

JANUARY 2013

Avoiding communication disasters

It pays to know which language style is understood the best – whether you are the speaker or the listener

By Nancy Neal Yeend

It is that time of year for making New Year's resolutions, and I have one you may want to add to your list – thus avoiding costly communication mistakes. The following tips are designed to make your New Year brighter, and could even make you healthy, wealthy and wise. Well, maybe not the first two, but certainly wiser.

Your words matter

You may be an eloquent speaker; however, if you are not speaking the language of your audience, no one will hear your message. There are four primary communication styles (languages), which are associated with how the brain links meaning and significance to words. Unless someone has an auditory impairment, people hear your words; however, if you are not speaking their language (communication style), your words have little relevance.

Four communication styles have been identified: *intuitor*, *sensor*, *feeler* and *thinker*. Although these terms are the same as those associated with temperament and personality type, there are distinguishing characteristics. For the purpose of this article, only communication style is addressed.

Individuals, who use the "*intuitor*" communication style, will hear and respond to words that relate to concepts, theories and ideas – words that stimulate their imagination. Therefore if you say, "I have an *idea* of how we can resolve this case," the word *idea* resonates with the *intuitor* and your message is received. It is worth noting that *intuitors* have a *future* time orientation, so your message really registers if you say, "I have an *idea* of how we can resolve this case. *Next week* we can..." With these two sentences you have used words that relate to ideas as well as the *intuitor's* future time reference point.

If you are speaking to "*sensor*" communicators, you need to use words that are direct, down-to-earth or pragmatic. *Sensor* speakers have a time orientation to the *present*, so statements like, "We are here *today* to settle this case," or, "I think we can *get it done* without *undue deliberation*," resonates with a *sensor* listener. Again, the *sensor* hears your key words *get it done* and *undue deliberation*, while the word *today* connects to their time orientation of the present.

Those who are identified as "*feeler*" communicators seem to demonstrate the unique ability to link events to the impact on people. It is not that individuals who use other communication styles do not make the connection; it is that *feelers* are more likely to articulate emotions associated with these events. The time orientation for *feeler* communicators is the *past*. They are very interested in spending time during negotiations exploring what things were like before an event occurred. Some refer to *feeler* communicators as "conflict archeologists." Word choices that resonate with *feelers* may include, "I appreciate your *concerns* over the loss of your job, and we want you to take this opportunity to *share* with us how your *life has changed*." Again, key words like *concerns* and *share* have a human connection, so important to *feeler* communicators. The *feeler's* time orientation to the *past* is captured with the words *life has changed*. It is important to remember that if *feelers* are not permitted to emote, they will keep repeating, and their brain will keep running the tape of what they want to say, thus, they will not hear anything you are saying.

Listeners who use "*thinker*" communication language tend to like data, facts and figures. No dominant time orientation has been associated with this communication style, so *thinkers* seem to hear all time references equally. A *thinker* communicator will get your message when you use phrases like, "Please *review the data* provided by our expert, and let me know *your thoughts*." Communicators with the *thinker* style respond to words where they can demonstrate their ability to take in and process data. They rely heavily on detailed information, so when talking to a *thinker*, using lists or referencing things by numbers, such as, "There are *three key elements*," is beneficial.

Based on the above, it is easy to see why some people just talk past one another – never seeming to hear what the other is saying. You need not panic and think this is just too complicated to be useful. All you need to do is *listen* to people speak. Do they use words that relate to the *future*, *concepts* or *ideas*? If so, they are *intuitors*. If they speak about the *past* and discuss *how they feel* about an event, then they are more likely *feeler* communicators. The simple key to get people to listen to what you have to say, is speak their language. Incorporate a few words from several communication styles, and people will more likely get the message you are sending.

You may wish to consider taking the two-minute Communication Style Indicator (located on next page) to determine your dominant communication style. The indicator also identifies the communication style that you are least likely to hear. Improving your persuasion skills begins with speaking multiple languages, which means honing your listening skills to hear your least preferred style. Depending on the setting or context, you are able to use all communication styles; however, you are more likely to use one dominant style at work, say *thinker*, and then use a different style at home, like *sensor*.

Copyright © 2013 by the author.
For reprint permission, contact the publisher: **www.plaintiffmagazine.com**



Communication Style Indicator

Directions: *Read each question, and rank the four responses for each question before answering the next question. Begin by placing a 4 next to the response most like you, most of the time and a 1 next to the response that is least like you, most of the time. When you have marked the two extremes, then go back and indicate which responses are 2 and 3. As you read the questions, read the question with only* **one context** *in mind: office, home or with a stranger. Important: only take two (2) minutes to rank the four responses for all five questions. Go with your first impulse, and do not analyze. You are more likely to get an accurate indication of your style.*

1. When I make decisions with others, I am likely to
_____ a. discuss what was done before and consider how people felt.
_____ b. explore concepts and anticipate how things will be done in the future.
_____ c. clarify present circumstances and make quick decisions.
_____ d. analyze all the facts and options.

2. When communicating with others, I am
_____ a. annoyed when people speak before they think.
_____ b. frustrated when people rehash old issues and take no action.
_____ c. impatient when people seem unwilling to explore options and possibilities.
_____ d. disappointed when people do not deal with emotions.

3. When confronted by people who hold a different point of view, I am likely to
_____ a. explore possibilities and encourage brainstorming.
_____ b. explain the logic of my perspective and evaluate theirs.
_____ c. consider current issues and practical ways to reach agreement.
_____ d. discuss the events that led to our different views and talk about why we feel the way we do.

4. When working on a project, I am likely to
_____ a. find ways to involve everyone in satisfying interactions.
_____ b. develop a practical, realistic plan of action.
_____ c. research data, analyze, and develop logical and rational ideas.
_____ d. look at the "big picture" and create ways to be innovative.

5. When I am in a discussion, I am likely to
_____ a. focus on present issues and the practical steps to resolve them.
_____ b. look at the relationship between events and find innovative ways to move forward.
_____ c. note the emotions involved and ask people how they feel about what is happening.
_____ d. analyze the issues, remain objective and consider options.

Getting the Totals

To obtain an approximate indication of your primary communication style, enter the number you wrote next to each response, and then add to get your totals.

	Intuitor	Sensor	Feeler	Thinker
Q.1	b.____	c.____	a.____	d.____
Q.2	c.____	b.____	d.____	a.____
Q.3	a.____	c.____	d.____	b.____
Q.4	d.____	b.____	a.____	c.____
Q.5	b.____	a.____	c.____	d.____
Total	____	____	____	____

Style Indicators

If you have a "high" number in one column, a total of 14 to 20, this indicates your dominant communication style. A "low" number, a total of 5 to 11, indicates the communication style that you are not likely to listen to, and you will discount the information that speaker provides. If you have the middle zone for all four styles, totals of 12 to 13, then it means for the context you had in mind as you answered the questions, you may not have a dominate style. It could also mean that this indicator had too few questions to identify your communication style.

(This document was designed by Nancy Neal Yeend and Bonnie Best. ©Nancy Neal Yeend. No reproduction allowed without written consent of the author.)

It goes without saying that you need to listen and translate if people are not speaking your language. For example, if you are a *thinker* communicator, which many attorneys are, and you are listening to a *feeler* speaker, it is not helpful for you to think, "I wish this person would stop whining!" You may need to say, so you lock in their statement and at the same

Copyright © 2013 by the author.
For reprint permission, contact the publisher: **www.plaintiffmagazine.com**



time indicate to the speaker that you heard what was said, "I understand you are *dissatisfied* with the *manner* in which you were *terminated*, and that you *feel* that *your service* to the company was *not appreciated*." The first half of the sentence reflects more of your *thinker* vocabulary, while the words in the second half of the sentence relate to *feeler* vocabulary. You just translated *feeler* emoting into *thinker* by using enough humanistic words to demonstrate that you got the message.

The same technique works if a *sensor* is speaking with an *intuitor*. The *sensor* is in the here and now, while the *intuitor* is dreaming up a variety of options. The *sensor* may say something like, "Why are we spending *so much time* listening to these *hare-brained ideas*?" The *sensor* wants to make decisions now and not speculate about possibilities, while the *intuitor's* creative mind is spinning with a number of ideas. One way to get the message across to the *sensor*, might begin with "Perhaps by *taking a bit of time* to be sure that *all options* are on the table, we can actually *save time*, and be out the door *sooner*, knowing we have *not missed* something important." Since the *sensor* wants things done quickly, pointing out the process will *not take too much time* and *time will be saved*, resonate. Likewise, the *intuitor* hears *all options* and that *nothing* will be missed. Time differences magnify the disparity between communication styles. This is especially true between *intuitors* (future) and *feelers* (past).

No one needs to talk past someone who has a different style. Just adding a word or two will make all of the difference. The *intuitor* can get the *thinker* to hear *ideas*, so long as the *intuitor* supplies some *facts* or *data*. Similarly, the *sensor* can hear the *feeler* by bringing the *feeler* to the *present*. Just saying something like, "You have *carefully* told me how *wonderful* and *caring* your *husband* was when you were *first married*; *now* please tell me how you want your life to look *after the divorce*." The first half of the sentence includes words that resonate with a *feeler* communicator, while the second half of the sentence uses the word *now* to bring the *feeler* forward to the *present*. The statement concludes with *after the divorce*, which provides a further nudge to move the *feeler* from the past and into the *future*!

Use your senses

The human brain records information and experiences, which form a *database*, in one of five sensory areas: *auditory*, *visual*, *kinesthetic* (touch), *olfactory* (smell) or *gustatory* (taste). Generally, people have a preferred sensory system, and tend to think and speak using those sensory words. As with any language, there are regional dialects, so it may be helpful for you to think of sensory words as local jargon.

Lucky for you, most people typically only use one of three sensory systems: auditory, visual and kinesthetic. Olfactory and gustatory are used in a few regions outside of the United States, so identifying sensory words is that much easier.

So much for theory, how can you use this knowledge to your advantage? It is very easy to identify sensory speech. For example, a person who is a *visual* learner and stores information associated with *sight* will say something like, "I *see* what you are saying." On the other hand, a person who takes in information by listening and links information to sound (*auditory*) will say, "I *hear* what you are saying." A *kinesthetic* speaker is a tactile learner, most likely a chronic note taker, who stores information associated with touch. The *kinesthetic* response would include something like, "I *get* what you are saying."

It is important to understand that when your sensory system is different from those of the people you are speaking with, although they may hear your words, two important things happen: they are *more likely to discount* what you are saying, and they are *less likely to retain* the information you provide. You will need to speak the local dialect, and use the listener's sensory frame of reference if you want to persuade.

Mastering this skill may be accomplished in two easy steps. First, identify your dominant sensory preference. Are you *auditory*, *visual* or *kinesthetic*? Of the following three lists, which group of words and phrases are you more likely to use?

1) That rings a bell; I got an earful; That sounds like a winner; I got it word for word; and That's just idle talk.
2) He is shortsighted; It appears to me; I know beyond a shadow of a doubt; In light of what you just said; and That's a horse of a different color.
3) I will pull some strings; They had a heated argument; Keep your shirt on; That's what it boils down to; and I will get in touch.

Hopefully, one of the groups includes more of the words that you typically use. If the first group contains more of your phrases, then your dominant sensory reference is *auditory*. If you preferred the second group, then your predominant style is *visual*. Finally, if you preferred the third group of phrases, then your frame of reference is *kinesthetic*. Everyone uses all three sensory references; however, for most people one sense will dominate. Listen to the words you use for a day, and you will soon identify a sensory theme.

Listening to others is step two. You may feel a bit awkward in the beginning, but within a very short period of time you will pick up sensory cues. Initially practicing the techniques outside the office will build confidence. For many it is a revelation to go home and listen for sensory words used by family members. By applying these skills at home, teenagers may even learn to listen to their parents, and just inserting the appropriate sensory word can save marriages!

Final thoughts

Several factors influence communication style and sensory preference, including profession and technology. In one study, first-year law students were tested to determine their dominant communication style. They were tested a second time after they completed law school, and the results were striking. Entering law school the communication

Copyright © 2013 by the author.
For reprint permission, contact the publisher: **www.plaintiffmagazine.com**



style percentages reflected the national average for type; however, after law school the majority of students were *thinker* communicators. It appears that the reward factor for being a critical thinker in law school was substantial enough to change the students' communication style.

Sensory preference has changed over time as technology has evolved. Early studies showed that the majority of people used *auditory* sensory references. Pre-technology, people just listened to one another, and then came the radio and telephone, so *auditory* remained king. With the advent of movies, and then television, there was a shift towards *visual*. With the universal use of computers, phones with applications and other handheld devices, *kinesthetic* references are gaining ground.

Listening to communication styles and sensory word choices is actually big business. There are those who have been known to hire consultants to listen to judges, and to determine their communication style and sensory preferences. Possessing that type of information allows an attorney to write a brief that may be much more persuasive to the judge.

Conclusion

New Year's resolutions come and go, but this communication one should be here to stay. Once you integrate these skills into your conversations, you will get your message across, be more likely to persuade, and even improve your own listening skills. This could make you healthy, wealthy and certainly wiser. Happy New Year!


Yeend

Nancy Neal Yeend is an experienced, nationally recognized dispute management strategist and mediator. As a strategist, she has designed court-connect mediation programs, including Maryland's first appellate mediation program; and she evaluates existing court ADR programs. As a mediator, Nancy handles real estate, employment, partnership and related business cases. She serves on California's First and Third District Counts of Appeal Mediation Panels. She co-founded Silicon Valley Mediation Group *in Los Altos. Nancy has served as a faculty member at the National Judicial College for 19 years, and has helped train over 5000 mediators. Her publishing credits include what some consider the seminal study of appellate ADR in state courts.*

Copyright © 2013 by the author.
For reprint permission, contact the publisher: **www.plaintiffmagazine.com**