



Harnessing a Brain-Friendly Style of Communication:

By Synaptic Potential



WHITE PAPER

Effective leadership communication is often much more about being persuasive than it is about the art of a good conversation. But why is it that some forms of communication work better than others? And what forms of communication works best from the perspective of the human brain? How can you win the brain over? How do you “talk it’s language”? And how can you tap into the neural mechanisms which make it tick.

This resource will cover some of the insights arising from the field of neuroscience which help inform on how to make sure your communication approach is “brain friendly”.

Conversational Turn Taking



The brain is an amazing organ.

Just take the process of having a conversation with someone you know well. It is a marvellous example of how good the brain is at multi-tasking [1]. You have to listen to what the other person is saying, whilst simultaneously creating and adjusting your own response, and your breathing [2], to be ready for delivery the split second they have stopped talking.

And it really is only a split second that you have. In fact some research suggests that the gap between speakers can be as little as 200ms [3], requiring you to be mentally on the ball to ensure that you can take the opportunity to get your point across.

To do this effectively, the brain is also on the lookout for a range of verbal [4] and non-verbal [5] cues that the speaker gives off which indicate when they are about to finish speaking. Cues like their amount of eye contact, their gaze direction, speech inflections, choice of words and body gestures. These are all on offer for you to pick up on. And they make the difference between a good conversation and a great one.

Don't give your already busy brain more than it can elegantly handle and take the time to focus in on the subtle conversational cues that are there for your benefit.



Communicating Fluently



Being “fluent” is a phrase that you most often hear in the context of learning a language. And if someone asked you whether you are “fluent” in your native language, you would most likely answer yes.

But are you?

Because here, we aren’t talking about fluency simply from the perspective of your linguistic abilities, we are talking about fluency from the perspective of your brain.

And to your brain, being “fluent” means something a bit different.

To your brain, when it hears or sees something “fluent” it means that it is easy to mentally process [6]. That it requires minimum cognitive effort to “get your head around”. That it is clear, straightforward and just seems to “be true” and “makes sense” to you. Fluency can also mean that something seems familiar [7], even when it isn’t, simply because it is so easy to “get”.

And all this means that something that is perceived as “fluent” - in other words something that is easy for the brain to make sense of without having to invest too much neural power - is more liked, more persuasive, and more likely to be taken on board [8]. This is because the brain is constantly looking for ways to “take the easy road”, therefore preserving its precious neural resources.

You have likely experienced many moments in you life when the words that flow from your mouth seem to come across effortlessly in a way that just works - where they fit together perfectly to make the point you are trying to put across. And opposingly, you have probably had moments where the words tumble out in a rather confused and jumbled manner and where you just can’t find the right way to convince, persuade and get your point across. The former is an example of when you are communicating fluently, the latter when you are communicating influently.

Some other examples of fluent communication to keep in mind when you are trying to put together that next big pitch to win over a client or team with a new product or initiative are shown in the table below

To be fluent, trusted and influential, make sure you’re well prepared, in the right state of mind and have the right visual aids to enhance your message.

Examples of Fluent Communication taken from a review article by Adam Alter from NYU and Daniel Oppenheimer from Princeton [9].

Rhyming aphorisms seem truer than non rhyming aphorisms

Absence of disfluent speech markers like “uh” or “um” implies truth

Easily retrieved stimuli are preferred to difficult-to-retrieve stimuli.

Stimuli against highly contrastive backgrounds are preferred to stimuli against less contrastive backgrounds.

Easier-to-imagine travel destinations are preferred to difficult-to imagine destinations.

Statements written in easy-to-read font inspire confidence

Words written in easier-to-read font seem more familiar than words written in difficult-to-read font.

Easier to process text seems to have been written by a more intelligent author.

Easier-to-imagine events seem more likely to happen

Avoiding Ambiguity



Although it might seem obvious to say that it is important to make sure your key take home messages are communicated clearly, it becomes even more so when you realise that the adult brain has an in-built aversion to ambiguity.

But your brain hasn't always felt this way [10]. When you were a young infant, ambiguity was the norm in a world that was novel and surprising. Coming across something ambiguous wasn't to be actively avoided. In fact it was something to be explored and learnt about.

But as an adult we have developed an aversion to ambiguity (and some people have this more than others). A bias that is in place because the brain computes many of its decisions in terms of risk and uncertainty [11]. And when something comes across as ambiguous it typically means that your brain has only received half the information. Where it doesn't have all the facts. Where there are gaps that it isn't quite sure how to fill in. And although this can, in some instances, evoke curiosity, it can also elicit feelings of uncertainty.

Communicating in a way that removes any chance of ambiguity means that you are less likely to be met with fearful resistance. Where the uncertainty, and therefore the risk, is removed and the brains' of your audience will be more open to engaging with what you are proposing.

What might seem clear to you might be ambiguous to someone else you can't see inside your head, so do whatever you can to reduce uncertainty in your messages.



Setting Clear Rewards

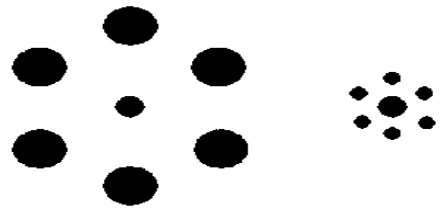
And there is one particular place where avoiding ambiguity is especially important. And that is when you are talking about rewards. In other words, what your audience will personally receive, either socially, emotionally, cognitively or materialistically from listening and taking on board what you are saying.

Because one unwanted consequence of poorly defined rewards is procrastination in those you are trying to motivate for action. And although procrastination is a multifaceted concept at the level of your brain, it is also something that is made worse when the goals and rewards are poorly defined. When the brain hasn't been given sufficient information or encouragement that means it is motivated to complete the desired activity (and therefore is on the lookout for more interesting distractions).

Communication styles where rewards ("what's in it for me") that people will receive are tangible and have a near-future time scale [12] - whether it be personal growth, cognitive enrichment in the form of building new social relationships or knowledge building, reducing stress and conflict, enhancing pride or happiness to name a few - means that you can help your audience overcome their inbuilt tendency for procrastination. They can then implement your key takeaways into their everyday workplace with a clear and rewarding sense of satisfaction.

Think about what is motivating for your audience and make sure you highlight these elements within your key messages to encourage them to take on board what you are saying.

The Importance of Context



But clarity isn't the only thing that is important to the brain. Context is also important. And within context, one thing especially matters. Framing.

But what is framing?

Framing is when you deliberately place a context around a particular point you are putting across which helps to influence the action or opinion of your audience [13]. Sometimes the way you frame the information means that what you are proposing sounds more risky to the brain. Conversely you can also frame information in a way that sounds less risky to the brain. And remember, the brain generally dislikes risk.

A simple example of this is with gains and losses, where the process of framing something as a gain vs a loss can change the way your audience thinks about it, even if the actual facts and figures you are presenting are exactly the same.

Framing is one example of the many irrational biases that people take on board when trying to make judgements and decisions about what they are listening to or watching. Knowing how these biases work at the level of your brain, are critical for communicating a persuasive narrative.

Think of the different ways that you can say the same message, and then pick the one that represents the most effective means of getting your point across.



Being On The Same Wavelength

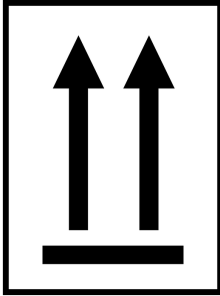
It is well known that to communicate well, you have to know your audience well. Do your homework on them. And then this helps you to get on their wavelength.

And research shows that you can really become aligned at a neural level when you are communicating and collaborating on a shared task [14]. What's more creating a shared attentional space - in other words making sure you and your audience are aligned in what you are paying attention to at each particular moment in time - means that they are more likely to put in the extra mental effort and remember the content better [15].

But reading the mind of your audience goes beyond attention. It also includes emotion. And the brain has an inbuilt way of detecting the emotional state of another person - of reading their feelings. And this is through emotional contagion or empathy [16]. This is the process by which the brain pays attention to [17], and then mimics or "play out" the feelings of others through its pattern of brain activity (using the so-called mirror neuron system [18]). Making sure that your style of communication is aligned with the emotional needs of your audience, will add an empathetic dimension to your communication style and be detected by their brain's prosociality radar.

Engage your audience and direct their attention to where you want them to focus. See your audience as friends not foe and be empathetic to their wants, needs and feelings.

Strategic Alignment Between Words and Brain



Effective communication therefore results from the strategic alignment between the way you articulate and visually present the points you want to get across, and the way the human brain works.

Being fluent, avoiding ambiguity, framing your words effectively, utilizing an empathic approach and emphasising rewards are just a few of the cognitive tricks which can be implemented to ensure that you are communicating in line with the way the brain works, rather than going against the neural grain.

And in doing so, you are ensuring that you are able to effectively persuade, mentor and lead the individuals who are essential to the collective success of your organisation.

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