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Feature: Lights, Camera, Inter-action!

By Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware

This is the last in a three-part series of articles on how to be more effective in these uncertain times. Someone once said “A one-eyed man is king in the land of the blind” (According to [Wikianswers](#) it was Erasmus of Rotterdam, and seems to date from about 1510—but who’s keeping score? And unfortunately that was way before we acknowledged that there are two genders.).

Anyway, there’s no doubt we (all of us) are all in the land of the blind these days. We (the two of us) are doing our best to help the rest of you keep that critical one eye open. We started with “[Concentrating on Concentration](#)” back in February and followed up with “[Getting Things in Order](#)” in March. Now we shift to “Interaction,” or how we (all of us, once again) communicate with our business partners and customers.

Communication (one of the most basic of human activities) is the social glue that binds people together in groups, teams, and communities. And when effective, it is a two-way street. It is the process by which we build trust, understanding, respect, and empathy. It’s trite only because it’s true: business relationships don’t go anywhere or produce mutual benefit without effective communication.

And we don’t mind saying that if that’s true then lot of what passes as “communication” today is garbage that doesn’t do anything even to help people “just get along.” Is mainstream television a two-way, interactive communication process? Jim Cramer, shame on you!

(We, like millions of others, followed the Jon Stewart/Jim Cramer “debate” with genuine curiosity—and some outrage too. But what was remarkable about [their final “confrontation” on The Daily Show](#) was that they had a reasonably civil conversation, in large measure because of their willingness to actually listen to each other. But more on that aspect of effective communication later.)

We are going to offer some practical guidelines you can use to improve, test, and evaluate just how well your communication process is working—whether or not you are inter-acting, or just acting. But first let’s look at what makes “interaction” really work.

First of all, it works for everyone, whether you want it to or not. You can’t really interact with your customers but not your co-workers. You can’t interact with your family but not with your neighbors. It’s part of being a member of the human race (remember John Donne and “No man [there’s that single gender thing again] is an island, entire of himself?”).

If you are really serious about interaction you will practice communicating with everyone, everyday, all the time. And we all have experienced times when that wasn’t happening and we didn’t like it. Think of a customer service agent who wasn’t listening, a politician who wouldn’t shut up, or Uncle Barney who has only got one line and never gets off it.

In our experience effective communication is made up of three basic qualities: *trust*, *connectedness*; and *relatedness*.

Trust is the most basic quality. Trust is an emotional thing. It comes when we share values with others and we can therefore expect them to behave in predictable ways. We trust people when we believe they will act in our best interests even though we aren't there. And without trust true interaction and communication just isn't possible. Trusting relationships are not based on power, or on status or one-up-manship.

Connectedness is a necessary but not sufficient condition of interaction. Simply put, it means there is a common basis for communication. Both parties are concerned about, interested in, or attracted to a similar issue, which then provides a basis for communicating. However, they must also **relate** to that issue. That is, they share a common belief, or a value around that issue. Note the difference. Take politics for example (or not take it, whatever). You can be connected with someone because you are both interested in the outcome of an election—but at the same time not be emotionally related (or even opposed to each other) because you have different philosophical positions. You can take that to the bank. If you are connected with someone, but not related, your communication isn't going to go very far! Test that perspective with Uncle Barney.

So what's our point? The "dark side" of communication is the creation of too many wasteful interactions. The "Let's have a meeting to plan a meeting" kind of thing. Communication activity not directed towards achieving a mutual goal is a total waste. What we want to do is eliminate that waste and channel everyone's energy into more productive (read "effective") interactions. No one has the time these days or if we ever did) to waste time in useless conversation; that's the bottom line.

Okay, how do we improve the quality of our interactions and communications?

One really quick way to separate out wasteful versus purposeful communication is to think through the purpose of an interaction **before** it takes place. It may be as simple as asking, "Why do you want to talk to me?" Or it may be more formal. We like to use purpose statements to guide interactions. Simply ask yourself three questions before committing to a specific interaction:

- What's the ideal thing you want to get out of the communication?
- What's the value added for both parties?
- If that happens, what will each of you be able to do that you couldn't before the conversation?

If you can answer those three questions with clarity you are well on your way to an effective, purposeful interaction.

Now we want to propose some rules for auditing communications to test whether they were effective or not. These are the after-the-conversation rules for deciding whether you should continue the conversation or cut it off. Really effective communicators do these kinds of audits instinctively. Warning: this approach can be **very** un-nerving to BS artists, insurance salesmen, and blow-hards.

Charlie's Rule(s) for testing conversations

- 1) If you're not talking explicitly by your third interaction about what value (e.g., money) might result from the conversation, chances are it isn't going anyplace worthwhile.
- 2) If you haven't gotten to "Well, I believe . . ." by the third conversation, forget it and move on.
- 3) If the other party is displaying TOAD behavior, forget it.

Telling you how good/rich/important he/she is
Overriding—stepping on your comments and ideas
Advising (unsolicited)—her/his values are more important than yours
Directing you—shepherding the conversation

So there you have it. That's our shot on how to manage your interactions in today's turbulent, confusing, and uncertain times. First (in February) we suggested **concentrating** your efforts and focusing on a few important things; next (in March) we suggested bringing some **order** to your actions so you could minimize the energy needed; and lastly, this month we've offered some advice on holding—and evaluating—effective communications.

Our overall theme in this series has been to eliminate wasted time, energy, and resources. We hope we have helped a bit.

Next month we are going to take another, broader look at social networks. No, not those currently popular cell phone calling circles and Internet social sites, but the actual structure of social interactions and how that structure brings value to business and to your life outside of work too.

[Please send your comments directly to us](#), or post a comment on the blog version of this article. We look forward to learning from you. This article is also available online [here](#).

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Direct inquiries to either Charlie Grantham at charlie@thefutureofwork.net, or Jim Ware at jim@thefutureofwork.net.