When you can't make your voice count
## VoicePrint Coaching Case Study

Simon is a Quant, which sounds like a character from a Terry Pratchett novel, but isn't. Quants are those folk in the financial services sector who do clever stuff with mathematical modelling. They are good with numbers. By reputation they are less skilful when it comes to dealing with people.

Of course the stereotype does not do Simon justice. He is quick, personable and talkative. At the same time it's clear that there's a lot going on inside his head. He's thoughtful and introverted by preference, but he's also very keen to communicate his thinking. Yet this is where he is less effective than he wants to be, and less effective in the eyes of his stakeholders. He gets critical feedback from his colleagues that he *'knows more than he shares.'*

The three objectives that we agree for Simon's coaching revolve entirely around the way he thinks and communicates.

1. To be better able to 'read' the needs of my stakeholders and to calibrate the pitch and level of my own communication accordingly.
2. To achieve a better balance between the deep & detailed analysis required in my Senior Analyst role and the synthesis & broader application expected of me in my Senior Portfolio Manager role.
3. To achieve a higher and more consistent level of engagement between my thinking and my stakeholders in the business.

How did we tackle this agenda? We started by exploring Simon's VoicePrint profile, which at that stage had a very definite shape.
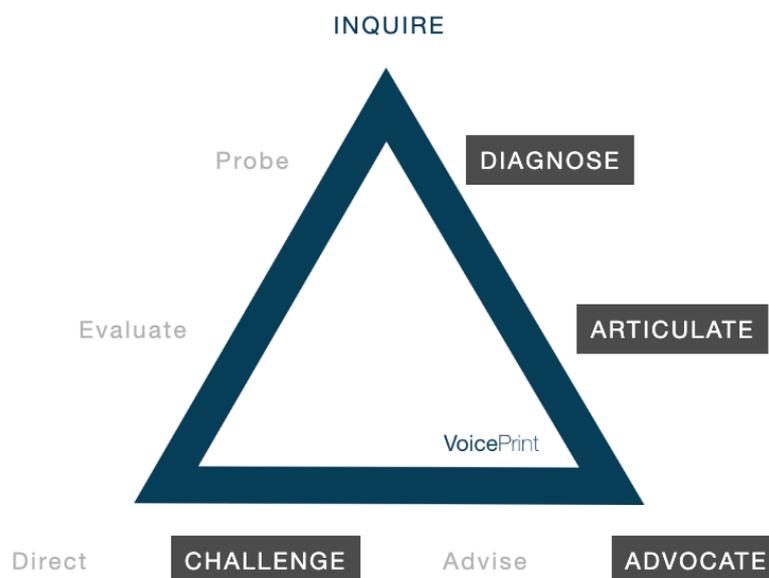
He uses four voices more, and four voices less, than most people. Within this pattern his tendency is to focus first, and strongly, on *diagnosing* and *articulating.* He looks for, thinks about and defines the problem and then shifts into *advocacy,* using both his own sense-making and his extensive prior experience to take up and argue for a position. From that point he aims to engage with others through a certain amount of *inquiry* but a great deal of *challenging*.

Simon quickly acknowledges these tendencies in himself and also their potential for creating 'heavy' and often combative interactions, as he would pile more and more of the weight of his thinking into his discussions to support the point of view that he was trying to get across. "*I enjoy the detail of the research and I enjoy using the insights. The bit I struggle with is finding the right level of detail and knowing when to stop.*"

Understanding your stakeholders

Our next step is to map his stakeholders: who does he find easier to engage and who is harder? He talks about the nature of his interactions with the various individuals in each of these categories. When we see the patterns that emerge, there is a clear contrast. Simon finds it easier to work with those who come to him with questions, with some clarity about the level of explanation that they want and with a willingness to manage the conversation. He finds it harder, when he is the one making the approach and has to figure out how to secure and hold the other person's attention.

"The worst is when I just get a painful silence."
'What do you do then?' I ask him.
"Normally I fill the silence myself….direct frontal attack."
'Does that work?'
"Not really, but I'm not sure what else to do."

We focus on helping Simon to recognise that his various stakeholders, and – given his dual role – he has many, can have quite distinct needs as well as well as quite different personalities, and that he needs to be able to 'read' both these dimensions to make his interactions with them more productive. We agree that he will treat it as *his* responsibility both to clarify his stakeholders' needs and also to take the lead in *shaping* the interaction that he has with each of them.

After a while Simon reports that his approach is changing. "*I always used to be the first to speak. I'd advocate too much to get my ideas across. Now I listen a lot more first*." He starts to make much more use of the question, '*What can I do to help you?*' finding that it helps to focus his conversations and make them more productive. In the informational material that he sends out, he shifts up a gear, away from the detail towards "*analysis of my analysis, commenting about it, to make it more holistic, to give more perspective on the trends, connections and big implications*." The most interesting revelation of all comes when he says, "*I'm using my Friday afternoons differently; now I use them to plan my forthcoming conversations.*"

Finding the voice that works for the interaction

In becoming mindful about the impact of his own VoicePrint, and enlarging his repertoire to use more *inquiry* and *probing* to focus his *articulation* and *advising*, Simon also starts to become more attuned to the voices of his stakeholders. He realises that the way someone is talking is a clue about what that person is looking for from the conversation; that when someone is *evaluating*, for instance, it is not an indicator that they are *criticising* Simon's thinking but that they are assessing it and weighing it up. He learns not simply to fall back on his preferred voices, but to tune in to allowing or taking part in the voice required by the interaction, the 'bigger conversation.'

He learns, for example, that co-creating a diagnosis or an evaluation, working it out together, is much more likely to engage people, and secure their commitment to the outcome, than if one person provides it solo.

Tuning in to the other person's voices proves particularly useful for Simon's relationship with his boss, another deep thinker, but one whose style is often short and sharp. His boss tells him, '*I don't want problems; bring me solutions.*' Simon has been taking this as a tacit invitation to bring out his strongest tendencies: *diagnose, articulate, advocate*. But is this what his boss wants? Simon is concerned that he can't get enough of his boss' time, attention or endorsement. '*I can't get enough engagement from him on the things I'm working on. It's hard to get his attention. I have to do a lot of de-crypting to work out what he's thinking.* '

We review a number of their interactions in detail. This reveals that his boss' primary voice is to *challenge*, and that the motivation behind this is most likely to be a desire to develop and improve things, Simon starts to use this voice to frame more of his own communications with his boss. He starts to present his ideas in the form of thought-provoking headlines, *'attention-grabbers'*, rather than elaborate slide decks. It works. His boss starts to call him in to say more about his ideas. It also gives Simon a better understanding of his boss' priorities.

Using the voice that resonates for the stakeholder has the effect of engaging their attention much better than extended analysis or advocacy have done in the past. Simon also learns to get better clarification from his boss (who makes relatively little use of the articulate voice and is impatient with verbosity) by asking more focused questions. It turns out to be easier to clarify what the boss *doesn't* want than what he does, but this is often the case with creative types.

Did Simon's coaching work?

Yes. And one important indicator was when Simon was able to report that '*more people are coming to me and asking what I think*.' They include most of the people that he used to find difficult to engage.

More fundamentally, Simon has changed his own approach. '*I've stopped preaching.*' The information that he sends out to his stakeholders, a core part of his role, has changed. It used to be '*very factual, over-loaded with charts and numbers, a barrage of evidence.*' Now it is much more insightful. '*I lead with my headlines. I distil more, highlight the themes and risks, and summarise more succinctly and promptly. I don't present what I don't need to present.*'

In his interactions too Simon is achieving much more engagement, because he is inviting it; he is talking *with* rather than *at* his stakeholders. He talks differently now. '*How can I help*?' '*Let me know if you want any more.*' '*Let me know when you're ready to talk through next steps.*'

In terms of his VoicePrint, Simon is making fuller use of his resourcefulness. He used to use too narrow a range of voices, pushing his own diagnoses and articulations through advocacy, backed up by challenge. Now he uses a wider variety of approaches: he *probes* to find out what his colleagues need from him; he uses the *challenge* voice to offer thought-provoking sound-bites; he uses *evaluate* to distil the significance of his diagnoses in a much more focused and relevant way.

He's learned to make all his voices count.

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Some Key Reflection and Learning Points

1. The voice/s that are most important in your solo work may not be the one/s that are most important in your interactions with other people.

2. One of the keys to a productive working relationship is to recognise and use the voice/s that resonate for that particular stakeholder and their needs and concerns.

3. How well do you draw on the full repertoire of voices in your dealings with your different stakeholders?