

What Gap?



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Why & How to

Use this Book

Consider the idea that regular quality contact and mutual understanding are not only pleasant but almost as vital to our survival as food, sleep or oxygen. And this is why we respond so positively to anyone who has the skills to close the UNDERSTANDING GAP.

It is quality contact and mutual understanding which will enable us to not only survive but also thrive.

The question is: what are the essential building blocks needed to close the UNDERSTANDING GAP between what we think we are saying and how others actually perceive us?

This book is a communication tool box for people who wish to take the lead and make a difference. It identifies these building blocks and takes you along the path of successfully implementing them.

Two individuals communicate similar information in the context of a live interaction. One person is easily understood on a factual level, as well as stimulating collaborative, creative thinking. The other is hard to understand, uninspiring on an emotional level and tiring or even annoying to listen to. *"I don't know how I managed to stay awake..."* The second person created a large UNDERSTANDING GAP. And maybe did not even realise it...

If we occupy the same space as other people each of us will be continually receiving and sending out different messages, whether we intend to or not. In a live social context there is never a moment when we will be able to communicate *'nothing at all'*. This is regardless of whether we are speaking or silent. If we have the skills during live communications to close the UNDERSTANDING GAPS, our effect on everyone around us can be significant. Whether it is with our friends and family, or in the professional or political arena.

When given the choice we usually prefer to spend time with an individual or group who we understand and with whom we can easily communicate. We enjoy the click. Even more than just enjoying it, we are more likely to excel when we feel understood. Humans are not solitary animals; contact with each other is a basic drive. When put in solitary confinement, many people – depending on their character – will eventually descend into insanity. On a daily basis people regularly experience moments of isolation, in the form of either not understanding or not being understood by others. The negative feelings which this isolation so often elicits are *'maddening'*. In the English language we sometimes use the word mad: *"I was mad at them..."* *"It made me feel so mad..."* to replace the word angry. How often does the reaction to the frustration of not being understood, manifest itself in some form of anger or rage?

Often the deciding factor in choosing to be with or work with a person, a group of people or an organisation will be when trust is established through an inter-personal click. On a world stage with the ever-more globalised economies it is increasingly common to communicate within a mix of national differences; to be effective each one of us will need to increase communication sensitivity and flexibility to reduce or close the cultural divide.

Although our society regularly gives the credit for innovative ideas to individual people, once we look under the surface we see that human brilliance comes through a combination of accomplished leadership and team thinking. Winning collaborations are rooted in our ability to effectively understand and be inspired by each other. One of the biggest obstacles, which all too often gets in the way of closing these complex UNDERSTANDING GAPS, is ourselves. Not because we are being insensitive, but because most of us have probably never studied how to do this. The skills needed to make useful selections of incoming messaging and create clear strategic outgoing messaging, thus closing the complex UNDERSTANDING GAPS, are given very little attention during our upbringing and education.

And yet it is not random or mysterious.

I have been fascinated by this topic since childhood, and over many years of studying and working in experimental theatre, the visual arts and a twelve month stint in a rock band, I have absorbed and developed countless ideas on the subject of communication. As a co-founder, creator and director of Executive Performance Training (EPT) for more than twenty years, I have applied and refined them. To date, several thousand professionals have passed through our hands.

During the years I identified the building blocks needed to close the UNDERSTANDING GAP between the message we think we are putting across and the message others actually receive.

I have regularly been asked to document these ideas and experiences. The aim of this book is to give the tools and to take the ideas past just reading into experiencing behavioural change, in bite sized portions. The reader will not have to take *'time out'* but rather can see how to take *'time in'*, weaving the process and information into daily life. The quick fix-it of a sensational learning moment, although fun and attractive, all too often evaporates. With the danger of initially becoming overly aware, the intention of this book is to take you through a longer process of which PLEASURE is definitely a component. In certain situations ignorance may be bliss. If you feel that investigating the breadth and depth of communication may be an ignorance-is-bliss case for you... please go no further... stop reading!

Each section of the book is intended to be self-contained. You can either read it sequentially from beginning to end or dip randomly into the ideas that appeal to you, motivated by the section headings. Many of the ideas are interrelated, so there is a certain amount of cross-over. However, one of our learning mechanisms is through re-experiencing. With this book through the experiencing, experimenting and building up of the ideas from different angles you will increase your personal perception, understanding and communication potential.

To guide your choice the sections are divided into three clusters: **Golden Classics**, **Under the Skin** and **No Man's Land**. Try reading a section and then experimenting with those particular ideas for a week or so before moving on to the next. Become a private eye, investigating the daily moment-to-moment effectiveness of communication and leadership. Enjoy!

As the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw noted,
'The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.'

Golden Classics

1 Choice Importance & Priority

This section includes two AND-DO-ITs

...Mmmmmm the vodka tastes good, shall I have another sip...

Deciding what to do and when to do it is continual. As I write this I am being bombarded with different stimuli, which are asking for a decision: I am a bit hot, shall I take off my jumper? It is getting dark, shall I turn on another light? I am getting hungry, shall I go and eat now or later, shall I eat at home or go out to a restaurant? Do I want to finish this thought, shall I stay and continue writing or leave the ideas hanging? My back is getting stiff, shall I move? Mmmm this vodka tastes good, shall I have another sip... and so on. As a matter of course, each one of us is in a constant process of making choices and prioritising.

It is a given that there are only 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and we need to make space for the two main time consumers: sleeping and eating. Together with the ever-increasing and competing demands on the same time limitations, the need and expectation to be effective and efficient are also increasing. The type of choices we make on an almost minute-to-minute basis will have an impact on not only our effectiveness but also our well-being.

Sometimes choosing the order and priority for certain actions is simple. For example, if you are going to take a shower it is more useful to take off your clothes before you step under the flowing water. But with less obvious sequences we can get tempted away from seeing what really needs to be done, or what needs our immediate attention, and what can wait for a minute, an hour, a day, a week or even longer. Daily demands can appear to require an urgent response, particularly in some work set-ups and with, for example, full time parenting. All too often this can result in an action being in 'response to' what we receive as being urgent, whilst neglecting other more important elements in our life. It is helpful to regularly take a moment to look and consider 'the big picture.' Neglect can easily build up and become self-destructive. Seemingly trivial and often elusive moments can turn into a major problem. This could

range from keeping up to date with certain business relations, to maintaining your physical health or intimate rapport with your family and friends. The GAP between our self and frequently those who may be the most important people in our lives can stretch to the point of no return.

A particularly ambitious and hard working executive comes to mind. Menno's desire to succeed at work (in a large Dutch company) resulted in him not prioritising effectively enough for every element in his life to flourish. The company demands appeared more urgent and important than the less dramatic daily desires and needs of his family. Reading this I am sure you can guess what I am going to say next... Yes, Menno's wife left him, taking the children with her. He was shocked, devastated, and to escape his grief threw himself even more intensively into his job. About six months later he had functioned so well at work that he was offered a position on the Managing Board. Menno told me that he suddenly realised if he did not take a more active hands-on role with his young children, who no longer lived with him, that their relationship would become little more than a title. His response to the offer was: *"Yes, I would love to accept the position, but only if I can work three and a half days a week. The other one and a half days I want to spend with my children."* To his amazement they accepted. He was delighted, but also saddened by the realisation that in many ways his change of priority had come too late, his marriage was over and with it the daily intimacy of family life.

Menno's initial way of prioritising was probably not simply to do with his character, but also influenced by gender conditioning. Depending on our background and gender we will be encouraged to think certain things have a different order of importance.

Water story

During a session with nine professional women the whole group were sitting in a conference space focussing on Sally. As she walked across the

room she accidentally knocked over a glass of water onto one of the tables. The two women close to the spilt water, as their conditioning to tidy up was stronger than their desire to keep their attention on Sally, immediately started mopping up the water. The consequence of them choosing to change their focus of attention to the water was that they missed Sally's 'turning-point learning-moment.' In turn they also missed a learning-moment for themselves. Although we later discussed what had happened, a split in the levels of emotional connection between the group members remained. GAPS in experiential understanding had been created.

Interestingly, we had a similar situation with an all male group. Men are not generally conditioned to tidy up after others, and although they may have experienced a small impulse to mop up the water, they immediately realised it was more important to keep their attention with their colleague. The individual learning plus group understanding and appreciation was therefore at an optimum.

There is no perfect answer to choosing a sequence of events. However, it is helpful to take a moment to think past an action into the possible consequences, as with the women and the glass of water.

Over the years I have noticed that the individuals who dare to make clear choices, and are able to say "*not now*" to last minute requests from an 'important' person or client, gain more personal credibility and often higher leadership positions in an organisation. I believe it is a misplaced sense of responsibility to blindly stick with such dictums as "*The customer always comes first.*" What if you have three customers and a family member who are all demanding your attention at the same time? And what about you and your needs? We cannot be all things to all people, and attempting this is a sure way to burn-out.

During the past 25 years, whilst painting and drawing, I have become more and more fascinated by how it is possible to guide the way people

look at a canvas. What is the function of a particular line? Is it defining a solid object in the foreground or is it defining the background? By changing our focus or the way we look, we can completely change what we see, as shown by the following well-known image.

Do you choose to see the goblet...  or the two faces?



If you take this idea into your daily interaction it can change the nature of 'the way' and 'the what' you see. This will influence the choice and priority of the actions, which then follow. Sometimes, as in the case of Menno, it is hard to tell what is the most important thing to do. This could be because of: *'Not being able to see the wood for the trees.'* In America the saying is: *'Not being able to see the forest for the trees.'* Interestingly with the English version even with this short saying by changing the interpretation of one word we can create a different perspective: the word 'wood' can mean both a piece of a tree or a group of trees standing together. Therefore transforming the meaning of the saying to the opposite message.

Our perspective on anything can and will change. But at different moments decisions need to be made. There is a big difference between performing semi-decisive reactions or taking a moment to strategise and make a clear choice and action. I have found that the clearer and more decisive a person is in prioritising the importance of the information they are giving, or the action they are taking, the more inspiring they become to their colleagues and friends. It is a leadership skill which gives everyone a moment of clarity and relief from the bombardment of those 'decisions to be made.'

The more clarity we can have with ourselves about what is the best thing to say or decision to be made at a particular moment, the easier it is for others to know where they stand. From this clear point, we can then all proceed to the next choice.

AND-DO-IT

Testing the Knee-Jerk

Take a moment to consider the following questions:

- Notice what your immediate impulse is when someone asks you to do something.

Does it depend on:

What the request is?

What you happen to be doing at the time of being asked?

What your relationship is with that person?

- If your boss, client, assistant or friend asks you to do the same thing will your drive for action be the same?
- Do you have a knee-jerk response into action or do you take a moment to prioritise?
- Do you become infected by the urgency of other people's desire for your assistance?

Now consider when you ask someone to do something:

DO YOU

- Request action from others as the need hits you?

OR DO YOU

- Prioritise by choosing the most important issues?
- Consider when would be the best time to ask and to do it?
- Consider who would be the best person to tackle the task?

**Experiment with changing any one element of the above.
Notice the effect.**

AND-DO-IT

Priority Gapping

Note the answers to the following questions

It could help to write them down in four columns.

Which different types of requests, activities and desires do you:

- Immediately respond to?
- Wait for the best time to do it?
- Provoke a dance of procrastination?
- Repeatedly neglect?

Would the quality of a relationship improve if an action-priority was changed?

Choose one item and make a realistic action plan to make a change: what, how, when.

Sometimes just one small change can have quite a large knock-on effect.

Would this change close an UNDERSTANDING GAP?
JUST DO IT.