

Becoming a “People Whisperer”: *How to Communicate So People Care About—and Act On— What You Say*

By David Lee

Excerpted from the seminar “Changing Minds, Capturing Hearts, And Moving Bodies: How To Help People See New Possibilities, Ignite Passion, And Spring Into Action”

Whether you are a CEO or an individual contributor, your success is largely determined by your ability to “move people”: to get them to both care about what you say, and then to act.

How good are you at this?

When speaking to groups, do you ever feel frustrated by their non-responsiveness, like you’re just not reaching them?

Whether talking to a group or one on one, do you find yourself believing strongly in a decision or new initiative, and yet your conviction doesn’t seem to transfer? They don’t seem moved?

Do you ever get frustrated by the amount of resistance and “push back” you get from your team or workforce when presenting new ideas and initiatives?

Do you ever wish your team or workforce demonstrated the same passion and determination as you do?

If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, you will find the following suggestions useful. Whether you are taking with an individual or to a large group, these suggestions will help you communicate in a more compelling way. They will help you overcome resistance and foster greater receptivity to your ideas.

In the rest of this article, when the term “audience” is used, it refers to both a literal

audience—i.e. a group of people—as well as a single person.

1. **Anticipate your audience’s concerns.** – Then generate ideas for how you will acknowledge and validate them. Then think of how you will help them surmount them.
2. **Clarify ahead of time your intention.** – Is it to inform, persuade, teach, challenge, or inspire? Are you also sincerely interested in their point of view? If not, do some work to get there. They won’t care about your perspective if they sense you don’t care about theirs.
3. **Join the conversation going on in their head.** – This is one of the secrets of elite copywriters. They know that doing their homework to understand their customers—their needs, their fears, and their desires—enables them to know what dominant themes occupy their customer’s waking hours. Thus, their marketing pieces are instantly recognized by customers as being relevant and worthy of attention. Do the same with your presentations, whether to a group or in a one on one coaching session.
4. **When sharing bad news, balance realism with optimism.** – This is perhaps the most difficult balancing act for a leader during difficult times. Since people’s trust in you is the greatest source of your influence, you don’t want

to betray that trust by trying to put a happy face on something that is obviously bad news. However, inspiring communicators balance acknowledging the harsh realities of a situation with an optimistic, forward thinking perspective. When sharing your optimism and vision for a better future, make sure you back it up with sound reasoning. There's a difference between empty cheerleading (e.g. "I am optimistic about the future because you're great and we're all winners") and grounded optimism backed up by evidence and a realistic game plan.

5. **Share your reasoning process.** – Even if they disagree with a decision, most people can accept it and move on if they understand the reasoning behind the decision. It's the decisions that remain unfathomable that leave people stuck and fixated, unwilling and unable to move on. When sharing your thought process and your reasons why, it also makes you more transparent, more human—qualities that make a leader more influential.
6. **Share your internal process.** – While it probably won't be appropriate to share EVERYTHING you're thinking and feeling about a difficult decision or unpleasant news, share some. Appropriate self-disclosure is one of the most powerful ways to connect deeply with other people. Great leaders and communicators self-disclose in ways that help people bond with them. So for instance, if you need to break the news that there will be layoffs, let your workers know how painful it's been to get to this point and the struggles you had to avoid them. If you need to give a conscientious employee negative feedback, let them know it pains you to do so and how much you notice and appreciate all the good things they do. Avoid the temptation some people in power have to put on their "game face" and adopt an impersonal, "all business" demeanor. While it might protect them from feeling discomfort and might prevent the other person, or people, from challenging them, it virtually guarantees a negative reaction.

7. **Balance advocating with understanding.** – Compelling communicators feel passionately about their ideas and convey that passion. However, to be influential, you must also listen to, and sincerely care about, the other person's—or people's—point of view. This helps prevent the "I'm being talked at" experience.
8. **Treat disagreements as an opportunity for all parties to learn.** – Rather than acting defensively when someone disagrees, learn to respond with curiosity. No one has cornered the market on correct perspectives and we all have blind spots. Use disagreements as an opportunity to facilitate new perspectives for all parties: the person disagreeing, the audience, and yourself.
9. **If no one brings up obvious issues and concerns, you do it.** – This is especially important if you are a senior level manager, have a strong personality, and/or are addressing a large group. In these situations, people might be reluctant to voice their concerns. Rather than being thankful that no one did so, bring them up yourself and address them.
10. **Invite discussion by asking questions and requesting feedback.** – Ask questions like "What's your take on..." and "Here's what I'm thinking...what do you think?" and "How would you go about that?" The more interactive your "presentation"—especially if it's one on one or with a small group—the greater the impact and buy in.
11. **When you ask questions, make sure you really want the answer.** – Think of times people have asked you a question that was really a statement or implicit judgment barely disguised (e.g. "Whose responsibility is that?" or "Why did you do it THAT way?") Remember how turned off you felt. Also, think of times you tentatively brought up a different point of view and the other person grilled you like a trial attorney battering a hostile witness. Didn't make you terribly receptive to their point of view, did it?

When you ask questions, make sure you're sincere. Make sure you truly want to hear their answer.

12. **If you are quiet or reserved, be "yourself plus".** – Passion and enthusiasm are contagious. If you are by nature a low key individual, amp up your energy level. While you don't want to affect a fire breathing televangelist's demeanor or a phony "Hi I'm perky" persona, try ratcheting up your energy level a bit. You can still be yourself, but with just a bit more "oomph". If you wonder about this, ask some trusted friends for feedback on your current style and then with your more energetic presentational approach.

13. **Start by answering THE all important question.**– If presenting to a group, imagine little thought balloons over each person's head saying "Why should I care?" and "What's this have to do with me?" Answer that question from the beginning. You can do that by:

- a. Telling a short story that illustrates the benefits of your proposition.
- b. Throwing out scenarios that you know are troubling them and state that what you are going to talk about will help them deal with these types of situations. Better still, ask them if they can relate to these scenarios.
- c. Asking a few rhetorical questions that get them thinking about the topic, e.g. "Have you ever tried to give someone constructive feedback and they instantly got defensive?"
- d. Making a provocative claim.
- e. Sharing a surprising statistic and then it's impact on their lives, especially one that they probably hadn't thought about.

14. **Create cognitive dissonance.** – The technique of throwing out scenarios your audience is probably struggling with is an example of creating cognitive dissonance. Giving people a challenging test,

exercise, or case study to solve in the beginning of your presentation is another way of creating cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the created when a current belief collides with new information that contradicts that belief. If you're speaking to people who doubt the value of your topic or think they already know everything there is to know about it, your first job is to create cognitive dissonance. You want to create an experience that helps them recognize that they don't know everything and they need your information. You want to create a sense of dynamic tension between where they now realize they are in knowledge or competency, and where they want to be. Then and only then will they care about what you have to offer.

15. **Always stay dialed into WII-FM** – Related to the previous point, keep in mind that we're all dialed into this station, whose call letters stand for "What's In It For Me?" Besides starting out your presentation with the answer to this question, revisit that throughout your presentation by linking your ideas and recommendations to what is important to them.

16. **Tell stories.** – The best communicators, the most inspiring leaders tell stories. They don't plod through endless PowerPoint slides crammed with graphs or paragraphs of 12 point Times Roman fonts. They tell stories that make ideas and concepts come alive and then live on in the memories of their audience. Think of your own experience suffering through dry recitations of facts, statistics, and concepts and then compare this with how you instantly lean forward when someone starts telling an interesting story. If you want people to care about and remember what you say, wrap your message in stories.

Where do you find these stories? Pay attention to your everyday life. Notice the experiences you have that affect you. Notice the stories others tell you that capture your attention and trigger some kind of emotional response or "Ah hah",

or “Wow!.”

Jot them down so you will remember them. Then think about why they affected you, what lesson they taught, what perspective shift they depicted, and/or what emotion they elicited. Then, use these in your presentations and coaching conversations to teach lessons, offer perspective shifts, and/or elicit an emotional state in the people you talk with.

If you need to present or teach something before you have developed your own library of stories, think of what points you want to make and then reflect on experiences you’ve had or stories you’ve heard from others that illustrate the point you want to make.

17. **Make abstract ideas real by using analogies.** – Just like stories, analogies help make ideas come alive. Because analogies make abstract ideas more concrete and understandable, they stimulate a deeper more visceral understanding and “A ha!” So for instance, compare this last sentence with the following example of using an analogy. Notice how, after reading the example, you find yourself understanding at a more visceral level the concept that analogies impact you at deeper level.

Sometimes, when leading workshops on management skills, I’ll say that so called “soft skills” are really the software that runs business. I then go on to say that people who scoff at the importance

learning so called “soft skills” are acting like a CFO who recommended that their employer buy brand new, state of the art computers, but said they shouldn’t invest in upgrading their computer operating system from Windows 3.0 because it’s too expensive. I then ask the group “Would you keep that CFO on your payroll? Are they being just a little ‘penny wise and dollar foolish’?”

I will also sometimes continue with the analogy and say “It doesn’t matter how state of the art and powerful the hardware system is, if you’re running an outdated operating system, you’re obviously not going to have access to its computing power. That’s the same way old school, command and control, “just do your job” management style fails to unleash the productive potential of your workforce. So not investing in “soft skills” training for managers is like running Windows 3.0 in today’s world. It’s not terribly bright.

Notice how when you compare the impact of the abstract argument with the analogy, how much more strongly the analogy makes the point.

18. **State clearly what you want before ending.** – This is often called “The Call to Action.” What do you want them to do next? What do you want them to do with the information you shared?



About the Author: David Lee is the founder and principal of HumanNature@Work. He is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement.

He is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, as well as over 60 articles on organizational and individual performance that have been published in trade journals and books in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. He has held positions as a clinician and trainer in the healthcare field and as a supervisor and trainer in the corporate world.

Related Articles:

[Can We Talk?: How to Foster Honest, Open Communication](#)

[How to Start a Difficult Discussion Off Right: The "Declaration Followed By Invitation"](#)

Related Resources:

Audio programs by David Lee

[Conversations: How to Foster Honest, Open, Non-Defensive Dialogue About Difficult Issues](#)

[Constructive Feedback: How to Give It So They Want to Hear It...And Use It](#)

Related Seminars and Keynotes by David Lee:

Changing Minds, Capturing Hearts, And Moving Bodies: How To Help People See New Possibilities, Ignite Passion, And Spring Into Action

Constructive Conversations: How to Foster Honest, Open, Non-Defensive Dialogue About Difficult Issues

Constructive Feedback: How to Give It So They Want to Hear It...And Use It