# The Three Dimensions of Clear and Effective Communication

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**Overview**

1. The message

    a. What do you *want* to say?
    b. What do you *need* to say?
    c. *Why* do you need to say it?

2. The audience

    a. The potential impact.
    b. The intellectual bridge.
    c. The emotional bridge.

3. The delivery

    a. Structure and code.
    b. Tone and timing.
    c. Measurement and loopback.

(In this discussion, "reader" can be taken as "listener", "speaker" as "writer", etc.)

**The Message**

- **What do you *want* to say?**

  More often than not, what drives us to "speak up" is some immediate stimulus, a poke in the eye, which gets us emotionally charged and ready to set the world straight. I can do no better than quote Laurence J. Peter (or someone) who said, "Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret." Again more often than not, what you *want* to say is rarely what you should say.

- **What do you *need* to say?**

  When you come to grips with what *needs* to be said, you're well on your way. This doesn't automatically equate with your being the one who has to say it, or that it needs to be said right now, or painted on the side of a barn, it simply means that it *needs* to be said by someone at some point in some fashion. All these things need to be considered.

- ***Why* do you need to say it?**

  Answering this question helps you think more clearly about your motivations and the condition of the audience. It may be something as simple as a quiet word to a friend (because he's your friend) that he needs a haircut before he goes into an employment interview, or as complex as arguing a case at the Supreme Court because that's what you were hired to do. Understanding the "why" helps you frame your approach so that it flows from a genuine and sincere heart.

**The Audience**

- **The potential impact.**

  No one can be entirely sure what will be the impact of what they say or write, but the great communicator needs to have a strong sense of what might result if the communication goes very well, or very badly. Will they vote for you? Divorce you? Buy your services? Shoot you? Without a functioning crystal ball you can never be certain, but to open your mouth without considering this is folly.

- **The intellectual bridge.**

  "The bridge" is the technical term I use to describe the process of getting the listener from where they are to where you want them to be. Intellectually, you need to have a very good grip on what the listener currently knows and understands, where you want to take them, and the necessary steps you have to help them walk along the "bridge".

- **The emotional bridge.**

  If you're teaching calculus you don't need to worry too much about the emotional process of learning (although I have a good deal to say about the emotional issues of learning even "dry" subject matter.) But if you're about to try to convince a Mormon to become a Baptist, you need to think long and hard about the emotional journey you are asking him or her to take.

**The Delivery**

- **Structure and code.**

  Structure has to do with the logical and emotional steps through which you will take your listener or audience. It also considers the delivery vehicle-- oratory, PowerPoint, music, Q&A, a lecture, a chat……

  Code has to do with the language you use, the level of language, devices such as the "dog whistle", symbols, pictures, Morse Code, Semaphore, and the thousand other ways that humans communicate. Code includes grammar, spelling, linguistic devices, literary devices, even such things as typesetting-- all these things are symbols which convey meaning to the listener or reader.

- **Tone and timing.**

  Tone has to do with the "level" of language as well as the attitudinal inferences which may be taken from a speaker's style. It tells the listener much about you, for better or for worse, and it tells the listener what you think of him or her. For example, if I use "street language" when addressing the judge or the bishop, it likely denotes a lack of respect.

  Tone has a lot to do with the comfort level, and hence receptivity, of the audience. The better you gauge your audience and "get on their wavelength", the better your message will be received.

There are two aspects of timing: when to deliver the message, and when to deliver a component of the message. Every great joke teller knows that timing is everything, but not everyone knows that for every message there is a season. Your message may be very important for the audience, but not just now. A good message delivered at the wrong time is a bad message.

- **Measurement and loopback.**

"You can't manage what you don't measure" is a truism of business management and it is a truism of communication. If you deliver a message without gauging whether it "took", you may have wasted your time. Worse, you may have annoyed the listener, made no progress, and lost political capital. Every great communicator is constantly "reading" his or her audience.

Having "read" the audience, formally or informally, the great communicator then loops back to pick up stragglers, fix the potholes and reinforce any points which didn't stick as well as was hoped. And then measures again.

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