

“Tell it like it is” How to communicate your future vision for earthquake engineering to clients and building owners



**NZSEE 2001
Conference**

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ABSTRACT:

“The measure of communication effectiveness is in the response you get not in the intent with which it was sent.” This quote illustrates the fundamental truth that communication is all about results not inputs. With the best intentions in the world we may prepare a detailed and carefully scripted message and then completely miss our target. This paper will explore techniques for engineers to communicate their vision for earthquake engineering to clients and building owners. It will include the principles of communication, Neuro Linguistic Programming, reaching the head, the heart and the self, and conclude with the forming objectives and strategies for targeting your message.

1 PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION

The communication process is a remarkably complex one. We must take as much care with our communication medium as we do using a second language. In public relations terms “to communicate effectively, the sender must use words that mean the same thing to the receiver as they do to the sender.”¹ It certainly helps if we begin using the same language but we must also consider tailoring what we say to the needs of the receiver. This is a fundamental principle of effective communications. The process itself has four main elements to it. They are:

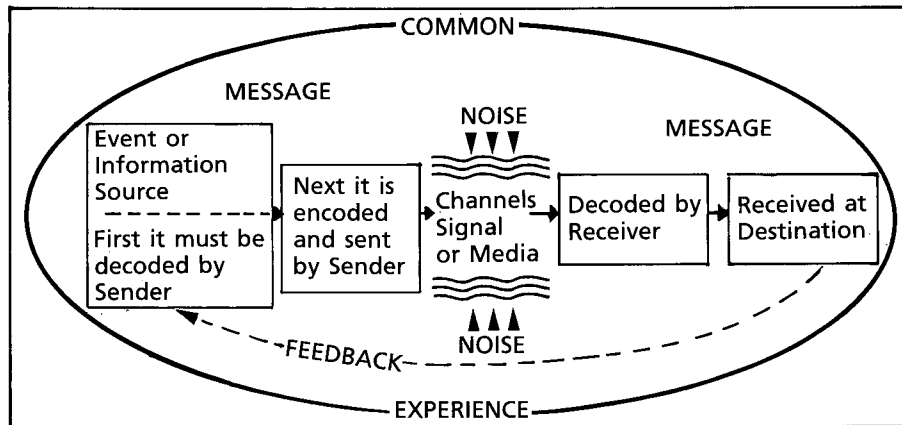
- The source or sender
- The message
- The medium
- The destination or receiver

The source is yourself, the message is the information you want to convey, the medium or the delivery mechanism (talking, written report, etc), and the receiver is the client or owner you are talking to.

Communication is not a simple exercise of opening one’s mouth and speaking while the other party listens like an empty vessel. Within the four main elements there are many potential areas where the message can break down so that it is not received as the sender intended it. This is demonstrated in the diagram below. Let’s look at an example of this in practice using this diagram.

¹ Tymson C. and Sherman B. 1991 The Australian Public relations manual, page 10

Figure 1



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Example 1 – explaining the diagram in practice

- Common experience: Your client base and your office is located in Wellington where there is a high awareness of earthquake events but a perception that all buildings constructed since the 1970s have adequate strengthening.
- Event: You have recently completed a structural strengthening job on a concrete building (which was constructed in 1972) for client#1
- Decoding: In your mind the building was dodgy to start with, and the client’s budget allowed for an o.k. job but if they had spent a few more \$000 they would have had a much better result
- Encoding: You want to tell other clients with similar buildings how they can achieve a similar or better result
- Channel: You are having a meeting with a potential new client#2 who owns a similar building and you discuss the experience of client #1
- Decoding: Client #2 decodes your message as you want to do the same thing to his building but doesn’t think it was necessary to strengthen a 1972 building
- Received: Client #2 receives your intended message as “what a waste of money that job was.”

There are at least seven stages at which the original message could break down. You may not start from a common experience base, the way you encode your message may not be easily decoded by the receiver. The channel or medium you use may not be one that the receiver prefers or is comfortable with. So we must carefully analyse how we communicate to others in order to have a more successful interaction with them.

2 NEURO LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING (NLP)

Another way of looking at communications is through the model of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). The concept of NLP was first developed Dr Richard Bandler and John Grinder in the early 1970s and refers to the way the brain processes information.

- Neuro – relates to the nervous system or the connections between the mind and body
- Linguistic – refers to the language or information that we process
- Programming – is about conditioning and patterns.

The theory is that each human being develops subconscious patterns in dealing with new information and these are manifested in our language and behaviour.

² Tymson C. and Sherman B. 1991 The Australian Public relations manual, figure 1.2, page 11

NLP suggests that there is no singular representation of similar experiences. We adapt the reality of our experiences and create mental representation to fit our perception of the reality. If we accept this premise and try to understand the reality of others then NLP can be a framework for more successful communication with others.

There are many courses and texts available about the “science” of NLP and this paper will not attempt to cover all of the principles. However, we will examine some of the key skills in order to see how earthquake engineers may apply this in practice.

2.1 Principles of NLP

2.1.1 Representation is not reality

One of the key principles of NLP is that: Representation is not reality. NLP encourages us to suspend judgement and objectively observe behaviour, in short don't judge a book by its cover. If we believe that none of our clients will want to upgrade their buildings to meet the new strengthening requirements then we are starting from a negative position and quite likely this reality will manifest itself. Whereas if we objectively view our clients and form a strategic approach we will start from a much stronger position.

2.1.2 *The path to comprehending the patterns of others is to seek rapport*

Rapport is meeting others in their world, trying to understand their needs, values, and culture and communicating in ways which are congruent. Putting yourself on someone else's shoes is the best way to understand someone else's information needs and thereby modifying your communication to suit.

2.1.3 *Individuals have two levels of communication – subconscious and conscious*

We spend a lot of time focusing on verbal messages but what about the non-verbal signs that are ever present in our interactions. Subconscious communication or body language tells us a lot about the other persons receptivity level. Sometimes the verbal language is not congruent with posture, tone or pitch and we may try to explore why this is so. We could try asking the client “how do you feel about ...”, “what are your thoughts..”, “do you have any concerns / reservations...” This may elicit more feedback for us to work with and give us a better handle the other persons true reaction to our message.

While we concentrate on the conscious level of communication we must not forget the subconscious barriers. Your client may be nodding in agreement with what you are saying and making all of the right acceptance noises but subconsciously they think “this will never work, it will cost too much, the big one will never happen in my lifetime”. Therefore pre-empting such a response we can use the “as...if strategy”. This is where you pretend as if the client could do it anyway. You combat such a negative with positive “if you could xxx how would you..”. For instance you may ask:

If a major event occurred today how do you think you're building would stand up to it?

If we did strengthen your building what benefits do you see that would have?

If you did have the money to invest in your building what would you do?

And so on.

2.1.4 *We all have different representational systems*

NLP would suggest that we all have different representational systems. Even the way we store and retrieve information from our brains could be different. Over time we develop preferences for the way we take on and process information. The simplest forms of these preferences are: visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic.

Visual preferences manifest as pictures, diagrams, graphs, and pictorial representations of the spoken word

Auditory preferences spoken word, like repetition, variance in tone, pitch, speed
Kinaesthetic learn best by doing, like movement action, trying things out.

Subconsciously we find it easy to connect to others using our own preference. But if we want to communicate successfully with others we need to use their representational preference. For instance engineers may tend to be more visual, favouring statistics and graphical based information. But what about clients or building owners? They may need to walk through a real-life scenario – a more kinaesthetic approach. It pays to do a bit of detective work in the early stages of the interaction to find out which representational system the client prefers. This can be easily done as in feedback you will find visual people frequently using the term “I see..”, auditory “I hear you..”, and kinaesthetic “I find this..” Use it back on them and they will feel a rapport with you.

2.1.5 Use Positive language

The point here is to say what is possible rather than what is not possible. It is very easy to buy into a client’s negativity and you may find yourself saying something like: “we have a problem, This is going to be difficult, That’s impossible”. It is better to reframe this into a positive by saying “we have a challenge, that is an option, there is opportunity.”

2.1.6 Resistance only comes about as a result of inflexible communication

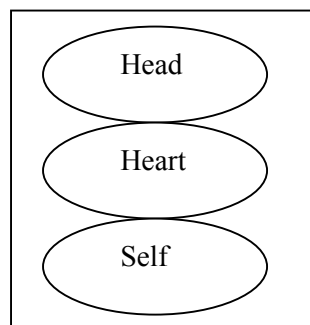
If you experience someone who is resisting what you are telling them have a look at the way you are delivering your message. If people are having trouble understanding what you say you might try to adjust the modality, or changing the representation system altogether. The key is to be aware and to alter one’s communication style to suit.

3 REACHING THE HEAD, THE HEART AND THE SELF

To successfully communicate with another person we must recognise the totality of their being. Too often we concentrate on the intellectual capacity of the brain and we focus on the need for detailed factual information at the expense of the other facets of the human being. We forget that this is a person with emotions, self-identity, behaviour patterns, and a history of experiences. We must also find a way to appeal to those needs in order to have a meaningful interaction with another person.

If we consider this human being to be made up of three circles then we can look at each one and how we might go about reaching the head the heart and the self.

Figure 2



3.1 The head

The head is the easiest part of the human being because we are in the habit of focusing on the intellectual side of ourselves and others. We fill-up the head with detailed information. We have

detailed statistics on earthquakes, probabilities, return periods, cost/benefit ratios and so on. We quote numbers from Standards or Codes and if you are familiar with this language then all is well. However, the uninitiated will find it confusing and begin to feel inadequate and start to switch off from the subject matter.

3.2 The heart

The heart is representative of our emotions. External signals such as body posture, tone and pitch of voice will quickly tell us with the other party is open or closed to our message. We do have the ability to modify what we say to accommodate other people's emotions and it certainly plays a big part in trying to establish rapport throughout a conversation. We appeal to the heart with pictures. We show slides and photographs of areas devastated by earthquakes and buildings in various stages of collapse. We try to appeal to the person's emotions by giving them a sensory experience which makes them more receptive to our message.

3.3 The self

All the while we have yet to convince the self. This is the one which processes all of the information and synthesises or rejects it based on own personal experience. For example, you may be showing a client some photographs of a devastating overseas earthquake and be talking to them about the need to strengthen New Zealand buildings. You have photos, facts and figures at hand. Meanwhile subconsciously the other person may be thinking:

"I have never lived through an earthquake that big and I don't believe we will ever see one like that in my lifetime. Those buildings overseas are made of inferior products. Besides which we have a lot of regulations in NZ. Even if we did have an earthquake I believe that my buildings would stand up to the test. Therefore I reject the need to modify what I do."

This perception of reality will probably not be expressed in overt language or body signals. We almost have to second guess by prompting some feedback from the client and then be ready to answer some real deep and meaningful questions. The "self" is the area we need to appeal to if we desire a change in behaviour, an acceptance of the facts and a willingness to do something differently. We need to convince this person that they need to change their perception, beliefs, and reality. And we can do so by being aware of how the facts and figures affect this person.

4 FORMING OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

So how do we pull all this knowledge of NLP and reaching the head, heart and the self together? A start would be to use a framework for effectively "telling it like it is". Spending a few minutes planning the interaction will result in a more targeted message and hopefully a better outcome. Whether you are making a presentation, having a one-on-one meeting with a client, or talking with someone over the phone ask yourself these critical questions before embarking on the communications exercise. Once you have completed the comments side of the equation you have a strategy for targeting your clients or building owners with your vision for earthquake engineering.

Table 1

Questions	Comments
What is the objective of the interaction?	<i>General awareness, changing perceptions, getting agreement to a course of action?</i>
What is the desired outcome?	<i>What do you want them to do? Buy your service, accept change, talk to the Council</i>
What's in it for them?	<i>What is it that they want to know? (Benefit to</i>

	<i>them, cost, etc) and do you have the answers prepared?</i>
How will I present the information?	<i>Oral, written (one pager, full report), power point, photos, site-visit?</i>
When is the best time /place?	<i>Their place, your place, site visit, neutral ground</i>
Who is the best person to talk to / to take along?	<i>Are you talking to the right person? Do they have power over the situation? Are you really the best person for the job? Does the person need to talk to a peer?</i>
Why is this necessary?	<i>What are the positive and negative consequences of action or in-action</i>
How frequently should I follow up?	<i>Is this a one-off interaction or will you pursue this long-term?</i>

5 SUMMARY

Communicating a future vision for earthquake engineering to clients and building owners is a complex exercise and needs some careful strategic thought. Successful communication is a result of setting objectives and targeting messages. Firstly, one must understand the principles of communications and consider the various models for more effective interactions. The principles of Neuro Linguistic Programming can be useful guides to modify our interactions to make them more meaningful. In addition an awareness that technical specialists have a tendency to concentrate on the intellectual and therefore need to explore the emotive and self-motivational drivers of others in order to relate to their needs. A simple framework was proposed in this paper to assist engineers in targeting their message to clients and building owners. The challenge is to use it!

6 REFERENCES:

- Rylatt, Alastair & Lohan , Kevin, 1995. Creating Training Miracles
- McMillan, Christl. 1998. Communications Solutions, Building Industry Authority Seminar notes
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