

Effective Communication

Both Ministers and officials live or die by our communications skills. We often have no other weapon at our disposal. But we are not communicating with machines. We are trying to achieve things by influencing the behaviour of other human beings. Whether written or oral, our communications need to be alive, and for this purpose they need emotion, they need energy and they need intelligence. They also need to be planned.

Emotion

We should never neglect the need for emotion and humanity when we speak and when we write, either for our own or for Minister's signature. Emotions make a very clear impression on those with whom we are communicating, and contribute greatly to the effectiveness of our communications. They should therefore form a small but vital part of almost all communications, including inter-Ministerial correspondence, Ministerial submissions, letters to the public and speeches – indeed any communication in which you are trying to persuade or leave a lasting impression. Dry, official sounding texts are simply less effective in these circumstances.

We must also always be polite and, if there is anything to apologise for – including a late reply – then apologise generously, using the word 'sorry' (as ever, a short Anglo-Saxon word is the most effective). Always try to avoid jargon, officialese, legalese, foreign or Latin phrases, acronyms and abbreviations. And please avoid insincerity. I distrust rounding off sentences at the end of letters e.g. 'I hope you find these comments helpful'. These words are certainly entirely inappropriate if the letter conveys unwelcome news.

Energy

To be effective it is also necessary to impart some sense of motivation, commitment or direction. For instance, it is not enough to demonstrate, in a Ministerial submission, that you are familiar with the facts, and are concerned about them. You also have to show that you intend to do something about the issue. Only then will a Minister be happy to leave you to get on with your job.

Similarly, a Minister, when writing to colleagues or the public, needs to demonstrate that he or she appreciates what is troubling the correspondent and, demonstrate his or her determination to deal with the point at issue.

After you have drafted a letter, take a good look at it to make sure that it passes the above tests.

Intelligence

Your approach to the draft will depend, of course, on whether you are still at the stage of designing your policy, or whether you are implementing or defending it. But, whichever

applies, it is essential that the contents are logical and accurate, whether we are communicating within Whitehall or with the public. Many of our communications deal with subjects which are important either to our Ministers or to sections of the public, or to both. None of us will get very far unless we learn to write accurately and unambiguously, and indeed all experienced civil servants have real skill in this area. It is also essential that we properly explain the considerations which underlie Minister's policies. It is a real cop out to use phrases such as 'It is the department's policy that . . .'. The obvious retort is 'Why?'

The structure of written text can make all the difference, especially if the subject is a complex one. Do not hesitate to make full use of side headings. 'Background' and 'Next Steps' or 'Action' are particularly useful. Also make full use of annexes to reduce the length, and improve the flow, of the main document. If you are asking more than one question, or dealing with more than one issue, consider giving each a separate section and a separate heading. And remember that one table of figures, or one graph, can often do the job of several pages of words.

We sometimes have to deal with people who are highly stressed or obsessive or worse. Such people need to receive very clear unambiguous information and advice, or else you will get absolutely nowhere. It is always a mistake to be rude or to show anger or frustration. Such reactions (a) raise the emotional temperature, and so get in the way of clear communication; (b) immediately make people dislike you, and (c) lay you open to criticism. All these severely reduce your effectiveness.

Planning

Before you turn to your keyboard, dictaphone or pen, or turn up for a meeting, take a little time to decide:

- P** what you expect to the recipient to do once they have read your missive, or what action you expect to be taken following your meeting
- P** when you expect it to be done, and (if appropriate)
- P** how much work you expect to create.

The answers to these questions are not always obvious and, if they are not obvious to you, they will certainly not be obvious to the recipient. It is particularly important to think about the amount of work that you are creating. You may think you are asking a simple question, but the recipient might be able to answer it at a number of levels after varying degrees of research. So do you want them to spend 15 minutes, or 15 hours, on the reply?

The question is particularly relevant if you are addressing a request to several

people. For instance, if you send out a request for briefing or information to the Heads of only 10 Divisions, but they each pass it out to four Branches, and if each Branch then has to do three hours work, you have created 120 hours of work. Even more work can be created by Ministerial correspondence and letters to trade associations and the heads of large companies. Do you really intend this? Could you not target the request more carefully, or write to a sample of recipients?

Once you have answered the above three questions to your own satisfaction, you should include the result in the first few sentences of your letter or minute, or at the end of the meeting. There is no need for this to appear as an order. You can add plenty of words and phrases like 'please', 'I should be grateful if' and 'it would be helpful if'. But do not disguise your expectations. The recipient needs these to be crystal clear.

If you are simply seeking agreement to a proposal, phrase your minute in such a way that a simple 'yes' or 'no' can be given by the recipient, e.g. finish the minute: 'Do you agree please?'.