



Don't put your foot in it - put their words in your mouth!



Keith Stacey

It may sound slightly unhygienic but it is far better than putting your foot in it! You may also find that you become a better negotiator as a result.

Our ability to communicate defines us as a highly evolved species. This ability has been fundamental to our evolution from nomadic hunter gatherers to knowledge workers in cyberspace. In fact, when you think of it the degree of planning, coordination and execution necessary to successfully hunt a woolly mammoth while avoiding being eaten by a sabre-toothed tiger is not that much of an evolutionary gap.

Theodore Zeldin in his wonderful essay, "Conversation: How Talk Can Change Your Life" proposes that real conversation can change the way that you see the world and can change you as a result. It is far more than just sending and receiving information. We need to be prepared to change as we enter into these conversations. To quote Zeldin, "Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought." The question is how do we realise that potential?

One way is to have something interesting to contribute by way of an experience, a thought and a point of view. Another key skill is to engage with the other party through listening to what they say. A recent profile of the last remaining investment bank on Wall Street, Goldman Sachs, stated that the firm was the world's biggest user of voice mail. Their staff constantly go out and talk to people to find out what is happening or about to happen. People are prepared to have these conversations because they also provide something of value in return. They understand the importance of reciprocity. However the key differentiator from them and their less successful competitors, is that they understand that information is more invaluable when it is shared. Hence the sheer volume of voice-mail as these new insights are shared throughout the firm.

You may remember from the Scotwork program that part of the argue step is to understand the others position, not to "win". Therefore, listening is a must skill to have in all forms of negotiations.

A survey reported by Robert Bolton in "People Skills" reports that listening takes up more of our waking hours than any other activity. Talking took up 30% while listening was 45%. But listening is far more than hearing. In fact there are 12 separate skills according to Bolton in listening spread over three clusters.



They are:

Attending Skills

- A posture of involvement
- Appropriate body motion
- Eye contact
- Nondistracting environment

Following Skills

- Door openers
- Minimal encouragers
- Infrequent questions
- Attentive silence

Reflecting Skills

- Paraphrasing
- Reflecting Feelings
- Reflecting meanings
- Summative reflections

If you find this list daunting it may be appropriate to have a conversation with someone about the whole topic. Both books are recommended reading:

Robert Bolton, *People Skills* , Simon and Schuster ISBN 0 7318 0031 1

Theodore Zeldin, *Conversation*, Harvill Press ISBN 1 86046 767 9

By Keith Stacey