

Leadership Skills Series: 1 - Developing Commercially Viable Ideas in Meetings

By Nick Anderson



During the last 6 months I have been coaching different professionals in how to reduce project costs and delays. This got me thinking about the last few blogs. The theme has been aligning people for change – coping with the economic turbulence we live in today.

All Leaders need communicate better and more effectively when there is a lot of uncertainty and turbulence. So, I got to thinking about practical tools that most leaders can use to “Talk Their Talk”. This is the start of a five part series on developing Leadership Behavioral Skills.

It is based on my 11 years with Huthwaite Research Group where we developed research based models of effective communication including:

- Developing effective solutions
- Negotiating
- Selling
- Facilitating

(Thanks to Neil Rackham, Simon Bailey & Linda Marsh of Huthwaite)

In this Blog, I want to start with a core leadership skill – **Developing Commercially Effective Ideas in Meetings**

What type of research was involved to develop these models?

All these models and subsequent research projects are based on a large scale research project in the late 60’s (Warr, Bird, Honey & Rackham) to

develop a truly descriptive and useful system for classifying behavior. This long and tedious process considered many potential categories. The researchers finally concluded that a practical list of categories could be produced if the selected behaviors met 5 basic criteria. They were capable of being:

1. Measured accurately
2. Easy to understand
3. Distinct from other categories
4. Change how often it is used
5. Related to effective performance

What sort of things did they come up with?

They came up with three classes of behavior:

Initiating



Initiating behaviors are proposals or suggestions to the group that call for action. New proposals and an addition to a proposal are both examples of subject initiation. There are two initiating behaviors: ***Proposing*** and ***Building***.

Proposing brings forth a new suggestion, proposal, or course of action (e.g. "I suggest that we organize the project into five modules." or "The File Menu can contain an option to print"). After all, a discussion has got to start somewhere.

Building takes the form of a proposal, but actually extends or further develops a proposal made by another person (e.g. "...and your plan would be even better if we added a scroll bar at the edge of the window." or "A pizza sounds great, and some sodas would be good too."). Since the initial

proposal is not the final solution, building is effective in producing an alternative or revised plan.

Reacting

Reacting behaviors involve the affirmation of or objection to a person, his/her opinions, or an issue. There are three reacting behaviors:

Supporting, Disagreeing, and Defending/Attacking.

Supporting is a behavior that makes a conscious and direct declaration of agreement with or support for another person, or his/her concepts and opinions (i.e. "Sounds okay to me" or "Fine"). Positive feedback is always good.

Disagreeing is the direct objection to another person's opinions. Disagreeing is an issue-oriented behavior (e.g. "Your third point just isn't true." or "What you're suggesting just won't work."). This behavior is normal in a discussion, but don't let it evolve into a Defending or Attacking behavior.

Defending/Attacking entails attacking a person directly or by acting defensively. This behavior is usually people-oriented, and involves value judgments and emotional overtones (i.e. "That's stupid!" or "Don't blame me; it's not my fault. It's John's responsibility."). Defending and Attacking will only bring unhappiness and plenty of tension to the group. There are better ways of handling a discussion. If you are being verbally attacked, try not to play into the instigator's hands by shouting back. Instead try to speak rationally and direct the discussion to the issue at hand rather than playing a game of Who's To Blame.

Clarifying

Clarifying behaviors attempt to clarify an individual's or group's understanding of the issues. Information interchange and summarization are involved in the clarification. ***Testing Understanding, Summarizing, Seeking Information, and Giving Information*** are the four behaviors that comprise this category.

Testing Understanding seeks to establish whether or not an earlier contribution has been understood by the individual. It differs from seeking information in that it is an attempt to ensure agreement or consensus of some kind, and refers to a prior question or issue (i.e. "Can I take it that we

all now agree on our tasks assignments for this week?"). This behavior is similar to Summarizing, but takes the form of a question.

Summarizing restates the content of previous discussions or events in a compact form. This behavior can be useful to ensure that the entire group is up to date with events that have transpired (e.g. "So far we have agreed that John will finish module A, while Maria and I begin module B."). This will insure that you and the rest of the group have a clear understanding, even if the summary isn't in the form of a question.

Seeking Information seeks facts, opinions, or clarification from another person pertaining to a proposal (i.e. "Can anyone tell me which page this is on?" and "Have you tested that thoroughly?"). This behavior insures that you are up to date with the topic of discussion. If you have questions, ask them as soon as possible (i.e. don't leave questions until the night before the project is due).

Giving Information offers facts, opinions or clarification to a proposal (e.g. "The new system is easier to operate." and "I'm worried about missing the deadline."). Feedback is always appreciated even if it is not always positive.

Process Behaviors

Process behaviors entail the obstruction of or opening up of the discussion process to group members. **Bringing In** and **Shutting Out** are the two behaviors that constitute Process Behaviors.

Bringing In invites views or opinions from a member of the group who is not actively participating in the discussion (i.e. "Lee, what is your opinion on the layout of the User's Manual?"). This behavior may introduce some refreshing new ideas from a shy or reserved team member.

Shutting Out excludes another person or reduces their opportunity to contribute. Interruption is the most common form of shutting out (e.g. Lee: "David, what do you think?" Eric: "I think..." — Eric has interrupted David and shut him out of the conversation). This behavior may seem harmless, but it is disrespectful and will not give someone the opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

How was this research used to in finding better ways to run meetings?

It turns out effective meetings showed that all three main behavior groups were present in a balanced way. They found that once a group became

locked into using one or two of these major classes the results they produced were impaired.

Case Studies

Here are some cases studies of groups and their meetings that were either high or low in Initiating, Reacting or Clarifying?



High on Initiating

- Too many ideas and ideas to handle
- Lack of attention to detail
- "up in the clouds" feeling

Group – Research team in Chemical Industry

Problem – On surface seemed very creative, innumerable ideas. Management asked for reducing severe dust problems in one of their plants. First meeting came up with 14 viable methods. As this was urgent they reported – Production Director said "which one" after 5 subsequent meetings they had not reached a decision and generated 6 new ideas!!!

High on Reacting

- Becomes emotional
- Misunderstandings become more frequent

- People take sides – entrenched

Group: Shop Stewards in Manufacturing

Problem – Coping with a change in economic climate – Management taking a more consultative approach letting people in advance of potential change – previously reacted to Management proposals e.g. wages benefits. They couldn't get out their traditional mold. They left Initiating to management and were low in clarifying which led to more misunderstandings

High on Clarifying

- Very time consuming
- Obsession with minor details
- “swimming in syrup”

Group – British Civil Servants

Problem – The meaning of the meaning. 90% behavior was clarifying. Their Initiating Behaviors was so low that they became stuck in minor detail. This was compounded by Low levels of reacting behavior so no one knew who supported or disagreed with other group members



That's the high side of the problem, what happens when you get groups that are low on these three areas?

Low on Initiating

- Backward looking
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Undue attention to detailed analysis

Group: Production Control Committee in the Engineering Industry.

Problem: Representatives from Production, QC, Maintenance, Industrial Engineering and Production Planning had jobs which overlapped so that when problems came up there were disputes as to who was blame.

"We seem to be very good at dissecting situations and finding who is to blame. Perhaps we should be spending some time finding ways to prevent things occurring in the first place"

Low on Reacting

- Tendency for Repetition
- People withhold important information
- Awkward and forced

Group: Systems Analysts presenting proposals to a group of staff members

Problem: The Systems Analysts came up with lots of proposals for change i.e. High Initiating. As a result Staff became nervous about these proposals and the technical jargon so they were high in Clarifying but did not commit – The Analysts Reacting already low levels dropped and gave more detail i.e. they were classic Low Reactors so the confusion continued. This is typical of specialists meeting decision makers and most know the discomfort of presenting to decision makers

Low Clarifying

- Meeting becomes disorganized
- Hasty decisions are made
- People cannot agree afterwards on what has been decided

Group: New York Advertising Agency

Problem: Clarifying

This active & dynamic group responded to a client brief with everyone talking at once. There were loads of ideas, plenty of excitement and

enthusiasm i.e. extremely high Initiating Behaviors. Also they were high in Reacting Behaviors with a chorus of approval or disapproval and consequently very low Clarifying Behaviors. So confusion reigned.

At the end they were asked to write what had been agreed. There were no two versions that were the same. Later further research showed people leaving a meeting could have an average of 5 misunderstandings per person.

What can we learn from these case studies in terms of where we are in this recession?

Leaders know that meetings are inherently expensive and today there isn't time to have the sort of problems illustrated. Leaders need to hold themselves accountable to managing meetings so that

1. Initiating, Reacting and Clarifying Behaviors must be present and balanced if meetings are to be successful.
2. They are alert to the impact of High or Low Reacting seriously impairs productivity
3. They recognize that different meetings have very different needs, so what works for problem diagnosis will not work for evaluating a production plan
4. Some Meetings need to be high on one of the three – although you need to be cautious of High Clarifying. Leaders have to question if a meeting is the most productive use of meeting where there is High – Information Exchange