SELF-COACHING GUIDE #1: COMMUNICATION

A compilation of posts from **www.edbatista.com**

More at **resources.edbatista.com**

A Note on Links: In digital copies of this document, all the links underlined in blue are live, and clicking them while holding down the CTRL key should launch your browser. If you're holding a printed version or if your browser doesn't launch, please visit www.edbatista.com.
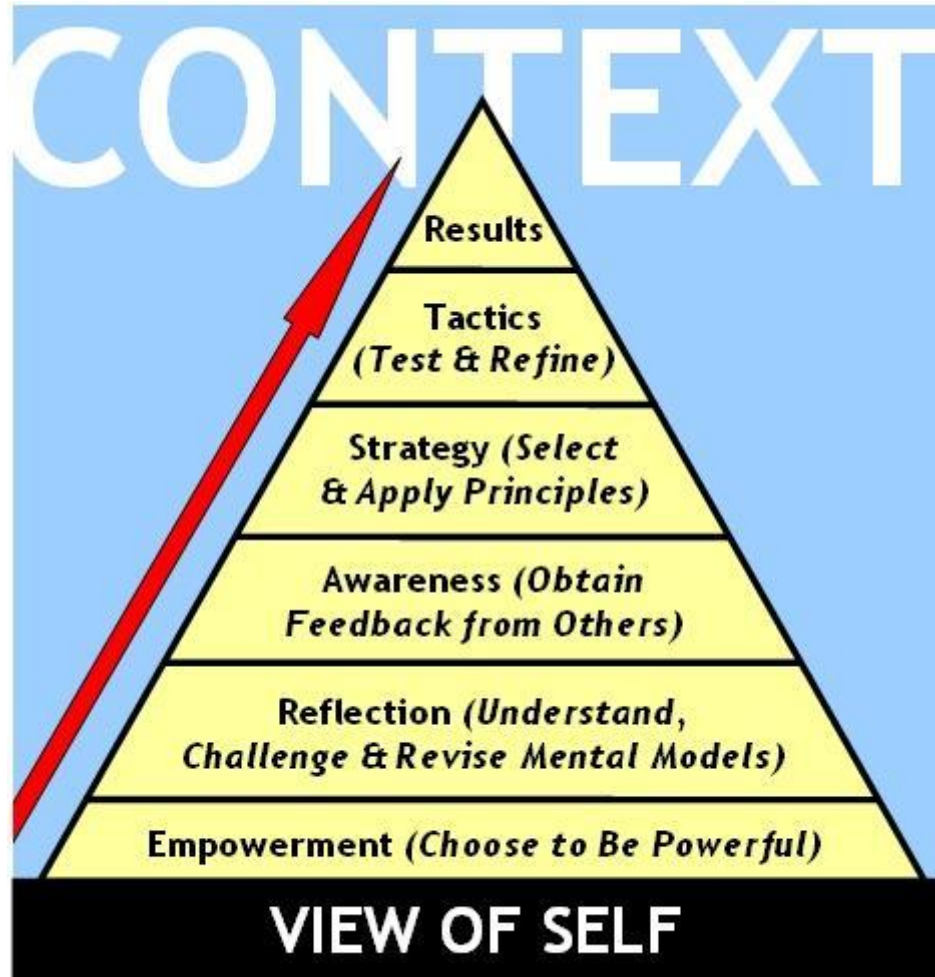
1. The Influence Pyramid
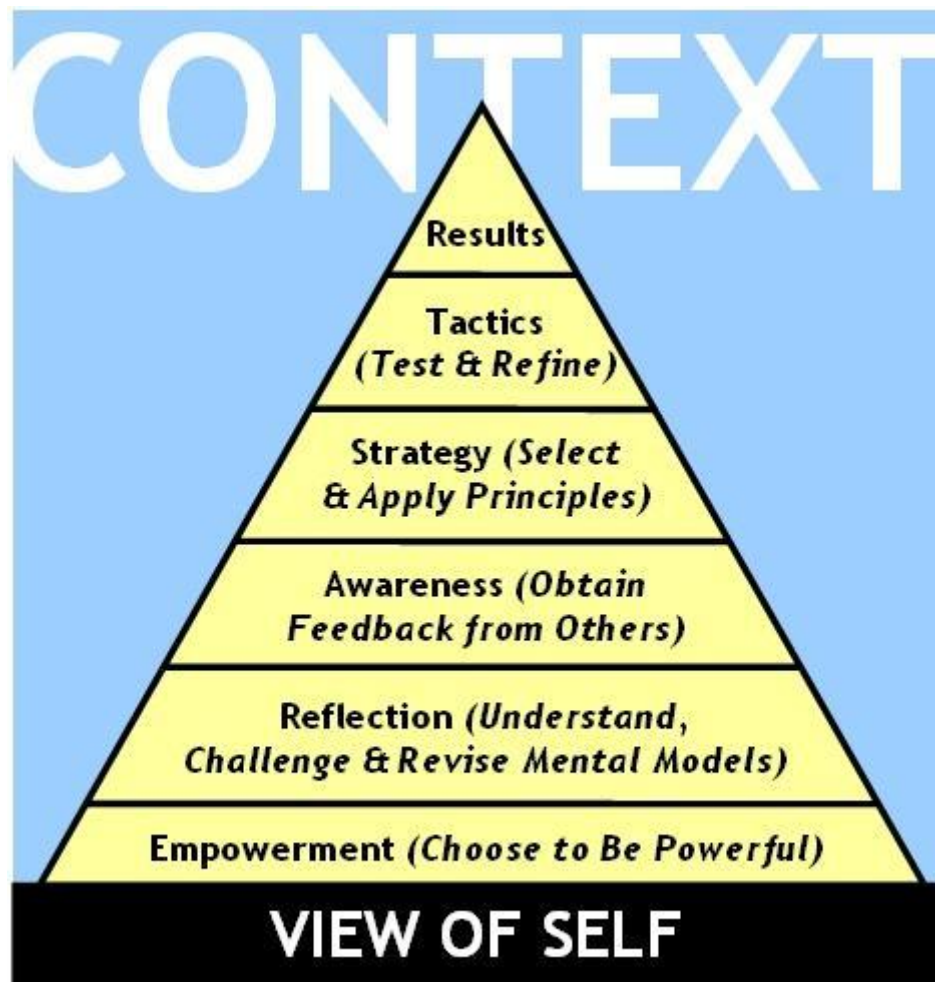
Influence Pyramid www.edbatista.com/2009/01/influence.html

Much of my work as a coach involves helping people be more influential, even--especially--when the thought of their own influence makes them uncomfortable.

Last year some reflections on the dimensions of cultural difference--and specifically the concept of "power distance"--led to further thoughts on interpersonal power, which in turn contributed to a rough model of how we become more influential, which I called the Influence Pyramid.

I recently had the opportunity to collaborate with Prof. Carole Robin on a revised version of this model--call it the Influence Pyramid 2.0--which is shown here and briefly annotated. (Working with Carole and serving as her occasional thought partner is one of the perks of my job at Stanford.)

I) FOUNDATIONS OF INFLUENCE: Our Ability To Influence Is Rooted In Our View of Self

Influence Pyramid www.edbatista.com/2009/01/influence.html

1) VIEW OF SELF
Our ability to influence is rooted in our fundamental view of self. (*I know, trust and accept myself enough to be authentic.*)

2) EMPOWERMENT
The act of influencing begins with a choice to be powerful. (*I want to exert influence, and I recognize and accept this in myself.*)

3) REFLECTION
Challenging and revising our mental models creates greater alignment between our internal and external worlds. (*I test my beliefs about influence and modify them based upon my experiences.*)

4) AWARENESS
Feedback allows us to see ourselves as others see us and to modify our behavior as needed. (*The goals and intentions that drive my attempts at influencing are clearly*

understood by others.)

5) STRATEGY
While recognizing the limits of social science, we adopt influence strategies rooted in generalized principles. (*My efforts to influence take advantage of expected dynamics and outcomes.*)

6) TACTICS
We employ tactics that we test and refine over time. (*I understand my strengths and weaknesses, and I adopt techniques appropriate to my skills while also trying new behaviors.*)

7) CONTEXT
Finally, we recognize that our results (and all the steps we take along the way) occur in a specific interpersonal and organizational context. (*I adapt my goals, actions and expectations to fit the environment.*)

II) INFLUENCE LEARNING LOOPS: Practical Experience Leads to Learning at Ever-Deeper Levels
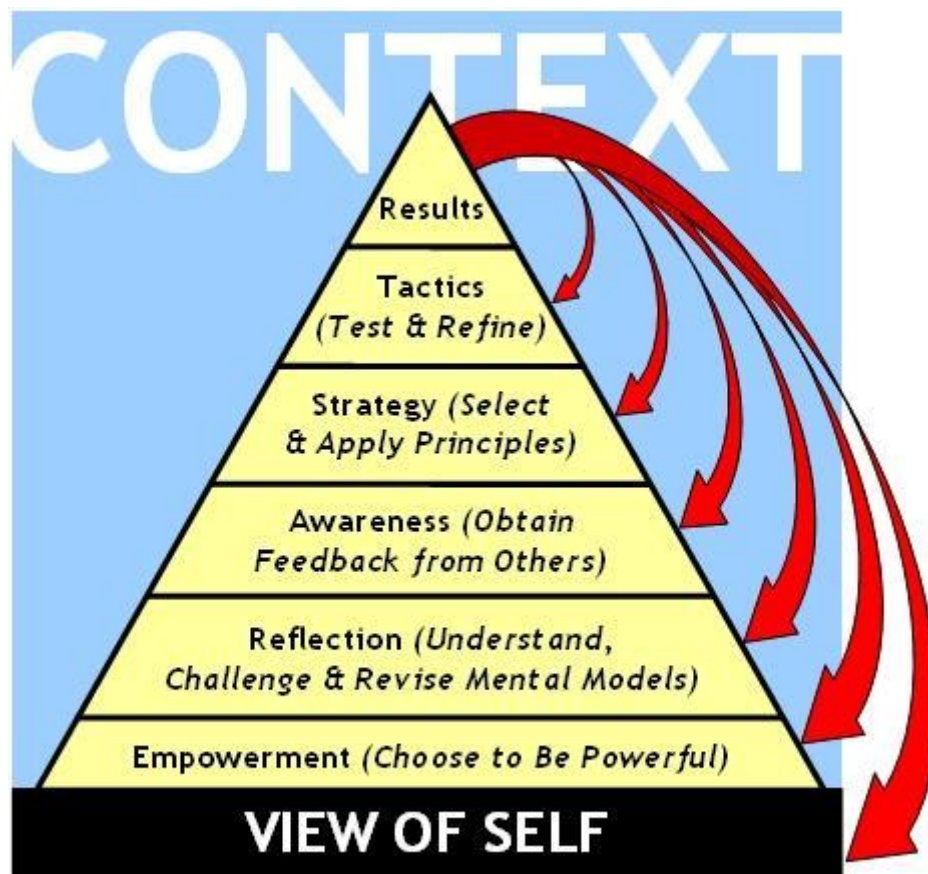
Influence Pyramid www.edbatista.com/2009/01/influence.html

Through a series of Argyris-style learning loops, we can understand at ever-deeper levels not merely how to be more influential but what implicit and unchallenged assumptions we hold about power and influence and our ability (and worthiness) to wield them:

- Refined tactical execution of tools and techniques.

- Improved strategic selection and application of general principles.

- Keener awareness of others' perceptions through feedback.

- Mental models in greater alignment with the outer world.

- Increased comfort with our desire to be influential.

- And ultimately an enhanced sense of self-knowledge and acceptance.

(Here's a PowerPoint version [78 KB] of this post.)

Continued thanks to Patricia Day Williams, whose "Self-Empowerment, Awareness and Choice" in the Reading Book for Human Relations Training got me thinking about all this at a much deeper level and still serves as a source of inspiration.

Original Post: http://www.edbatista.com/2009/01/influence.html

2. Interpersonal Power

Recent reflections on the [dimensions of cultural difference](#), specifically the concept of "power distance," have led me to think further about the nature of power and how it's expressed interpersonally.

What, precisely, do we mean by "power"? I find that my MBA students are often uncomfortable with the word; they tend to prefer "influence," which is much less...powerful. And, of course, their resistance suggests that there's something worth exploring here.

[Merriam-Webster's first definition](#) of "power" is the "*ability to act or produce an effect*." OK, but I'm particularly interested in *interpersonal* power. Can we get a little more specific?

Kai Sassenberg, et al's [Why Some Groups Just Feel Better: The Regulatory Fit of Group Power](#)* includes this definition of "relative power differences between groups":

One group has a higher capacity to modify the other group's state than vice versa.

Dacher Keltner, Deborah Gruenfeld and Cameron Anderson take a similar approach in [Power, Approach and Inhibition](#) ([PDF version](#)):

> We define power as an individual's relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments.

So a simple definition of "interpersonal power" might be *the ability to modify another person's state*.

But this definition poses a problem: It identifies a subject--i.e. another person--and a relationship between ourselves and that subject--i.e. the capacity to modify--but it says nothing about us and our internal state. And yet our level of comfort with power (and our ability to wield it effectively) varies so widely in different circumstances that it seems essential to include ourselves in the equation more explicitly.

In "Self-Empowerment, Awareness and Choice" (from the [Reading Book for Human Relations Training](#)), [Patricia Day Williams](#) discusses power in a way that emphasizes a sense of self:

> If "power" is the ability to act or produce an effect, then we daily face situations in which we feel more or less powerful; more or less able to affect circumstances...

Self-empowerment begins with self-awareness. We must first become aware of the many internal and external factors affecting our behavior and the difference between the two. Most of us find it relatively easy to identify forces "out there" that hold us back or down...but it is far more difficult to uncover the ways we undermine ourselves with self-limiting beliefs...

There are three beliefs that commonly disempower us. The first is the belief that power is determined primarily by factors outside our influence or control... At worst, ascribing our power or lack thereof to forces beyond our control results in overlooking those factors over which we do have some control.

A second, related way in which we unnecessarily undermine our power is believing our view of the world is the same thing as external reality... Then, acting in accordance with what we "know," we collude in the continued external manifestation of our view of reality.

A third belief that undermines us is the belief that power is a fixed commodity, a limited resource for which we must compete... The more I have, the less you have, and vice-versa. If I want more power, I will spend considerable time and energy trying to increase mine and prevent you from increasing yours. If I feel undeserving, I may try to avoid using my power, pretend not to have it or give it away to others whom I believe to be more deserving.

Williams makes it clear that although our *understanding* of power may initially focus on others and our mutual relationships, the ability to actually *wield* power ultimately depends on our level of self-awareness and our ability to modify our beliefs and our internal state. So in seeking to be more powerful (or more *influential*, if you prefer) we should first seek to better understand ourselves.

Thanks to Nora Richardson of the [Jackson Library](#) reference staff for bringing this article to my attention.

Photo by [octal](#). Yay Flickr and Creative Commons.

Original Post: http://www.edbatista.com/2008/02/power.html

3. The Value of Soft Startups

How do you initiate a difficult conversation? Even when the other party has really screwed me over, I'm hard pressed to think of a time when going in with guns blazing resulted in a successful outcome. In a post on John Gottman's findings about good relationships, I briefly mentioned the value of a "soft startup," i.e. initiating a tough discussion gently and compassionately, rather than leaping to harsh, critical comments.
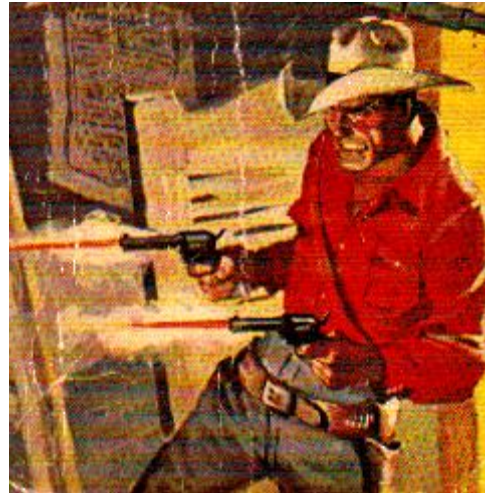
I participated in some role-plays today with students at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, and the experience made it quite clear that a soft startup goes a long way toward resolving difficulties successfully. J. Bailey Molineux talks at greater length about Gottman's definition of a soft startup, and although his comments are focused on a discussion between a husband and wife, I think they can be paraphrased effectively for use in professional relationships:

How to Initiate a Soft Startup

1. Start with something positive. (C'mon, you must be able to think of *something*.)
2. Use "I" statements to express *your* perspective and *your* feelings. (Don't assume that what you perceive is the only possible truth.)
3. Don't make assumptions about *the other party's* perspective. (They may not even be aware that there's a problem, or it may not be their fault--and they may be happy to help solve it if they're approached in the right way.)
4. State your request clearly, firmly and politely. (And acknowledge any concessions that are granted.)

Now this is just the *beginning* of the discussion, not the conclusion, and you'll need a number of additional behavioral skills in your repertoire to succeed. But marriage researchers like Gottman have concluded that spouses are much more likely to resolve difficult conversations successfully when they use a soft startup, and I'm inclined to believe that the same is true in most of our professional relationships as well.

Original Post: http://www.edbatista.com/2007/01/the_value_of_so.html

4. Talking About Feelings

Much of my work involves encouraging people to talk about their feelings--a process formally known as *affect labeling*--which can happen in a free-flowing coaching conversation or in a structured environment like a T-group. Experience tells me that this is a useful practice...but why? What happens when we talk about our feelings?

Stephanie West Allen recently referred me to a post of hers from June 2007 that noted a "flurry of articles...about the neuroscience research showing that labeling your feelings can quiet your brain and increase impulse control." Stephanie also linked to the original *Psychological Science* research article by Matthew Lieberman, Naomi Eisenberger *et al*, Putting Feelings into Words (PDF), that prompted that flurry in the popular press, and it's fascinating reading:

> Putting feelings into words has long been thought to be one of the best ways to manage negative emotional experiences. Talk therapies have been formally practiced for more than a century and, although varying in structure and content, are commonly based on the assumption that talking about one's feelings and problems is an effective method for minimizing the impact of negative emotional events on current experience...

> Recent neuroimaging research has begun to offer insight into a possible neurocognitive mechanism by which putting feelings into words may alleviate negative emotional responses. A number of studies of *affect labeling* have demonstrated that linguistic processing of the emotional aspects of an emotional image produces less amygdala activity than perceptual processing of the emotional aspects of the same image (Hariri, Bookheimer, & Mazziotta, 2000; Lieberman, Hariri, Jarcho, Eisenberger, & Bookheimer, 2005). Additionally, these studies have demonstrated greater activity during linguistic processing than during nonlinguistic processing of emotion in right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (RVLPFC), a region associated with the symbolic processing of emotional information (Cunningham, Johnson, Gatenby, Gore, & Banaji, 2003; Nomura et al., 2003) and with top-down inhibitory processes (Aron, Robbins, & Poldrack, 2004). Finally, the magnitude of RVLPFC activity during affect labeling has been inversely correlated with the magnitude of amygdala activity during affect labeling in these studies. Together, these results suggest that putting feelings into words may activate RVLPFC, which in turn may dampen the response of the amygdala, thus helping to alleviate emotional distress...

> The results of this study provide the first clear demonstration that affect labeling disrupts the affective responses in the limbic system that would otherwise occur in the presence of negative emotional images...

These data thus suggest that one route by which putting feelings into words may regulate negative affect is by increasing activity in RVLPFC, which in turn dampens activity in the amygdala by way of intermediate connections through [the medial prefrontal cortex]...

In summary, this study provides the first unambiguous evidence that affect labeling, compared with other ways of encoding, produces diminished responses to negative emotional images in the amygdala and other limbic regions...

These findings begin to shed light on how putting negative feelings into words can help regulate negative experience, a process that may ultimately contribute to better mental and physical health.

Lieberman is apparently at work on a new research article dealing with similar issues, a draft of which is also available online: Symbolic Processing of Affect (PDF). From the introduction:

[T]here is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the process of sharing one's worry, of putting bad feelings into words, can diminish one's emotional distress at least under certain circumstances. This chapter will examine the neurocognitive mechanisms of *disruption effects*, the process by which putting feelings into words can disrupt the feelings being verbalized.

I'm reluctant to quote further from this work-in-progress--the cover page warns "DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION"--but a cursory reading suggests that Lieberman's latest neuroscientific research provides further evidence that talking about our feelings is an extremely helpful process.

Photo by malias. Yay Flickr and Creative Commons.

Original Post: http://www.edbatista.com/2008/02/talking.html

5. The Problem with Positive Feedback

An issue that comes up repeatedly in my work as an executive coach and facilitator is the ineffectiveness of positive feedback. It frequently fails to make an impact, and at times it can even cause intense anxiety. But isn't praise supposed to make us feel good? What's going on? I see three factors at work:

1) Waiting for the Other Shoe
When we deliver negative feedback (or any unpleasant message), we often try to soften the blow by leading with something positive. As a result, people on the receiving end may come to hear positive feedback as a hollow preamble to the **real** message. Rather than feeling genuinely appreciated, they're waiting for the other shoe to drop.

2) Staying Out of Debt
A related dynamic is the use of positive feedback to overcome resistance to a request or a demand. The feedback can create a sense of obligation, a "debt" that the recipient feels compelled to "repay" by acceding to the giver's wishes. There's an underlying logic here, but there's also an inherent contradiction: most people don't like being in debt.

3) Currency Devaluation
A common problem with positive feedback is simply that like any currency it loses value when there's too much in circulation. [Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes](#) have noted that praise can be a "*'dissatisfier.' Like a salary, it is less likely to motivate when it's given out than demotivate when it's expected but withheld.*" I disagree with their contention that merely showing interest in someone's work is an adequate substitute for actual compliments, but they're absolutely right to observe that too much praise renders all such feedback meaningless.

So how do we avoid these traps? I have two recommendations: First, although I firmly believe in the value of [soft startups](#) that initiate difficult conversations on a positive note, feedback given in that context should be authentic and relevant to the issue at hand. Don't abuse the soft startup principle by swaddling a substantive critique in superficial happy-talk.

Second, try giving some positive feedback...and stopping right there. Don't go overboard--bear in mind that too much praise will eventually have the same effect as no praise at all. But by uncoupling the feedback from any goals other than rewarding the recipient, you'll increase its value as a motivator.

Original Post: http://www.edbatista.com/2007/02/the_problem_wit.html

6. Scott Ginsberg on Asking Questions

What kinds of questions do you usually ask people? We're often drawn to *yes*/*no* questions--they're simple and direct. But when simplicity and directness aren't our only goals, *yes*/*no* questions can be problematic. They surface a minimum of new information because they don't invite the other person into a dialogue and they constrain the boundaries of the conversation.

When we do move beyond *yes*/*no* questions, we tend ask *why?* questions, such as "Why did you do that?" or "Why did you do it that way?" But *why?* questions can be heard as "What the hell were you thinking?" and provoke defensiveness.

In the Leadership Coaching class I'm involved with at Stanford, we encourage our students to ask questions that are designed to get the other person actively involved. Such questions can be challenging and even blunt, but they're also open-ended and compel the other person to reflect before answering.

Scott Ginsberg recently posted a list of 62 useful questions, along with a one-line explanation of why they work. It's an incredible resource, and I encourage you to read the whole thing, but as I expect to refer back to it regularly, here are the 20 I found most valuable:

10. How are you creating...?
Proves that someone has a choice.

13. How could you have...?
Focused on past performance improvement.

14. How do you feel...?
Feelings are good.

16. How do you plan to...?
Future oriented, process oriented, action oriented.

17. How do you want...?
Visualizes ideal conditions.

18. How does this relate to...?
Keeps someone on point, uncovers connections between things.

19. How else could this be...?
Encourages open, option-oriented and leverage-based thinking.

23. How might you...?
All about potential and possibility.

27. How much time...?
Identifies patterns of energy investment.

28. How often do you...?
Gets an idea of someone's frequency.

29. How well do you...?
Uncovers abilities.

30. How will you know when/if...?
Predicts outcomes of ideal situations.

31. If you could change...?
Visualizes improvement.

34. If you stopped...?
Cause-effect question.

37. Is anybody going to...?
Deciding if something even matters.

49. What are you doing that...?
Assesses present actions.

50. What are you willing to...?
Explores limits.

53. What can you do right now...?
Focuses on immediate action being taken.

57. What did you learn...?
Because people don't care what you know; only what you learned.

60. What else can you...?
Because there's always options.

Notice the structure of these questions. They're almost all *how?* or *what?* questions, which encourage the other person to take a moment and look inside before answering. They can certainly be challenging--*"What can you do right now?"* is hardly a softball--but they're also non-judgmental, which minimizes any defensiveness. Perhaps most important, they're not leading--they don't suggest that there's a "right" answer--which encourages the other person to answer thoughtfully and honestly, rather than framing an answer to please you. Many thanks to Scott for sharing his insights.

Photo by [Erik Charlton](). Yay Flickr and Creative Commons.

Original Post: http://www.edbatista.com/2008/04/questions.html

7. Stagefright and Public Speaking

John Lahr had a great article on stagefright in *The New Yorker* a few years ago that made me think about how much I hate--and love--public speaking. Lahr wrote:

All the central traumas of childhood--being alone, abandoned, unsupported, emotionally abused--are revived for an actor when he appears before the paying customers, who have the power to either starve him of affection or reward him with approval... When things are going well, the stage and the house merge and a sort of imaginative union is achieved... "There is brilliant intellectual clarity, a sense of boundless, inexhaustible energy as the chambers of the brain open up," [Ian] Holm says of a successful performance... When the actor cannot make contact and the audience withholds its affection, however, the experience brings back a primal anxiety.

That aptly describes the attraction and repulsion that any public speaking opportunity holds for me. But Lahr goes on to explain that the terrors of stagefright can be useful, even salutary. He quotes the pianist Charles Rosen:

> Stagefright is not merely symbolically but functionally necessary, like the dread of a candidate before an examination or a job interview, both designed essentially as tests of courage," Rosen writes. "Stagefright...is a grace that is sufficient in the old Jesuit sense--that is, insufficient by itself, but a necessary condition for success.

Lahr closes with a discussion with the acting coach Susan Batson:

> If you're a people pleaser"--worried about whether the audience is going to like you--"you're bound to have stagefright," she told me. "If you have an issue of not feeling like you're good enough, you're bound to have stagefright. The people who survive it are the ones who can take control of the situation and override it.

Rather than think of performers with stagefright as aberrant or lacking in determination, Batson actually takes the opposite view:

> I'm always terrified of the person who doesn't have [stagefright], because it means that the commitment is not fully there.

Lahr's article makes me think that the problem isn't really stagefright itself--it's my *resistance* to stagefright. I feel anxiety and fear; I see those feelings as evidence of my inadequacy as a speaker or as harbingers of failure; and I become consumed with the futile struggle to stamp them out.

But if, instead, I see those feelings as evidence of my desire to do well and to win

over the audience, and as entirely natural reactions to the situation, I can simply accept that I'm anxious and fearful--as I should be--and harness that energy rather than try to fight it.

I've linked before to R. Todd Stephens' public speaking tips, and I still recommend them. But in addition to those tactical ways to increase my comfort level before an audience, I'm going to adopt the strategy of simply accepting my stagefright, breathing it in, and moving on. We'll see how it goes.

UPDATE: Marnie Webb has a detailed description of the process she's developed to deal with stagefright when speaking. Two things I particularly love:

1. By telling her audience at the outset that she's prone to fast talking because of nervousness, she "invites everyone into the problem" and allows them to be part of the solution. We could apply the same strategy to any issue that we struggle with as speakers--inviting our audience into the problem (i.e. recognizing and embracing it, rather than trying to hide it) completely transforms the dynamic from "me vs. them" to "us vs. the problem." Big difference.
2. She drafts a detailed text to accompany each slide and then deletes it, leaving just "a screen shot or a word or a phrase." The text goes into the notes section, so the audience will have a useful handout **after** the talk, but **during** the talk their attention will be focused on what Marnie's actually saying, not on her slides. The slides will complement and support her words, rather than substitute for them. And Marnie will be engaging the audience by looking at them, rather than looking over her shoulder in order to read her slides. This is consistent with Seth Godin's excellent PowerPoint guidelines, but it also forces Marnie to practice her presentation repeatedly, which is probably the best way to deal with stagefright, but also one of the most easily ignored.

Original Post: http://www.edbatista.com/2006/08/stagefright_and.html

8. What We Talk About When We Talk About Ourselves

I was recently asked for advice by someone who's giving a presentation on himself--his background and experiences, how he arrived at his current position, what he's doing now-- and here's how I responded:

• When it comes to telling our own stories (as opposed to giving a presentation on some other subject), we tend to assume that we know it cold because we've lived it, so we wing it, which leads to rambling. I wouldn't memorize a text, but I'd map out the themes I want to address, and then I'd practice talking with a timer. Get a sense of the rhythm and the pace that feels right to you. Make the most of the time available to you, while insuring that you don't run long.

• We also rely too heavily on chronology, which is the obvious way to tell a mini-biography, but not necessarily the most powerful way. Is there another lens you could put on your experiences? Can you create a narrative with a little drama, rather than simply reciting facts as though you were reading your resume?

• Resist the temptation to include too many details. Think bigger. Talk about the *why*, and not just the *what* and the *when*. Help people understand *who you are* and not simply *what you've done*.

• I find it helpful to speak slightly slower than I think I should. Even when I'm not nervous, I tend to speed up when speaking publicly because I'm so eager to get my message out. Slowing down calms me, helps my audience, and gives my words a little more power.

• Finally, I often refer to R. Todd Stephens' Top Ten Speaking Tips, which I've found helpful over the years.

On an entirely separate note, if the title above rings a bell...

Original Post: http://www.edbatista.com/2007/02/what_we_talk_ab.html

Ed Batista
Executive Coaching & Change Management Consulting

464 Funston Avenue   +1.415.235.4272
San Francisco, CA 94118   edbatista@gmail.com

edbatista.com

About Me   about.edbatista.com

Professional
I'm an executive coach, a change management consultant, and a Leadership Coach at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. I help individuals find professional fulfillment and develop their leadership and interpersonal skills; I help people work together more effectively as members of a team; and I help companies and nonprofits adapt their management practices and organizational culture to better fit their changing needs.

My work as a coach began after a 15-year career in management, during which I took two years off to earn an MBA at Stanford, and I've helped launch three new organizations. In addition to coaching and change management, I'm particularly interested in the intersection of organizational culture and social technology.

Personal
I've lived in San Francisco since 1990; I'm married to Amy Wright, a recovering corporate attorney-turned-law school librarian; and I'm passionate about listening to music (particularly jazz, but I love punk, blues and bluegrass as well), hiking throughout the Bay Area, and visiting New Orleans whenever possible.

What I Do   services.edbatista.com

I help individuals find professional fulfillment; I help people work together more effectively as members of a team; and I help companies and nonprofits adapt their management practices and organizational culture to better fit their changing needs.

My coaching services are aimed at helping people be as fulfilled and as effective as possible in their professional lives. I work with individuals to assist them in unlocking their full potential, meeting new challenges, and developing their skills. People often find an executive coach a helpful resource when they're...

- Starting a new job
- Taking on new responsibilities
- Coping with a changing environment

- Considering a new position or career
- Addressing areas for improvement
- Simply trying to get "unstuck"

I'd be happy to have an initial conversation to discuss your needs and how we might work together. My contact information is above, or you can reach me at contact.edbatista.com.