

7 TIPS FOR PERSONAL IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS

If you knew the impact you were having on others, that would be great wouldn't it? In business what might you change and how might your outcomes be affected? Personal impact is about the ease with which we achieve our results. It includes the experience that other parties have with us.



Measuring Impact

Every one of us has an impact on others. The way the impact is experienced can vary enormously. Have you ever heard somebody say, "When he spoke it was like being hit in the face with a wet kipper" or "She could talk a glass eye to death"? What might that tell us? Well in all probability, that the experience was very unpleasant and one that the recipient would hardly want to repeat! What about from your point of view? Think of an occasion when you've had to make a really positive impression. What have you done? How did you go about that? How successful was it? What got in the way of it being even more successful? No doubt you are beginning to appreciate that your component in an interaction is a significant part - maybe even as much as the listeners. One way to think of the topic, is to think how might we measure impact? If we started by saying the impact of our communication is only as good as the reaction in the listener, then perhaps we're on the way to understanding a little more.

No Failure - Only Feedback

Many of us will have had the experience of receiving less desirable outcomes than we would have liked in our interactions with others haven't we? Some people say, 'that's the listener's fault', others with a little more insight say 'that's the speaker's fault'. Let me suggest a slightly different approach - it's actually nobody's fault. You might be thinking, 'Well how can that be?'. Look at it this way, if we desire to have greater personal impact and effectiveness, it must first of all be our responsibility. The next step is to consider that we're not talking about failure. We *are* talking about feedback - our results were less than we desired. Therefore, it's likely our impact was less than we desired. That's obviously not as effective as we would like. So if we believed that there is no failure, only feedback, how much more empowering might that be?

Many readers will be familiar with the basis of the learning cycle as suggested by David Kolb¹. This has spawned many unauthorised imitations and adaptations that misrepresent his theories, and in addition the theory has some critics. Followers of Honey and Mumford, McCarthy etc, may well say what about their theories? Fair point and they are excellent, however I want to stay with the initial value of Kolb in considering its practical impact. Please bear in mind that in practising this model, our own unique ways of appreciating the world will affect our clarity of self-assessment. First of all, the aim is one of experiencing or immersing oneself in doing a task. Then by stepping back from the task and reviewing what has been done and experienced, we can assess its success. From here we can go about interpreting the events and our understanding of the relationships between them. Finally, we might plan to allow any new understanding to inform what actions should be taken to refine the task for next time.



Kolb's Learning Cycle

¹ Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall (1985).

So in essence we have the idea, put it into action, check the results, and if need be, we modify what we did based on those results. Given the frequency with which we might test our personal impact out, we could have many opportunities to get feedback and plenty of opportunity to modify. This really is not even a cycle, it's a spiral, and a virtuous spiral at that. We will always get feedback {including silence} and the implied question is "what might that tell me, and what shall I do"? Interestingly there are things that the recipients can do as well, after all we are not communicating in a vacuum are we? So how about actively seeking feedback, so that we can assess our results? I suspect most readers will realise that the basis of this theory might have some value after all.



Smoke And Mirrors?

Another reason to improve our impact, is that it actually feels good! Most of us want to be influencing with integrity, so that after the result of the interaction we can walk away feeling good about ourselves and feeling good about the other parties. Some people specialise in this area. Personally, I work with directors and decision makers in business, coaching them to enhance results and their interactions with others, and there are those who focus on a line of business. A business acquaintance works purely as a media coach and you might imagine what that means. The media is perceived as a vast PR opportunity for many and therefore investing time and money in improving personal impact and effectiveness is crucial. For celebrities, politicians and royalty, impact and image is everything. I've heard it said that in that context, its all a mirage. Whilst I have no intention of advocating misalignment with who you are, it's worth considering some of the devices that are encouraged.

Its Only Words

Language is an important feature of influence and therefore impact. We have established at one level that having greater personal impact and effectiveness is likely to deliver more successful results. What do we mean by success? You see, all of us have a different notion of what that is. Success comes into a category of words sometimes referred to as nominalisations - a word that can have different meanings for each of us. That why this class of words is widely favoured by politicians. They don't need to explain what success is, yet to say "and if we follow these policies through, the average member of the public is going to have even greater success", sounds as though it's a good thing to do and, potentially for the recipient, to have. If you actually aim to pin down specifically what that success is, how we will know when we get there and the underlying evidence, that is a much more difficult thing. That is why an average interviewer will have a much longer and often fruitless conversation in that context. Pay attention when a good interviewer, who will not easily be fobbed off, is in action with a politician.



Most of us will have heard the term, 'Wow' factor. That special something that's sought after to create a positive impression upon us. Those in the public spotlight often aim to achieve this through their clothes, either a particular style or cut, and often through their demeanour.

The Eyes Have It

Eye contact is always important. We are less likely to be trusting of someone who averts their gaze when speaking to us, aren't we? It's important to aim to lock on to someone's eyes when communicating. This should be done without staring like a rabbit caught in the headlights! Give this action particular attention when you first meet and shake hands. Some people in business have been known to misuse this to exert subtle power over another. Most women are very good at reading this type of signal. Make a point of paying attention to this feature of human interaction.



For example, Professor Albert Mehrabian's² much quoted and, like Kolb, also misquoted research, involved the importance of tonality, non-spoken and spoken communications when in face-to-face communication.

The model is particularly useful in illustrating the importance of considering factors other than words alone when trying to convey (as the speaker) or interpret (as the listener) meaning but, care needs to be taken when considering the context of the communication.

Style, expression, tone, facial expression and body language in Mehrabian's experiments accounted for 93% of the meaning inferred by the people in the study. This suggested that the exact words used accounted for just 7% of the impact. Beware this is not a general rule that you can transfer to any given communications situation. The understanding of how to convey (when speaking) and interpret meaning (when listening), remains essential for effective communication, management and relationships. Having said that, most of us sense when that which someone is saying doesn't match up with their actions. Make sure you concentrate on matching these areas and your personal impact will be greatly enhanced.

All of the above can be deployed in ways that will work for you in your business and indeed personal life. Does your clothing match the impact you desire? How appropriate is your language and tonality with your clients or customers. What do they expect and how do you know?

Love Thy Neighbour...



A good start might be to treat someone how you would like to be treated. However an approach that gets results with some people may not work for others. The reality as we usually know, is that one size definitely does not fit all! Think of those people with whom you've found it difficult to make a positive impact. We are all different and need to be treated differently. It's like buying after shave or perfume for a friend. Unless you actually know the specific product, what's the likelihood that the great value item you bought is exactly what they want? Even though you like it, it might not be what they would choose. To clarify this point I was reminded of a programme I developed for EEF (the Engineering Employers Federation) and which ran for the almost 5 years. I was asked for a strap line that would sum up 'Managing and Motivating People'. After a great deal of thought I suggested "Only when we master our own motivation, can we truly begin to motivate others with integrity". In other words for the best results, get to know yourself first. Then you can operate with more knowledge, self awareness and hopefully flexibility, to meet the situation.

² Mehrabian A and Ferris L. 1967, The Journal of Counselling Psychology Vol 31. {Professor Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at UCLA}

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung devised a system for understanding people called Personality Type. This was finessed by two American women, Katharine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers. They wanted to 'enable individuals to grow through an understanding and appreciation of individual difference in healthy personality and to enhance harmony and productivity among diverse groups'. They concluded³ there are 16 psychological types., All are equally important, valuable and necessary. All have potential strengths and weaknesses and there are no right or wrong 'types'. This means that if we can accept most of the time that people are not being difficult, they are usually being different. This breakthrough in thinking often produces a mental shift from being irritated and annoyed with individuals to curiosity about what makes them tick. If you have had the benefit of receiving detailed and qualified feedback on your type you'll know what I mean.

Mind Reading Skills

If we accept the reasons for improving in these areas then practice is important. None of us are mind readers, we really don't know how other people think, even though you may have met people who counter that believe! A really simple and effective way to test how others might think is to sit in a room with at least 3 different chairs, imagine you are having a conversation with somebody in the chair next to you, notice what that's like as you consider what you're saying and how you're saying it. Now move to the chair in which the other imagined party is seated, make believe that you're listening to what's being said {by the speaker - you}. Pay attention to what you're hearing, what you're thinking about as the listener, what you believe about the speaker, and how you're interpreting that. Now move to the third chair. You are watching the conversation between these two people, you are paying attention to what one person says and how they say it. You are noticing what happens with the listener and you are taking a complete objective, removed view from the situation. Most people will experience a shift in their perception at this stage, it truly is different to be an observer of a conversation. This is an experiential approach, no amount of reading it will demonstrate to you that this actually works, you may want to practice in a safe environment initially to notice the effects.



This idea of positioning ourselves in other people's shoes is by no means new, Ghandi is reputed to have done it all the time and a long time before then Jesus said 'do as you would be done by'. Which certainly includes putting yourself in other people's shoes so that you can understand the experience of the recipient.

Earlier I mentioned EEF. I am indebted to HR specialist Julie Sinclair. During her time there I had explained that another way of being more resourceful is to imagine what someone else you admire might do. Julie decided to test her understanding of removing yourself mentally from a situation in an important client meeting. She wrote to me:

'IT WORKS' "Faced with the prospect of a challenging meeting when not feeling my usual "bubbly self" I adopted the approach "put yourself in the shoes of somebody who could do it easily". I did, a colleague for whom I have the utmost respect - result - 100% success! I will be adopting this approach again, however, I have also learned something about me!"

³ Briggs-Myers, I. *Introduction to Type*, Oxford Psychological Press (1987)

Feedback And Feedforward

Many of us are familiar with the idea of getting feedback on what we're doing and how we're doing it. Perhaps take time to ask others what we ought to do differently the next time round, should the opportunity arise. This is an invaluable process, the downside is that it can result in defensiveness, how many of us want to hear a long diatribe of things that we're not good at? Push back can occur, i.e. we resist, we may consciously or unconsciously decide not to value the information we are receiving.

Another method is the idea of asking for 'future feedback', i.e. thinking forwards. In this model no request is made for information on how we did, rather we ask for information on tips that we might use for our future development. Let me offer you an example. Let's say I want to become a better listener. Rather than asking for feedback on my current listening skills, I say, "I'm working on my listening skills, can you give me two tips please on things I ought to do that would help me become a better listener?"

According to Sir John Whitmore⁴, one of the earliest UK coaches, coaching is comprised of awareness and responsibility. Awareness, "is the product of focussed attention, concentration and clarity", it is characterised by feedback. Responsibility is "when we truly take responsibility for our thoughts and our actions, our commitment ...rises and so does our performance". Whilst these are two qualities crucial to our effectiveness, the attitude of the state of mind of the performer is also key.

Consider Your Questions

Whitmore emphasises the importance of effective questioning as the means to cause individuals to think for themselves and therefore in raising awareness and responsibility. As a simple yet powerful example, he describes how and why the sports command "keep your eye on the ball" fails to achieve the desired effect. A more effective questioning style is one which compels the player to focus to a higher level – these are descriptive, not judgmental, and crucially provide a feedback loop. An illustration of this is "Does it spin faster or slower after it bounces, this time – each time?". This is a brilliant exercise to try on yourself, taking each question in turn, noticing how your awareness changes dramatically. Now consider an area of you personal impact that you want to enhance. What is the question that you need to ask yourself? Sigmund Freud, Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, said: "He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore." In summary, others will spot insincerity - so aim to be authentic - there is no greater impact!



⁴ Coaching for Performance by John Whitmore, *Nicholas Brearley Publishing, 1997*

Seven Tips:

1. Practice mentally putting yourself into other people's shoes.
2. Vary your tonality, consider practising into a hand held voice recorder and listening to what you sound like.
3. Increase your eye contact when communicating. Aim to avoid staring, yet retain the maximum you can, whilst keeping it comfortable. Notice how it feels.
4. When nervous, perhaps if meeting with others or making a more formal pitch in business, spend a few seconds recalling a successful experience that means a lot to you. It need not be business related. Notice how your confidence improves by doing this - top sports people do this all the time.
5. Become acutely aware of your own thoughts and actions, relative to what your intentions are. Remember the example of 'keep your eye on the ball'.
6. Get to know yourself first. One option is to carefully select a coach to work with you on a programme of gaining greater self-awareness.
7. Most important of all - be true to yourself. Impact is a precursor to the ability to influence. Only when we master our own motivation, can we truly begin to motivate others with integrity.