

The Architects of Tomorrow by David Finney

'Rash response is the single most damaging factor in professional and personal relationships' -

In some tribes it is not unusual for groups to sit in silence for protracted periods during a conversation until the right words are found; for instance the Sng'oi people of the Malaysian jungle as Robert Wolff describes in his "Original Wisdom". Silence has many negative connotations and is often paired with the word 'awkward'. Some are unnerved by it; they see it as a threat and feel that something should fill that gap.

In the corporate world, a delay in response can come across as a sign of weakness. In a meeting, managers may view it as a waste of resource. Replacing silence with anger can produce a regrettable aftertaste: 'I don't know what came over me there'.

Email is a warm and loaded gun. The speed of response it encourages is often the very cause of the lengthy and unproductive mulling that follows. Many an executive has sat seething over the contents of an email fired into her inbox, unable to work effectively until the heat has cooled. Many an executive has sat mourning over the loss of dignity at aimed criticism shared in front of a 'cc' audience. We have often learnt the hard way that the Internet's most powerful gift needs to be handled with extreme care.

So what kind of communicator are you? In Corporate Life, these communicator types may seem familiar:

Amiable Diplomat – holes in the back seat of their trousers through much non-committal sitting on the fence

Articulate Advisor – the enthusiastic mentor who gives advice in great detail and with flamboyant precision

Bad Cop – aggressive and misplaced use of authority; Good Cop sometimes accompanies but often ends up imitating

Chancer - hurrah an opportunity to air views!

Compulsive Coach – just got off the free coach training weekend and coaching just about everywhere; 'what are you up to?'; 'oh just making a drink'; 'what kind of drink?'; 'tea'; 'what are you trying to achieve?'; 'a good cup of tea'; 'how much do you really want this tea on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is not at all and 10 is absolutely'; 'is this going to take long?'

Information Taxi – shipping data from one team to another without adding value; emails tend to be accompanied with 'FYI' & 'JSYK'; sometimes useful and sometimes delegation masquerading as avoidance or simply hovering above stressful activity

News Feeder – headlines from the Metro, tid-bits from the Lite; so much news so little time

Railroader – the very height of work passion; just have to push this idea through and there is simply no room upstairs for any other opinion

Sharp Reactor – on a life mission, determined to turn surface over-reaction into an art form

Viktor Frankl taught the world to widen the space between stimulus and response and recognise our power of choice; whether the stimulus is an event, a comment or an email the principle is the same: once aware of the gap, we are no longer slave to rash response. The single most powerful slice of philosophy ever delivered to mankind - powerful enough to inspire Covey to expand it into his 'first habit'.

Rash response takes away that freedom to choose. It leaves no options. It does not allow the effective alignment of action with intention; not surface intention but deep and considered intention. And so silence can be a good thing. It leaves space to think, space to let the contents of the mind settle and for our best qualities to rise up and take control.

So how does rash response manifest in the workplace and what kind of an effect does it have? Time pressure of course causes stress and in turn this can sometimes causes us to do everything a little too quickly. We rush complex calculations, hurry reports, snap at colleagues and fire back aggressive emails. Getting a set of figures to a department for a 2pm deadline only for them to find that another 3 hours of checking and correcting is required is false economy. Offending an associate with a remark unnecessarily damages morale which can significantly slow down work-rate on both sides as hurt and guilt tend to walk in parallel lines.

When someone is thinking of leaving an organisation they tend to search around for reasons to bolster their exit; a curt email might just be the tipping point. Cost of replacing staff can of course be a scary figure that might include HR hours, Departmental Manager hours, training and induction hours, agency fees and the often hidden figure of disruption time that stretches across the exit and entry points.

So what to do? First thing is to reconcile ourselves with silence; through practice, through meditation and through experiment. Secondly, to acknowledge that working feverishly does not always produce the best results and that pausing to think can be fruitful. Thirdly to revisit, review and redesign daily rituals: toxic email does have an antidote – it's called an apology; prevention of course is always better; saving an angry email into drafts and leaving it there for 24 hours is a wise move. And is incessant chasing the antidote to supplier radio silence or is something different required?

The things that will happen tomorrow will happen because we make them happen. We are creative beings and have the words inside of us to design wonderful and vibrant conversations that will move us forward and leave people 'in a good place' when each interaction is closed.

David Finney is Managing Director of The Energy of Conversation who provide corporate and personal coaching expertise – email DavidFinney@TheEnergyofConversation.co.uk