

bosses with style getting things done at work

One of the key characteristics of effective managers in the workplaces we studied is their stylistic flexibility - they showed a remarkable ability to modify the way they talk according to the context. Good managers know there are many ways to skin a possum - or get their deadlines met - and change their style according to who they are talking to, the situation and what they are hoping to achieve.

Adapting your communication style to the situation is an important skill. So what are some of the ways in which managers use talk to get things done?

giving it straight

- Good managers exert their authority quite explicitly when they need to. There were plenty of direct instructions in the speech we collected, for example: okay follow that up or organise a meeting as soon as possible or these letters must go today. Direct 'straight-talking' like this was typical of office talk between people who had worked together for some time, where each knew their role, and what needed was not in doubt.
- Most managers were ready to challenge others directly when the occasion warranted it, with statements like No, I can't agree. I don't see it that way at all or I always have the final overriding say, as one manager said to a staff member who was questioning an unpopular decision he had made.

- At meetings, managers showed that they were under no illusions about the need to be decisive. They usually set the agenda clearly at the outset: right, we've got two things to sort out today . . . And they would typically close a meeting with remarks like Okay let's wrap this up. So what we've agreed on is . . ., summarising decisions, and making sure that everyone was clear about what they had to do next.

This is what most people expect of the boss - the decisive style that gets things done. But good communicators choose their strategies to suit the situation, and the managers we recorded often chose a less direct approach to get their message across.

treading softly

- A tricky problem or a difficult task will be approached with care. Even when people have worked together for years, a good manager will often avoid a direct approach if the task is problematic.

In one case, a manager wanted a staff member, Wendy, to undertake a project which promised to be very challenging. Instead of simply instructing her to do it, the manager discussed the project very thoroughly with Wendy first, listened to her comments, and then asked "So where does that leave us? What do you think? Is this something you could take on?" Through a skilful use of language, the manager presents the problem as a joint one, and makes it clear that Wendy's views are valued. Wendy responds positively because she feels that she has some degree of choice about whether to take on the project or not.

- When someone is new to the job, managers are often more subtle in the ways they get things done. For example, to start with, instructions may be couched more gently as helpful suggestions rather than as direct orders.
- Advice or criticism is rarely given 'straight' - rather, the effective manager will find a diplomatic way to get the message across so that their employee does not lose face unnecessarily.

Managers also used humour to good effect:

- Humour is a good way to encourage a staff member or to provide advice. For example, one manager used gentle, self-deprecating humour to indicate that there are times when everyone has trouble keeping up: *I'm afraid I haven't even taken the rubber bands off those reports!*
- Managers also use humour to soften criticism - a strategy which helps the person to accept the criticism more readily. So Grant suggested that a letter written by one of his advisers needed to be . . . warmed up a bit - *it's pretty much deep frozen as present*. This kind of low key humour was common and very effective.
- Another strategy which worked when people knew each other well was to be unexpectedly so direct that the effect was to generate laughter. So dealing with an unsatisfactory report, a manager addresses the issue head on saying *right here's the next curly question - let's see if you can duck this one*, and later *you know I can be really picky if I put my mind to it*. The humorous tone enabled the other person to handle the criticism more easily.

important things to remember

- Good communicators choose their strategies to suit the situation: they know that a direct approach is sometimes necessary, but also that it can be a lot less effective than an indirect, light or humorous strategy for conveying the same message;
- Effective managers take account of their relationships with the people they are talking to and the difficulty of what they are asking them to do. The way they talk reflects an awareness of what it is reasonable to expect;
- By adapting the way they talk in different situations, effective managers prevent misunderstandings and build up positive working relationships with their staff.

about the project

The Language in the Workplace Project aims to identify the characteristics of effective interpersonal communication in business contexts. To date the project has recorded and analysed over 2000 interactions in 16 government and private sector organisations. Some features of workplace talk we are currently investigating include:

<i>Directives</i>	What is the most effective way of getting things done?
<i>Miscommunication</i>	How do people prevent or fix misunderstandings?
<i>Style shifting</i>	How do people adapt their talk to their audience?
<i>Email</i>	What role does email play in workplace communication?
<i>Problem solving</i>	How do people collaborate to solve problems or complete tasks?
<i>Meetings</i>	What structures and processes are typical of effective meetings?
<i>Humour and small talk</i>	How does "social talk" work as a communication tool?
<i>Workplace culture</i>	How is an organisation's culture reflected in their communication?
<i>Knowledge work</i>	How is knowledge created and advanced through talk?

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Associated researchers and workplace practitioners
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We would like to express our thanks to those who allowed us to record their interactions

Where can I get more information?

Visit our website to see a list of our publications and the latest project information:
<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp/>

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