of words and their meaning matters. I became really fascinated with the power of *talk* in organisational settings from the mid



1980s, fully in the flow of a career in organisational development.

I realised more and more that relationships could go well, and they could go badly, and that very often the difference was down to the quality of the dialogue between the players.

I began to notice that some people were more capable than others in shaping conversation and influencing people.

Two qualities emerged. An authentic ability to steer the conversation strategically towards some helpful outcome together with the ability to respond sensitively and thoughtfully to what had been said, 'in-the-moment'. Not unlike the coaching requirement to be 'simultaneously on the dance floor and in the gallery' these better conversationalists, where they were really good, used these qualities to build not just their own capability, but the quality of the dialogue for all of the people they engaged with.

From these and other insights SoundWave was born. It's a model, a practice, and now a business. At the business end we provide training, coaching and consulting, working with people to improve the quality of their interactions with each other, to listen and to talk better.

The model and practice, meanwhile, takes you deep into your conversational preferences and offers you the opportunity to gather insights into your tendencies and patterns in your use of talk. This is the world of our 'verbal strategies' or what we refer to as 'the 9 voices'.

Words, finely tuned conversation, more intentionally structured, can cause seismic shifts to the quality of relationships as I encourage you to 'own your conversation'.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Eyre', with a long horizontal stroke underneath.

Kevin Eyre  
Creator of SoundWave

# INTRODUCTION

*Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do; once or twice she had peered into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it.*

*'And what is the use of a book', thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversation?'*

*Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll*

## OUR MEMORIES AND OUR IMAGINATION

**A**lice is thinking. She's having that most intimate of conversations, inside her head, with herself, internalised, absorbing, never making a sound and totally consumed.

This solitary activity is, of course, only one side of the conversational coin. It's the other side, the one out there with other people that is the primary concern of this book. We talk to ourselves, we talk

to others, we do both simultaneously. This process is dynamic, anchored by our memories and let loose by our imagination.

Our talk, our listening and our conversations are forever with us.

Conversations occur between people in personal, social and institutional contexts - with family, friends, community groups or colleagues. Context affects the way we hold conversations, and conversations themselves affect the context<sup>1</sup>.

## CHITCHAT WON'T CUT THE MUSTARD

**T**his book looks at a particular context - at what happens in people's working lives, a context characterised perhaps above all else by a sense of purpose. Whereas in families, with friends and in community settings, we may have more space to chat, dream, speculate and are able to enjoy a spontaneous aimlessness in our talk, working life demands that we are *effective*.



These demands can be considerable, particularly where our roles include a level of responsibility for the performance and welfare of others.

Chitchat just won't cut the mustard.

We have to be nimble and sure as we respond to the changing needs of the people around us. It's not always easy to shift from engaging with a customer one moment, to being 'in the room' for a team member who need counsel the next. But these are the sort of demands that are placed on us and that we create.

For the most part we meet these demands, but we meet them imperfectly. Whilst we often seem able to accurately observe what happens inside conversations when we are the third person, we find it harder when we're part of the conversation itself, consumed by the drama of it all, to navigate towards a good outcome. Here and there we know that our communication could be better. We reflect, 'if only I'd said' or 'if only I hadn't said'; 'if I'd just listened a bit more' or 'if I'd just taken up a bit

less airtime'. It's hard to be always 'in-the-moment' and it's hard always to have clear intent.

And even if we don't notice the imperfections in ourselves, we certainly notice them in others or in groups of others. There are few staff engagement surveys that fail to point the finger at the poverty of communication.

## TREASURE YOUR TALK

Because it comes so naturally and so habitually, we tend to take our skill with language for granted, seldom reflecting on how amazing it is.

So this book begins by reminding us of the brilliance and power of the talk we already possess. It moves on to explain how, when we give serious attention to what we say and hear, we discover a world far richer in conversational content and meaning than we had ever imagined.

Beyond this it shares and illustrates the SoundWave model of nine 'verbal strategies' or 'voices' which,

when understood and practiced, provide the platform for enhanced dialogue.

Finally, it holds out a metaphorical hand, inviting you to look closely at your own patterns and preferences in how you talk and listen.

My motive in writing this book is simple, it's a provocation ... We don't take our talk seriously enough, we just let it happen and so we end up in situations and relationships which could have been better had we thought a little more about them and about the conversation they needed.

Conversation is not everything in relationships, but it's underrated and undervalued in any broad consideration of what people do to themselves and to each other.

This is a balance I'd like to redress.

# OUR UNDENIABLE BRILLIANCE

*You listened, you listened, you listened.  
To what she said to you.  
The sound of sounds enlightening  
The whisper, the promise, the solace  
Of where you're led to...*

Gomez, *The Sound of Sounds*  
from the album, *In Our Gun*, 2002

## THE SMALL, SKINNY BIPED

**F**or 200,000 years, humankind, with our big brains and noisy chitter-chatter, has bestridden the planet for good and for ill, creating cultures, societies, institutions and organisations.

That's not bad for a small skinny biped with tiny ears, poor eyesight, a weak sense of smell and not

much in the way of teeth. Laughter, song and speech (quite possibly in that order and the latter perhaps as recently as 50,000 years ago) allowed humankind to communicate beyond the screech of other contemporary apes, interacting in large communities, co-operating, negotiating differences and surviving where others didn't<sup>2</sup>.

In this march towards dominion, our ears played a critical role as a 360° surround sound defence system. We could hear the snarl of the tiger and the absence of birdsong as a clear and present (or absent) sign of danger and react to it often before we could see it. The sound of thunder told us to run for cover, the volcano erupting inferred the same<sup>3</sup>.



We tuned in to the extremes of sound quickly in the environment and socially. When the drums beat, we danced, when people got angry and shouted, we noticed. In conspiracy as people whispered, we were aware. It was and is the extremes of sound that we most quickly tuned-in to the fact that 'something is going on'.

## **I SPEAK THEREFORE I THINK**

Human language has two important characteristics. Firstly, it's portable. Where we go it goes and, although it needs nourishing, it's pretty light to carry. Secondly, it's intergalactic; it operates without boundaries and across time and space.

So whilst I can describe what's in front of me and visible to us both as part of our shared concrete reality, I can do far more than this. With the exactitude of a precision instrument, I can look inside myself and tell you how I feel or what I'm thinking. I can bring people who are not with us into our conversation. I can introduce you to

people you don't know. I can invent people and things and I can exaggerate and tell a tall story about them. I can describe a future we might have. I can tell you what the heavens are saying and I can go back in time and tell you of worlds that existed before you were born. I can lie and disappoint you, I can woo you with my poetry, I can persuade you of the truth. To talk and to listen is to encourage life.

It is then in its storytelling (or *fictive*) quality that our facility for language enables us to find meaning and to make connection. In this way it becomes our collective genius and at times, in its crass manipulation, our collective burden.

## **WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES**

It's understandable that people make mistakes when they communicate. Sometimes we don't recall what someone just said because our mind drifted. Sometimes we use too many words to convey an idea. Now and again we fail to say the right thing at the right time. For some reason these

small failings stay with us and move us to take a dimmer view of our communication skills than seems reasonable.

So let's consider some facts in support of the argument that, all things told, we're doing a pretty good job as communicators.

Here we go ...

The simple computational power of the human brain in relation to its use of language is phenomenal. In 600 milliseconds, the human brain can think of a word, apply the rules of grammar to it, and send it to the mouth to be spoken. In 60 seconds, we can think of between one and three thousand words, speak 350 of them and listen to and process three times that number<sup>4</sup>. We can also, in the privacy of our own heads, speak to ourselves processing as many as 4,000 words a minute<sup>5</sup>.

And when all of this processing power is, for a moment, overwhelmed and we make an error, we





have an in-built auto-correct facility.

*Sorry I wasn't listening; could you run that by me again please?*

Or take the proposition that the human voice is the most complex sound in nature and that the auditory system in the brain is capable of picking up on tiny variations in speech patterns between the many different people that we meet and yet remain capable of distinguishing what is being said by each of them. Again, this is astonishing computational power and capable of being an extraordinary social skill<sup>6</sup>.

We are blessed but imperfect.

## **DEVELOP 'HEAR-SAY'**

The intimacy of the face-to-face conversation is a place where I make connections, form and handle relationships and develop a pronounced but flexing sense of self. The gap between what I think I'm saying and what is heard by others causes me

to constantly and continuously refine myself through my interactions with others. My talk is adaptive in the moment.

The process of conversation is intimate, spontaneous, free-flowing, often unselfconscious and governed by who I am, and have become, as a member of my society.

In conversation I listen as I talk, I hear others as I hear myself. I track my inner dialogue as I track the dialogue 'out there'. I don't listen and then talk, I 'hear-say' (hear-and-then-say) switching between listening and talking in a continuous cycle of dialogue<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, although free-flowing, conversation is not anarchic. It possesses system and structure (in grammar) and follows simple conventions which appear to be universal<sup>8</sup>.

For example, although we may now and again interrupt others when they speak, we mainly take turns. And we know that the interruption is a break

with social expectations because we tend to 'sound-post' this by apologising:

*Sorry, but I've got to interrupt you there.*

This inter-dependency between listening and talking raises an important question about the relative status of each.

Why is it that listening is so often held in so much higher regard than our talking?

Why does reverence for the saint of listening (and its equally canonised sister, 'active listening') hold such superior sway over the sinner of talk?

Of course, there are arguments, and we are not deaf to these, but at SoundWave we're all in favour of encouraging something of an intimate relationship between the two, for the simple reason that conversation only works when they both work together.

# SHOCK!

*The human voice is the organ of the soul.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

In our SoundWave training programmes, we often record conversations in order to go back and analyse them with participants. A predictable yet extraordinary thing happens when we invite people to listen to themselves in these recordings; *they hear themselves*.

Sometimes, for the first time in their lives, they hear the vocal sound that they make outside of themselves. Not the muffled, critical old tones of their inner dialogue nor the voice that since birth they believed they had, but the sound of their true voice, as heard by others.

The reaction to this novelty (technically known as ‘voice confrontation’) is shock and an almost immediate and universal horror. It’s as if they were

witnessing their first ever formal speech, public, cringing and mildly embarrassing. Even before they begin to listen, in anticipation of what is to come and re-calling some small previous moment when the recording of their voice was once captured, we hear the immortal words.

*Gah, I hate the sound of my voice!*

Why is this? Why, initially at least, are we so uncomfortable with the sound we make when we do that most human of things, talk?<sup>9</sup>

## **A HALL OF AUDITORY MIRRORS**

Whilst there are good scientific reasons for disliking the sound of our voice (the transmission of sound through our bodily structure), personally, I blame the bathroom mirror. Whilst we are at liberty to see ourselves, to check out our appearance in our own direct and accurate reflection dozens of times a day there is, it seems, no auditory equivalent of the bathroom mirror. Instead, when it comes to making sense of how we are heard, we





rely on what might be described as a 'hall of auditory mirrors'.

Feedback about how we are heard comes to us as a series of multiple, subjective (perhaps distorted) interpretations from every single person that ever hears us. This is not to say that these interpretations are entirely different. If that were the case then no two people could ever settle on the fact that the voice they are all hearing belongs, in this case, in this moment, to me. But how each of these people hears me will vary slightly depending on the uniqueness of their own character and the particular weight they give to the variables of interpretation<sup>10</sup>.

It's worth mentioning that the significance of the modest, utilitarian bathroom mirror is easily overlooked. Time was when the local pond might have been all there was to give us a murky image of what we looked like. But now, through the accuracy of its reflection, the mirror, the camera and the video, affords us the opportunity to see



what we truly look like and to make immediate, real-time changes to our appearance.

But this direct and immediate feedback does more than this. The mirror also allows us to house memories of ourselves. When I peer into it I notice how I am changing. Depending on my stage of life I may be excited or disappointed at what I see but I can always try do something about it. Beard, no beard? Long hair, hair cut? Glasses, contact lenses? You get the idea. Further still, I can rehearse the future using a mirror, camera or video. I am my own feedback. How safe, how reassuring is that? Love it or hate it, I know with astonishing intimacy what I look like.

But hearing myself as others hear me? I have no equivalent reference point for the way I sound or the way I speak. I know my voice is unique, but I tend seldom to reflect on this fact perhaps other than to be aware of my regional or class accent. So, listening to the recording comes as a shock rattling, if only temporarily, an aspect of my self-esteem. Nor do I easily have any immediate

mechanism to change the way I talk in the way that I might with the aid of the mirror, camera or video adjust my appearance.

When it comes to hearing myself I am, it seems, out of ear-shot.

## **LET YOUR VOICE SPEAK FOR ITSELF**

For the most part, we can live with the knowledge that what we sound like is not the same as the way we hear ourselves. For most of us, for most of the time, there is little incentive to change. I can happily revert to the familiar old comfort of the voice that I have known for all of these years.

But do we want to miss an important opportunity? Our voices are full of character. They are a part of us. They help others to define and see us as well as to hear us. If you think it's worth knowing what you truly sound like, try an experiment.

On the next page are a range of adjectives offering positive possible descriptions of the quality and

Light

Strong

Warm

Clear

Deep

Melodious

Gentle

Gravelly

Silky

Smokey

Assured

Characterful

Earthy

Fruity

Relaxed

Tight

Natural

Friendly

Cheerful

Engaging

Assured

Soft

Laidback

Sincere

Rich

Direct

Relaxed

Precise

Authoritative

Avuncular

Amused

Expansive

Warm

Bright

Dynamic

Serious

character of your own voice. Begin by applying them to someone you know well whose vocal tones you enjoy and then seek some feedback from others about yourself. You might well be surprised at what you are told.

And will someone out there who knows me well please confirm the *smokey* and *fruity* character of my own voice!

# SURPRISE!

*A conversation has a life of its own and makes demands on its own behalf. It is a little social system with its own boundary-maintaining tendencies; it is a little patch of commitment and loyalty with its own heroes and its own villains.*

Erving Goffman, 1957

**D**uring our SoundWave workshops, participants work out that they can bypass the shock of voice confrontation by giving attention to other things. Our participants begin to listen beyond the pitch, tone and pace of their speech and encounter, somewhat to their surprise, a data-rich world of talk-in-interaction<sup>11</sup> information which until that moment they hadn't fully registered.

Inside this data they notice just how well they are (or are not) responding to others 'in-the-moment'

and how well they are (or are not) shaping the conversation in line with their intent.

1. The first is in the gap between what they wanted to communicate and what they actually communicated. We call this 'The Intention - Reality Gap'.
2. The second is that even apparently ordinary conversations are rich in content and meaning. We refer to this as 'The Drama of the Average Conversation.'
3. The third is that the action is in the talk and not independent of it. We refer to this as 'Talk is Action'.

Let's take a look at each of these in turn.

## **1. THE INTENTION-REALITY GAP**

In the same way that our workshop participants experience the true recorded sound of their voice as shockingly different to the 'in my head' voice, so too do they notice how what they intended to say or thought they'd said turns out to be slightly, but

importantly, different from what they'd actually said.

*I meant to say, but I seem to have said ...*

*I thought I said, in fact I said ...*

*I thought I was muddled, but I wasn't.*

*I thought I asked one question but in fact I asked four.*

This is Anna before she listened to herself in conversation with Andre.

*How did it go Anna?*

*Yeah, really good ... I did just what I'd planned to do. I didn't advise or direct him. I just asked good questions and let him do the talking.*

This is Anna after seven minutes of listening to herself in conversation with Andre.

*That is not me! That's not what I said or rather, that's not what I thought I was saying as I was saying it ... are you sure that's me?*

Although Anna is something of an extreme case, she is not untypical. Over the past seven years about five hundred of our training programme attendees have passed through a simple process of listening to themselves in conversation with colleagues at work.

None of these conversations is a disaster. In fact, most third-party observers would be complimentary. Unmistakably they would witness politeness and respect inside a two-way conversation.





Where these conversations occur between a boss and a team member, they might even be inclined to comment on the apparent constructive relationship that the parties have.

But on closer analysis, the people themselves report areas of minor disappointment.

They acknowledge that small things done at a different point or in a more skilful way during the conversation would have improved the outcome or would have got to the outcome faster. The conversation would have been more effective.

So when hearing their own conversations played back to them, what is it that people are most surprised by? What in particular do they say they want to correct most of all?

Here is our Top 20 list of things people would like to *do better*:

1. Ask questions one at a time, rather than multiple questions all at once.
2. Ask 'open' questions, and avoid ones that are 'leading' or 'closed'.
3. Share the airtime; try not to dominate it.
4. Ask for solutions rather than offering them.
5. Don't be afraid of silence; sometimes it's best to not talk in order to fill the gap.
6. If someone is in their flow, it's better to allow them to continue rather than to interrupt them.
7. Keep the conversation focused; try not to let it wander off topic.
8. It's better to invite opinion than to offer it.
9. Offer clarity in what you say; watch yourself if you start to 'ramble'.
10. Pay attention to what's being said; try not to tune in to your inner voice.
11. Try to be succinct; avoid long-windedness.
12. Don't lose the thread; it's better to follow the thread.

13. Try to summarise the conversation rather than contest the argument.
14. It's better to lead the conversation than be led by it.
15. Take pauses to think when you need to.
16. Try to 'open up' talk, being mindful not to close it down.
17. Tune in and notice the mood.
18. Name the 'elephant' in the room - ie don't avoid the obvious but difficult things that need to be said.
19. Staying calm will keep the conversation calm.
20. Be in control of yourself without being controlling.

This is quite a list and it's not a full list. In each case our workshop participants are clear that the gap between intention and reality resulted in some small negative effect - tension, frustration, delay, a blip in trust or a sense of dissatisfaction.

The patterns in our talk set up expectations in our relationships, which affect our levels of energy and the nature of our commitment. I might well forgive the tendency of my boss to interrupt me, but it still annoys me every time they do it and over time it's wearing. Much better for everyone if they didn't do that. Even better if they understood us more by having listened to us more closely.

## 2. THE DRAMA OF THE AVERAGE CONVERSATION

Sometimes there's not a lot going on in conversation. Sometimes the conversation is overwhelming<sup>12</sup>. Much of the time it's just (by definition) average.

Let's explore this.

Much of the daily chitter-chatter between us serves to confirm the status quo of our ordinary interactions. Take the following example of a familiar greeting, a part of the 'drip, drip, drip' of our conversation with others. How many times a day do you hear it?

*Hi, how are you?*

*Yeah, good thanks ... You?*

We think nothing of it, but its function is critical to the everyday fabric of life. It's a little social convention, perhaps for some, even a small ritual. When it happens, it tells us in the immediate moment of it being uttered that all is right with the world. It might be regarded as the simplest form of birdsong between consenting adults.

But when it *doesn't* happen, for example, when our greeting goes unreturned, we notice its absence immediately and our negative thoughts and feelings (disbelief, confusion, annoyance and even anger) are likely to surge.

Or consider what happens if we hear an *unusual* reply.

*Hi, how are you?*

*Hey, I'm blissed; swam with the dolphins and spoke to the mermaids this morning.*



We find it impossible to ignore the novelty of a remark such as this. 'Are they being funny, or what?', we ask ourselves. That departure from the social norm is a standout moment. It stops us in our tracks; momentarily it has changed something. We register it because its novelty grabs our attention.

But in between these extremes of routine, everyday interaction between people and the exceptional, unfamiliar or non-reciprocated interaction there is a whole world of minute-by-minute relationship affirming and relationship dis-confirming conversations taking place. They are the conversations that in our working lives comprise the vast majority of our talking time in which we hear the more subtle but no less real dramas of our relationships being played out<sup>13</sup>. Because of this they need to be done well.

Of the themes that people detect inside the drama of the average conversation, they hear three; *disclosure; inventiveness* and *authenticity*.

## **Disclosure**

People reveal a lot about themselves in conversation with others, often more than they intend to or are aware of. Much of this disclosure happens unconsciously as the thoughts and feelings that occupy my mind are expressed in my body. Those in close conversation with me notice these thoughts and feelings (these 'states') through my facial expressions and bodily movement and it is these gestures that signal to others how I am<sup>14</sup>.

It's your rapid interpretation of my gestures that offers the first and primal piece of communication between us and it is for this reason that so many people state that a very high percentage of our communication is non-verbal.

But let's be clear. At this level of interaction we are the primate occupying the same cognitive space as the chimp. For they do the same as us, express thoughts and feelings through gestures and go on to consolidate the communication of those 'states' in the minds of others by aligning sounds to the gestures.



The sounds themselves can be sophisticated and nuanced. For example, in the scream that accompanies fear or in the momentary hesitation and pause for silence as a person gathers themselves in the aftermath of a surprise.

But why the scream? But why the silence? We can hazard a guess, but after the gestures and the sound the chimp is stuck in an eternal loop for more gesture and more sound whereas you and I, well we can talk.

I can explain why I screamed, what at, how often, for what duration, whether it's a frequent occurrence or a rare one, whether it was a justified or necessary reaction, whether I should control this (it scares others and induces panic) or let run with it.

I can explain my silence, how I was shocked and why I froze, what this does to me and others, how I might avoid it with some sensitive conversation, and so on.

It is our talk that takes us beyond the chimp to the domain of homo sapiens. It is this layering of the talk on top of sound and gesture that allows me not only to express my state but to influence yours in ways that are not only primal.

Once I tell you that my fear is unfounded you can explore with me the reasons why it happens. In that moment you have shifted perhaps from being moved by my fear to being moved by my vulnerability. Your understanding and acknowledgement of my condition relaxes me and makes me open to your help for which I thank you. Your thanks are heard and appreciated and I become more motivated to help.

And so this dynamic, dialogic relationship blossoms for the benefit of us both<sup>15</sup>.

Conversation exists in the space between people.

## **Inventiveness**

Secondly, people notice just how clever we are with our talk.

In the dynamic of our exchanges we seek, find and create meaning and do so in creative and imaginative ways. For example, by saying the opposite of what we intend to mean in order to ... that's right, establish clearer meaning! Irony, sarcasm and humour are good examples of this.

Here is a personal example.

In the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, my mother sent me a greetings card which read: 'Obey Boris!' (Prime Minister of the UK at the time of writing). At face value, she might be thought to be telling me what to do, since clearly this reads like an instruction. Yet I know that as a 'young socialist' at over 80 years of age, my mother's disapproval of right-wing politicians had got the better of her. In fact, her note is written ironically with a sub-text which those close to her would know - 'Ignore him, but do the *right thing* anyway!'

OK Paramount

7:54 PM



Or take the Managing Director who pointed out to his Operations Director that production rates needed to increase by asking:

*If you can't go any faster, can you go less slowly?*

Or the proud father (in this example, me) to his son intent on taking the shine off his adolescent vanity:

*Is it me or are you just getting uglier as you get older?*

*(harsh I know!)*

Or as Tsar Nicolas is purported to have said regarding the role of the harsh Russian winter in defeating Napoleon's invasion of 1812:

*January and February are my best Generals.*

The moves we make in conversation also indicate a sometimes artful and sometimes brilliant inventiveness. We move from defending to attacking, between explaining and exploring and from controlling to inviting. People witness the

dynamic impact of all of this, of how a change in tone and content of voice by one person causes a changed 'state' in the other.

This is powerful. Think about it. A few choice words delivered with intent can almost immediately change the thoughts and feelings of those that we are interacting with and these changed feelings play back, in turn affecting the subsequent thoughts and feelings.

Conversation is dynamic and at its most inventive, playful.

## **Authenticity**

Our brains work out for us just how congruent the disclosures of others (gesture, sounds, words) are. That is, if they mean what they seem to be meaning.

Congruence creates a sense of safety and trust; a lack of congruence, its opposite.

We notice the lack of congruence in a lie.

We become suspicious when the gap between what is said and how it's said 'doesn't add up'. Because we see and hear the gestures and the sounds first, the words are more isolated or exposed. This is most clearly noticeable when listening to (many, but not all) politicians or to (some, not too many) managers and leaders who rely heavily on jargon and 'management-speak'. Words don't work when they are dislocated. We are more likely to trust the 'orally clumsy empath' than the 'smooth-talking rascal'.

In conversation, check your intention.

### 3. TALK IS ACTION

Finally, participants in our workshops don't simply report how they sounded (vocal tone) or what they said (the words they used), but *what they did*.

This is important because in the conventional sense, they didn't *do* anything, they conversed, they just talked and listened.

*I hadn't realised just how much I led the witness.*

*That was so fast. I got a bit lost a few times but got it back on track.*

*There was a point where I wanted to ask one question and ended up asking four. She was really confused and didn't really answer any of them!*

*She's so challenging. Everything you say is a battle. I really had to hold my ground.*

*I was so clear.*

Notice just how much the action is in the talk.

There is a common aphorism, 'Let's have a bit less talk and a bit more action'. This makes sense when physical actions are needed such as baking a cake, building a warehouse or creating a plan, although strictly speaking none of these tasks can get done without talk at some point.



Besides, what people really mean when they use this phrase is not that the talk is unnecessary but that it has been used unproductively or inefficiently. Meetings going on for too long is a classic example.

Talk is not something we do 'on the side' or in addition to our behaviour, it is integral to it. In the modern economy in particular, the actions and the successes of so much of what we do are *in the talking*. The truth of this takes almost everyone by surprise.

## IN SUMMARY

We might conclude at this stage in our book that taking our talk for granted is a risky strategy, that although a 'spontaneous aimlessness' is enjoyable, in the world of work, at the very least, it is potentially harmful. How much better it would be if we could harness the observations in these short chapters, own our conversations, and become more effective in our interactions with those around us. So what do we have to do to?

# DELIGHT!

*The owls are not what they seem.*

Twin Peaks (1992)

## DEVELOPING OUR TALK AND OUR LISTENING

**T**he world abounds with useful aids that frame the process of effective conversations. These range from coaching, through negotiating, facilitating, selling, mediating, consulting and counselling, to name but a few.

Such techniques are especially helpful when the subject matter is new and when we have little or no 'on the ground' experience. They can help point us in the right direction while we get to grips with what we have learnt, until they have become a more natural, integral and authentic part of us.

For example, with a little instruction and some practice, someone who finds it hard to ask *open* questions (as opposed to leading or closed

questions) can learn to do this better in a matter of hours. Similarly, someone who listens too little can learn how to improve and listen more.

But many of these techniques are narrowly confined. I acquire the language of negotiation in order that I can negotiate; I acquire the language of mediation in order that I can mediate. Real conversation doesn't usually arrive so neatly packaged. It comes to us more randomly, requiring us to make sense of shifting context as well as the changing intent on the part of the speaker. For this reason we need to hear it for what it is, acquire it as it is and use it as we must.

A more naturalistic alternative (or complement) to acquiring technique is to be alive to what's coming at us in conversation. To be able to hear and discern what others are saying in order to respond with greater intentionality and with greater sensitivity and timeliness.

We know that we pick up quickly on the gestures and the sounds that others make in conversation.

We know we check in on the words to make sure of their congruence and we know that their use can affect each of us in profound ways shaping thoughts and feelings and shifting the direction of the conversation and the associated relationship.

So let's now learn to hear and classify 'the talk' by listening out for it.

## **LISTENING OUT FOR VERBAL STRATEGIES**

Imagine a cityscape.

Deep within the expensive part of town lies a boulevard of ten storey buildings. Place yourself in one. By today's standards the building is small but the tenth floor is high enough to offer perspective on what's happening below.

From here, you can overhear the conversation but only at the most abstract of levels. Perhaps someone is suggesting a safer direction of travel, maybe there's a person asking a question about some tourist spot and there's someone else who



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appears to be telling another person not to cross the road. At this level we get to hear only the broadest verbal orientation of people as they ask, suggest and tell.

As we drop down to the level of the street it's different. Here we catch the tail end of multiple conversations and join midway before moving on to the next. It's hard to pick up the thread of each one and easy to misinterpret what may be happening.

In fact they're not conversations to which we have been invited and to decipher them all would be very onerous. At this level we hear the complex chit-chat of everyday conversation.

So let's go back half way up to level five. At this level we focus our attention on the couple who are having a long conversation by the front door.

We can't catch every word they say but we can get a sense of the themes and direction of their conversation and of the contrasting options and

styles held by each of them. One seems to be challenging the other. One seems to be telling a rather long story. The other in response is periodically probing for clarity. This is the level at which we can discern 'verbal strategies'.

These are the big 'brush strokes' of conversation, purposeful and big enough to get hold of but not so big that they become abstract and meaningless. They are around us all of the time.

# THE NINE VOICES

The SoundWave model identifies nine 'voices', or verbal strategies, that we all employ to greater or lesser degree. In short, they are:

**Inquire for engagement:** to ask open, exploratory questions in order to discover more

**Diagnose for solutions:** to question logically in order to understand the cause, symptoms or origin of something

**Probe for insight:** to question more deeply, going beyond what's given and teasing out what's hidden

**Articulate for influence:** to describe, summarise or clarify in a neutral way

**Advise for credibility:** to offer a course of action or way of thinking based on experience or expertise

**Advocate for impact:** to strongly express an opinion for or against something

**Challenge for change:** to assert an opinion or different point of view to promote alternative thinking or action

**Correct for improvement:** to correct someone by (re)-stating a requirement, rule or boundary

**Critique for judgement:** to evaluate objectively providing the positives and negatives in a situation or idea



## INQUIRE FOR ENGAGEMENT

For nearly 20 years, Dublin-born Dr Anthony Clare hosted a BBC Radio 4 programme called *In the Psychiatrist's Chair*<sup>16</sup>.

You bring open-mindedness and curiosity to your interactions. Your inclination is to ask and find out, and this is especially useful when matters are new, unclear, unfamiliar, puzzling, contentious or stuck. You recognise that inquiry is a necessary gateway to strategy. By opening issues and conversations up to alternative perspectives, you both express and encourage open-mindedness and a willingness to engage and connect with others.

From 1982, listeners tuned in to hear the softly spoken presenter interview the great and the good in an unusually intimate way. From playwrights to

politicians, celebrities to secret agents, you felt, perhaps, those on the couch revealed more about themselves than they had intended to.

His gift, his technique? He was simply curious and asked good questions, and followed them up, gently yet tenaciously, with more good questions. You never got the sense that his interviewees felt pressured into talking, but they often unravelled nonetheless. You could sense him tracking the gestures and the sounds made by his interviewees but never missing the words.



Critical to the approach was an intensity to his listening. Listening begat questions. Questions compelled listening, curiosity fuelled them both.

Take this question to the former British Conservative politician Ann Widdecombe in July 1997:

*'Many people find you interesting but what I want to know is do you find yourself interesting?'*

To inquire creates connection. To take an interest in what others do and how they do it through inquiry makes people feel important. Its absence may signal a lack of interest in them. Too much of it might feel like interrogation.

The workplace context is rich with the use of this voice in one-to-one and group settings. In our SoundWave data it is one of the most heard of our nine 'verbal strategies', a reflection of its significance in relationships.

In the average conversation of the world of work we hear it often:

*Can you tell me more about that?*

*What do you think we should do?*

*What possibilities do we have?*

Were we to coach Anthony Clare (at the risk of being seriously out-classed), we might invite him to speculate on how much of his pre-programme research was ever really used. With so much natural curiosity wouldn't it have been simpler to just rock-up and get on with it?

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to inquire'?*

## DIAGNOSE FOR SOLUTIONS

You seek to arrive at a dependable understanding by figuring out how things really work. You use questioning and hypothesising, through one or more cycles, to generate progressively more reliable and nuanced explanations. By modelling a process of iterative sense-making, you can assist others to distinguish between symptoms, causes and consequences, and to recognise that rigorous problem-solving takes time and careful thinking.

From the moment Tom Hanks (playing astronaut Jim Lovell in the 1995 film *Apollo 13*<sup>17</sup>) tells Houston 'We have a problem', and all the things that couldn't have gone wrong have gone wrong, it's a race against time to bring our space-heroes back to Earth. Something more helpful than the controller's 'But that's impossible' needs to happen, and fast ...

'Let's work the problem people', says Gene Kranz (played by Ed Harris), NASA's plain-talking Flight Director. 'Let's not make things worse by guessing'.

Much arguing ensues about the best course of action, but it becomes clear that they will only succeed if they work with what they *know* the astronauts have at their disposal. And so begins the famous duct-tape-and-cardboard scene, where the team on the ground talk the astronauts through a



process of repairing their broken spacecraft with, well, duct tape and cardboard ... 'We gotta make this [holds up cubic object] fit into the hole for this [holds up cylindrical object] using nothing but that [gestures to a table piled with spacesuits, card, wire, plastic and tape]. That's the problem statement, out of which comes the tested solution.

The workplace context is rich with the use of this voice in one-to-one and group settings. In our SoundWave data it is the most heard of our nine 'verbal strategies', a reflection of the pragmatic and purposeful nature of work in organisations.

In the average conversation of the world of work we hear it often:

*So what's wrong with it?*

*I know what that is; that's the 'elapso-structure' failing again!*

*What caused that?*

Were we to coach Gene Kranz (were we courageous enough!), we might draw his attention to how being clear about the problem often requires the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, and how the absence of surefooted logical discourse generates speculation rather than answers. Would he agree also, that the skilful use of this voice makes people feel invested in their job?

We might also mention (now feeling emboldened) just how easy people find it to jump to conclusions based on inadequate reasoning and under the pressure of time. What would he say to people who proclaim that there just isn't the time to take the time?

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to diagnose'?*



## PROBE FOR INSIGHT

You engage with uncertainty rather than shying away from it. You pursue issues through a process of focused exploration to go further and deeper and get below the surface. By 'following the clues' and progressively clarifying the unfamiliar and the unexpected, your persistent questioning and wondering enables gradual convergence to a point of clearer and more precise understanding. You probably also like to explore apparently familiar issues in unfamiliar ways to question and re-examine them.

The 1976 film *All the President's Men*<sup>18</sup>, about the journalists who uncovered the Watergate scandal, illustrates the voice 'to probe' to its most toe-curling extreme.

As they 'follow the money', to get through the layers of lies and corruption, Bob Woodward and

Carl Bernstein (Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman) interview employees of the Committee to Re-Elect the President. They push and push again, going back over conversations, picking apart what has been said to the point where you almost want them to back off, such is the discomfort of their interviewees.

Do they intrude or do they probe? It is of course both, but the relentlessness of their quest says a lot about how this voice is skilfully used. They follow a hunch, an intuition. They are prepared to travel down any dark alleys and retreat at pace to assuage their suspicion. The investigation has to be thorough, or its outcomes will be unusable.

The workplace context is rich with the use of this voice in one-to-one and group settings. In our SoundWave data it is one of the least heard of our nine 'verbal strategies', a reflection of its riskiness in use.

In the average conversation in the world of work we hear it often:

*So you moved the machine to the West Wing and stopped once on the way. What did you do when you stopped?*

*How sure are you about that?*

*A £50,000 investment will give us what?*

Were we to coach Woodward and Bernstein (at the risk of being scrutinised), we would commend their persistence and the astuteness of their questions but we would also invite them to reflect on what it feels like to be on the receiving end of them.

We might also want to know about some of the micro-skills in use that allowed them to get away with that level of persistence.

Finally, we would acknowledge that they probe because they care and that without that voice the truth would remain hidden.

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to probe'?*

## ARTICULATE FOR INFLUENCE

You express yourself clearly and can use this to advantage through summarising and clarifying situations and understandings in a neutral and even-handed way. The impartial atmosphere that this creates is likely to help others in providing a neutral platform from which they can easily participate.

In 1985, two pioneering young mountaineers from the UK, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, travelled to Peru to climb the dangerous west face of the Siula Grande mountain peak. This was to be the adventure of their lives, and so it became, retold in gripping detail in Joe's 1988 book and subsequent documentary, *Touching the Void*<sup>19</sup>.

The story of the ascent up the mountain turns out to be the easy bit. The descent meanwhile is a catastrophic tale in which anything that could go wrong, does go wrong. And then it's a tale of one



man's incredible determination to survive.

As they start their return journey, the weather turns, Joe breaks his leg and then slips and falls over the edge of a precipice, tethered out of site to his climbing partner Simon above.

Simon, wedging his boots tightly into the snow to stop himself following Joe over the precipice, doesn't feel the rope slacken, so knows that Joe is dangling out of site. He stays locked in this awful position for ages before he cuts the rope to save himself, assuming that Joe is dead.

At this point, Joe falls into a crevasse, out of sight and deep within the mountain. Joe recalls:

*And [the rope] just kept coming and coming and coming. As soon as I saw it, I knew it had been cut. I thought, 'you're going to die in here'. I had a pleased feeling that it meant Simon was alive. Looking at where I was, it was an awful prospect. You know, you don't die of a broken leg ...*

He doesn't.

It's an incredible story of danger, pain, despair and hope. It's a brilliant example of the voice, 'to articulate'. Good articulation connects people, hooks them in and keeps them alert. It's storytelling, done in a way that explains, describes and illuminates facts and ideas, captures attention and imagination and imparts a sense of belonging.

The workplace context is rich with the use of this voice in one-to-one and group settings. In our SoundWave data it is one of the most heard of our nine 'verbal strategies'.

In the average conversation of the world of work we hear it often:

*Let me summarise what I've heard ...*

*So, if I hear you right, you're telling us that ...*

*... And so by the third quarter we were a long way behind. Without the effort of this team, we'd have ended the year with a serious problem.*

Neutrally explaining things as they are creates the safe space for others to join in and to participate. When conversations get stuck its neutrality helps to unstick them. The arch-articulator is quietly influential.

Overdone, this voice can be experienced as 'droning on' and can suck the life out of a room (think of the old uncle reliving tales of his past adventures for the millionth time).

Underdone, it allows more partial opinions to dominate, increasing the likelihood of misunderstandings.

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to articulate'?*



## ADVISE FOR CREDIBILITY

You seek to use your experience and understanding to guide or steer others. The perceived intention behind your advice will strongly colour how it is received. You may be seen as generous and helpful, especially if you recognise that it is for the other person to decide whether to accept what you have to offer.

There's a wonderful children's book by Julia Donaldson called *A Squash and a Squeeze*<sup>20</sup>. It's about an old woman who complains to a wise old passer-by that her house is too small, and she asks for his advice. 'Take in your hen', suggests the old man, which she does, and it creates havoc, laying an egg, flapping around and knocking over a jug.

Crossly she asks him again, 'Wise old man, won't you help me, please? My house is a squash and squeeze'. 'Take in your goat', he advises. The goat

chews the curtains, treads on the egg and eats the furniture.

This sequence repeats until her house is full of livestock and chaos.

That's not good advice, surely? But one by one, the old man advises reversing the situation, until cow, pig, goat and hen are once more outside. At this point, the old woman realises how huge her house is. 'Thank you old man for the work you have done. It was weenie for five. It's gigantic for one'.

The old man is gifting answers, moving things along effectively on the basis of previously known experience and sound judgement. Skilful advisors make people feel informed, helped and supported.

The workplace context is rich with the use of this voice in one-to-one and group settings. In our SoundWave data it is one of the most heard of our nine 'verbal strategies', a reflection of its ubiquity in everyday life.

In the average conversation of the world of work we hear it often:

*In your situation I'd do it, but it's up to you.*

*Why not go south this summer; it's warmer.*

*He stole the whole idea from you. You should get legal advice.*

If the wise old man had written the woman a plan and stood over her while she executed it, she might well have felt patronised. Too much advice can feel like micromanagement.

If he'd just walked on by with a nod and a smile, he would have passed over an opportunity to establish credibility and be of service. He certainly wouldn't have been deserving of his mantle 'wise old man'.

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to advise'?*

## ADVOCATE FOR IMPACT

You argue convincingly for, and against, particular points of view, are likely to sound persuasive, and to be capable of influencing and 'selling' ideas. By developing a position, you assist the process of dialogue by prompting others to think more clearly about how they present their own arguments and counter-arguments.

Julia Gillard was the 27<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Australia.

A consummate and respected politician, from 2010 to 2013 she led a Labor government (the first and only woman to do so, in coalition with the Greens) through a shaky few years marred by a global financial crisis and a more home-grown style of misogyny.

On 10<sup>th</sup> October 2012, in response to what might be called 'heated provocation' she made an electrifying speech to Parliament<sup>21</sup>, fighting back at slurs made about her personally, but leaning into a culture of bullying and sexism that was part of Australian politics and culture more generally.

What makes it so powerful is the blend of the personal and the societal. I don't think I'm going too far when I say that elements of her 'I am offended' mantra resonate at some level with all women, wherever they are from.

*I was ... offended on behalf of the women of Australia when in the course of this carbon pricing campaign, the Leader of the Opposition said, 'What the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing...' Thank you for that painting of women's roles in modern Australia.*

The way she calls out her opponents, while they sit and squirm opposite, is a fist pumping moment for feminists everywhere.

She ends by positioning herself squarely as the voice of law and order, common sense and responsibility.

*We ... should think seriously about the role of women in public life and in Australian society because we are entitled to a better standard than this.*

And if this section has made you agree vehemently or disagree angrily, that's advocacy! Skilful use of this voice motivates others - for or against.

The workplace context is rich with the use of this voice in one-to-one and group settings. In our SoundWave data it is often the most heard of our nine 'verbal strategies', a reflection of leaders who want to make an impact.

In the average conversation of the world of work we hear it often:

*It's my belief ...*

*You may well say that but if you look at the evidence, which is compelling and conclusive ...*

*Oh, I think you're doing a great job because ...*

Were we to coach Julia Gillard, we might draw her attention to the polarising effect of her speech and to the fact that it punched its weight because of its proportionateness as well as its passion. We might note also its inspirational impact and ask how this is to be sustained.

By contrast, not advocating when advocacy is needed can make the situation feel somewhat leaderless.

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to advocate'?*





## CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE

You are prepared to interrupt, insist on a different interpretation or even call immediate attention to other perspectives in order to point out the assumptions and limitations in what others are saying or doing. By promptly calling attention to such matters, you improve the quality of dialogue by inviting others to re-think and to be more aware of what and how they are contributing’.

There’s a great scene from the movie *Whiplash*<sup>22</sup>, starring JK Simmons as Terrance Fletcher, a ruthless jazz instructor at the Shaffer Music Academy, and Miles Teller as Andrew Neiman, a student jazz drummer. In the scene in question, our protagonists meet by chance in a jazz club one evening. Here they enter into a conversation about Fletcher’s teaching methods.

Rationalising his bullying and tyrannical behaviour, Fletcher makes the case against mediocrity. Unless you push people to the limit, they will never know what they are capable of achieving, he argues. 'But isn't there a line?', asks Andrew, seeking a boundary on Fletcher's abusiveness. 'No, there isn't', replies Fletcher, adding 'There are no two words in the English language more harmful than 'good job'.

Fletcher may well be a flawed character (although the film does end by offering a succulent moral dilemma), but he is consistent in his methods and in the orientation of his talk. Fletcher challenges. In fact, to be more precise, Fletcher *attacks*. What might otherwise be a plausible verbal strategy for getting the best out of his students ('to challenge') is over-used and morphs into 'attack'.

So imagine for a moment, a more moderate version of Fletcher. Someone who picks up on the inconsistencies, contradictions or perceived limitations in others and plays these back in direct and sometimes forceful ways, whose purpose in

conversation is to stimulate new or different thinking. This would be a helpful Fletcher.

The workplace context is rich with the use of this voice in one-to-one and group settings. In our SoundWave data it is a commonly heard 'verbal strategy'.

*Why are we doing this again, for the second time!*

*Surely there's a better way than this ...*

*Hey, we were due to have had this done by 10 o'clock. What's going on?*

If we were to coach our more moderate Fletcher, we might well make him aware that people are highly sensitive to the sound of this voice. It can often stop us in our tracks. It benefits from being well *sound-posted*, so that recipients get a moment to adjust and prepare themselves for what's about to head their way.

We would want to encourage our reformed character to use this voice with awareness and sensitivity, to continue to use it frequently but not continuously. Not using it would simply allow poor practice to hold sway.

We might also counsel recipients of 'challenge' to pay attention to the relevance of its content rather than to the force of its delivery. But if you want change, you challenge.

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to challenge'?*

## CORRECT FOR IMPROVEMENT

You use a corrective voice to make sure people understand what is expected of them and what they need to do to improve their practices. By clarifying, and insisting on adherence to requirements and boundaries you ensure that individuals and teams operate in accordance with the needs of the bigger system (or culture) of which they are a part.

In the original 1984 version of *The Karate Kid*<sup>23</sup>, we listen to an immortal phrase in an iconic scene.

*Wax on, wax off; wax on wax off.*

The old caretaker (though really a wise sensei) Mr Miyagi is teaching his prodigy, Daniel, karate. They strike a deal. 'I teach, you learn. I say, you do'.  
Master, apprentice.



Although there is clear hierarchy in the relationship, at its heart is the drive for learning and improvement. Correction happens when Mr Miyagi finds Daniel not following his methods. Mr Miyagi corrects him clearly and respectfully, hands-on, attentive, adjusting. The message is clear. 'This is the method. Stick to it and you'll get better.'

When used skilfully, the voice of correction drives compliance in the interest of improvement. Its characteristic is 'less is more'. Correct early; correct simply and correct without fuss. Good educators understand this dictum (although it's not the only thing that good educators understand).

The workplace context is rich with the use of this voice in one-to-one and group settings. In our SoundWave data it is one of the least heard of our nine 'verbal strategies' with some national cultures exhibiting a particular reluctance to use it.

*Hey there, there's a requirement here to walk between the yellow lines. It's for your own and our safety.*

*We always do step B before step C. You seem to have done the opposite. Let's work out how we fix this.*

*What's the standard? What have you got to do to get to the standard?*

Were we to coach Mr Miyagi in the use of this voice, we would alert him to the effect it has when it is overused and morphs into punishment. We would also highlight how Daniel has learnt to self-correct (moving the cloth from his right hand to his left) and how much calmer and less chaotic he seems to be as a consequence.

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to correct'?*



## CRITIQUE FOR JUDGEMENT

You evaluate ideas, proposals and problems in a direct, balanced and objective way. You highlight potential shortcomings and weaknesses but you also take care to consider and to weigh up both the pros and the cons. By providing impartial, analytical rigour, you enable others to improve the thoroughness and quality of their thinking, discussion and decision-making.

The final episode from the HBO drama *Chernobyl*<sup>24</sup>, has the scientist Valery Legasov (played by Jared Harris) explain to the Soviet judicial enquiry the reasons why Chernobyl exploded.

It offers a devastating example of the power of critique. With the aid of a simple visual prop, Legasov explains how the relationship between heating and cooling is kept in balance when the nuclear generator is working normally. In the

incident at Chernobyl, this balance fell apart in favour of an unstoppable rise in temperature as one by one the safeguards on temperature increase failed. For the assembled members of the enquiry, so clear and so powerful is this critique, that they are silenced by it.

Clear, rigorous and critical reasoning underlies Legasov's presentation. The conclusions arise naturally out of a reasonable and fair-minded assessment of the case. This is the voice 'to critique'.



In our SoundWave data 'to critique' is one of the least heard of our nine 'verbal strategies', testimony to its potential edginess.

*These are the reasons why we could go for this option, though on the other hand...*

*The context is important here. Whilst Abe is right to say that opening an office in Shanghai is a good move (and there are good reasons for this), there are some counterpoints to consider.*

Were we to coach Comrade Legasov, we might firstly check that he has calculated the personal risks he is taking in presenting to the enquiry. We might then invite him to reflect on the function of the voice he is using. Ordinarily this is the function of bridging between the understanding of an issue and the action that someone might then take.

When the voice is *overused*, people tend to hear criticism and may become defensive. The line between critique and criticism is indeed narrow.

When it's *underused*, it runs the risk of allowing poor decisions to hold sway.

When it's well done, critique moves people to reflect, to consider perspectives and to make good decisions.

*Where would we be in a world without the voice 'to critique'?*

# CHOOSING YOUR VOICE

From the vantage point of the 5th floor of our 10 storey building, we've illustrated the nine SoundWave 'voices' with the help of nine different stories, each revealing some, but by no means all, of the way a particular verbal strategy works.

Did you see or hear yourself in any of these scenarios?

Could you more easily imagine taking to the advocacy of a Julia Gillard, passionate and arresting or more to the probing of a Bob Woodward, suspicious and incisive? Could you recognise others in these stories, perhaps a story-telling Joe Simpson or a critiquing Valery Legasov?

Or maybe you know someone who seems to strategise their talk in two or three particular ways and for whom there is a real absence of one or more voices?

Can you begin to understand how an effective use of the voices would enable you to strategise your talk? At the same time 'listening out' for these voices will allow you to understand the intention behind the talk of other people and enable you to respond more effectively in the moment.

## **CONTEXT SHAPES TALK; TALK SHAPES CONTEXT**

A close reading (or listening) of the verbal strategies would have alerted you to something I mentioned at the very beginning of this book, that context affects talk and talk affects context.

For example, Julia Gillard's speech is powerful because she chooses to advocate and not articulate. She could have decided to simply explain the challenges facing women in a more neutral way through the voice of 'articulate'. Had she done so, she would have had people approve of what she said but it would also have been far easier to have ignored her. The context demanded a powerful response and she gave it. In providing it she in turn set a challenging context for any reply.

It is important to note that Julia had a choice to make. There was no predetermined style for her to adopt.

Society<sup>25</sup> teaches us how to act and how to communicate across a very wide range of social contexts. The formality of our talk increases when we believe that we are inside institutions that demand our respect, a court of law for example or even our acquiescence, a religious gathering for instance. On these occasions, there is a strong sense that the context itself is dictating to us what we say and how and when we say it. These powerful contexts with their institutional rules, conventions and rituals shape how we speak.

Periodically we re-socialise our talk. Take the classic example of starting a new job. Can you remember those first few weeks when you sat in meetings listening to important discussions, hearing the words, nodding sagely at various points to signal your inclusion, whilst not really having the faintest idea of what anyone was really talking about?

Can you then re-call, a few months into the new role, how you had by then learnt not just the jargon (a necessary survival strategy), but to speak on equal terms with your colleagues having now incorporated the meaning behind the words and phrases that initially baffled you?

In working life, our conversations assume more freedom than institutions might typically allow, although constraints do exist, and managers may well intervene to deliberately shape conversations for efficiency and effectiveness.

Good examples of this occur when people work inside of processes. Call centre staff work often with scripts (heavily structured conversational guidance). Teams might meet daily around a control board which dictates topics and sometimes the sequence of conversation.

Leaders coach their teams sometimes using a 'step-by-step' process.



So in conversation, we tread a tightrope between the imaginative impulse to speak as we wish and the socially conditioned requirement to speak as we must.

Although contexts come in many shapes and sizes, our own research points to two dominant organisational contexts for talk which, unless we choose differently, serve to shape the way in which conversations happen. The first I describe as 'diagnostic-led'. This is the space where conversation centres around the use of four voices, diagnose, inquire, articulate and probe. This creates a collegial and facilitative culture in which 'solving the problem' is the primary focus.

The second I describe as 'challenge-led'. This is the space where conversation draws heavily on the voices of challenge, advocate, critique and correct. This creates a culture which is driving and unremitting and in which outcomes are the primary focus<sup>26</sup>.

Whilst the differences between these two contexts (and there are others) are stark, we are not bound eternally to either of them.

We know that people speak differently depending on who they are speaking to<sup>27</sup>. And we also know that often these differences are determined by habit, routine and expectations.

But by strategising our talk, by consciously deciding what combination or pattern of voices we will use, we can change these contexts.

Remember, context shapes talk; talk shapes context.

# OWN YOUR CONVERSATION

*It is never my custom to use words lightly. If twenty-seven years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way that people live and die.*

Nelson Mandela , 2000

**A** verbal strategy is the current that runs through a conversation revealing its direction and intent.

Our model of nine voices expands to include nine accentuated (over-used) and nine passive (under-used) voices and of course, given that it's a model, it doesn't pretend to capture everything that human beings do in their talking and listening.



Nonetheless, our experience is that the voices resonate across cultures, have an impact on personal as well as professional lives and when learnt and applied, improve the quality of people's conversational skills. There is evidence that applied with other business techniques it will make a tangible difference to organisational performance.

The data<sup>28</sup> accumulated from the thousands of people who have completed SoundWave assessments provides some fascinating insights about how people think they talk and how they are heard to talk. Here is a list of some of them:

- People are heard to listen better than they themselves think they listen
- Most people prefer to use some 'voices' more than others
- Most people have a low preference for using some of the 'voices'
- People's 'self-talk' plays a dominant role in determining how they think they talk

- The vast majority of people are heard slightly differently from how they think they talk
- A minority of people are heard to use all nine 'voices' at a roughly equivalent level
- Most people will overuse one or two voices when under pressure
- Most people will underuse one or two voices when under pressure
- A person's top 3-4 voices might constitute their strategy for success
- Most people report being able to flex up or down the use of any 'voice' as the context changes
- Most people are heard to vary the verbal strategies they use depending on which stakeholder group they are speaking to
- Low use of a voice is consistent with low confidence and sometimes low skill in its use
- Preferred use of a voice is consistent with high confidence and often high skill in its use

- Most people report that increased awareness of preferences and patterns in talk enables skilful development of them
- People learn that it's better to be able to deploy the full range of voices to meet the demands that they face than it is to rely on a dominant few
- Many people 'use' their boss not as a sounding board but as a 'sounding-off board', airing concerns
- Reduced volume of talking is indicative of a withdrawal from social interaction

Becoming aware of your preferences and patterns and developing your talk and listening as a consequence allows you to do two critical things.

Firstly it allows you to strategise your talk. This means adding a clear intentionality to what you say and how you say it. Whilst you will never want to eliminate the 'spontaneous aimlessness' that characterises so much of everyday conversation outside of work, in certain workplace scenarios you

will want to aim for the necessary purposefulness and effectiveness expected of you.

Secondly, it will allow better responses in-the-moment. Having seen the thoughts and feelings of others expressed through their gestures and having heard these compounded in the sounds that are associated with them (the growl and the grimace, for example), you can become more capable of detecting and responding to the verbal strategies at play.

Our mantra at SoundWave is to ‘own your conversation’. It’s a simple idea. Conversations are never really consequence-free. At the very least, in some small way, our relationships are modified or maintained through the conversations that we hold. The more conscious we are of how we converse, the more able we are to shape the conversation and our relationships for the better.

*There is a better way - own your conversation!*



# CONCLUSION

**T**he story of our ability to communicate is the story of our sociability and of our ever-expanding consciousness as human beings. There are many problems in the world we live in and there are many ideas for how we overcome them. Ultimately it will be through our ability to 'hear-say', to hear-and-then-say, to engage in dialogue that transforms relationships and the context in which they occur that progress is made.

I hope that by now you have overcome the shock of your vocal tone; that you are hearing the drama inside even the simplest of conversations; that you can see how talk *is* action and that you are already working to close the gap between what you intend to say and what you actually say.

I also hope that the idea of 'verbal strategies' makes sense to you and that you have begun to notice them in the conversations around you and

perhaps even to act on them with some greater intention.

But don't stop there!

Take advantage of the resources and insights that SoundWave has to offer. You can visit our website to secure white papers and contribute to our blog. You can 'get your feet wet' and find out about your preferred verbal strategies by completing a Brilliance 3 assessment or you can always speak to us directly. We're always ready to talk.

Own your conversation!

**Kevin Eyre**

2021

# THE SOUNDWAVE MODEL



# FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For in-depth analysis of this idea see, *Rethinking Context*, Ed A. Duranti and C Goodwin. Cambridge University Press 1992

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<sup>2</sup> See *Human Evolution*, Robin Dunbar, Pelican Books, 2014. The precise date at which humans first began to speak is unclear with estimates ranging from 50,000 years ago to over 1 million years, with the earliest hominids.

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<sup>3</sup> *Human emotions track changes in the acoustic environment*, Weiyi Ma and William Forde Thompson PNAS 2015

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<sup>4</sup> [www.livescience.com/5780-speed-thought-speech-traced-brain.html](http://www.livescience.com/5780-speed-thought-speech-traced-brain.html)

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<sup>5</sup> *Chatter: The Voice in Our Head and How to Harness It*, Ethan Kross, Vermilion, 2021

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<sup>6</sup> *Plasticity in Speech Perception*, Sophie Scott,  
Serious Science: [serious-science.org](http://serious-science.org)

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<sup>7</sup> For an exquisite explanation of this idea, see *The Social Construction of Reality*, P Berger and T Luckmann, Penguin Books 1966 pp49-61

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<sup>8</sup> For a clear explanation of the systematic nature of talk, see *Talk: The Science of Conversation*, Elizabeth Stokoe, Robinson 2018

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<sup>9</sup> See [www.theguardian.com/science/2018/jul/12/the-real-reason-the-sound-of-your-own-voice-makes-you-cringe](http://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/jul/12/the-real-reason-the-sound-of-your-own-voice-makes-you-cringe)

See also *Why You Don't Like the Sound of Your Own Voice* Ted Talk by Rébecca Kleinberger:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/](https://www.ted.com/talks/rebecca_kleinberger_why_you_don_t_like_the_sound_of_your_own_voice?)

[rebecca\\_kleinberger\\_why\\_you\\_don\\_t\\_like\\_the\\_sound\\_of\\_your\\_own\\_voice?](https://www.ted.com/talks/rebecca_kleinberger_why_you_don_t_like_the_sound_of_your_own_voice?)

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this see Friedrich Schulz von Thun's *Seven Tools for Clear Communication: The Hamburg Approach* in English Language

Arbeitsgruppe Beratung und Training, Fachbereich  
Psychologie, Univ.

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<sup>11</sup> A term used by ‘conversation analysts’ to describe conversation which draws attention to its turn-based organisation. See *Doing Pragmatics*, Peter Grundy, Routledge, 2002

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<sup>12</sup> See also, *Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler. Pub McGraw-Hill 2012

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<sup>13</sup> See [www.mcgill.ca/newsroom/channels/news/human-sounds-convey-emotions-better-words-do-257683](http://www.mcgill.ca/newsroom/channels/news/human-sounds-convey-emotions-better-words-do-257683)

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<sup>14</sup> See *Core Affect and the Psychological Construction of Emotion*, The American Psychological Association, 2003

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<sup>15</sup> ‘But often the distinction between the talk and the action is less clear. The classic proof of this is

when I make a promise. There is no action in making a promise other than in the promise. An idea first advanced by the Philosopher of Language, John Serle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969), Cambridge University Press

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<sup>16</sup> Episodes of *In the Psychiatrist's Chair* are available on BBC Sounds

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<sup>17</sup> *Apollo 13*, Universal Pictures, 1995

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<sup>18</sup> *All the President's Men*, Warner Bros, 1976

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<sup>19</sup> *Touching the Void*, FilmFour, 2003

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<sup>20</sup> *A Squash and a Squeeze*, Julia Donaldson, Axel Scheffler, McMillan 2003

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<sup>21</sup> You can watch Julia Gillard's 2012 speech here: <https://youtu.be/fCNuPcf8L00>

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<sup>22</sup> *Whiplash*, Bold Films, 2015

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<sup>23</sup> *The Karate Kid*, Columbia Pictures, 1984

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<sup>24</sup> *Chernobyl*, HBO, 2019

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<sup>25</sup> Agents of socialisation include family, religion, peer groups, economic systems, legal systems, penal systems, language, and the media

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<sup>26</sup> For research details see [www.soundwave.global](http://www.soundwave.global)

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<sup>27</sup> SoundWave 360 data shows just how much our patterns of talk change depending, for example whether we are speaking to a peer , team member, boss or subordinate.

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<sup>28</sup> Currently our data is WEIRD – based on countries that are in the main Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich Democracies

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**Find out more about SoundWave:**  
[www.soundwave.global](http://www.soundwave.global)

**9 VOICES:  
OWN YOUR CONVERSATION  
KEVIN EYRE**

SoundWave is a concept and model created and developed by Kevin Eyre.

We are in the business of helping organisations and individuals hold better, more constructive conversations, through the use of nine identified ‘voices’.



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