

The brave psychologist

Paul Furey explores how simpler interventions can boost chances of business client success

I was recently delivering a small piece of a very large attitude and behaviour change project for a public sector client. A colleague and I were due to facilitate the group through an awareness-raising piece to enable them to get to grips with the damage they were doing to one another in many small and almost invisible ways: contradicting one another in public meetings, picking fault, not listening, opting out of decisions, were just some of the devices that they inflicted upon each other, knowingly or otherwise, to make their situation so unpleasant. In preparation for this important session, I had spent hours honing a particular explanation for how we can sometimes come unstuck by playing archetypal roles (e.g. I am the Chief Executive and you must act with due deference).

Barely half way through the explanation in the first workshop one of the client participants 'checked out' and made a big show of letting us know.

It was all rather tense for the next 10 minutes as we tried to find out what had annoyed him so much. Once we had somewhat got the session back on track again a useful conversation ensued, but only regarding half of what I had been trying to explain. And when, the following day, I approached the client who had begun the rebellion to check that he and I were still on speaking terms he explained that the reason he had behaved so disruptively was because he had been hoping for a simple explanation of some useful communication strategies. He explained that he had arrived at my session very preoccupied with a meeting that he was due to attend just after. His disappointment at the lack of a simple tip or two had soon turned to annoyance as my 'interesting explanation' grew in

length and complexity. He had come to me hoping for a quick snack of practical help and had been force-fed a four-course feast of theory. The fact that the remaining three quarters of the session were to have been really hands-on was of no use. By making it complicated at the beginning, that day, for that group, I missed the boat.

Like the other consultant breeds that have emerged into the business world before us, psychologists have developed a culture, a language and a specific set of methodologies. Much of our language and methodology has been brought to prominence by people whom most of us have never met – the heavyweights such as Maslow, Zimbardo, Rogers, Belbin and Goleman, and by global firms who have marketed and sold psychometric testing to the business world. These institutions, of one sort or another, have created a body of knowledge which can often boast both breadth and depth of explanation. These icons, and many others besides,

have helped psychology as a whole, and lesser-known psychologists and coaches like me, and maybe you, to appear on the business landscape with sufficient gravitas-by-association for us to be able to make a living from taking

psychology into business.

The question is, in delivering psychology to our consulting and coaching clients day-to-day, has our tendency to embrace the whole scope of knowledge handed down by our professional forebears left us with an inability to keep things simple? Are we routinely falling short simply by doing and saying too much?

These are commercially demanding times in which we operate. Organisations need to solve real people-related problems, quickly. And since speed is

often achieved by keeping things lean and simple, I find myself questioning whether we are capable working with our clients in a spirit of simplicity. Do we, the newcomers to consulting, have the courage to adopt a more transparent, psychobabble-free approach to helping them? Are we brave enough to stride into the room without our books, models and presentations, confident in the knowledge that we can often help by just simplifying the picture? Could it be, that like the client I have mentioned, what our customers really want, are simpler solutions that are easy to buy, grasp and use?

The cleverness trap

So if we do complicate things – and I think that despite multiple imprecations to KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) we do – why do we do it? Of course, there will be no single answer to that question, but I can at least answer for myself. In the preceding example, I chose to bulk up on theory because I expected the client to feel patronised if I didn't give them something really substantial to get their heads around. Having said that, I have noticed that I have also, in the past, added elements to my explanations simply in order to feel adequate in the room amongst 'business people'. On the positive side, we don't work in a simple environment: people and their capabilities, drives and fears are complex and thus present us with assignment situations that are complicated. It can be difficult to keep to the basics when the situation seems to demand a fuller explanation.

But there's more to it than that. Perhaps the more irresistible drive to complicate and over-enhance has frequently emerged from my worries about whether the substance of the solution that I planned to apply actually had the power to deliver a measurable result. This doubt has been known to urge me to bolt-on extras just in case my idea, on its own, failed to deliver the required outcome.

About six years ago my firm was hired to do a fascinating piece of facilitation aimed at getting a group of about 30 people to come to terms with the fact that their engineering company was about to go to the wall if they didn't act quickly and drastically. Confusingly, the brief also included the caveat 'but don't freak them out by dwelling on the bad news'. I had designed a three-session intervention for the morning. The first comprised the group splitting into two and creating huge murals depicting their current



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situation and what they would have to do to turn things around. With giant pens and huge paper walls to draw on, both groups quickly became enthralled and absorbed by their task as they took the opportunity, for the first time to publicly depict what was to come; to share and confirm the bad news in a safe way – in this case as giant cartoons of plane crashes where no one got hurt and waters infested by menacing but ultimately toothless sharks. The event would have been the greatest success had I not followed my notes to destruction and imposed the second and third parts of my master plan upon them. The three sessions ended in an unsatisfactory, confusing mish-mash. A bit of this and a bit of that. If only I'd had the courage to stop when the required benefit had been delivered. To say: 'You know what, let's scrub what I had planned next – you seem to have got what you wanted. Lunch?'

If those are a couple of the background motives and consequences surrounding this tendency to over-contribute, what are some more of the recognisable triggers? Here are a few that feature prominently in my own practice.

Be sparing

I am in the habit of writing very brief proposals. I never write more than two sides. But what I have noticed is that the length of the words I use is sometimes inversely proportional to the length of the document. So, in this case, whilst I seem to have mastered keeping things short it has been at the expense of becoming jargon-bound. This could be because although I know that I have written winning proposals on just one page a part of me wonders whether I need more barbs on the hook; more different angles in my proposed solution to maximise the chances that just one of them might capture the client's interest and therefore the contract. Another tendency I have demonstrated I can only term as knowledge 'leaks'. I am proud of what I have achieved academically, and it so happens that I also find it very interesting and assume that others will think so too. So faced with an appreciative, inquiring audience, is it any surprise that I find myself giving more than was asked for and more than is strictly needed to progress the situation?

Sometimes I notice myself 'going on' enthusiastically and strain to stop. At other times I will notice myself, weigh up the audience reaction (and they are an audience by now), decide to take a chance with their patience and continue.

Painfully, on the occasions that I fail to control my internal showman, I still recognise that my actions have probably skewed a helping conversation away from fulfilling the needs of the client towards fulfilling the needs of the consultant.

All these issues I have raised demand at least a stab at a solution before this piece ends. So at the risk of complicating things, here are a few possibilities to consider if you have recognised yourself in anything that you have just read.

Be bold

I had a session yesterday with a client I have been working with for almost 18 months. Not for the first time he turned to me and said, 'Paul, I absolutely get the logic of what you are suggesting, and some of the things you are saying we have covered before, but, like before, my challenge remains, as it was right at the beginning, how do I do this when I am in front of the Board, who intimidate me?' The answer was almost too embarrassing to utter because it had been uttered before both by him and by me: 'Practise'. I returned to that answer nevertheless and we began to explore why he found it difficult to practise and experiment when he really wasn't being challenged. The point here is that progress came from going back to the most basic material and not going off on a new methodological safari. So, the first thing I suggest is that you and I should be much braver, more often being prepared to repeat ourselves even though the client wants new magic. Being prepared to lose a pitch because it lacks exoticism (even though it had the guts to succeed) or to deliver a session that ends early because it was really simple (and worked quicker than expected).

The simplicity of an approach, or rather our ability to communicate and execute our approach simply, is a brave stance to take when everyone around us seems to be implying that they want more 'apps' not fewer, more hidden magic than daylight and reality. And beside this need to be brave, it can feel like a momentous and unrealistic task to distil the practice and thinking of many years. You may even

believe that it is reductionist and that such a process does not pay proper respect to the precept of what you do. And yet, as psychologists in the business world, we would do well to take in one piece of our own advice to clients: 'Think about it'. Routinely and naively questioning what we do, far from inciting discontinuity, inconsistency in our work and exposing damaging flaws in our thinking, is vital if we are to succeed in distilling and simplifying what we think about, say and demonstrate. Simplifying things releases us to be light on our feet, to do what works even if it looks like it is too simple to succeed – all in the spirit of serving our clients' best interests even though we might feel exposed by doing or pointing out the obvious.

Be brief

You may also choose to experiment with thinking and talking in terms of the outcome rather than the process. Clients are quite rightly interested in what we can make happen rather than in how we make it happen; we should be telling people about how things will look when we've been rather than how they will look when we are still there. Secondly, actively experiment with describing your offering in one sentence – the real essence of what happens for the better after you have been on site. And thirdly, resist the temptation to revert to the same old way of

describing yourself or your services when you are meeting people for that first time. Don't think too hard. Choose a few, new, simple words. For the ultimate challenge, devise ways to describe your effects on client functioning in three words or less: quicker decisions; better job fit; fewer U-turns; more trust; better hires.

These are just a few things that we can do to nurture the habit of pruning things back to the live wood. Of course, this is not just an exercise aimed at improving the way we market our services, it's about how we can approach complexity with simplicity as a way of delivering a better outcome. It's about how we can help our clients to make quicker progress out of their problems by giving them access to clearer, more concise, more user-friendly psychology without all the complicated extras that they may well have asked for, but honestly didn't need.



'How do I do this when I am in front of the Board, who intimidate me?'