



Tools Training Strategy Facilitation

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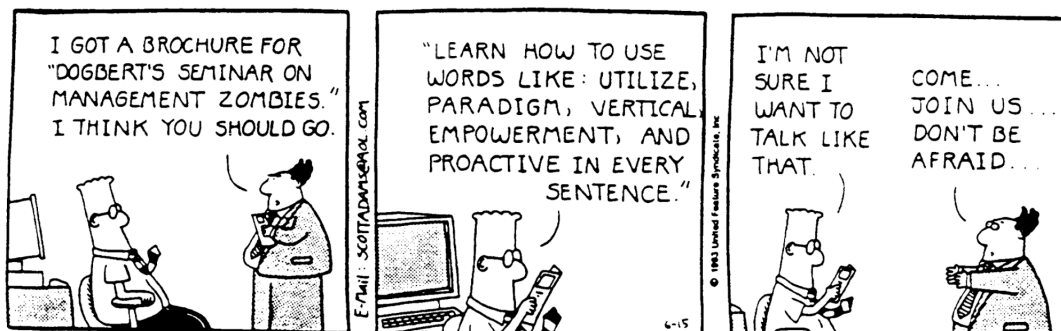
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Four Universal Laws of Communication

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Les Robinson

Corporations and agencies have a marvellous ability to become their own bubble universes - isolated islands of time-space that operate according to their own physical laws and generate their own mutually indecipherable languages.



Humour is one thing that can puncture the bubble and bring us back to reality. The other is the corporate near death experience - a shock which forces us to start 'listening to our customers' (as the jargon goes). For instance, a composting education program that apparently causes fewer people to compost. Or a waste education program that apparently causes fewer people to care about overpackaging. Or a stormwater education program which results in no detectable changes at all! When we get results like this - and we all do from time to time (that's how we learn) - then it's a chance to rethink our fundamentals. One of these is the nature of human communication itself.

Even the best communicators get tangled up in jargon and start mistaking policy for reality, and data for truth. So it can sometimes be useful to go back to basics.

So...why do some of our communications 'reach people' and some fall flat?

I want to suggest 4 rules for communication which are so fundamental that they underpin every form of communication, but yet are so pervasive that they can be easy to miss.

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OK...let's go back to 50,000 BC. It's winter...well, it's always winter in the Pleistocene Era...and we all live in tribes made of extended families, and we need to kill bears and insects to survive.

Now, I want to know...What KINDS of human communication exist in this most fundamental of human ages?

To short-circuit an interesting brainstorm: I'll assert that there are only three truly fundamental kinds of human communication:

- **Stories**

How the Bear Star got there. How uncle Grunt lost his fingers.

Stories work best when they are vivid narratives that engage the emotions and imaginations of the listeners.

In modern terms, stories are how we communicate visions, norms, models, desires.

- **Warnings**

Stay away from the tar pit, Gurk!

Warnings work best when there is a credible threat of consequences or punishment.

Modern examples include: "No parking". "What are you really throwing away (\$200)."

- **Conversations**

I want some grilled monkey. What's that crawling in your hair?

Conversations are of many kinds: quizzes, gossip, interrogatives, directions.

Directions seem to be the most common kinds of communications used by environmental educators. Now it's important to realise that *directions* are a common - if highly attenuated - form of conversation.

That's because a direction only makes sense if it is the answer to an implicit question.

(The bear is coming straight at me, what should I do?) *Run really fast Gurk!*

This explains why the 'how-to-use-your-new-bin' info what come with a new waste service works as a communication. Because the arrival of the new bin makes most people ask salient questions: *How do we use it? When do we put it out? What are we allowed to put in it?* Since these questions are really in people's minds the information they receive can be part of a genuine conversation. So the info fits. So 'new bin' education programs are undoubtedly the most effective environmental education programs that currently exist (the data proves it).

On the other hand - why does the routine '100 Hints on Being Waterwise's brochure fail to connect? Well, for lots of reasons, but partly because your average citizen does not spend much of their day wondering how to become 'Waterwise'. Do it doesn't answer a question in people's minds. So it fails as a conversation.

So,

The first universal law of communication:

Either you are having a conversation
Or you are telling a story
Or you are issuing a warning
Or you are not communicating.

As environmental educators, how do we make sure we are having real conversations? Well, we can talk to people directly (stalls, phone, meetings), we can train intermediaries (peer education), or we can spend enough time really listening to people be able to anticipate the questions they are asking, and be there with the answers.

One of the real barriers to councils and government agencies being effective environmental education, is that funding policies often force us to answer questions people have never asked, or are no longer asking. Nowadays, for instance, the biggest environmental questions people want answers to are about chemicals in the home and family health. But since there is no formal funding on this issue, we are not allowed to answer this questions. Instead we may feel constrained to keep answering questions that fewer and fewer people are asking (or never asked): like *'How can we reduce waste going to landfill?'*

In short, as everyone knows: the best conversationalist is a good listener.

I completed a fascinating project recently...looking at the way councils and agencies involve their publics in decisions about new waste facilities.

This sounds boring - but in fact there could hardly be a hotter or more controversial topic than choosing technologies, and sites, for waste management facilities.

And so I got into the literature on risk communication, and I discovered something profound that underlies all communications.

Second universal law of communication:

You are always communicating your credibility, whether you know it or not.

That is, we may think we are communicating facts, we are always also communicating our *trustworthiness* and *believability*.

That's because we - as listeners - are constantly surrounded by a seething ocean of factoids, opinions, assertions, claims, suppositions and gossip. We have to decide which things are believable or we'll go mad. But unless we have direct personal experience of an issue, we can't really know where the truth lies. Hence we are forced to rely on the opinions and expertise of others.

Hence we all carry a kind of credibility scorecard in our heads. We are constantly assessing and reassessing the credibility of speakers and agents of news.

As a result the *credibility* of the speaker can be the most important part of a message - more important than the facts or story they are telling.

There is a nice illustration of this: In New York state a community consultation for comprehensive waste management strategy involved sending out detailed surveys to members of the public. But as part of a research project, 2,000 of the 2,600 surveys included well-argued 'for' and 'against' cases for 5 different waste management options written by independent experts. These were placed in side bars next to the questions, and people were asked to read the side bars before answering. The options were recycling, incineration, out-of-county disposal, landfills and composting. Then the respondents were asked to rate them according to their health and environmental safety, and whether they should form part of the final strategy. 1128 responses were received. (McComas and Scherer 1999).

Now, which group do you think rated the technologies as safer - those with the for and against cases, or those with no information?

The answer is: those who received the strong for and against arguments rated the options as significantly *safer*. Now this is counter-intuitive. Surely those with 'against' information, would be alerted to dangers they had not considered and find technologies such as incineration and landfill less safe.

The researchers did not offer an explanation for this, but there is reason to believe the explanation is that those citizens who received balanced arguments naturally perceived the agency was more trustworthy, and hence the technologies less hazardous.

In effect, people could say "well I don't understand all the facts, and it seems very complicated, but it's obvious to me that any agency which is unafraid to publish the views of it's opponents is unafraid of the truth, therefore I have reason to trust it is acting in the public interest."

In fact this surprising relationship between expert credibility and perceived safety has been proposed in many studies.

'Results suggest that the lay public relies on social trust when making judgements of the risks and benefits when personal knowledge about a hazard is lacking.' (Siegrist and Cvetkovich 2000)

The effect is that ideas, proposals or technologies introduced by credible institutions are perceived to be more beneficial and less risky than those introduced by untrustworthy institutions.

So how do you communicate credibility?

Credibility is gained by personal and organisational performance, by evidence of independence, and by evidence that the expert is acting with the interests of the public in mind.' (Petts 1997)

A number of studies in the fields of communication research and risk management have tried to unpack the public's understanding of 'trustworthiness'. These variously suggest that the public perceives trustworthy authorities as possessing:

- competence and expertise;
- dynamism;
- lack of bias;
- fairness;
- concern for the community's well-being;
- honesty and openness;

- consistency and predictability. (McComas and Trumbo 2001)

As educators, we can use these qualities as a check list for our communication efforts (or those of our councils and agencies). However, it turns out that the surest ways to communicate trustworthiness are to involve trusted people in your communication program, by:

- endorsements (ie. demonstrating that trustworthy people support your vision - as the 'faces' and 'voices' of your program);
- peer education (ie. train peers to talk directly to members of the public);
- participative design and ownership (ie. involve members of the audience as co-producers of the communication).¹

One of the surest ways we destroy credibility, however, is by not keeping promises. Hence one-year funding is the biggest enemy of environmental education. We are just beginning to form relationships with members of the public and win their trust, when suddenly the funding is over and we disappear from sight again...and our credibility is blown as a result.

And a solution to this is the 'meta-brand'. An example is Kiama Council's 'Kiamasphere' program. Funding cycles may come and go...but the Kiamasphere program maintains a permanent presence, supported by grants from whatever sources are available. And because it is a holistic lifestyle promotion program, rather than a fragmented 'thou shalt' program, it has something to suit all funders. At least in principle - it will be interesting to see how it evolves.

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This is something I've learned from practice:

The third *universal* law of communication:

All learning involves doing.

We know that *awareness alone* does not lead people to take voluntary action or change their lives.

We know that most people who are capable of acting positively for the environment *already* know enough about the costs and benefits of their actions to make the necessary changes. And yet they so rarely do.

So there is clearly much more to the ecology of personal change than simply awareness. Hence our work as communicators needs to focus on the actions,

¹ For more on Participative Action Research, see www.greencom.org/greencom/eec.handbook.asp

or behaviours of our audiences, rather than simply on the transfer of information.

This is important because:

- actions are what make a difference for the environment;
- actions are measurable, hence we can observe the impact of our work and give our audience's feedback;

and even more importantly:

- *people learn best by doing*: hence our most effective work as environmental communicators may be when we *facilitate experiential learning* by the participants in our programs.

This explains the difference in impact between the following factoids:

"The US stock market last week lost more value than the entire funds held in the Swiss banking system".
(Response: "interesting, but so what?")

"Air fares will increase significantly after 30 October."
(Response: potential travellers will see this as a strong call to action: book now to avoid the increase.)

In fact this reflects the basic principles of adult learning:

- Adults need to know why they need to know something
- Adults need to learn experientially
- Adults need to approach learning as problem solving
- Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value.

As communicators, this tells us that creating *opportunities* for action may be our most effective work. Organising events or how-to demonstrations (where the public can experiment with new products or practices), and working with action groups can be powerful ways for people to safely leave their comfy zones and learn through *experience*.

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The fourth *universal* law of communication:

If your are not in accord with your audience's values,
you are not communicating

'Values' can be a vague abstraction. But, to be concrete, I think of values as places, experiences or qualities which are valued by people.

Look at the way commercial advertisers incorporate values into their campaigns (below).

They are showing us how to 'cut-through' to the things that matter in people's lives. As environmental educators, we need to make similar connections to deeply-held values. That is the essence of motivation.

Possibly the stupidest thing we do as educators is get tangled up in the technocratic policy fragments that are handed down with government funding. Instead of promoting safe, healthful, desirable lifestyles, we find we are talking about stormwater or waste. Then we fragment waste in recycling and composting and toxics. Then we fragment recycling into steel recycling and paper recycling. The public cannot possibly relate to these tiny abstractions - they just want to know how to lead better lives. Values are holistic - they relate to experienced life, not to governmental policy.

Now, while we ponder these images, I'll issue a challenge: I want you to see if you can imagine a recycling campaign that doesn't feature waste or bins, but relies instead on strong, commonly-held, positive, human values.

Hint: it's a little cynical, but an easy way to figure out if people value an experience or quality is to ask: will they pay for it? For instance: safety, health, convenience, wellbeing, beauty, community, privacy, sex, power, popularity, a laugh

Q1: What are they selling?

Q2: What values are they appealing to?



A1: Home composting.

A2: Leafy tranquility and naturalness



A1: Natural cleaning ideas

A2: Having a healthy family



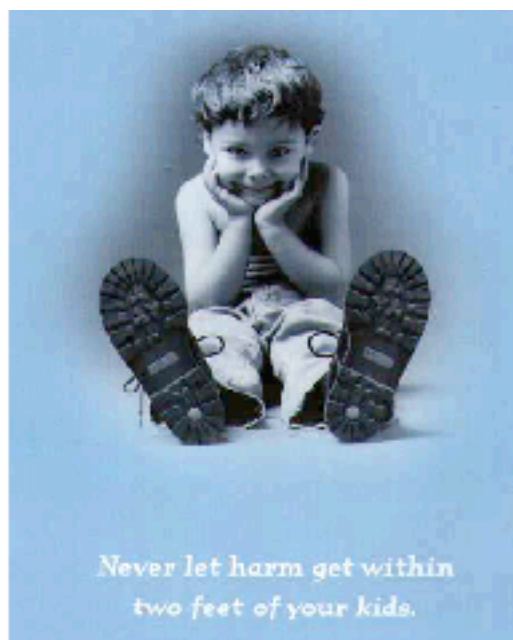
A1: Don't speeding

A2: Young men's fear of killing small children.



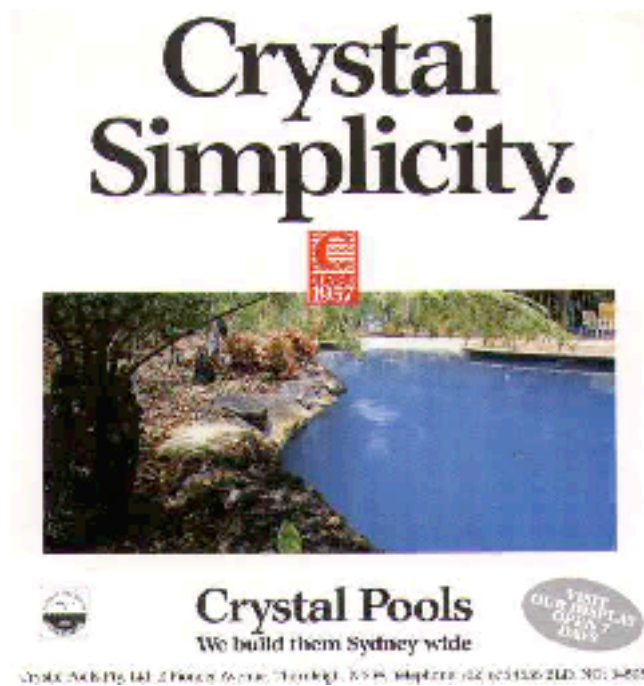
A1: Don't smoke

A2: Having a healthy child



A1: Shoes

A2: Keeping your children safe from harm



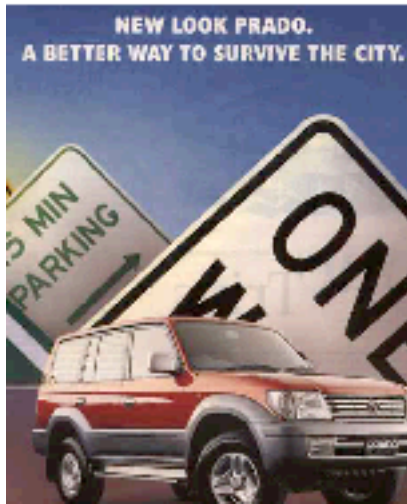
A1: Swimming pools

A2: Tranquility and naturalness



A1: Pesticides!

A2: Fear of pesticides



A1: A car

A2: Safety and security, with a hint of domination.

To conclude, here are the Four Universal Laws of Communication again:

The first universal law of communication:

Either you are having a conversation
Or you are telling a story
Or you are issuing a warning
Or you are not communicating.

Second universal law of communication:

You are always communicating your credibility, whether you know it or not.

The third universal law of communication:

All learning involves doing.

The fourth universal law of communication:

If you are not in accord with your audience's values, you are not communicating

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