

# When a Small Change Makes a Big Difference

## VoicePrint Coaching Case Study

Sometimes a successful development intervention entails no more than raising awareness about something that people are already equipped to fix. They have the ability and the motivation, but have not been recognising the problem to which they need to direct those energies. It's also very common to have a general sense that a problem exists, but to lack a sufficiently precise and useful diagnosis of what it is.

In this particular case, as so often, the problem had been given the fuzzy label of 'communications.' Stuart was the Managing Director of a business providing advanced networking technology to an elaborate set of pan-European customers who were also its co-owners. Success for this business depended on maintaining those complex relationships and on the provision of sophisticated technology for specialist purposes, handling enormous volumes of traffic, while sustaining outstanding service quality and reliability across multiple national and regulatory boundaries.

*'We understand networking technology, and we're adept at communicating with our stakeholders. We have to be. My concern is closer to home. I want to make the meetings of my own senior management team more effective. We're all so busy, it's hard to get everybody together as often as I'd like. And when we do, there's always so much to go through. I don't think anybody is very satisfied with our meetings. We've already established some disciplines, not only in terms of times and agendas and minutes, but also for listening to each other and not interrupting. But I still don't think we've got it right.'*

Sensing that VoicePrint might reveal what else could be done, he commissioned a group profile for his senior management team to be explored at its annual 'away day.' At my suggestion and with the team's agreement, they were observed at work for an hour on another piece of their regular business first.

During that first hour I heard one particular phrase being used over and over again, as different team members spoke. So before even starting to explore the team's VoicePrint profile, I asked if they knew about their verbal habit. Nobody was aware of it. The phrase was 'I think' and it served as their characteristic prelude to offering a view or opinion. I counted it more than forty times after I first noticed it. It was a very audible clue that the Advocate voice was being over-used.

Observation of the team in action corroborated its VoicePrint profile. Together the observation and the profile provided three important and practical insights:-

1. Too much Advocacy had become a regular sticking point in their meetings. Their discussions struggled to go beyond view and counter-view, a to and fro pattern of competing and essentially individual opinions.

2. One of the reasons why the discussions were not breaking out of this confined space was that nobody was controlling the proceedings. The Direct voice was absent. Stuart spent his time. Listening rather than managing the process.
  
3. A further reason why the team's discussions were not escaping from the gravitational pull of its members' tendency to Advocate was the relative under-use of the exploring voices. As I observed, 'You hardly ever ask each other questions.' I had only counted two during the hour of their initial meeting. Probe, Inquire, Diagnose: any of these could have lifted the discussion away from its sticking point and re-focused the proceedings on a question or issue that deserved the group's collective attention and resourcefulness.



A team needs leadership when its conversations get trapped in a sticking point, and facilitative leadership can and should come from any member of a senior management team. But in general teams tends to look to their formal leader to provide that leadership. And when the person 'in the chair' does not steer the proceedings explicitly, then discussions start to drift. They lose shape and consume time, as individual team members are effectively left to follow their own tendencies. The usual result is that some hold back, while others plough on, using their own preferred voice/s rather than giving much thought or attention to which 'voice' would make the conversation as a whole most productive.

In the case of this senior management team, it was not until VoicePrint brought them into conscious awareness that it began to recognise the pattern in their meetings and to tackle the shortcomings of its conversational dynamics.

In addition to giving Stuart a new grasp on where and how to steer his team's meetings, VoicePrint gave this Managing Director a new depth of insight into how his own characteristic pattern of voices was making conversations more difficult than they needed to be.

Most people have a distinct starting point in their VoicePrint profile, one particular voice from which their thinking and speaking embarks. They proceed from there into a second voice and these set the type of foundation which that individual likes to have before proceeding further. Stuart was unusual. In his case VoicePrint revealed not one but three potential starting points: Inquire, Diagnose and Evaluate. It was almost as if he personally was trying to replicate the multi-channel processing of one of his company's technical networks. But in the context of his senior management team this complexity was confusing rather than clarifying.

When he shared his profile with the team during the afternoon of the away day, a number of people had a simultaneous 'ah ha!' moment. As one of his senior reports put it, *'This explains why you can think you've discussed something with him, and then wonder why you're being asked to discuss it again, and again and again.'* It was, they now realised, because Stuart was coming at the subject from a different angle and for a different reason each time. The revelation made them not only more tolerant of what they had previously regarded as needless repetition, but better able to contribute usefully, since they now had a clearer idea of the different purpose or emphasis of each discussion .

It was a revelation for Stuart too. *'I hadn't realised it, but yes I do all those things. I like the big picture that you get from open inquiry, but I also want to think things through, understand how it all fits together and be very clear about that so we know what we're talking about when we come to evaluate it.'* It's a thorough process, and a useful one given the nature of the business. The problem was that it was Stuart's own largely unconscious *internal* process and, until he started to use it explicitly to structure the SMT's discussions (or at least its discussion of the big issues that needed this sort of approach), it did not leave anyone, including himself, feeling that the meetings were efficient or productive. Paradoxically and unintentionally, his unconscious process was actually contributing to the continuing over-use of Advocacy by others, partly because these viewpoints provided inputs into *his* process and partly because the lack of a collective process left the team's meetings dominated by what happened to be its members' strongest voice.

VoicePrint taught this leader and his senior management team the importance of making and keeping the purpose and process of their meetings clear. Even before the end of the away day Stuart had started to 'signpost' more explicitly and to shape the proceedings in a more conscious way that helped his people to recognise how they were being invited to contribute. Team members had started to recognise, name and select the voices that they were using to contribute to the proceedings. The discussions not only flowed better; more importantly, they became more productive.

'Voice' can be a great connector or a great divider. As this team quickly discovered, having and using that awareness is a small change that can make a big difference.

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## Some Key Reflection and Learning Points

1. Are there particular 'sticking points' in meetings that you regularly attend? Which voice is being over-used? And which voice/s might enable the meeting to progress, when it does become stuck?
2. Does the absence of a particular voice undermine the quality and value of any of the meetings in which you take part? Which voice is being under-used? When is it needed and what would that sound like?
3. How do you own principal voices shape the dynamics of your team meetings? How well do you use your voices to make the meetings productive for all concerned?