

Bridging the Communication Divide: Speaking to Audiences with Different Preferences for Sensing or Intuition

Critical skills for leaders include the ability to communicate effectively despite interpersonal differences within an audience. An area of significant difference among people is how they appreciate, gather, understand, and use information. Psychologist Carl Jung postulated that individuals prefer either a mental functioning style he termed “sensing” or one termed “intuition”. According to Jung’s early theory and subsequent research, one pays greater attention to ideas that fit one’s innate preference, and correspondingly attend less intensively to those that reflect the non-preferred style. The challenge for leaders is to speak effectively to audiences where both of these quite different preferences are in force. What is important for a leader to understand is that people with different preferences can listen to the same language through different cognitive filters and can hear different messages. In order to reach diverse audiences with a message it is helpful to “speak the language” of the listeners—the *diverse* language of the listeners. This skills development handout highlights these differences and guides you in how to use “bridging language” to communicate more effectively across this communication divide.

What is it that makes a Sensing type different from an Intuitive one? Sensing types appreciate facts and are grounded in reality. Common sense and realistic appraisal are key to their view of the world. Sensing types like direct experience, tangible results, and value efficiency and cost effectiveness. The application of ideas is more tantalizing than the ideas themselves and many Sensing types will need to see an idea’s application in order to fully understand it. Sensing types tend to avoid generalizations and inferences. They also value established methods, traditions, or institutions. They value good technique in that it leads to good outcomes. Sensing types can seem resistant to change, but closer to the truth is that they just need to see the common sense path leading to the change—those definite and measureable steps to take—in order for them to jump on board (1-7).

Those who prefer the Intuition function can be markedly different in what they appreciate and listen for when communicating with others. Intuitive types enjoy brainstorming and readily make inferences and connections between data and the big picture or the vision. For them, context really matters. They prefer to focus more on the concept than the application and particularly enjoy new theories or ideas. Innovative, different, or unique ideas are appealing to them. Dealing with hard-to-measure, intangible results does not worry them. They are typically resourceful when dealing with new or unusual circumstances. Intuitive types tend to be naturally future-oriented, and thus they can eagerly support a proposed change just based on the idea, even if the details are not fully worked out. Many engage readily in strategic planning (1-4, 7).

The task for a leader is to speak to a group that holds both of these perspectives—and offer a message that appeals to the particular cognitive filter of the individuals listening. Here is an example of how to fashion language that will marry both the opposing preferences into a single over-arching statement, which we refer to as “bridging statements” in our teaching and coaching work. Combining language in this way draws together the true benefits of both preferences and helps gain the attention of those with either preference. The words that fall to either preference (S or N) are denoted in all capitals.

While it is important that we be INNOVATIVE, we must also examine the FACTS and seek to make TANGIBLE improvements in EFFICIENT ways. We know that we are well positioned to apply CUTTING EDGE THEORY in PRAGMATIC ways. We can trust in our

EXPERIENCE and SKILLS while we work together to CREATE NEW approaches to these complex problems.

A statement such as this can be used to preface the introduction and details of a new plan, strategy, resource allocations, budget cuts, staffing changes, etc. What comes after can differ widely—the purpose of the introductory statement is to cue both sensing and intuitive types that their perspectives are valid and embraced. This example bridging statement endorses the Sensing perspective, and bridges it to the Innovative one. One could easily turn the capitalized words around to endorse the Intuitive perspective to a Sensing one, or use other words altogether, as described in the Sensing and Intuition paragraphs above.

These bridging statements can be useful in conversation with another individual as well. For example, when someone who sees the world from an Intuitive perspective is trying to advocate for changes in process or policies to someone who sees the world from an opposite Sensing perspective, a statement such as the following might be helpful:

We do need a practical solution, one that is efficient and effective, but we also need to be innovative and resourceful as we face these unprecedented challenges. While these ideas on the table might be ones we haven't tried before, how might we implement them, at least on a pilot basis, and measure their effect?

And someone speaking from a Sensing perspective might advocate to a colleague who sees the world through an Intuitive filter:

I agree that innovation and creativity are important. However I want to explore how these proposed solutions can be applied to the ground level problems our clients face. What we have tried before has had disappointing effectiveness. How might we work from what we know and use that as a launch pad to develop alternative approaches?

Crafting communiqués for either groups or other individuals that appeal to how people think will help you, as a leader, deliver messages that are understood and retained better by your audience. They will improve communication and help support shared, mutual understanding.

References of interest

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