

In the Psychiatrist's Chair by Anthony Clare

The Probe voice can be surprisingly elusive. Fortunately, this book illustrates it in practice better than any other that I know.

But let's start with VoicePrint's definition. To probe is '*to dig deeper, going beyond or behind what is already apparent.*' It is '*the voice that calls for further detail or disclosure.*' It can be tempting to view this as merely a narrow or more focused version of the Inquire voice, a shorter and skinnier sibling, as it were. But that doesn't do it justice. Although both voices have their roots in curiosity, Inquire can work while being more laid back, relying on its open-mindedness and receptivity. Probe has to be more energetic. It only works if it takes the initiative and shows more daring.

Anthony's Clare's book *In the Psychiatrist's Chair* was originally published in three volumes between 1992 and 1998. It comprises transcripts of 36 of the many interviews that he conducted with public figures from different walks of life in a long-running BBC radio series of the same name. Each and every episode reveals a lot about the Probe voice in action. Incidentally, many of the interviews, including a number that are not covered in the books, are available on the Internet as recordings. Listen to them to learn about the prosody of the Probe voice, tone, pitch, pause, pacing, volume and emphasis. These are important parts of the skill of using any of the nine voices, but especially important perhaps for the Probe voice. That's because probing, like challenging, is more time-sensitive than most of the other voices. The opportunity to use it to good effect comes and goes quickly. One moment the opportunity is present, the next moment it is past.

It's important to spot these moments, and how they are taken - or missed - in the flow of a real conversation as captured in a recording. But it's also useful to be able to slow that process down and to revisit it, to study the words after the event, and examine them carefully on the printed page. The books make it easier to learn how to turn the intention to probe into words.

The most obvious feature of the Probe voice is that it consists *primarily* of questions, and that many of these questions are short. '*Why?*' '*When was that?*' '*Where does that happen?*' One of Clare's favourite questions is one word, an interrogative '*Because...?*' inviting the interviewee to fill in the blank. It's short and to the point. And of course it makes sense to use a pointed tool to dig deeper. But do these questions always work? No. Of course not. Sometimes, although rarely, no answer is forthcoming. Sometimes the response is as short as the question and consequently uninformative. Sometimes the question produces a wordy reaction, but one that goes off the point, becoming sprawling, rambling or evasive. (I'm not going to point the finger at particular interviewees; part of the interest in reading these books is to see how well-known figures respond). Suffice to say that Clare's interviewees provide abundant examples of diverse responses to similar questions.

The point is that the Probe voice (like Inquire but to an even greater extent) is dependent on the *active participation* of the other person. Most of the voices (Advocate, Advise, Challenge, Direct, Evaluate, Articulate and Diagnose) do not have this dependence. Yes, the question of whether they have their intended impact still depends on how they 'land' with the listener. But those voices

are not dependent on another person for content, nourishment and life itself in the way that Probe is.

The Probe voice cannot function simply as an utterance. It requires an expressed, preferably spoken, response. It's not sufficient for the other party to hear, hopefully take into account what is being said and ideally respond with some form of behaviour at some point in time. The Probe voice needs an explicit response and it needs it right away. Probing is therefore the point in the VoicePrint model where the interactive nature of communication is most clearly and immediately exposed.

This dependence is not necessarily problematic. If the probing question is non-contentious, perhaps a simple matter of fact-checking, then a prompt and reliable reply is likely to be forthcoming. Likewise with questions of clarification after a presentation. *'I'm not quite clear about what you meant, when you said...Would you mind explaining that a bit more for me, please?'*

However, the willingness to be probed can never be assumed. Even among Anthony Clare's guests In the Psychiatrist's Chair, all of whom had willingly accepted his invitation to be interviewed, there are markedly different levels of co-operation and contribution in the process, not just from one guest to another, but from one question to the next. As he observes in the book, some interviews felt like explorations while others felt more like duels and most were somewhere in between.

What *In the Psychiatrist's Chair* illustrates so well is that the effective user of the Probe voice needs both verbal and inter-personal skills. The person on the receiving end of the probe is ultimately in control of whether and how far they open up. It hinges on how safe they feel and on how far they trust the person asking the probing questions.

'Are you a tolerant man?'

'What don't you like about yourself?'

'Would you say that at times you are a very difficult person to live with?'

Probing questions indeed! You would have to feel comfortable with the interviewer to be ready to answer them.

By the time most of Anthony Clare's guests appeared in *The Chair*, they'd had ample opportunity to decide on his trustworthiness. They could judge that from previous episodes of the programme and from his by then well-established reputation for personal integrity and care for others through his work as clinician, medical leader, prolific writer and debater. But we have to ask ourselves whether the context of *In The Psychiatrist's Chair*, a fusion of entertainment, auto-biography, current affairs and education - is radically different from the world of work and organisations generally, and whether that then means that his techniques for probing will not transfer from one context to another.

His interviewees were all volunteers. That certainly isn't the case for people on the receiving end of the Probe voice in organisational life. Furthermore, Clare and his guests interact as equals. In organisational life, the power dynamics are more acute; interactions are inevitably affected by real or perceived issues of hierarchy, status and face. And yet, despite these differences, it's hard to conclude that the stakes are necessarily higher for individuals in the world of work than they were In the Psychiatrist's Chair.

Clare's guests perhaps had more kudos, prestige and publicity to gain, but by the same token they perhaps had more to lose. As more recent examples have shown, a public reputation once damaged can be impossible to retrieve. By contrast, how many people do you know who actually lose their jobs by only providing a partial, incomplete or evasive answer to a probing question?

My sense is that the basic dynamics of the prober and probed interaction are essentially the same, regardless of context. There are always potential risks and potential rewards for both parties. Answering candidly and fully might cause awkwardness, anxiety and embarrassment, or even guilt, shame and loss of trust. Or it might enhance trust, reputation and future prospects. Likewise, asking probing questions often generates awkwardness, anxiety, embarrassment, and the answers might leave the asker feeling guilty or ashamed and come at the cost of a loss of trust in the relationship.

Reading Tony Clare's interviews also convinces me that it is counter-productive to vex about levels of awkwardness and discomfort. These are individual matters. They cannot be weighed on a common scale. They vary from person to person, issue to issue, and from one probing question to another. It's altogether more useful to recognise that whenever the Probe voice is used, some level of discomfort is to be expected. Probing is a venture into the unknown and entails uncertainty for both parties.

So it's appropriate too proceed with care, giving attention to maintaining the relationship as well as obtaining information..

And this brings us back to Anthony Clare's interpersonal skills. He doesn't allow the potential discomfort to stop him. One way or another he tacitly acknowledges that the potential discomfort is present and then sets up a way to work through it.

One way is to ask permission to probe.

'What I thought we might do here is...' Or more directly, *'Can I press you on this point...?'* In effect these are courtesies to prepare the ground for his questions.

Another device that he uses is to set the scene by referring back - often at some length - to something the other person has already said or written. *'I read somewhere that you once described yourself as...'* *'What I missed in your written account of that time was...'* The effect is to establish a piece of shared understanding that can then serve as a natural jumping off point for a further question.

Best of all these strategies is simply to explain where he's coming from, to reveal his motive for asking. *'Let me explain why I'm interested in this.'* *'The reason I ask...'* *'I ask because...'* The effect of all these devices is maintain the relationship between prober and probed, to legitimate the probing question, to make the asking of it feel appropriate and acceptable.

This isn't verbiage or verbosity. It's about acknowledging that probing questions can feel uncomfortable and working to make the person on the receiving end of the probe feel comfortable enough to give fuller, more thoughtful and more candid answers than they otherwise might.

And that is vital, because extracting an answer is only part of the potential value of the Probe voice. Sometimes the person being probed already has their answers to the question, and the task is to encourage them to relax their reservations and disclose that information. That's useful, but more useful still is when the probing question elicits the response, *'Oh, that's a good*

question!' and what follows is not a ready reply but a silence while the individual engages with the question and thinks about it, perhaps for the first time, perhaps more deeply or more freely than they have ever thought about it before. Interestingly, *'learning about myself, about why I think, feel and behave as I do'* was one of the reasons that many of Clare's interviewees gave for opening themselves up to his probing. It's why one of his favourite opening questions became *'Why did you agree to come on this programme?'*

This is why the Probe voice is such an essential part of the coaching process. But more than that, it's why the Probe voice is a vital part of any conversations which hope to go beyond the status quo and to explore the realm of possibilities, whether technologically, socially, politically, artistically, or indeed in any other sphere of human endeavour.

The Probe voice is not just the doorway to the vaults of what is already known and hidden, but the generator of fuller, fresher and more creative thinking.

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