



High-Performance Communication

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January 2012

I'm doing a workshop on High-Performance Communication with the executive committee of the MIT/Stanford Venture Lab, a great organization that supports entrepreneurs and startups. To help the committee members prepare for our session, I've compiled the following series of extracts from my writing over the past few years. Many thanks to the social psychologists, neuroscientists, business thinkers and fellow coaches cited below whose work has informed my own. And thanks to VLAB-- I'm looking forward to working with you!

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1) Excellence

Most of my clients and students are seeking to be more effective and fulfilled as professionals, and a resource to which I've referred people for years is Peter Drucker's *Managing Oneself*, primarily because of his perspective on excellence:

One should waste as little effort as possible on improving areas of low competence. It takes far more energy and work to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence. And yet most people--especially most teachers and most organizations--concentrate on



making incompetent performers into mediocre ones. Energy, resources, and time should go instead into making a competent person into a star performer.

So we need to ask ourselves: What are *my* strengths? Where can I improve from first-rate performance to excellence? Where should I be focusing my energy, resources and time? Just as important, where am I *wasting* effort trying to improve from incompetence to mediocrity?

2) Safety, Trust, Intimacy

Every group serves as an implicit learning laboratory in which we come to understand how our interactions with others support (or undermine) our efforts to achieve our goals.

But some groups are more effective than others at helping the members learn, increase their awareness and adapt their behavior as needed, and the group's levels of safety, trust and intimacy are key factors in determining its effectiveness in this regard.

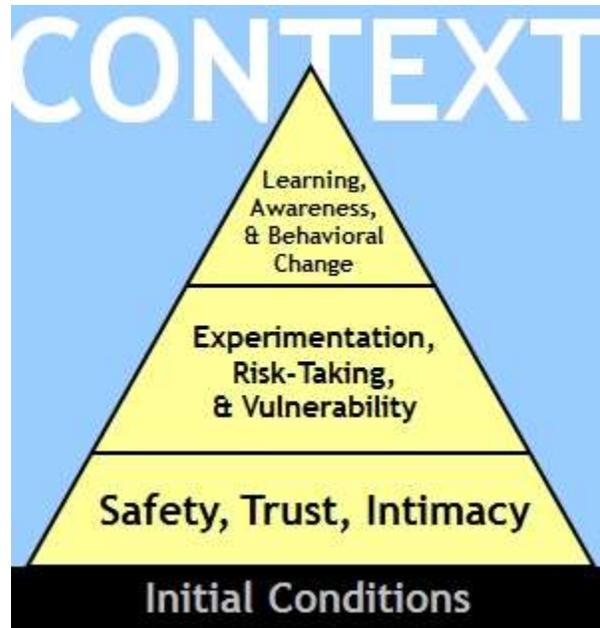
Every group's experience is rooted in a set of initial conditions: *How and why were we assembled? What will our first meeting be like? What will we discuss there?* These initial conditions form the foundation for all subsequent layers of the group dynamic.

The foundational qualities that define a group are the levels of safety, trust and intimacy: **Safety** = *A belief that we won't get hurt.* **Trust** = *We mean what we say and we say what we mean.* **Intimacy** = *A willingness to make the private public.*

When safety, trust and intimacy are established, these qualities support the actions that lead to greater success as a group: experimentation, risk-taking and a willingness to be vulnerable.

When we feel able to experiment, take risks and make ourselves vulnerable, our ability to learn, to increase our self-awareness (and our awareness of others) and to change our behavior in order to achieve our goals more effectively increases dramatically.

The process of building one layer upon another occurs in a unique context—so in addition to asking whether learning and change are taking place, we also need to assess how the group's context supports (or inhibits) the development of the underlying layers in the group experience.



So we need to ask...

- How will the group's initial conditions support or inhibit the establishment of safety, trust and intimacy?
- At each step of the group's subsequent development, are we increasing or decreasing the levels of these qualities?
- What factors in the group experience support the development of these qualities? And what factors inhibit these qualities?

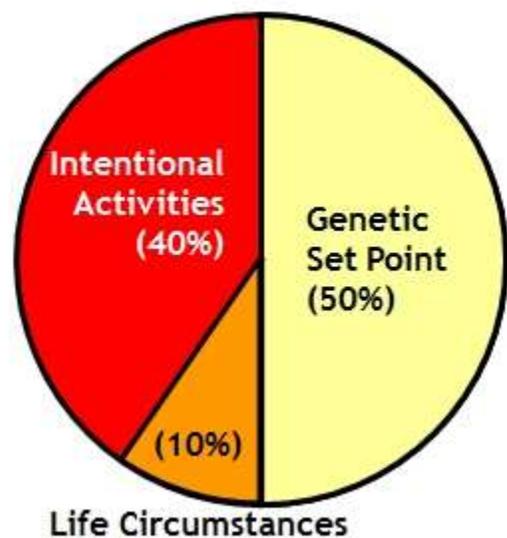
A final point regarding feedback: While excessive delicacy and indirectness inhibit learning, the degree of candor in a group must be calibrated to the group's current levels of safety, trust and intimacy. Feedback attuned to these qualities can increase their presence in the group by stretching the group's capacity for direct discussion. But feedback that fails to take these qualities into account can actually lead to less safety, trust and intimacy than before and undermine the group's ability to learn and change.

3) Happiness

A fundamental premise of mine is that organizational success starts with leaders who feel a personal sense of happiness and fulfillment. Not all successful organizations are led by happy people, and not all unsuccessful organizations are led by unhappy people (although I suspect the correlation is higher in the latter case), but I believe that, all else being equal, happy people make better leaders, and happy leaders build better organizations. Research shows that we have a substantial degree of control over our levels of happiness and fulfillment, and we exercise that control most effectively through small-scale, consistent intentional activities, not through large-scale changes in our life circumstances.

Sonja Lyubomirsky is a social psychologist whose research on happiness resulted in this graph. The image conveys three of the most important (and surprising) findings from recent work in this field:

What Determines Happiness?
(Lyubomirsky, 2008)



1) Half of our happiness is attributable to a "genetic set point" inherited from our parents and similar to other genetically influenced predispositions, such as weight. So those of us with low happiness set points will have to work harder to

achieve and maintain happiness, while those of us with high set points will find it easier to be happy under similar conditions.

2) A surprisingly small amount of our happiness—just 10 percent—is determined by our life circumstances. Lyubomirsky writes:

[O]nly about 10 percent of the variance in our happiness levels is explained by differences in life circumstances or situations--that is, whether we are rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy, beautiful or plain, married or divorced, etc. If with a magic wand we could put [a group of people] into the same set of circumstances (same house, same spouse, same place of birth, same face, same aches and pains), the differences in their happiness levels would be reduced by a measly 10 percent... An impressive body of research now shows that trying to be happy by changing our life situations ultimately will not work.

3) Finally, the remaining 40 percent of our happiness is determined by our behavior--intentional activities that we might call "happiness strategies." This is the core of Lyubomirsky's research: We can't alter our genetic set points, and changes in life circumstances don't have a lasting impact on our happiness, but we can increase and sustain our happiness through intentional activities. Lyubomirsky describes twelve "evidence-based happiness-increasing strategies whose practice is supported by scientific research," which include several that involve interpersonal communication:

- **Expressing Gratitude:** Counting your blessings for what you have (either to a close other or privately, through contemplation or a journal) or conveying your gratitude and appreciation to one or more individuals whom you've never properly thanked.
- **Practicing Acts of Kindness:** Doing good things for others, whether friends or strangers, either directly or anonymously, either spontaneously or planned.
- **Nurturing Social Relationships:** Picking a relationship in need of strengthening and investing time and energy in healing, cultivating, affirming and enjoying it.
- **Learning to Forgive:** Keeping a journal or writing a letter in which you work on letting go of anger and resentment toward one or more individuals who have hurt or wronged you.

4) The SCARF Model

David Rock is an executive coach who for many years has been exploring the field of neuroscience and its implications for management, coaching, and organizational life, and his SCARF Model provides a framework for understanding how our brains respond to perceived threats and rewards. Rock writes:

[T]wo themes are emerging from social neuroscience. Firstly, that much of our motivation driving social behavior is governed by an overarching organizing principle of minimizing threat and maximizing reward (Gordon, 2000). Secondly, that several domains of social experience draw upon the same brain

networks to maximize reward and minimize threat as the brain networks used for primary survival needs (Lieberman and Eisenberger, 2008). In other words, social needs are treated in much the same way in the brain as the need for food and water...

The SCARF model involves five domains of human social experience: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

Status is about relative importance to others. Certainty concerns being able to predict the future. Autonomy provides a sense of control over events. Relatedness is a sense of safety with others, of friend rather than foe. And fairness is a perception of fair exchanges between people.

SCARF Model of Social Threats and Rewards

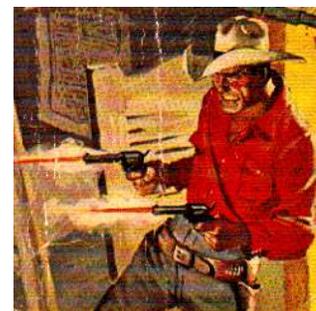


These five domains activate either the 'primary reward' or 'primary threat' circuitry (and associated networks) of the brain. For example, a perceived threat to one's status activates similar brain networks to a threat to one's life. In the same way, a perceived increase in fairness activates the same reward circuitry as receiving a monetary reward.

As this graphic illustrates, threat responses are usually much more powerful than reward responses, and thus we move *away* from threats more quickly and more vigorously than we move *toward* rewards. So it's not enough to give equal emphasis to rewards in our leadership, management and communication practices--our brains' disproportionate response to perceived social threats implies that we need to put a much greater weight on efforts intended to generate a reward response, and take great pains to avoid triggering a threat response.

5) Soft Startups

How do you initiate a difficult conversation? Going in with guns blazing rarely results in a successful outcome. Social psychologist John Gottman coined the term "soft startup" to describe the process of initiating a tough discussion gently and compassionately:



1) Start with something positive that conveys your intent to reach a successful resolution--but note that this *doesn't* mean inventing something nice to say. If you're struggling for words, simply saying that you want to have this conversation because you care about the other person and your shared goals can be helpful.

2) Use statements beginning with "I" that express your perspective and feelings, rather than statements beginning with "you" that focus on the other person. (And don't assume that your perspective is the only possible truth.)

3) Don't make assumptions about the other person'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) Be direct. State your request clearly, firmly and politely--while being sure to also acknowledge any concessions that are granted.

This is just the beginning of the process, of course, and you'll need a number of additional skills in your communication repertoire to succeed. But Gottman's research shows that a soft startup is a crucial step in resolving disagreements successfully.

6) Talking About Feelings

Photo by [malias](#).

We know that talking about our feelings--a process neuroscientists call *affect labeling*--has a powerful impact on our ability to manage difficult emotions and, in turn, on our relationships...but why? What happens when we do?



[Stephanie West Allen](#) has written about "the neuroscience research showing that labeling your feelings can quiet your brain and increase impulse control," most notably a groundbreaking article by Matthew Lieberman, Naomi Eisenberger *et al*, [Putting Feelings into Words \(PDF\)](#):

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... [T]hese results suggest that putting feelings into words may activate [brain regions associated with emotional processing],

which in turn may dampen the response of the amygdala [a brain region associated with negative emotion], thus helping to alleviate emotional distress...

In summary, this study provides the first unambiguous evidence that affect labeling...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.

7) Powerful Questions

Photo by Erik Charlton.

What kinds of questions do you usually ask? 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 to 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.

Scott Ginsberg has developed a list of 62 useful questions, along with a one-line explanation of why they work, and here are the 20 I find most powerful:

- 1) How are you creating...?
Proves that someone has a choice.
- 2) How could you have...?
Focused on past performance improvement.
- 3) How do you feel...?
Feelings are good.
- 4) How do you plan to...?
Future oriented, process oriented, action oriented.
- 5) How do you want...?
Visualizes ideal conditions.

- 6) How does this relate to...?
Keeps someone on point, uncovers connections between things.
- 7) How else could this be...?
Encourages open, option-oriented and leverage-based thinking.
- 8) How might you...?
All about potential and possibility.
- 9) How much time...?
Identifies patterns of energy investment.
- 10) How often do you...?
Gets an idea of someone's frequency.
- 11) How well do you...?
Uncovers abilities.
- 12) How will you know when/if...?
Predicts outcomes of ideal situations.
- 13) If you could change...?
Visualizes improvement.
- 14) If you stopped...?
Cause-effect question.
- 15) Is anybody going to...?
Deciding if something even matters.
- 16) What are you doing that...?
Assesses present actions.
- 17) What are you willing to...?
Explores limits.
- 18) What can you do right now...?
Focuses on immediate action being taken.
- 19) What did you learn...?
Because people don't care what you know; only what you learned.
- 20) 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. Just as 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.

8) The Problem with Positive Feedback

Photo by [Aaron Matthews](#).

Positive feedback frequently fails to have the desired impact and can even make many of us feel uncomfortable. But isn't praise supposed to make us feel good? What's going on, and what can we do about it?



When we have bad news to deliver, we often try to soften the blow by beginning and ending with something positive, a practice that I distinguish from the "soft startup" principle discussed above. Soft startups begin with a positive statement that conveys our intent to reach a successful resolution and helps avoid triggering a threat response in the other person. In contrast, "sandwiching" critical feedback between superficial praise eventually causes people to hear anything positive as a hollow preamble to the *real* message. Rather than feeling genuinely appreciated, they're waiting for the other shoe to drop. So while I do advise beginning difficult conversations with a soft startup, those comments must be authentic and relevant to the issue at hand.

Like any currency, positive feedback can become devalued or can be perceived as counterfeit. [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." So the solution isn't to withhold praise--when it's expected (or even just hoped for), its absence can be a powerful corrosive. Rather, we need to insure that the positive feedback we do deliver is consistently perceived as meaningful, authentic and heartfelt.

Finally, we need to take some responsibility as feedback *recipients*. We often resist the validation that comes with positive feedback precisely because we want it so badly. The depth of that desire makes us incredibly vulnerable--so much so that we're willing to avoid *any* validation in order to insure that we're never embarrassed by our hunger for it or--even worse--by falling prey to inauthentic validation from manipulators or phonies. When we say we want candid feedback, we typically expect that it's going to be hard to hear criticism--and it can be--but it can be even harder to

hear (and truly acknowledge) real praise. If we blindly react to praise with (in Peter Vajda's words) "skepticism, dis-belief, arm's-length appreciation, and/or embarrassment," that's going to make the giver feel awkward, if not resentful, and it's going to keep us from developing a stronger relationship. As always in interpersonal communication, it's a two-way street.

9) Taking Risks

Phil Stutz is a psychiatrist based in Hollywood who has mentored and collaborated with therapist Barry Michels, and in [a recent interview](#) Stutz discussed the pair's innovative approach to helping their clients overcome obstacles by embracing risk:

The risk you take has a feedback effect on the unconscious. The unconscious will give you ideas and it wants you to act on them. The more courage you have when you act, the more ideas it will give you.

In [my own experience](#), when I've quelled my fears and pushed myself to take meaningful risks, the reward has been a renewed sense of passion, a clearer sense of purpose, and a deeper connection with life. This concept evokes for me the feeling of standing at a cliff's edge, anticipating the thrill to come if I take the leap, but held back by fear--of a crash landing, of unanticipated difficulties, of the shame that would accompany failure. But Stutz's framing encourages me to see that my fear--and my courage--can be self-reinforcing through their influence on my unconscious, and that taking a bold leap can be a powerful way of breaking fear's grip and unleashing my courage.



About Ed Batista

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