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Mastering **Communication**

Fourth Edition

Nicky Stanton

palgrave
macmillan

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First published 1982 by Pan Books as *The Business of Communicating* in the Breakthrough series.

Second edition published 1990 by Macmillan Press Ltd as *Communication* in the Professional Masters series.

Third fully revised and updated edition published in 1996 by Macmillan Press Ltd in the Masters series.

Fourth edition 2004

Published by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-4039-1709-6 ISBN 978-0-230-21164-3 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-0-230-21164-3

For use by ICM Student Members only.

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stanton, Nicky, 1944–

Mastering communication / Nicky Stanton. – 4th ed.

p. cm. – (Palgrave master series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4039-1709-6 (pbk.)

1. Communication. I. Title. II. Series.

P90.S787 2003

302.2—dc22

2003053651

10 9 8 7 6 5

12 11 10 09 08 07

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Preface to the fourth edition

When I first wrote *What Do You Mean, Communication?* and *The Business of Communicating* in 1982, I had no idea that they would remain popular for so long. The two books have since been combined into one, but it has not really been necessary to make any radical changes along the way. Similarly, in this, the fourth edition, now established as simply *Mastering Communication*, I and those who have helped me by using and reviewing the book have needed to make only minor changes.

Perhaps we should not be surprised. After all, the subject of the book is the way in which human beings communicate with one another in words and actions, and essentially this will always – at least in the foreseeable future – remain much the same: to think carefully about what we want to say and how we want to say it and then, perhaps more difficult, to translate these thoughts into words and actions so that we are understood in the way we intend.

True, over the centuries, the means of communication have changed dramatically from the quill pen to the telephone and typewriter through to a world in which almost everyone, in the developed world at least, has access to PCs and mobile phones. True, our relationships with others have perhaps become more friendly and informal and, because of education and the expansion of the media world, our messages have become more sophisticated and yet sometimes more informal. But our task remains the same: to find the most appropriate words and actions to convey our thoughts and meaning.

As with previous editions, the main changes in this edition have therefore been concerned with updating dates, recommended books and sources of advice; names of journals and institutions that have changed; words that have had to alter in response to social changes and pressures; and the effect of office and personal technology. Gone are ‘salesman’ and ‘chairmen’ replaced by ‘sales people’ and ‘chairs’! Gone are stencils and carbon copies, typewriters and eradicating fluid, replaced by word processors and extremely high quality printers at a price almost every office, however small, can afford. Gone are blackboards and the problems of managing 16 mm film projectors, replaced by video machines and computer controlled projection. Gone is the ability to blame the typist or the printer for our mistakes; most of us at work now key in our own data and messages and can no longer escape responsibility for the accuracy and quality of the final message.

However, in a world in which electronic communication appears to be able to carry out miracles of transmission, in which with the press of a few keys we can chat on screen within seconds to almost anyone in the world, perhaps we now appreciate personal communication even more. How good it is to hear a voice on the

phone that sounds like a real, live, breathing human being instead of a computer voice or someone simply reading a script. How pleasant it is to receive a handwritten letter from a friend, or a business letter that seems to have been written by a real person with a name, in a style that seems to convey that they really mean what they are saying, rather than a series of selected standard paragraphs that sound like the outpourings of an emotionless computer. How rewarding it is to have a face-to-face meeting in which we can see people's eyes sparkle with enthusiasm, detect from a subtle smile that they are actually being humorous and ironic, recognise that someone has been hurt by thoughtless remarks and put it right there and then, rather than spending all our time addressing a telephone answering machine or a computer screen.

In this world, it is all too easy to be lulled into believing that the machinery will do the thinking for us. It is perhaps, therefore, even more important than ever to stop and think:

Is this the best way to communicate?

Is this the effect I meant to achieve?

IS THAT WHAT I REALLY WANT TO SAY?

NICKY STANTON

Introduction

Why? The purpose of this book is to help anyone who is interested in improving their communication skills and their knowledge of the way in which communication functions in business, by providing a self-contained book which will both stand on its own without the aid of a teacher, and complement a taught course.

Who? It is intended to help:

- students on NVQ/SVQ, BTEC/GNVQ Intermediate and Advanced, Higher level courses, A-level and AS-level students and students on other professional courses to improve their skills in communicating by learning and practising techniques on their own; this is also an Open University set book;
- teachers in colleges and universities, whether communication specialists or not, who are concerned with improving their students' communication skills, but who find there is never enough time in the timetable to give students sufficient chance to get the practice which is so essential if their knowledge and skills are really to develop satisfactorily; and
- anyone interested in communication and keen to become a more effective communicator but who is unable to take advantage of a course at a college, university or at work.

What? The book covers the main communication tasks with which you are likely to be confronted – telephoning, interviewing, meetings, giving talks and oral presentations, writing letters, reports (long and short), questionnaires, e-mails and so on. In addition you will find chapters on non-verbal communication, listening and reading, and the use of visual aids – boards, projectors, videos and the like, and on visual communication – graphs, charts and so on.

The final part deals with the basic elements of English grammar and usage and is intended either to help you brush up your knowledge of English or to act merely as a quick reference section together with some useful reference lists in the appendices at the back of the book.

How? In order to help you check your progress as you work through the book, you will frequently come across questions and exercises.

Self-checks are usually short questions or exercises to test your understanding of what you have just read, or to find out what you know already, before reading on. Try not to read on to the discussion of these questions until you have at least attempted an answer for yourself. Try not to cheat – it will only hinder your progress – but if you are really stuck, then read on or check back over the last few pages.

Exercises are similar to self-checks but come at the end of a chapter or section to test your understanding of the whole chapter. Again, if you have difficulty answering these, go back over the previous section or chapter. You can find suggested answers to these exercises at the back of the book.

Assignments are longer exercises, usually at the end of chapters to help you apply your knowledge and practise the skills and techniques you have learned. However, sometimes these activities occur in the middle of a chapter and ask you to carry out some observations or do some research over a longer period of time. Make a note of them when you get to them to remind you what to do or what to look out for during the next few days or weeks.

In writing this book my aim has been to adopt a tone and style of writing which both reflects acceptable current practice and makes the reader's task as easy as possible. I have therefore not always adhered strictly to some of the older 'rules' of writing, which the purist would regard as essential to good writing style. As I have explained in Chapters 19 and 20, on English and grammar, the English language has gradually changed over the centuries, and these changes are still taking place. I believe my task is to indicate to the reader what is acceptable to good, modern business writers now, in the twenty-first century.

However, in 'breaking' one rule, I have perhaps been particularly controversial. Normally in formal business writing nowadays we would still probably try not to use contractions ('don't' for 'do not', 'can't' for 'cannot') unless we know the reader well and were permitted by the circumstances to write in a more casual style. I have chosen to use contractions and a generally informal, although I believe correct, style of writing in order to lighten the tone of the book and give the reader, particularly the self-study reader, the feeling that I am talking rather than writing, and that we are working together.

In order to avoid accusations of sexism and yet to avoid the rather clumsy 'he/she' form I have often used the plural form 'they' or 'their' even when referring back to a singular noun, for example, 'anyone who wishes to improve their communications skills'. This may offend the purists, but it is now a broadly acceptable way of avoiding the 'his/her' problem.

When? The chapters in this book inevitably develop from one another. However, each chapter is designed to be complete and self-contained, enabling you to pick up the book and make use of those odd hours between other demands on your time.

Where? Armed only with this book and a pen and paper, you should be able to work through the various chapters at home, at college, in a library, on buses, trains and even planes. However, in some of the chapters that deal with speaking skills you may find a small tape-recorder useful, in which case you may prefer to work in privacy.

So – good luck, and above all, enjoy yourself! Learning should be fun and the way in which human beings communicate is always fascinating even when we fall short of perfection, which we all too often do.

NICKY STANTON

Acknowledgements

No idea can really be said to be original – for every ‘new idea’ is a development of the countless ideas which have gone before. Any book is therefore merely an expression of the knowledge, experience and skill acquired during the author’s lifetime of contact with other people. To all those people who have in any way been influential in my own development and learning and who have therefore contributed, often without my knowing, to the ideas expressed in this book, I owe my gratitude.

However, my special thanks are due to my colleagues at the University of the West of England, Swindon College and Rede Group, and to all my students, in colleges, universities and in industry and commerce, with whom over the years I have learned about the process of communication.

For their patient and tireless, practical and moral support I thank especially my husband, Mike, and my two children, Matt and Abi, and the help and support of my parents, Jo and Gordon.

NICKY STANTON

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The National Audit Office for an extract from ‘Evaluating the Applications to Run the Lottery’, 1994–5.

Longman, for the example of an algorithm from D.M. Wheatley and A.W. Unwin, *The Algorithm Writer’s Guide* (1972) in Chapter 18.

Flamingo Modern Classics for an extract from Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, 1991.

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