

making an impact



“There is still a common perception within the leadership of councils that communications is narrowly focused, dealing mostly with local media and building relationships with journalists.

However, encouragingly, most chief executives said that they wanted communications to become more strategic. As part of this, chief executives wanted communications to be more pro-active, gain a better understanding of services, work better with colleagues and become more politically adroit.”

Chief Executives’ Challenge Report

This booklet is in part a reflection on the Chief Executives’ Challenge Report. But it has also been the substance of many discussions about what gives communication teams weight at the top table. Sometimes these discussions begin in passing remarks at conferences where chief executives ask for advice on their communications function. They want to know why it doesn’t appear to be working. In other discussions, people tell me that senior people are no longer listening to them and want some tips.

If you’re motivated by the need to make an impact, then you might find the ideas in the next few pages helpful. If it does no more than confirm what you’re already doing, then I hope that the reassurance feels warming rather than patronising.

I hope you enjoy reading it either way.

Mark Fletcher
reputation

Contents

1	What keeps people awake at night?	1
2	Indispensability	5
3	Method acting	11
4	Putting on weight	15
5	The art of nous	21
6	What to do if people stop paying attention to you	23

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I. What keeps people awake at night?



Let's take for granted that you have most bases covered. You've got an external publication that is full of stories about how you are helping the community. You're on speaking terms with local journalists and you get a decent amount of good coverage and the heads up on pear-shaped issues. You're either driving internal communication or you're very close to HR colleagues who are. And you're getting your head into gear on partnership communications.

Will that be enough these days?

My view would be that if you're doing all that then you're well on the way to securing your position in changing economic times. But true security lies in doing more. It's about working out what the real problems are and how you can help to solve them.

You won't make much headway unless you understand what the organisation is trying to achieve. There was a time when being good at handling journalists was enough to merit a place at the table; but things, I believe, have changed. Media relations still matter but there are many other fish to fry.

- Improving perceptions of place
- Bringing about behaviour change
- Increasing advocacy for the council both inside the organisation and in your communities
- Understanding how your organisation is seen (and key people within it)
- Improving the value of the organisation's reputation

- Building awareness and the value of your organisation in the minds of partners
- Building awareness amongst key local and national opinion formers
- Supporting the achievement of service goals
- Supporting challenging issues (such as serious case reviews)
- Creating solutions to emerging problems before they become unmanageable

Your ability to do all of this will depend upon your understanding of your organisation and how it works. If you don't already do it, it might help if you:

- **Keep an eye on key websites** - the Audit Commission, Department of Communities and Local Government, The LGA, DFES, MORI, Demos, IPPR and the like
- **Read key publications** - Municipal Journal, Local Government Chronicle, Local Government First, the nationals' public sector pages
- **Understand the inspection regime** - download material from the Audit Commission and Ofsted websites
- **Understand your organisation's strengths and weaknesses** - read the inspection reports, talk to key staff and managers
- **Network with key managers so that you are abreast of emerging issues** - build trust so people tell you things they'd rather keep to themselves
- **Tune into gossip so that you are the first to hear about damaging material**

- **Understand how the movers and shakers are moving and shaking** - where they want to go, who is likely to be in the way and what they're likely to do to about it

Find out what keeps the boss awake at night

One thing unites all senior people: the possibility that the things that could go wrong do and they end up unmanaged in public in a way that is fatally damaging (in terms of career lifespan).

So understand the problems senior people face. Communications will not be the only thing on their minds. They will be concerned about delivery, emerging issues, relationships. There will be several thorny issues they will have to deal with. Some of these may be both intractable and insoluble.

These days there will be concern about maintaining delivery in the face of a massive economic downturn. It's likely to mean doing more for less. That will have a potential impact on service delivery. Some services may need to be cut - presenting that in the least reputationally damaging way will fall to you and your colleagues.

As services are downsized, so this will impact on staff. Advocacy may disappear altogether. Productivity may fall. There may be disputes. How can you help to shore up service delivery whilst the wheels are falling off?

The more you understand how the people in charge of your organisation think, the more likely you are to be successful in what you do.

Look at each of the key tasks that matter to your organisation and seek to understand what success would look like. It's one thing to say, "we want a good reputation", but unless you are clear what that might look like then you might never achieve it.

For example, better media relations might mean keeping the bad news off the front page. This may or may not be achievable. If you are getting hammered regularly because local journalists simply don't like you, then you might be able to address the relationship issue. It may have an impact.

If your negative news relates to things your organisation is doing - and is likely to continue to do - then you may have to manage down expectations. Don't underestimate the damaging impact of successive negative headlines. If you can't get rid of them, it may be assumed that you simply don't have the skills and someone else will be recruited to fix this.

Don't wait until you are asked to sort things out. Be proactive. If you find that people are not talking to you, not keeping you in the loop, not seeking your advice, don't see it as an opportunity to have more time to yourself. Get out and find out why. Don't take it personally (unless it is, in which case you'll have to have a turnaround plan). But don't ignore it. The less you are plugged into the things that are important, the more senior people have to go elsewhere for advice and the less relevant you will become, making your position more vulnerable.

How will you know you're making an impact?

Apart from getting names and faces in local newspapers, here is a range of other indicators which may be used to judge the effectiveness of marketing and communications related activity.

National Indicators for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships: Hand Book of Definitions, published by HM Government

General perceptions

- NI 1 % of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area PSA 21
- NI 2 % of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood PSA 21
- NI 3 Civic participation in the local area PSA 15
- NI 4 % of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality PSA 21
- NI 5 Overall/general satisfaction with local area CLG DSO
- NI 6 Participation in regular volunteering CO DSO
- NI 17 Perceptions of anti-social behaviour PSA 23
- NI 21 Dealing with local concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime by the local council and police PSA 23
- NI 22 Perceptions of parents taking responsibility for the behaviour of their children in the area HO DSO
- NI 23 Perceptions that people in the area treat one another with respect and dignity HO DSO
- NI 24 Satisfaction with the way the police and local council dealt with anti-social behaviour HO DSO
- NI 25 Satisfaction of different groups with the way the police and local council dealt with anti-social behaviour HO DSO
- NI 41 Perceptions of drunk or rowdy behaviour as a problem PSA 25
- NI 42 Perceptions of drug use or drug dealing as a problem PSA 25
- NI 138 Satisfaction of people over 65 with both home and neighbourhood PSA 17
- NI 140 Fair treatment by local services PSA 15
- HO DSO Help people feel secure in their homes and local communities

Behaviour change indicators

- NI 8 Adult participation in sport DCMS DSO
- NI 9 Use of public libraries DCMS DSO
- NI 10 Visits to museums or galleries DCMS DSO
- NI 11 Engagement in the arts DCMS DSO
- NI 14 Avoidable contact: The average number of customer contacts per received customer request

- NI 32 Repeat incidents of domestic violence PSA 23
- NI 47 People killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents DfT DSO
- NI 48 Children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents DfT DSO
- NI 52 Take up of school lunches PSA 12
- NI 53 Prevalence of breastfeeding at 6 - 8 weeks from birth PSA 12
- NI 55 Obesity among primary school age children in Reception Year DCSF DSO
- NI 56 Obesity among primary school age children in Year 6 DCSF DSO
- NI 57 Children and young people's participation in high-quality PE and sport DCSF DSO
- NI 90 Take up of 14-19 learning diplomas DCSF DSO
- NI 91 Participation of 17 year-olds in education or training DCSF DSO
- NI 110 Young people's participation in positive activities PSA 14
- NI 112 Under 18 conception rate PSA 14
- NI 118 Take up of formal childcare by low-income working families DWP DSO
- NI 123 16+ current smoking rate prevalence PSA 18
- NI 179 Value for money - total net value of on-going cash-releasing value for money gains that have impacted since the start of the 2008-9 financial year CLG DSO
- NI 191 Residual household waste per head Defra DSO
- NI 192 Household waste recycled and composted Defra DSO
- NI 195 Improved street and environmental cleanliness (levels of graffiti, litter, detritus and fly posting) Defra DSO
- NI 196 Improved street and environmental cleanliness - fly tipping Defra DSO
- PSA 18 Promote better health and well-being for all
- PSA 21 Build more cohesive, empowered and active communities
- DCMS DSO Encourage more widespread enjoyment of culture and sport
- DCSF DSO Ensure young people are participating and achieving their potential to 18 and beyond

Information based indicators

- NI 27 Understanding of local concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime by the local council and police HO DSO
- NI 37 Awareness of civil protection arrangements in the local area CO DSO
- NI 139 People over 65 who say that they receive the information, assistance and support needed to exercise choice and control to live independently PSA 17
- CLG DSO Support local government that empowers individuals and communities and delivers high quality services efficiently

2. Indispensability



Indispensability is about becoming someone others both rely upon and need. *If everyone can do what you do, then why on earth should the organisation pay for you as well?* This question will start to apply to many people over the coming years as finances get tighter and senior executives closely scrutinise budgets for potential savings. The issue here is how you can make yourself indispensable both to the organisation and to key people within it. It's about recognising the value of what you do in terms of the problems that are out there - and producing solutions before they are asked for.

Here are some areas where you may be able to become indispensable

Manage the media

Communications people sometimes get into denial about the media. So concerned are they to be seen as “strategic” that they can forget that journalists keep senior people awake at night - see chapter 1. It may be that you don't have the skills to manage the media in which case either acquire them or ensure that you can procure them when they are needed.

Keep relationships with journalists (local, regional and national) strong. If you are a key source of information (and can help journalists keep their heads above the water in what are choppy times) then you will be seen as helpful. You are more likely to be able to deliver favours in-house (keeping stories out of the news or pushing them further down the bulletin) if you're seen by the media to be a

key person. Be in a position to create feature opportunities in all the key media. These can have a disproportionately good impact on your reputation.

Intelligence

Most senior people don't like surprises. Your ability to pick up potential issues and start to shape plans to deal with them will help to define your importance. If you are finding out about things after they've gone public, your value will be severely curtailed. So read around. Scan key documents. Ex-journalists are often the best at finding things out. The combination of powerful research skills, reading the runes and generally being nosey can put them ahead in the race for useful intelligence.

Get people to tell you things (they'd rather keep to themselves) so that you are in a position to advise on how to handle fall out. But be wary - it's one thing to hear gossip and quite another to develop a reputation for passing it on. Indulging in speculation could well turn you into the source of something that your team will later have to deal with.

Tell it like it is

This is a difficult area in which to operate. Telling people what you believe they need, but may not want, to hear requires a good manner and a strong understanding of the individuals concerned. It's one area where you will not be competing with many others but it can make you deeply unpopular. Not everyone wants to hear unpalatable truths. They may talk about

thinking the unthinkable but they won't necessarily want anyone saying the unsayable. If you can present an honest, dispassionate, well-evidenced appraisal of how things are you may be able to mark out some territory. If you can then use this to challenge potential courses of action, you may strengthen your position. But don't just be the source of bad news - always have a solution.

Make people visible - at the right time

You can help people become visible in a number of ways. You can design internal and external campaigns that will make it easier to pitch both people and messages to key audiences. You should be able to create opportunities for your top managers and councillors to pick up news and feature opportunities in key magazines. You can draft presentations, write speeches, draft features and create photo opportunities.

Help shape key messages

You will have to work hard to establish primacy in this area. Many senior officers and councillors are powerful wordsmiths. But if you are able to demonstrate how micro changes in wording and phrasing can produce different outcomes, you will be in a strong position.

There is a ton of research you could familiarise yourself with (if you haven't already). Daniel Kahneman's work looking at the ways in which we reach judgements will help you determine which words and concepts you should use to shape messages. "Nudge" is worth a nose. It's

also worth looking again at Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance theory to remind you about the ways in which we all interpret messages that are threatening. The excellent book, "Mistakes were made - but not by me" is definitely worth reading. (See page 20).

Understand the organisation's big problems (and the little ones)

Get inside the organisation's challenges and develop solutions with other key colleagues (HR/OD/Legal/Policy etc). Others will be hard at work on the place-shaping agenda, on driving up discretionary effort, dealing with the impact of change, bringing about behavioural change and all the other things that people don't like to talk about. Get in on the act.

Anticipate what will happen next

Think chess. Understanding and being able to advise on how messages and communication will play (in terms of outcomes) will mark you out. But you will need to be able to found your view on an understanding not only of the audiences concerned but the context within which you are communicating. Which means that you will need to be connected to those audiences. Get out and about. Meet people. Learn about how they make judgements (which will help you to second guess what they will do next). Understand who is connected to whom, who depends upon others for support and how all the power-brokers are connected to one another. Understand what key people want - this will inform your view about how people may take

advantage of changing circumstances (some of which they may have caused to occur).

Demonstrate judgement

The ability to make judgements is absolutely critical. It's about doing the right things in the right ways at the right time. Remember it is possible to commission others to write articles, draft press releases and put together strategies, none of these will matter a whit unless you are making sound judgements. Bear in mind that others' perception of your ability to make judgements will be shaped by how you behave. Ill-thought out passing remarks in front of the wrong people can kill any chances you may have to demonstrate that you can be trusted.

Get the timing right

Timing is a key factor. Knowing what to share, with whom, and how, will be governed by your understanding of governance. Understanding the rules of engagement between officers and members is vital. As a rule of thumb I would always ensure that officer advice is collated and considered prior to any of it being presented to members. Making this line fuzzy can create problems.

Understand how things will play

You should be in the best position to judge how things will *play* with different audiences. Don't guess how others see the world. Go and talk to them. Speak to those who regularly communicate with key audiences and learn from them. All the same, you should have a pretty clear understanding of these audiences:

- Journalists
- Editors
- Chief officers
- Members
- Board members
- Health professionals
- Opinion formers
- National figures
- Voluntary groups
- “Hard to reach” groups (who probably don't see themselves as such)

Advise on tactics

Of course, it's not just the message that matters. It's the sequence of events and actions that will lead to the right outcomes. There will be others better suited to this work than you. Understanding how different people will react in different sets of circumstances and managing the consequences requires experience. Before you seek to advise on these matters, ensure that you learn all you can from others.

Be creative

One of the privileges of this kind of work is that you get paid to come up with ideas. You have the time to think about ways of putting things so that you can achieve the outcomes that others want. But you will always have to square potential creative approaches with the culture of your organisation.

Keep looking at other people's ideas. There are brilliant examples of excellent communication tumbling upon us all virtually every day. Again, if you can evidence that a particular approach is likely to achieve the outcome, even though "things aren't usually done that way", you will strengthen your position. But always evaluate honestly. You can often learn more from failure than you can from success. Knowing that something doesn't work is as important as knowing it does.

Be able to make things happen

The ability to get things done is vital. The best solutions in the world are of no value unless they can be implemented. And while the public sector has become comfortable with the merit of having communication staff in key meetings your ideas will not always be given universal support.

You will need to show an ability to overcome obstacles. Your chief executive cannot be called upon every five minutes to insist that other officers listen to you. Some heads of communication I've spoken to talk about waging a war over a period of years to be allowed into meetings where they can be given the opportunity to offer a point of view; being listened to and acted on is another stage down the line.

Create opportunities to influence

Sometimes you simply won't get into key meetings. Not everyone does. There are many places you can influence thinking - corridors, car parks, stairs, coffee queues, at the water cooler, through other people. It's always good practice (in my experience) to get to know the PAs of senior staff. They will know more about how you may be able to approach an individual than just about anyone else. They may be able to get you in for a few minutes between meetings. Once you have established the relationship you won't necessarily have to be in key meetings to have an impact.

Indispensability - make it personal

Senior people - officers and politicians - all have ambitions. They will want things to happen. They will have made promises about things they believe will happen. They will want to create landmarks, legacies, outcomes and generally have a disproportionate impact on the world. They will need people who can help them to do that.

Highly successful individuals appear to have people around them who can make things happen. Some of these people will understand what the blockages to success are and how they can be overcome. Others will understand the legal, financial and inspection frameworks within which the organisation operates. Others will be good at identifying problems and making them go away. Some may be brilliant at interpreting the world and selling that interpretation to a number of key audiences. All of the people who understand what key people are trying to achieve and become part of the delivery team are more likely to be indispensable than others.


To improve your impact, get yourself into the delivery team. Such teams may not ever formally meet. They may be no more than loose arrangements of people who understand what the people at the top want and can help make it happen. I met one senior person who asked me if I'd seen the film *Pulp Fiction*. "I'm the cleaner - Mr. Wolf", he said. "When really bad things happen I come along and clean it all up."

Even this level of indispensability won't necessarily protect you should the cutting blades start to swish. In the end, when there are cutbacks all non-essential services will be vulnerable. Neither is this approach without its risks. Where we become closely associated with key individuals whose fortunes change, we can be vulnerable. But our ability to be effective and useful to our organisations will, to a degree, hinge on our ability to understand the problems it faces and provide solutions.

Two final points: be invisible; and always pass on the credit. My experience is that communications advisers who are not seen are more likely to wield influence than those who are much higher profile. As Bob Woodruff of Coca Cola is reported to have said: "There is no limit to what a man can achieve as long as he doesn't care who gets the credit". I'd go along with that.

So by all means get things done. Draft features, produce solutions, advise people on the tactics of tricky things - but stay in the background. Pass on the credit for everything you do. Those who need to know that you are effective will. Otherwise, it doesn't really matter.

3. Method acting

A close-up portrait of a woman with long, wavy brown hair. She is wearing a black lace masquerade mask with white sequins and black beads. Her hands are raised to her cheeks, and she has red lipstick on. The background is a dark teal color.

Communications shouldn't feel like a dark art but it often does. Unlike other professional fields it doesn't always appear to be driven by a clear methodology. Perhaps it's because communications in the public sector encompasses so many fields. My view is that work should be underpinned by a methodology which is visible and which will enable those you advise to understand the basis upon which you are offering advice.

In this chapter, I've set out a methodology I use in addressing reputation and communication problems. There are many others. Whichever you use is a matter for you. If it looks as if you are just making things up off the top of your head, then people will conclude that is just what you are doing.

As you read this think about other professionals and how the ways in which they work convey credibility. In most professions you will see:

- The presence of a body of knowledge that is shared by all in the profession
- Knowledge based upon research or the critical examination of practice
- A consistent methodology
- Shared terminology
- A tendency to plan, perform and review
- A tendency to write things down
- A reliance upon evidence-led action

My approach is very simple. You might want to reflect on it.

Outcomes - what does the organisation actually want?

Rather than public relations being about the management and maintenance of goodwill and mutual understanding, managing communication is about helping to bring about particular outcomes. That being so, I would always want to know:

- What the desired outcomes are
- Whether they are achievable
- What the likely resource implications are
- Whether the outcomes are contingent upon other factors which may be beyond your control
- The sequence in which you will have to deliver your outcomes for maximum effectiveness

Get a starting point

We have all come across people who say, "I want to improve our reputation". Fine once you have established what that reputation currently looks like (research is essential here) and what will be needed to change perceptions. It may mean establishing what has created a poor reputation in the first place.

Identify the audiences

Who are the audiences - and what do we know about them? I'd want know who they are, how they think, how they see the

organisation, what language is likely to connect with them and what concepts should be used to package the message.

This may mean research. You may be able to talk to colleagues in policy or consultation if these people are not part of your function. Health colleagues may also have research material which will help you build up a picture of the people you are seeking to engage.

Identify the channels

Reaching the audiences depends upon using different channels or media. Ideally, I'd want to use media that already have credibility with each audience. I would be aware that the more you directly control the editorial content (as in using your own newspaper, using advertorials or writing adverts) the less credibility and believability that channel will have. I'd also throw into the mix passing remarks (people will tend to believe things said in passing) and people. People believe people.

You may be able to use other channels. There may be relationships in place across the organisation which will enable you to reach key people quickly and with credibility. Channels should allow you to listen as well as broadcast. Feedback is a key part of the process.

Clarify the key messages

Everyone talks about key messages but sometimes they sound too clunky. Key messages should always be written in a form that fits into the mouths of the people who

will communicate with your key audiences - ideally using words they would normally use (few people talk about "community cohesion" in the real world). Increasingly I try to create killer messages - pieces of text that are so compelling that the people who hear them will want to tell other people. That way you multiply the impact of your communication and create a powerful viral effect. For example, if I wanted to say that although it's been 200 years since the abolition of the slave trade there is still a lot more to be done, I would say that there are still 27 million slaves in the world today - half the UK population.

Identify actions that will add weight

Words alone will not create outcomes. Most of us want to see things happen alongside the words that we hear. I'd want to know what actions would need to be taken to create the outcomes the organisation wants to bring about. And who should take them. Here communications will have to work alongside other colleagues. So if you were putting together a communication campaign to drive down sickness rates, you would work with people in HR to align your messages to the managerial actions that they advise managers to take to improve attendance.

Clarify how you will measure success

Finally, I would want to know that my advice had delivered results. You need to evaluate in terms of the outcome you set out to achieve. You need measurable things - reductions in sickness rates, more people making use of a service, shifts in perceptions. Importantly, you

should include evaluation against the measures that your “clients” (those who commission your services) would consider important.

Now add in the real world

So that’s the outline theoretical approach. But life is more complicated than that.

I would also want to know what the **risks** are. If I advocate a particular course of action what are the chances that it will produce perverse outcomes - and what are the implications of that?

I would want to know the **cost** of implementation - do we have the resources, do we have the skills, is there the motivation, could we make a mess of it and actually make things worse?

I would want to know **who will support** this approach (getting key people on board can be important in making things happen) and importantly who is likely to be against it. This latter group may actively set out to undermine your approach. It will not be the first time that I have seen people using private briefings against those who are driving a particular strategy.

I would also want to know **who else** is advising on communications. These people may not be communications staff but others whom senior officers and members value. They may have strong judgement and a track record in delivery.

I would want to know **who is delivering** the key messages. You might advise one approach;

they may have a different view. They may improvise. I once did a lengthy briefing on a complex issue preparing for a TV interview. We agreed the messages and the style of delivery before driving off to a location shoot. The officer concerned forgot to bring the messages with him and said, “Oh, it’s okay - I usually make it up as I go along.”

It’s always important to identify the people who will want the opposite of what your boss wants. They may look as though they want the same thing - they might smile broadly and say how much they love his or her ideas. But they may simultaneously be working against your plans. You can call these people **saboteurs**. They may be witting or unwitting. Either way, you will need to know who they are.

Finally, I would want to know that if I get the **green light** for my approach I could deliver it. It’s better to under-promise and over-deliver than the reverse. Better scale down unrealistic expectations than allow them to swallow you and your career whole.

Making an impact

Local government is a process-driven beast. You will be surrounded by people who talk about programmes, PIDs and plans. The clearer you are about having a systematic, measurable approach, the more weight you will have with process people. It’s as simple as plan, perform, review. The absence of such clarity can cause people to conclude that communications is about “smoke and mirrors”, a much more lightweight field of endeavour.

4. Putting on weight



Sometimes communications people are seen as fluffy or lightweight. If that's the case where you are, you might want to reflect on why. In some authorities, communications and marketing is seen as an integrated part of decision-making. It's on the radar for all of the right reasons. In other places, it's not. If you're in the latter bunch then you might want to ask around and understand why.

It may be that your senior officers don't rate the whole idea, dismissing it as "spin". It may be that they have had a bad experience. Or it may be that they simply don't get it. In one training session, I met a woman who had been a local TV journalist and now struggled to get anyone to tell her anything because they thought she would go and "tell her friends in the media".

Some factors that appear to add weight to your position

- **Salary** - the higher the pay, the more people will listen (at least at first)
- **Reporting lines** - reporting to the chief executive adds weight
- **Proximity of your office to the centre of power** (so too the size of your office)
- **Endorsements** - being endorsed by 'heavyweights' adds punch
- **Associations** - being visibly connected to the powerful adds pounds

Some of these factors may already be beyond your control. But there are other areas in which you can make decisions that could help you to be seen as a "weighty" person.

You can decide:

- How you act
- How you speak
- How you dress
- What accoutrements you use
- How you offer advice
- How you work with councillors, senior officers and partners
- How you build relationships
- Whether you make promises
- Whether you deliver your promises
- Whether you are trustworthy and can keep confidences
- How much you contribute to organisational life
- How you use passing remarks

I discussed an early draft of this note with a number of senior officers and chief executives. One person said that in his experience communications people couldn't be trusted to "stay schtum". Others said they had had bad experiences. Another said that communications couldn't necessarily be trusted to say the right things in the presence of members, creating the risk of setting hares running.

Your ability to manage the constituent parts of messages about you will have an impact on the extent to which others will trust you with doing the same thing for them. It could be argued that if you are apparently unable to nuance any messages about how you present yourself, how on earth will you be able to do this for anyone else?

Behaviour

Look at the dominant behaviours in your organisation demonstrated by those in key positions. The chances are that you will be seeing people who consider, who ponder, who mull before reaching a view. When they express their view it will sound as if there is a method behind their thinking process. Look at the way other senior advisers/officers behave. There will be behavioural differences between authorities, of course, but you are likely to find that people are considered and calm. They are also likely to appear organised.

One assistant director said to me, “If you are going to be successful, you will need to learn to suck your teeth.” In a nutshell, don’t look as if you rush to judgement.

To be a senior adviser you need to behave like one. By all means have the mental space to be able to jump up a gear if it’s needed. But don’t spend your life rushing around looking tired, sweaty and stressed. It doesn’t build confidence or convey competence.

Even if you are an ex-journalist, don’t behave like one. Don’t look as if you are fuelled to the eyeballs by adrenaline. In the main, you won’t see people in positions of power dashing about looking out of control. They will convey calmness and control.

I once met a communications manager who said to me, “If there isn’t a crisis when you arrive, create one. It’s a good way of showing how much you can do for the organisation.” This is not an approach I would advocate.

Appearance

It shouldn’t surprise you to know that people will make judgements about you on the basis of how you present yourself. If, as it has been suggested, 70% of the communication that matters is visual, most of what people will conclude about what you are saying will come from what they see rather than what they hear.

The way you present yourself should be consistent with the dominant code in your organisation. If everyone in positions of power wears suits, then that’s what you should do. Suits or formal dress are not just for Heads of Communication. They’re for everyone.

Senior managers will think long and hard about how they present themselves to different audiences. That will range from the suits they wear, their ties, jewellery and watches, as well as range of accoutrements that convey their position, status and power. These things form a language that allows people to communicate without saying a word.

And yet, it’s not uncommon for communications people to wear informal dress, to be scruffy in their appearance, to turn up unshaven and so on. Don’t think it doesn’t matter. It does. We may be communications people but that doesn’t allow us to have a common sense by-pass. If you don’t think it should count, try advising your chief executive whilst sporting a banana. That may seem a ludicrous example but I clearly exaggerate for effect.

Think about the ways in which you would be expected to dress in order that key people in your organisation would conclude you are a heavyweight. This is not fatuous - there's a lot more to being a heavyweight than wearing a sensible suit - but if you don't dress as might be expected, people may conclude that you are trying to say something through your apparel. Unless you are clear about what that is, and that it is worth both saying and hearing, it's probably better to fit in.

You might want to apply the **Steve Jobs test**. Steve Jobs is the top man at Apple. And whenever you see him, he is dressed casually. The test for me is to ask yourself how good do you have to be before people are prepared to listen to your advice in local government when you turn up dressed like Steve Jobs.

Language

As a general rule, you should use the words that count in your organisation and express them in the manner that those in positions of power do. One chief executive said to me, "Whenever you bring any ideas to management board, please say you want to *share some ideas with them*."

You will need to tune into the ways that people speak where you are. When I have been working with senior health managers, with doctors and with consultants I tend to make my sentence structures more complex and my language richer. I tend to make references to key pieces of research to substantiate my points. I never say, "Believe me because I

know". Medicine is evidence-led. The practitioners are highly educated and capable. They have probably read a good deal of the literature that I would draw upon.

If I am speaking to social care professionals I will tend to use kinaesthetic language and talk about how things *feel*. I would use a lot of non-verbal communication. That's because, largely, they do.

Since much of communication, particularly at a strategic level, relies upon nuance, it will be important to convey through the way that you speak that you understand the impact of subtle changes in language. Simply making the statement will not convince anyone. Rather you must demonstrate through the way that you talk to those who are sensitive to such things that you understand and can speak "between the lines".

Again, these may seem like small points, but if you want to be taken seriously then you will need to embed this thought process in everything you do. Everything. That's not just when you meet with people formally but also when you "bump" into them in the car park or in the corridor or at the Christmas lunch.

If you are struggling with this idea, simply observe the ways that other senior officers ensure that they are listened to. Watch how they mirror body language, how they sample each other's key words and phrases, how they build empathy and how they make emotional connections. And above all, how they "fix" problems before they occur.

Weight

If you want to see what weighty advice looks like, get your hands on a QC opinion. It will be something to be marvelled at. In a few short pages, you will get the sense of something to be reckoned with.

Or take a look at the pages of the *British Medical Journal* or the *Veterinary Record*. You need go no further than the letters page. In a no more than a handful of paragraphs, the authors will draw in references to previous research. They will qualify what they say. They will hedge their views. They will be cautiously assertive. They will demonstrate that there are few certainties in life - and those that are, are often heavily caveated.

Now ask one of your colleagues for a view on how to handle a media issue. Listen out. Do they establish the facts? Do they assess the situation? Do they consider the risks? Do they look at which journalist is calling and what their track record is? Do they look at the policies that govern the present position? Do they consider who might speak, what they might say and why? Do they consider whether any action at all should be taken?

If so, good.

But how much of it do they write down? And if so, does it read well? Is it balanced? Does it look like good advice? Is it spell-checked? Does it have gravitas? Does it refer to previous advice?

On the basis of those *meta-indicators*, would you consider it to have the same value as a

note from the Director of Finance (a group of people thought by chief executives to have more weight than communications people) or a QC?

Presentation

Think about how you offer advice. If it is to have weight it needs to look and sound as if it should. Remember, well-considered advice can be blown out of the water because it is badly written or poorly presented. Unfair? Surely not. You would think that if anyone were going to present things well, it would be people whose job, whose sole *raison d'être*, is in shaping communication for impact.

Be a consistent thing

Of course, you may want to be seen as “creative” and “unconventional” to reflect the brand values you believe are associated with being a communications adviser or creative person. Fine. But don't restrict your thinking to how you dress. Think about how this will be reflected in your work, how it is presented, how you build relationships, what you say and do, how you add value in meetings, the accoutrements you use and so on.

Other places you might look for inspiration

Experience counts for a lot. As does talking to people who have been in the business for a while. Feedback from your peers and bosses will also give you pointers for improvement. Here is some reading material that might offer you additional ideas, research and inspiration.

Ariely, Dan, 2008, *Predictably irrational: the hidden forces that shape our decisions*. London, Harper Collins.

Crompton, Alistair, 1987, *The craft of copywriting*. London, Century business.

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Thaler, Richard H and Sustein, Carl R, 2008, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Yale University Press

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Tavris, Carol and Aronson, Elliot, 2008, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions and Hurtful Acts*. Pinter & Martin Ltd.

Theobald, Theo and Cooper, Cary, 2004. *Shut up and listen: The truth about how to communicate at work*. London, Kogan Page.

Underhill, Paco, 2000, *Why we buy: the science of shopping*. London, Texere.

5. The art of nous

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a wooden chess king piece. The hand is positioned in the upper right, with fingers gripping the top of the piece. The king piece is light-colored wood with a crown-like top. In the background, other chess pieces are visible but out of focus, including a dark piece and another light piece. The lighting is warm and focused on the hand and the king piece.

In my experience, there is one thing that matters above all else to politicians and senior officers: nous.

Nous is not an easy concept to capture. You need to understand who stands to lose from any potential course of action and decide whether that loss may be avoided. It can seem almost intuitive - some people appear to be able to sense when things are going to go wrong. Or could do.

One way into this is to think about how stories, decisions or actions will impact on those in positions of power.

- How will it make them look?
- Will it create problems for them?
- Will it create perceptions that may be unhelpful to them?
- Will it create opportunities for those who would undermine them or seek to usurp their position?
- Will your actions create unhelpful impressions about your relationships with these powerful people?
- Will your actions create unhelpful impressions about your relationships with those who may in time be in positions of power?
- Will your actions make it harder or easier for people in positions of power to advance their ambitions?
- And if your actions make it easier, will you be perceived to be complicit in their plans?

In order to make sense of these matters, you will need to understand public sector culture. This will include the role of councillors, the cabinet system, trust legislation (in health), understanding of decision-making processes, governance, understanding the relationship between officers and members, understanding scrutiny and the law.

But it will also extend to the way that things get done in the public sector. Ex-private sector communications professionals can approach the public sector with an immediate sense of confusion - they refuse to believe that it can take as long as it appears to reach a decision. If you are going to be successful, you will quickly work out why and acclimatise; if you don't you may not last very long.

Nous is also concerned with what will happen next. Communication channels are often used by power-brokers to advance their interests, causes or ambitions. It's easy to find yourself in the midst of another's battle - or worse, find that you are in effect unwittingly firing the bullets.

If you find that you lack nous, either acquire it or get close to someone who has it.

A black and white photograph of a person's hands covering their face, symbolizing despair or being ignored. The hands are pressed against the forehead and eyes, with fingers spread. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light, possibly a window or a bright outdoor setting. The overall mood is one of helplessness and frustration.

6. What to do if people stop paying attention to you

There may come a point where people no longer seek your advice. They may start to work around you. Meetings may take place to which you haven't been invited - and you should have been. Sometimes, you simply don't see the end coming. Sadly, it happens (and in my experience to people of whom you might never have thought it possible).

If you are lucky enough to see this emerging pattern, then act now.

Take stock and decide if your position is recoverable

It may not be recoverable in which case you should start to look for another position. It's not easy to find out whether you will be able to row back from this position. You can talk to people who are close to your key "clients" - but only if you can trust them. There's little worse than demonstrating vulnerability to those who would do you down.

Re-establish client relationships. If you can't get in and talk to them, go to where you can reasonably bump into them - the car park, the corridor, the queue for coffee. It's absolutely vital that you do this in a way that demonstrates that you are working in a new way. For example, if your stock has fallen because you have a reputation for brashness, then shouting across the car park to the Leader of the Council, will not enhance your position.

Start to deliver - but focus on early wins

Act quickly, bring forward solutions, fix those things that are not working. As your "clients" start to see you have changed your ways, they may allow faint glimmers of approval to emerge. When you are in a position where you have delivered a number of the early promises you have made, arrange a proper meeting.

Rebuild damaged relationships

Sort out those relationships which are not working. If you have previously been very influential, you might well find that people have been talking you down to erode your impact. Don't declare war on such individuals. Rather, get to know them and make them your "clients" (people who look to you for advice, guidance and action) - find out what they want and work to help them get it.

Poor relationships with those who are close to key managers and opinion-formers are unlikely to help you. Often such people are called upon for a view about others. If you are constantly rude and unpleasant, it would be difficult to imagine that they would support you when asked.

How you act in all of your day-to-day transactions will be one of the ways that people judge you. People, unsurprisingly, talk to other people - sometimes about you.

Thank you very much

In the course of putting the early drafts of this booklet together a number of people offered advice and comments. I am grateful to Alex Aiken, Anne Akers, Darrell Beck, Steph Bowen, John Brown, Mick Burrows, Marcus Coleman, Fran Collingham, Howard Crabtree, Jason Ditton, John Edwards, Nick Kavanagh, Liz Lesquereux, Alison Milner, Dale Phillipson, Steven Pleasant, Tim Rainey, Linda Scott, Karen Spencer, and Carl Welham. Others preferred to remain anonymous. You know who you are - thanks.

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(Municipal Journal)**

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Carl Welham, Chairman “Commission on Senior Communication Roles”

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Hamish Davidson, Chairman & Senior Partner, Davidson & Partners

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