



Travelling the Yellow Brick Road Together

*Understanding and
Promoting
Small Business
Growth and
Entrepreneurship*

Part 2

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Beyond communication skills

Human relating: a doorway to doing good business

Alison Donaldson & Michael MacMahon



As a writing coach and a public speaking coach, we would like to offer some thought-provoking ideas about business communication. These include: coping with fear and stress; developing ideas jointly; giving your writing a 'social life'; and using stories. But there is one other vital item that often gets overlooked: how to have good conversations. In our view, by



paying close attention to all these crucial aspects of human relating, small business owners and entrepreneurs can unlock a door to doing better business.

Key words

Writing, public speaking, business pitches, communication, stories, conversation, entrepreneurs, SMEs

Most entrepreneurs and business owners probably realise that being good at both speaking to groups and writing – or having people in the team who can do these things – is a great advantage to them and their company. These vital forms of communication enable them to pitch successfully for funding or new business, to get across what is distinctive about a new product or service, and to engage with customers, colleagues and staff. But rather than going over the basics of communication skills, we decided to select seven ideas that we think are relevant in the business context and likely to provoke fresh thinking:

Seven ideas for better business relationships

1. Coping with fear and stress
2. Knowing how you want people to respond
3. Organising your thinking in advance (or not)
4. Developing ideas jointly
5. Giving documents a 'social life'
6. Using stories as well as facts and propositions
7. Recognising the value of conversation.

These points are all relevant not only to speaking in front of groups but also to writing. By paying attention to all of them, we think that entrepreneurs can *become better at human relating* and therefore *more likely to do well in business*.¹

¹ Our only footnote! We have deliberately used the slightly uncommon term 'human relating' as to us it feels much broader than 'communication', which is anyway overused and nowadays often associated with technology.

In selecting just seven aspects, we had to make some tough choices. So, for example, we have not looked specifically at how to use PowerPoint, how to write for social media or how to construct a good sentence – each of which could justify a whole article in itself. But we hope that the ideas we are offering will go beyond the obvious points you might normally find in how-to books and courses in communication skills, or in those ‘ten tips about x’ that pop up so often in the online world.

As we wrote this article collaboratively, we have laid it out in the form of an extended dialogue, with initials MM and AD indicating whose ‘voice’ you are reading at any given point in time. The themes are numbered but there is no right order in which to read.

1. Coping with fear and stress

MM: Public speaking (speaking in front of groups) is the number one phobia for many people. Some fear it even more than death. To quote Mark Twain: “There are two kinds of speakers: (1) the nervous; and (2) liars.” A certain amount of fear is inevitable, but if effectively managed it aids performance. Judi Dench, [interviewed for BBC Radio 4’s Desert Island Discs in 2015](#), admitted to being nervous, whether acting or engaging in public speaking (and she finds the latter worse). But she said: “Fear generates a huge energy. You can use it. When I feel that mounting fear, I think: **Oh yes, there it is!** It’s like petrol.”

One of the best speakers I’ve ever heard was the famous Provost of Blackburn Lawrence Jackson, who spoke frequently at business conferences. He told me: “I’m nervous every time. If I stop being nervous, I’ll stop speaking.” The adrenaline generated by fear gives you the energy that enables your brain to be slightly ahead of your tongue; by the time you’ve ended this sentence the next one is ready.

How to manage nerves is a central part of speaking to a group. The most powerful method in my experience is a form of visualisation: deciding in detail what is the outcome desired, relaxing and then creating a mental picture of that outcome; freeze-framing that picture and carrying the picture around in one’s head until the event.

Legendary boxer Muhammad Ali used that technique. When he attended a press conference to announce a fight for which he was contracted, immediately after the conference was over, Ali would excuse himself, go up to his hotel suite, draw the blinds, sit down and relax, breathe deeply and then create a picture of the fight. More than just creating a picture: he even used to predict in which round he was going to win. He would get into that level of detail. And he would create this picture of the end of the fight, opponent flat on his back, referee raising his own arm in triumph, TV commentator climbing through the ropes: everything. He would ask himself: “How will I feel? What will I see and hear and smell?” And he would then freeze-frame that picture and carry it around for the next two or three months, or whatever it was, until the day. That was his version of what’s sometimes called ‘creative visualisation’. I prefer Ali’s term: ‘future history’.



Painting of Ali by pop artist John Stango

When I talk to coaching clients about this method, I ask how they can tailor it to their own needs and situation. What's *their* future history? Their equivalent of that knockout moment? That is where they go back and remember what was the purpose in giving the speech, the presentation, the pitch; then they can create their own picture of a successful outcome – by their own definition; nobody else's.

The conscious mind can only hold one thought at a time. The subconscious, on the other hand, throws up a stream of thoughts and associations, many of which may be negative. So what Ali was doing was ensuring that whenever the subject of that next fight came up, the image that his subconscious had been trained to throw up was the expectation of a positive outcome. (Another useful approach to quietening the critical inner voice can be found in the [‘Inner Game’ books by Timothy Gallwey.](#))

AD: I think the worst thing to do to overcome fear when speaking to a group is to read from a script or to overwhelm your audience with a long and boring PowerPoint presentation. The trouble is, though, it's not easy to know how to prepare a talk or a pitch that is to be spoken without a script. In my experience, what works best is to create some cues to jog one's memory. These might take the form of key words on cards, or pictures projected on the screen, or even physical 'props' of some kind. If, as well as knowing and caring about our subject, we also have good cues, we shouldn't have a problem remembering what to say – or better still, saying it in a way we've never said it before. There is much to be learnt here from oral societies. Traditionally, the Australian Aboriginals used landmarks as cues to help them narrate the Dreaming (the stories of their ancestors) and navigate huge distances across the Outback.



[Uluru](#)

The risk in literate societies is that we feel obliged to plan what we are going to say in an over-systematic and comprehensive way. But that isn't how the spoken word works.

Fear and stress don't just affect people speaking to groups. They haunt writers as well. As a writing coach, I often hear people say they have difficulty with putting ideas down on the page. Fear of writing may go back to school days, when teachers or parents were quick to point out mistakes. I am often struck by how many clever people are dyslexic and yet manage to write with great imagination.

Writing phobia is not that surprising, given that producing text is a rather unnatural activity. After all, the alphabet was invented a mere 3000 years ago, which is extremely recent in terms of human evolution. And just think about the complexity of using 26 symbols to represent all the sounds of talking. Author Verlyn Klinkenborg hits the nail on the head: "Talking is natural. Writing is not." (Klinkenborg, 2012).

There are numerous ways of overcoming the fear of writing. 'Freewriting' is one of them and Natalie Goldberg's celebrated book (1986) strongly recommends it. It means taking pen and paper and just writing for yourself, without stopping to think too much and without going back to edit (though you can and should go back to revise it later). Those who feel more at ease speaking than writing may find dictation helps. And yet another way of stimulating thinking and getting ready to start writing is to have a chat with somebody about your ideas. As a writing coach, sometimes I even record conversations between me and would-be writers: they can usually express ideas spontaneously, and later the recording gives them valuable material to use as they write.

But probably the best thing anyone wanting to overcome writing phobia and develop their writing skills can do is simply to practise as much as possible, reminding themselves that a first draft is nearly always going to be rough and messy. That's normal. But at least a draft is something you can work on and edit. Klinkenborg says: "All writing is revision", and I take this to mean that we revise our thinking even as we compose a sentence in our head, but also we must remember to revisit what we have written later on, in order to refine and improve it.

2. *Knowing how you want people to respond*

AD: Whether we are preparing to speak in public or to write, it is all too easy to get caught up with the content and to forget to get really clear about what we are expecting of the audience or reader. What do we want them to think, feel or do in response to our ideas? An entrepreneur and business angel I know recently emailed me the following words:

"As an angel investor I see more investment presentations than most from entrepreneurs running early-stage SMEs. What always strikes me is the disconnect between their own objectives for their pitches and the true purpose of that moment of human communication between speaker and audience. The wise presenter knows that, with limited time, you need to carry your listeners quickly on a short but compelling journey from disinterest and zero knowledge all the way to engagement and comprehension. In the context of an investment pitch, that translates to a goal of 'If I've given you just a glimpse of how exciting your involvement in my business could be, then let's take this dialogue to the next stage.'

Sadly the bored recipients too often get a collection of worthy but ultimately disconnected facts that follow outmoded conventions of presenting and leave us disinterested, dismissive or disconnected. My advice to presenters is: define your purpose, know your audience, craft your storyboard, rehearse, deliver with passion, but always, always seek a response. Stopping mid pitch and asking: 'Does everyone now understand what my company does?' could be one of the most important questions you'll ever ask!"

MM: I agree 100% with your business angel's view. Online marketing experts talk about the need for a 'Call to Action' in your web copy too, maybe on every page. Implicit in that need is the requirement to decide exactly what action you want. Before your audience contemplates any action, they must understand your message and feel positively about *what* your business does and *how* you do it. Some people take it further and say that the best businesses communicate *why* they do what they do. (In this connection, ['The Golden Circle' model developed by Simon Sinek](#) is well worth a look.)

3. Organising your thinking in advance (or not)

MM: Gerry Robinson, who went from a successful business career to become a hard-hitting management guru on TV (e.g. *Can Gerry Robinson fix the NHS?*) was once complimented because one of his team was a good presenter. He responded to the effect that being a clear thinker was all that was required. (I wouldn't go that far – I'd say clear thinking and a logical structure are 'necessary but not sufficient' for a good pitch or presentation.) One way of achieving such clarity, as Chris Anderson argues in [his video](#) (2016), is to make sure you always convey one inspiring idea.

AD: Similarly with writing, some people advocate clarifying your thinking before you start. When I worked as a Communications Specialist with management consultants McKinsey & Company in the 1980s, our bible was a book called [The Pyramid Principle: logic in writing and thinking](#) (Minto, 1991). According to Minto, for the average business or professional writer, producing more literate reports and memos (this was before personal computers were around) means "formally separating the thinking process from the writing process, so that you can complete your thinking *before* you begin to write."

That is fine for highly rational writers and readers, but personally I no longer find it entirely satisfactory – logic is only part of what makes a piece of writing clear and persuasive. Many other factors, including beautiful sentences, imagination, stories and personal style, also play a part. What's more, an over-organised document full of sub-headings and bullet points can make for a logical but terribly dull piece of writing. But still, I do agree with Minto that, in a business context, it is unhelpful to impose our half-baked thinking on the poor reader.

4. Developing ideas jointly

AD: When writing something for business, it is easy to succumb to the temptation to do it all yourself – to try and control the way things are expressed. But by involving other people in your writing process, you may be surprised what rich new ideas emerge. Writing is *not* just a way of producing a document. It is a creative and potentially collaborative process. (And, in case anyone feels their writing is not creative, it's worth realising that writing is always creative in the sense that it can give rise to new thoughts in the writer's mind – and unanticipated responses from the reader!)

Collaborative writing doesn't have to take the form of full co-authorship – sometimes it is important to have a lead author in order to avoid writing by committee. But even if you are the sole author, you can still work collaboratively – by sharing drafts earlier than you might normally do so, getting responses from test readers, and then working those responses into the next version. And by the way, it's worth thinking about whether you want your test readers in each instance to be people who are on your wavelength, or people who see things differently. Each of these options can be right. It all depends on context.

In drafting this article, Michael and I experimented with collaborative writing and found it highly productive and stimulating. And of course, we didn't just write and edit; we also had numerous stimulating conversations – via Skype, by telephone and once in a café (in fact this was the first time we had ever met in person!).

5. Giving documents a 'social life'

AD: There is generally no need to wait until after you have finished writing to have a conversation about it. The richer the conversations you have before and during the writing process, the better the result is likely to be. And those conversations might be informal or formal, with employees, customers or board members, face-to-face or via telephone. They might even include 'conversations with other authors' – i.e. reading!

In my view, there is a deep flaw in the way we tend to think about writing. We often talk as if business documents – e.g. strategies, business cases and even emails – 'contain' facts and ideas, and that if people read them (a big 'if') they would 'take on board' what was in them. In other words, we speak as if documents (and people) were some kind of container and ideas could be taken from one and put into the other. But this is only true in a metaphorical sense. (If you're interested in the widespread and unconscious use of metaphor, it's well worth reading Lakoff and Johnson's book (1980) *Metaphors we live by*.)

In reality, even when people bother to read a text, they go on to make sense of it (interpret it) in their own diverse ways. They notice what interests them or what troubles them, and they tend to overlook or dismiss thinking that seems unfamiliar or against their interests. In other words, all human communication is inherently ambiguous – readers and listeners always come to their own conclusions. We all know this instinctively, and yet some of us continue to articulate our 'great thoughts' and send them out in emails and attachments, expecting people to read and 'implement' them exactly as we intended.

What to do? Paying attention to the 'social life' of documents is crucial in my view. This means asking ourselves questions like: What conversations will be necessary to make people engage with the ideas we have expressed so carefully in writing? Could or should we set up a meeting or informal get-together to work out what it all means in practice? Whom do we want to influence, and what are their reading habits and preferences (not to mention their agenda and prejudices)?

MM: Whenever I listen to a speaker, I am aware that what I understood might not be what the speaker intended. This is particularly true in Britain, where we are experts in indirect language. As Brian Tracy, author of the audio book [The Psychology of Achievement](#) says, many people say things that are unclear, even to themselves. That's the reason why Tracy's favourite question in a conversation is "How do you mean?" He concedes that this might not be good grammar but it does invite the speaker to rephrase in different (maybe simpler) language. There is a somewhat exaggerated summary of this idea, which goes something like this: "I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant."

But my own favourite statement of the near-impossibility of perfect communication came from Alan Greenspan, then Chairman of the US Federal Reserve. He famously told a business audience: "If I've made myself too clear, you must have misunderstood me."

6. Using stories as well as facts and propositions

AD: Many business owners will know that stories can be very powerful in communication. Some business writing is, of course, limited to factual content – e.g. policies and plans. But other kinds (e.g. marketing copy, websites, articles and updates) can be brought alive by judicious use of examples and stories. And these don't always need to be long and detailed. As Steve Denning has pointed out (Denning 2001), a story boiled down to one short paragraph often engages the reader far more than a hundred assertions or exhortations can.

Before humans invented writing, the only modes of communication we had – to work and live together and to share memories and insights – were talk and stories (accompanied of course by gesticulation and body language). But all sound is transitory. As Walter J Ong wrote: “When I pronounce the word ‘permanence’, by the time I get to the ‘-nence’, the ‘perma-’ has gone.” (Ong 2002) So one of the great advantages of writing over the spoken word is its greater visibility and ‘fixity’. To some extent, it can make up for the ephemeral nature of talk and the unreliability of oral storytelling. This makes writing a fantastic organising tool. It can be used to confirm and remind people of what has been said and to create a record that can be referred to again and again. And, for all its faults, email is particularly useful these days as an ‘asynchronous’ form of communication, when busy calendars make it difficult to talk, or when people are in different time zones. But let's not forget that, as well as helping us to organise things, writing can also be used to tell inspiring stories. Unfortunately, these days, a kind of ‘story desert’ has taken hold of much business and academic writing.

MM: Good storytellers often make compelling public speakers as well. A classic example was Abraham Lincoln, who won nomination, then election in 1861, to the US presidency, though a total outsider. A big part of the reason lay in his oratory. Admittedly the skill of using rhetoric was a talent more prized in those days than it is now. But calling someone a good orator is really just another way of saying they can engage with their audience and win over hearts and minds. The excellent biography *Team of Rivals* by Doris Kearns Goodwin (2002) suggests that, in Lincoln's case, the ability to speak to an audience derived partly from his lifelong love of storytelling, but also from his evident passion. A contemporary reporter wrote: “Mr Lincoln's eloquence was of the higher type, which produced conviction in others because of the conviction of the speaker himself.”

7. Recognising the enduring value of conversation

AD: It may be obvious by now that Michael and I are fans of informal conversation. The trouble is that technology now seems to be pushing us all into contacting people via email and social media rather than picking up the phone or seeking out opportunities to chat informally in cafés and doorways. Email and social media are useful when used intelligently, but nothing quite substitutes for a good conversation – by phone, Skype or in person.

MM: Is a business presentation or pitch a conversation, I wonder? It can be, or at least it can feel like that, if the speaker finds ways to engage the audience. One technique is to use ‘question tags’ after a statement to prompt a response, such as: ‘... would you agree?’ or ‘... does that make sense?’ Of course those are closed questions; but they are a quick-fire method of increasing engagement. More open questions can be

used if time permits. Either way, through questions, engagement is multiplied many-fold. And the bonus: asking questions and thereby inviting responses will force the speaker to pause, which is anyway an underrated and powerful habit.

AD: While informal conversations are vital in business, not just any conversation will do. Some are frustrating – conversations dominated by one person, dull or superficial ‘rhubarb, rhubarb’ talk, endless, over-formal meetings, and so on. But despite these all-too-common experiences, conversation remains essentially a creative activity: at best, it is improvised, responsive and sometimes risky and edgy. It can give rise to thoughts, associations, feelings and enthusiasm that none of the speakers anticipated; and it can bring together different perspectives to produce an exciting cocktail of ideas and insights. If it goes well, we leave full of energy, clarity and new resolve.

What can we do to ‘up’ the quality of our conversations? I think it is worth making a conscious effort to *pay attention to our experience of conversation*. Admittedly, this is not always easy and it takes practice – often we are so caught up in the content, emotions or politics in what’s being said that we feel unable to stand back from it. But if we do manage to get better at ‘noticing’, we can also learn how to change the quality of conversation. For example, we can press the imaginary pause button and draw attention to something that has struck us about the nature of the conversation. And if we notice that certain people are dominating, we may be able to find a way of bringing in other voices. Or if people have slipped into a pointless argument, there are ways of shifting the conversation – e.g. by requesting that each person talks from the ‘I’ position. That can be a good way of nudging them into speaking from their own experience, which tends to be a great connector.

Finally, as someone who spends a lot of time at her desk, I want to urge all business leaders to give conversation a chance by walking about and bumping into people a bit more than they might naturally do; pausing before tapping out another email (especially when sensitive issues are involved); and resisting the temptation to fill up electronic calendars with back-to-back formal meetings. I also want to encourage those who have staff working for them to think before they turn down a request for a chat. In many situations, it pays to view conversations as an opportunity for joint exploration rather than as just a transaction or a distraction. For some people that requires a profound shift in attitude.

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Our starting point with this piece was to offer some suggestions based on our experience as coaches. But we didn’t want to write yet another simple how-to guide, offering advice on the basic communication skills that many business owners already master. Instead we chose to address some broader themes that we think deserve attention – some of which regularly get overlooked. Our fundamental conviction remains that human relationships matter in the workplace, and good human relating can open a doorway to doing better business.

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A note about AMED



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