

Communication and assertiveness skills for IT Staff

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Oxbridge Colleges IT Management Conference

21 March 2014

Agenda for today

- Good written communication
- The need to avoid jargon and acronyms
- Hostages to fortune
- The importance of proof-reading
- Good verbal communication
- Assertive behaviours vs passive or aggressive behaviours
- The dangers of email in difficult situations
- What to do when things go wrong
- Credits and questions

Written Communication

- Universities tend to use too many words
- Choose your words carefully and don't try to write "posh"
- More words don't make a better message
- Less is more!
- The passive voice is good in a D.Phil Thesis. Less good in a service announcement!
- Who was this?

"There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know."

Passengers are reminded that...

- Which is clearer on a bus from the airport?



Passengers are reminded that it is a legal requirement in the UK for all passengers to wear seatbelts on coaches where fitted

or



You must wear your seatbelt

How to write clearly

- Think about what you want to say
- Then just write it as you would say it
- Avoid jargon, acronyms and clichés
- Get the punctuation right!
- A comma can change everything!

**basically; essentially; in essence; to be honest; I'm like; let's touch base; With all due respect; at this moment in time; at the end of the day; myself; yourself; I'm not trying to be funny...
*what irritates you?***

**I like
cooking my family
and my pets.**

**Use commas.
Don't be a psycho.**



**An apostrophe is the
only difference
between a team that
knows its shit and one
that knows it's shit**

Choose your words carefully

- Say what you mean and say it in a neutral way
- Avoid prefaces and adverse prefaces – they turn the listener off and/or prejudice what they think of what you say

This may not be important...
I know this sounds silly...
I may be wrong...
It's just that...
I was just wondering if...
I hope you won't be angry...
I don't mean to offend you...
I don't want to tread on your toes...
Don't take this the wrong way...
No offence...
I've been wanting to say this for ages...

...but, however,
nevertheless...

Avoid hostages to fortune at all costs

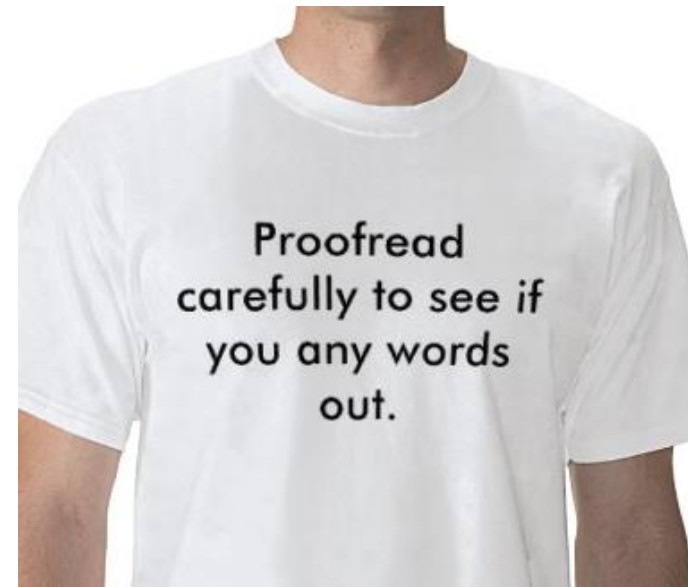
- Never promise something unless you are SURE you can and will deliver it
- Never promise a timescale unless you are SURE you will meet it
- It's fine to be vague or non-committal in early announcements or communications
- Before you publish or say anything consider if it might cause you trouble later

We want to tell you that the current software is being retired and replaced with something more modern and better-supported as part of a project that aims to complete in mid-2014

We want to tell you that the current software is being retired and replaced with something more modern and better-supported by the end of July 2014

You can't proof read your own stuff

- You will miss the mistakes for the same reasons you made them in the first place!
- Ask someone else to read it for you
- Ask them what they understand by what you wrote
- Make sure what you want to say is actually on the page
- Never skip this step!



Verbal communication is about listening as well as speaking

- You wouldn't use a phone with no speaker
- So let the other person talk too!
- Listening is not just about hearing, it's about understanding and showing that you understand by reflecting back
- Non verbal messages such as body language are very important for comprehension
- Make sure the focus is on who you are listening to – not you!
 - avoid “Oh yes, that happened to me, I know exactly how you feel” – **you don't**

How to show you are listening

- Smile
- Posture
- Don't be distracted
- Mirroring body language
- Make eye contact
- Question
- Clarify
- Reflect
- Summarise
- Agree

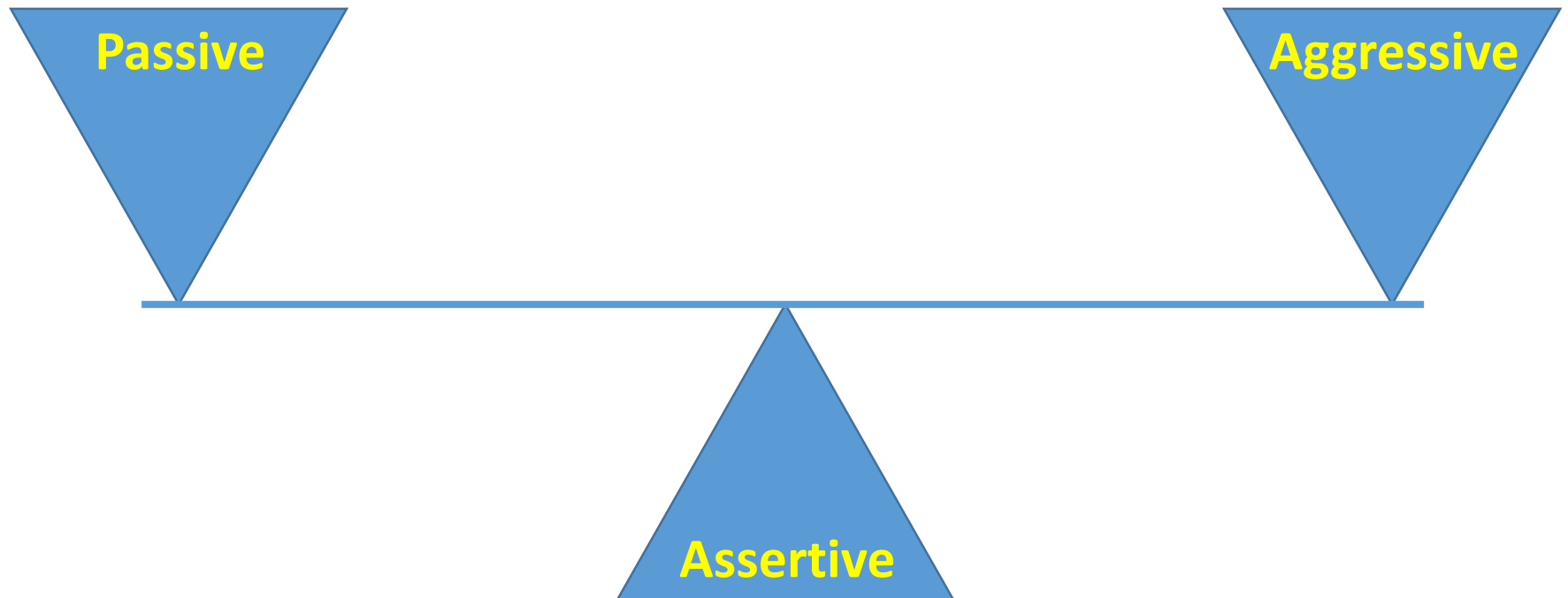


Listening exercise

- Try explaining to a your neighbour where you work and what you do
- If your birthday is on an odd-numbered day of the month then don't make eye contact
- If you birthday is on an odd-numbered month then do some web browsing on your phone
- How does it feel?

Assertiveness is a positive and effective behaviour

- It demonstrates your self-respect and your respect for others
- It's a balance – where are you?



The four types of behaviour



Aggressive



Passive



Indirect



Assertive

- We all have a mix of these
- Trick is to know how we respond in given situations
- Plan ahead so we can focus on assertiveness
- Which are you and how will you be what you want to be?

Passive behaviour

| How they behave | What they say | How it feels to receive | How they feel | Consequences |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Easy going✓ Anything for a quiet life✓ Inner turmoil | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ "If you like"✓ "I don't mind"✓ "Whatever you want"✓ "It's up to you" | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Unsure if heart is in it✓ Confused✓ Uncertain✓ Irritated | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Lack of self confidence✓ Overridden✓ Ignored | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Relationships suffer✓ Get left out✓ Get walked over✓ Lonely✓ Doormat feeling |

Aggressive behaviour

| How they behave | What they say | How it feels to receive | How they feel | Consequences |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Shout✓ Forceful✓ Uncompromising✓ Confrontational✓ Angry✓ Don't listen✓ Putting down | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ "you"✓ "you should"✓ "your fault"✓ "You're useless" | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Intimidated✓ Upset✓ Frightened✓ Guilty✓ Angry✓ Wondering what I'm doing wrong | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Covering up low self-esteem✓ Lack of confidence✓ Drive to win at all costs✓ Pressured | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Relationships suffer & change✓ People get left out✓ Nobody wins |

Indirect behaviour

| How they behave | What they say | How it feels to receive | How they feel | Consequences |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Move goalposts✓ Inconsistent✓ Don't take responsibility✓ Manipulative✓ Emotional blackmail✓ Misinform and blame | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ "If you were a decent colleague you would..."✓ "You know you're really good at..." | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Guilty✓ Frustrated✓ Wrong-footed✓ Panicky✓ Inferior | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Victim✓ Insecure✓ Feel need to make themselves important | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Confusion✓ Anxiety✓ Avoidance |

Assertive behaviour

| How they behave | What they say | How it feels to receive | How they feel | Consequences |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Stand up for their rights✓ Respect your rights✓ Directly✓ Clearly✓ Honestly✓ Considerately | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Express wants, needs and feelings appropriately✓ "I think"✓ "I feel"✓ Lots of "I"✓ Little "you" | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Respected✓ Good✓ Encouraged✓ Clear about tasks and role | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Content✓ Everyone gets something✓ Win-Win✓ Knowing where they and others stand | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Treated with respect✓ Open and inclusive environment✓ Disagreements get resolved✓ No resentment✓ Things get done! |

It's so easy to mess up in an email

- Face to face conversation has body language and tone as the back-channel to assist understanding
- Phone just has tone
- Email has neither!
- Language is extremely important
 - But means different things to different people
 - Oxbridge has lot of people from all over the country and indeed world with lots of different language and dialects
- Email can come back and bite – be careful what you write and it will be forward to anyone
- Don't Cc without permission and if you want to Bcc ask yourself why
- If you are a Bcc don't reply-all!



If you get a tough email

- Pause to think about it and read it several times
 - This is like listening properly
- Draft a reply but don't send it immediately
 - Sleep on it
 - Run it past a colleague to see how it sounds
- Maybe don't use email as the reply medium
- Talking over coffee etc. is very cathartic
- Try to assume the best of people, not the worst
- Think about the outcome you want and check every action you plan to take or word you write for whether it will move you closer to that outcome



Good and assertive emails are...

- ...listened to (well-read)
- ...demonstrate understanding of the situation or request
- ...empathetic
- ...say what you think and feel (self-disclosure)
- ...say what you want to happen (or not happen)
- ...work towards a solution acceptable to both parties
- ...clear and specific
- ...concise and polite

What if it all goes wrong?

- It's OK to say so and accept some responsibility
- People will not think less of you
- Saying sorry doesn't have to be an admission of guilt
- Saying sorry can be an expression of regret
- Think about the outcome you want and whether the cost of conceding a minor point is acceptable
 - it often is
- Try to resolve at as lower level as possible
- Try to resolve as informally as possible
- Don't escalate the situation by going up the management chain unless all other options are exhausted

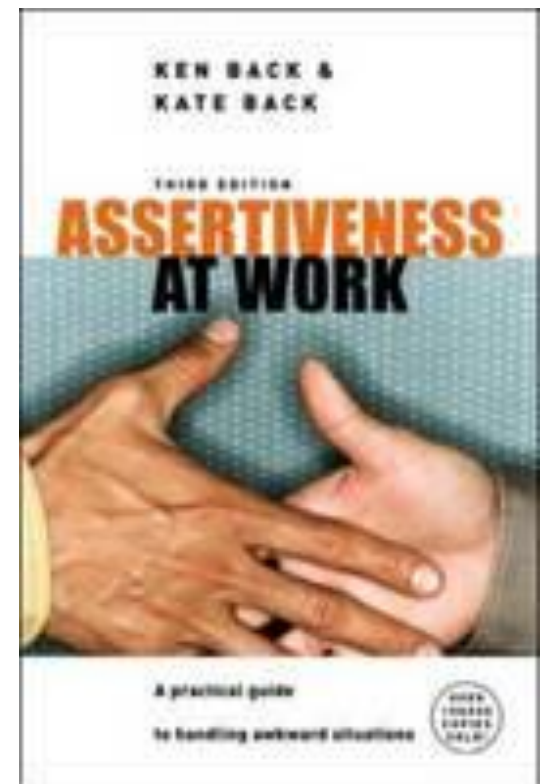
A final reminder



- Relationships are everything in distributed, complex and heavily devolved environments
- Good communication, good assertiveness and good soft skills are key to making relationships work
- IT people often under-rate this and neglect their own soft skills
- Don't let that person be you!
- Relationships and reputation take time and care to build but can be destroyed very easily

Huge thanks to...

- Hannah Boschen of the Oxford Learning Institute
 - for letting me use some of her material about communication and assertiveness
 - Hannah recommends this book
 - ISBN: 0077114280
ISBN: 9780077114282



Any questions?

- Thank you for coming to this session
- I hope you have found it useful
- I welcome feedback
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