

Communication: managing the challenges – celebrating success: Mel Larsen (nee Jennings), Consultant, Coach and Trainer and William Brand, Coach and Trainer

This session was about the way we listen and speak to each other; the use of praise and constructive feedback.

Mel suggested that the biggest mistake made about communication was the assumption that it was taking place at all. She explained what she meant in a group exercise. People paired up, and each was asked to introduce themselves by name, make some kind of personal statement and declare what they wanted to get out of the day. Each member of the pair was asked to repeat back to their partner what they had been told.

Some of the group said they found it difficult to repeat *exactly* what was said. It was concluded upon discussion that one of the blocks to listening is a tendency to listen to yourself rather than the other person.

Praise and feedback

Mel and William went on to talk about the benefits and pitfalls of giving and receiving praise. The group brainstormed some ideas on why giving praise is often difficult:

- Shyness;
- Time;
- Jealousy;
- Embarrassment;
- Being taken for granted – belief that others already know they are doing a good job;
- Desire not to be seen as patronising.

And why receiving praise was also difficult:

- Embarrassment;
- Suspicion;
- Surprise;
- Lack of self-esteem and the belief that one is not important enough..

What is good about praise is that it acknowledges and gives feedback on behaviour that delivers desired results. It can motivate people to develop their performance and it fosters a

great working environment where people are more willing to accept constructive feedback as well.

To give people the first hand experience of this, the participants – again in pairs – were asked to tackle the following exercise:

- Partner one tells about a time when you were really effective;
- Partner two reflects back what they heard and gives praise;
- Partner one feeds-back how it felt to receive the praise.

The group observed that:

- It was difficult for partner two to reflect accurately the incident that partner one recounted;
- It took a lot of effort;
- There was a tendency to filter out information;
- Intensive listening can produce counter productive self consciousness;
- There was a low-level worry about not looking genuine enough;
- The desire to not get too involved prevented really entering into the spirit of the exercise.

Mel and William's handouts summarised some top tips for giving praise:

- Check it's a good time for them to fully hear what you have to say;
- Give praise at a time close to the behaviour/results you are acknowledging;
- If in person, face them and look them in the eye;
- Be clear: acknowledge specific behaviour or attitudes;
- Put the information into context: say how their behaviour/results support the company/project;
- Be genuine;
- Enjoy the warm glow (yours and theirs!)

Constructive criticism

However, praise is one thing and constructive criticism is another. The group was asked what was its purpose?

- To see your actions from someone else's point of view;
- You might learn something;
- It give you an opportunity to change your behaviour;
- It can help individuals feel noticed.
- It raises self-awareness.

Absence of criticism produces anxiety, a bad atmosphere, unchecked assumptions and conflict.

Healthy relationships depend on open communication. We depend on feedback to check if our behaviour is having the desired effect and producing the desired results. It can help people to improve their effectiveness and develop their performance.

Mel and William suggest getting into the 'praise habit' which allows constructive criticism to take its rightful place:

- Each day commit to praising someone when you normally wouldn't have bothered;
- Aim to have at least four conversations where you praise someone, for every conversation in which you give them constructive criticism;
- Check that you're doing this first and foremost to help the other person, and that you're clear about the benefits to them; your personal gain should be on the back burner during this conversation;
- Put constructive feedback into context (say why it is important), stick to the facts and address the issues directly;
- Conclude with plenty of praise and encouragement to help them to think positively about themselves and bolster their self-confidence.
- Above all – be genuine.

The following is a checklist for offering constructive feedback:

Preparing:

- What do you want to tell them?
- How will they be better off as a result?
- When are you going to tell them?

- Where?
- Who else, if anyone, will be around?
- Are you likely to be disturbed?

The conversation:

- What are you going to say to set the context for them?
- What specifically is the issue? If something didn't work, how can you express this objectively?
- What were the implications? How can you explain these without appearing to put your own slant on things?
- What are some of the things they could do (a) to recover the situation and/or (b) to prevent repeating the same behaviour?
- What questions are you going to ask them to help them decide on their own solutions?

Lastly, Mel and William left participants with a short guide to active listening:

- Question: find out more;
- Reflect: establish that the message is heard and understood;
- Clarify: check meaning, ask for examples;
- Summarise: focus, key points, priorities, round up;
- Challenge: being careful to be appropriate;
- Silence: allowing time for thought and reflection;
- Listen to what is being said (and what is not);
- Listen to how it is being said.

Speakers Biographies

Marksteen Adamson has become highly regarded during his fifteen-year career within the branding industry. With a reputation for being an inspiring creative strategist he has written articles on the subject of corporate and brand identity. He is also a visiting college lecturer and conference speaker. He and his work have made many appearances on television: in a Channel 4 documentary following his re-branding of a state school; on the Richard and Judy Show (showing the branding work on St Kea); on ITV News and the BBC 24 news on *Re-branding a country - Estonia*; and most recently Sky. Marksteen, as global creative director of Interbrand, created and directed numerous global identity programmes, including: *Welcome to Estonia*, a unique brand identity project commissioned by the Estonian Government; award winning brand identity for the merger PricewaterhouseCoopers; the brand identity for the merger between Pharmacia and Upjohn Pharmaceuticals which won several gold awards, including two gold awards for Marksteen's own photography; and the Niceday for WH Smith, which won extensive awards, including two design and art direction club awards, and a design effectiveness award. Other programmes include: Rabobank; Arcadis; AT&T; Guinness Mahon Private Banking; Orange; and the world's largest edible poster for The British Library's international 26 exhibition. Most recently he invented *The Big Cold Turkey* and its foundation to support charities working with youth at risk from alcohol and drugs. As one of the governors, Marksteen is working with a non-governmental organisation helping to build and fund a vocational training centre in Arusha, Tanzania.

Beth Aplin is a director of Henderson Aplin Partnership, a company she started with Pam Henderson this year after leaving Catalyst Arts. She has spent eight years working as a consultant following eight years working for Select Ticketing Systems, installing ticketing systems and managing a team of seventeen. The Henderson Aplin Partnership works with cultural organisations to obtain, retain and maximise the performance of their staff. Beth works closely with customer facing staff and senior managers to achieve business objectives. Pam Henderson is an accredited executive coach and the previous director of the Arts Marketing Association.

Beth specialises in feasibility studies and business planning for ticketing projects, organisational change management, business process review, customer care and staff management and planning,. She has delivered training courses on a wide range of topics, facilitates many board retreats and is a regular speaker at AMA events. She is vice chair of the AMA. Some recent clients include: Shape Arts, Arts About Manchester, Audiences