

Felicity Lee makes the case for effective communication at work

speaking the same language



■ **Increasing competitiveness in the financial services market is forcing organisations to be more flexible and dynamic to retain competitive advantage. Employees at every level are being required to demonstrate their competence and the value they bring to their organisation. They are typically being assessed on tangible outputs. However, one of the most critical competences and differentiators of success is the ability to build and maintain effective relationships, with co-workers, clients and customers.**

Research supports this claim. In the Leadership Challenge (OPP 2004) survey of 100 Financial Services organisations, when asked what the key competences and characteristics that make leaders successful in the industry, communication was rated as the third most important factor (16%), following expertise (23%) and strategic vision (18%).

In a Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL) study of 937 published research articles, leadership success and failure are primarily tied to the ability (or lack of ability) to:

- develop constructive relationships among members of the team or organisation
- communicate appropriately with team members.

The table opposite summarises the importance of relationship building and communication for success in organisations.

In summary, relationship building, and effective communication as part of this, is a critical competence in the workplace – and in fact is the biggest single contributor to derailment. Interestingly, technical expertise, for example technical accounting knowledge, is a relatively small factor in success.

making sense of communication

'Effective communication', often central to organisations' competence frameworks, is ill-defined, with subjective judgements placed on how employees should communicate with one another. A good definition of effective communication is the ability to interact effectively with others both internally and externally.

This requires different skills, styles and approaches, depending on the people involved. Effective communication requires awareness of both your own style, strengths and weaknesses and of how others are different.

One way of understanding and enhancing communication is to use a personality profile such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®). It is the most widely used personality indicator,

being completed by over 5m individuals internationally each year as part of leadership, team and individual development. It assumes that different personality types 'speak different languages'; having different motivations, perceptions and judgements. We are all experts in one of these styles (as it's the way we speak ourselves) and are likely to find the other people and their styles 'interesting', 'different', 'challenging', 'offensive' or simply 'impossible to get through to'!

The MBTI® profile asserts there are 16 personality types. When focusing on communication, these can be summarised into four styles. A synopsis of the four styles and how to communicate and how not to communicate with each type is shown overleaf.

All individuals will be 'an expert' in one of these modes of communication because it's the way they communicate themselves. It is key to note that:

- all styles can do all jobs – it is not about ability
- there is no better or worse style (but there are often clusterings of different styles in particular jobs or organisations)
- effectiveness is the ability to understand and communicate effectively with all styles.

what is your style of communication?

You may be able to look at the table overleaf and recognise your own style immediately (and that of your boss and clients too!). However, to go through a more in-depth process of self-assessment, it is recommended that you complete the MBTI® and receive feedback on your profile.

communicating effectively within the organisation

I have worked with a range of financial service organisations where poor communication has been an organisational issue, observable through lack of morale, working in isolated silos, lack of trust and conflict (both covert and overt).

One large insurance company identified the need to improve communication across the organisation, following an acquisition and substantial restructure. Having clarified what needed to be communicated, the middle and senior managers participated in a sequence of development activities, including coaching, to enable them to manage the change effectively. As part of this, managers were profiled using the MBTI®. This provided an understanding of

the culture and what was needed to ensure successful change. The majority of the management population were 'Practical Facts' people and this was evident in the organisation's culture. It was traditional and highly structured, but was also weighed down by processes, red tape and a silo mentality. In order to effect change, the organisation put in place initiatives to develop a more strategic focus and people-orientated approach, to complement the existing style.

Working with a professional services firm, the need was to facilitate communication across the organisation. Teams participated in a series of workshops to improve working relationships. As part of this, individuals identified their own style of communication and how others differed from them.

A simple illustration is that in meetings 'Practical Facts' people will typically be brief, factual, logical and specific, using data and examples to support their points. 'Personal Service' people will, in contrast, use personal examples to prove their point. 'Support their Vision' people will be big picture, conceptual,

personal and idealistic in their approach. 'Logical Options' people are likely to use theoretical models and argue their case analytically.

Often what works for one person is the exact opposite of what works for others, despite them often having the same intended outcome! This understanding was then applied to enhance line management meetings, team meetings and organisation-wide communication.

communicating effectively with clients and customers

The same approach was used to improve client relationships at a professional services firm whose strategic focus was on business development. Client facing staff participated in a series of workshops to recognise their own and their clients' style of communication.

Videos of different client types were used to highlight their different needs. For example, 'Practical Facts' clients wanted to know the offering, value, price and demonstrated past effectiveness of an offer.

'Support Their Vision' clients were often more interested in the bigger picture,

behaviour cluster	percent related to enabling success	percent related to derailment
relationship building (caring, showing interest, fairness and inspiring trust, understanding, displaying empathy and vulnerability; seeking feedback)	23.8%	45.3%
cognitive complexity (managing ambiguity, paradoxes, diversity and system complexity; creativity; seeking to understand unintended consequences)	23.8%	10.5%
communication (supportive, informing, confronting and presentation skills, written clarity, demonstrating no pre-judgement, the ability to undertake collaborative inquiry)	16.4%	5.2%
technical expertise (functional skills, specific business acumen)	5.9%	10.5%

innovation and having a connection between the two parties. The staff worked on how to present the firm to different types of client and respond to their different needs.

Simulated business development meetings were used, with different styles of client, who subsequently discussed what worked and what didn't. For example 'Logical Options' clients did this in a direct, challenging manner, whilst 'Personal Service' clients used a non-direct and gentle manner, backed up by specific examples! This enabled the firm to use this methodology when building new client relationships and to maximise the effectiveness of existing ones.

Effective communication is a key organisational competence. Understanding others and being able to communicate effectively with a diverse range of individuals is key to personal and organisational success. There are many ways to address and enhance it. MBTI® is one, very powerful approach to do so. ■

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<p>personality type – practical facts values responsibility – present them with facts</p>	<p>personality type – personal service values personal loyalty – present them with ways you can be of service</p>
<p>overall approach be knowledgeable, efficient and competent be brief, give concise facts be business-like and honest know background information, prepare fully and pay attention to detail give specific information present information logically give factual, written information have available percentages/ relevant data for comparison expect to be tested</p> <p>do not bluff or make vague, unsubstantiated statements go off on a tangent waste their time – get to the point</p>	<p>overall approach provide a personalised service listen carefully, give your time and complete attention be warm, friendly and approachable give factual information honestly, but with a personal touch provide practical information and examples provide references explain any options clearly and allow time to decide</p> <p>do not rush or give impression time is being wasted jump to conclusions without listening properly be rude or condescending go off at a tangent, be vague or too conceptual</p>
<p>personality type – support their vision values making a difference to others – listen for and present them with a vision</p>	<p>personality type – logical options values competence – listen for and present them with logical options</p>
<p>overall approach treat them with respect, as a person offer innovative solutions listen to and value their concerns provide an overview of your approach without detail take time to discuss needs demonstrate that the case is unique be sincere, get to know them as a person take seriously the need to discuss alternative approaches and solutions</p> <p>do not treat as an impersonal case be dismissive or trivial be brusque or uncaring give too much detail or factual information up front</p>	<p>overall approach direct and non-personal offer innovative solutions demonstrate your competence give overall options and show a pattern respect their intelligence and need to understand show that you continually update your knowledge and approach listen to their views and ask questions before giving advice</p> <p>do not expect that a personal relationship will be built when competence is shown decide for them hide anything give too much detail initially</p>