

TALK  LEAN

*Shorter Meetings.  
Quicker Results. Better Relations*

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# PREFACE

Try the following simple experiment: ask a dozen people in your circle of friends, acquaintances and colleagues, with as much diversity as possible when it comes to nationality, culture, sex, age, profession, social class and management level, to answer this question:

*“If someone – a colleague, a client, a boss, a subordinate, a supplier, a spouse, a friend, a lover, a stranger – approaches you to ask you for something or to tell you something, how do you want things to be said, how do you like the other person to speak to you?”*

Write their answers down in two columns, one for “Content” and one for “Manner”.

I am confident that their answers will be almost exactly the same as those in the chart overleaf:

## TALK LEAN

<b>Content</b>	<b>Manner</b>
clear	polite
direct	calm
straight to the point	respectful
simple	courteous
precise	warm
concise	with humour if possible
concrete	etc
etc	

My confidence is born of hard data. Across 20 years, in the course of teaching people how to deal more effectively with others, trainers at our company, Interactifs, have posed this question to over 60,000 people around the world, of all ages, of both sexes, in diverse functions, at many different hierarchical levels and in all kinds of industries (and we continue to pose it). The answers – the ones you’ll find above – are ALWAYS the same. An ability to speak in a way which is consistent with these answers is the essence of “talking lean”.

Note that the question is about what people would like, not what actually happens. There is clearly a huge paradox at work here. Although human beings can identify very rapidly how they like to be spoken to and therefore, by extension, how other members of the human race may also like to be spoken to, very few people are consistently able to be direct without becoming brutal or unpleasant; or to be courteous without being submissive or manipulative. They are confronted with what they see as a stark choice between being direct or being polite.

Resolving that dilemma is the subject of this book.

PART ONE

# INTRODUCTION

1

**What the book  
is about and  
who it's for**

Consider the following probably all too recurrent situations.

- You don't like the way your new boss is managing you. He's constantly looking over your shoulder, checking not just whether you meet your objectives but also how you do so. He has criticized you in front of your subordinates and has taken decisions which affect you without discussing them. He's succeeded in thoroughly demotivating you but doesn't appear to be aware of that. You need to tackle him about this.
- At a conference, you spot a prospect you've been unsuccessfully chasing for six months. The person he's drinking a coffee with during a break suddenly excuses herself to answer a call, leaving your prospect alone and five feet away from you. Now's your opportunity!
- You're a senior management consultant. At the end of an assignment, your client has asked you to carry out some additional analyses. You agree to do so at no extra cost, but the analyses are more complicated than you envisaged and your team has spent a considerable amount of extra time interrogating the data. You think you're justified in asking for an additional fee but feel uncomfortable doing so after the work has been done rather than before. You hesitate before making the call.

## WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT AND WHO IT'S FOR

- Someone you manage makes invaluable contributions to the project you're working on together, but he's always late for your team meetings and his lateness is starting to become contagious. You've already explained to him the problems this poses but it hasn't made any difference. Yesterday your boss came to the team meeting. She was singularly unimpressed by the fact that the meeting started 10 minutes late and asked you afterwards to sort things out. You need to do so.
- You've had a fire overnight on your production line and you've just been told by your operations manager that a big order to a major client can't be delivered on time. Now you need to pick up the phone and give the client the bad news.
- You're a front office manager in conversation with a customer. You feel the customer is being gratuitously rude to you but you ignore it in the hope of preserving the sale. But the more you ignore the insults, the worse they get. You need to address the situation.
- It's 2 o'clock in the morning. After a party in your flat, a member of the opposite sex to whom you are strongly attracted (and not just because it's 2am) has stayed on to help you clear up. Instead, you end up having a deep and meaningful conversation over the last bottle of wine. Your thoughts turn to romance – or at least to lust. Then he/she says: "I suppose I ought to be thinking about getting a taxi." You clear your throat to respond.

Situations like these will be familiar to anyone picking up this book. Who hasn't hesitated before leaping in? Who hasn't, on occasion, failed to leap in at all? Who hasn't had cause to regret the things left unsaid; or the things which were said, but ineffectually or maladroitly? Apart from those of us incarcerated in solitary confinement, marooned, Crusoe-like, on a desert island or pursuing careers as the loneliest of goatherds (and I'm guessing that if you're reading these words, none of those descriptions apply to you) then we all spend most of our lives



interacting with our fellow human beings, both professionally and personally – negotiating, selling, influencing, requesting, procuring, transacting, seducing, persuading, resolving; and our happiness and success at practically every level is in large part measured by how effectively we do so.

Dealing effectively with someone else doesn't just mean getting what you want from them. Being effective also means getting the result quickly rather than laboriously. And, even more importantly, it means doing so whilst maintaining or enhancing the relationship with the other person so that they'll continue buying from you, going out with you, living with you, working for you, employing you. It also means maintaining or enhancing the relationship even if, for objective reasons, you don't get the result you want – so that perhaps you'll still have a chance in the future.

It's my view that the "secret" of dealing effectively with other people is no secret – and not just because it's been exposed in the preface to this book. We all instinctively feel greater respect for someone who speaks candidly than for someone who beats around the bush. We trust them more and if their honesty and transparency is also accompanied by courtesy and respect, we are more likely to help them if we can. On the basis of "do as you would be done by", we automatically understand that we will have more impact, generate greater trust and confidence and give ourselves a better chance of the other person listening to us in an open and receptive frame of mind if we can speak straightforwardly and honestly – as long as we can manage to do so without also being blunt and abrupt.

Our instincts are clearly telling us what we should be doing. But how to do so? For there's the rub. The vast majority of human beings are faced with what they see as an insoluble dilemma: to be clear, straightforward and direct, but risk being seen as blunt and brutal; or to be polite, respectful and courteous but incapable of getting to the point. In other words, to have no inhibitions and trample heedlessly on the

sensitivities of the listener, or to be a slave to inhibition and tread so softly as to leave no trace.

This is of course a false dilemma, because how can you be truly respectful of other people if you're not also being straightforward with them? This book will suggest ways in which you can systematically square the circle – it will propose principles which will allow you to “talk lean”, to be both candid and courteous in every situation. If you apply these principles, you will give yourself every chance that other people will be open and receptive to what you have to say and ready to help you if they can.

Many years ago, I witnessed a scene on the London Underground which has remained vividly in my memory. A young man hanging onto straps near mine was clearly attracted to a girl who had jumped in at the same station – and it seemed to me that his interest was shyly returned. This scenario probably recurs a thousand times a day on the Tube in London and in other cities around the world, but in most cases nothing at all comes of it because neither party finds the courage or the words to say what's really in their mind. (I've noticed recently that rather than seizing the moment, these prospective lovers have started saying what's in their mind the next day in the columns of free commuter newspapers [*Rush-Hour Crush* in the London *Metro* is one such column] – by which time the opportunity has probably been missed, or at the least has now been entirely drained of the seductive power of spontaneity.)

But the young man in question clearly did have both the necessary courage and the words to grasp the moment. After a couple of stops, he spoke up (discretely, but I was an attentive eavesdropper) and a conversation ensued which went something like this:

**Boy:** Excuse me. Uhhh . . . I apologize if I'm being forward. I've been wracking my brains since you got in to find something original to say. But my mind's a total blank, you're probably going to get out at any minute and the moment

will have gone; so I just want to say that I really like the way you look . . . and I'd like to have a coffee with you!

**Girl (reddening but smiling):** Oh! . . . I don't know what to say . . . that's quite flattering!

**Boy:** So what do we do now?

**Girl:** I don't know! What do you suggest?

**Boy:** How about that coffee?

**Girl:** When?

**Boy:** At the next stop?

**Girl:** OK! Why not?

The reason the young man's words have stuck in my mind over the years was because they impressed me so much. I was awe-struck – and envious.

He had been spontaneously both straightforward and polite, he had found the freedom to put into words exactly what he was thinking and he did so in a way which was comfortable for him and comfortable for the person he was talking to. He spoke respectfully and generated respect; and consequently he presented himself as someone who was honest, genuine and sincere rather than as a smooth pick-up artist. The conversation was efficient because it quickly produced the result the young man was looking for.

His initiative could just as well have ended in failure if the girl had not been single or simply didn't like the look of him. But he would certainly still have gained her respect (as well as mine) and he wouldn't have spent the rest of the week regretting what he hadn't found the courage to say – to the detriment too of his own self-respect.

This analysis came to me years later with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight. At the time I simply reflected ruefully that some people have a natural gift for communicating which the rest of us can only envy from afar; and that those people will probably be the ones who will

have the most fun in life by landing the best jobs, the most appealing dates, the fastest promotions, the most valuable contracts and everything else we'd all like to ask for but don't dare to. And after that reflection, I went back to reading my newspaper and to carrying on my life as a distinctly second-division communicator.

Luckily, 15 years later I met a man called Philippe de Lapoyade who showed me that communication skills at this level can be developed by anyone. Like me, Philippe had witnessed situations in which someone had dared to speak up and had done so in a way that had delivered results and enhanced the relationship. Unlike me, he hadn't simply reflected ruefully that some people are born with those skills and some people aren't.

Instead, he set out to identify, via meticulous observation of his own meetings and those of many others, the verbal behaviour patterns which consistently produce concrete results rapidly and whilst enhancing the relationship. The target of his observation was "effective communication" rather than "effective communicators" because he noticed that we're all capable on our day of effective communication. Great communicators don't possess skills which the rest of us wholly lack; they just manage to deploy those skills more consistently.

It is no surprise that "effective communication" turned out to be communication which was simultaneously both candid and courteous. Where Philippe's exercise contributed huge value was in identifying the "how" rather than the "what". As a result of his observations, he defined a set of simple rules to describe effective behaviour patterns in meetings and conversations so that he could apply them himself, consistently and consciously, rather than occasionally and unconsciously; and so that he could teach others to do likewise. What you are reading is based on the results of that canny piece of reverse engineering.

This book is not unique in addressing the subject of dealing effectively with other people – doing so is after all a pretty fundamental part of

being a human being and it is not surprising that the subject has inspired a substantial bibliography. I can't claim to have read every book on the topic, though I have read a good few. Some are simple compilations of the blindingly obvious ("It's a good idea to remember the other person's name" is an example I found recently), the better ones contain good common sense but no framework for applying the common sense consistently, the best contain both common sense and a framework for applying it – but in my (admittedly partial and subjective) view no other book on the subject will give you a framework and tools that are so effective and yet so simple. This is the consequence of Philippe's rigour in condensing and organizing the fruits of his observations into a concise set of easily understood principles which can be summarized on a single page – and at the end of the book, they will be.

As the example from the London Underground suggests, this is a book about seduction, but not in the narrow sense of erotic seduction. It is about seduction in a much broader sense. Seductive behaviour, in both a professional and a personal context, is behaviour which is attractive to the other person, which engenders trust and confidence and so puts them in an open and receptive frame of mind, ready to allow themselves to be taken in the direction in which you have told them you want to take them. Seductive behaviour is necessarily based on transparency and sincerity – the absence of those qualities is unattractive because it creates anxiety and puts us on our guard. Paradoxically, there is nothing less seductive than the behaviour of a seducer. The would-be Don Juan, or the salesman oozing faux charm, both have intentions which are plain, but which invariably remain unvoiced, with adverse consequences for the generation of trust and respect.

## What the Book Does

The book will suggest how to *introduce* any meeting or conversation – a sales meeting, a request for a raise, a loan, an investment or a date,

the assignment of an arduous task, the extraction of a promise or a commitment, the announcement of bad news – and how to prepare that introduction so that right from the outset, the other person will be curious, open and receptive to your request, ready to listen and to help if possible.

It will suggest how to use your arguments *during the meeting* in a way that will ensure they produce something other than counter arguments. It will suggest how to listen with rigour and precision to the other person and to demonstrate irrefutably not only that he or she has been listened to but also that you have done something with what you have heard. It will suggest how to react verbally to what the other person says in the conversation, how to seize opportunities and overcome setbacks, in a way which guarantees complete consistency between what's going on in your head and what's coming out of your mouth. It will suggest how to ensure that all of the energy during the exchange is focused on achieving your goal or protecting your interests whilst also constructing the required amount of trust and esteem. It will suggest ways of dealing effectively with the situations described at the beginning of this chapter – but it will give you the verbal tools to deal effectively with ANY situation.

The ideas advanced in the book will have a significant impact on the productivity of your meetings at the level of both the relationship and the results.

Some of the approach described in the book is relevant only to meetings and conversations which YOU have initiated (what I will refer to as “outgoing” meetings). Unless you're the one who's called a meeting or initiated a conversation, it's not your role to open it. But many of your meetings and conversations are “incoming”, initiated by someone else and for which you can't prepare and can only listen and react. The book will suggest how to be more effective in both outgoing and incoming meetings and conversations.

Much of the book's content may suggest that its subject is primarily dealing with other people in *challenging* meetings, where the stakes

are high. By definition, this is the area where the book is likely to be most helpful – and probably the reason you picked it up. But although our approach will help you to tackle tricky meetings more successfully, Philippe is keen to emphasize that his focus in developing the approach was not on solving problems but on constructing results and relationships. To borrow an analogy from another colleague whose passion outside work is growing trees, the approach should not be seen as a way of putting out forest fires, but rather as a way of planting saplings.

Once you've understood and assimilated the approach as it relates to handling challenging meetings, I hope therefore that you will appreciate that everything between these covers can also be practised in easy meetings, to make them even simpler, quicker for all involved and more positive in terms of the impact on your relationship with other people. It will help to reduce the pain you suffer in difficult meetings – but much more importantly it will help to increase the pleasure you derive from all meetings.

## **What the Book Does Not Do**

The book can't – and doesn't set out to – provide a cast-iron guarantee that if you apply the approach you will always get what you want from a meeting. More modestly, it will give you the courage to say what you think and to ask for what you want and, if what you want is obtainable, it will give you the best chance of obtaining it quickly. And if what you want isn't objectively attainable under any circumstances, you will find this out more quickly too and avoid wasting time and energy; and avoid the risk of poisoning the relationship through fruitless argument.

The book will not seek to change who you are; it will seek instead to change what you do with who you are.

It will not seek to impose upon you standard words and phrases. You will be able to assimilate everything between these pages in a way which is entirely consistent with your own vocabulary and way of speaking.

The book will not school you in the dark arts of manipulation. Deliberate manipulation (by which I mean trying to take someone somewhere without telling them in advance where you're trying to take them) can undoubtedly be an effective *short-term* strategy for getting what you want (which is why, regrettably, manipulative behaviour – under different names – is often taught to people in management and sales roles).

Unsurprisingly, most of us dislike being on the receiving end of manipulative behaviour. We usually realize pretty quickly, though often too late, what's happened, with negative consequences for the relationship. De facto, manipulation is not an effective *long-term* strategy if you want to maintain or enhance the relationship and continue getting what you want from the other person. Most of us are also uncomfortable being asked deliberately to manipulate someone else; and in our view, companies should think twice about asking their employees to do things they're not comfortable with, particularly if those things are also of dubious strategic value.

A particularly egregious form of manipulation is the surreptitious application of “techniques” or “methods” to the unconscious mind of the other person. There is a strong belief in many quarters that the most effective way to influence someone else is by working on his or her subconscious. There is no doubt that we all process a lot of the information in a meeting or conversation at an unconscious level – what the other person looks like, how they're dressed, how they speak, the way they hold themselves, the space they occupy and much more; and it is consequently quite possible to influence the other person by working on their unconscious mind. But this is a difficult trick to pull



off subtly and without detection. You could never openly admit to using techniques which act on the other person's subconscious – and if the other person ever suspects that you are consciously setting out to work on their unconscious mind, it's likely to be disastrous both for the result and the relationship. The advice in this book is exclusively concerned with working on the other person's *conscious* mind.

Admittedly a lot of manipulative behaviour is applied accidentally rather than deliberately, without ill-will or dishonest intention, but simply through the lack of an accessible alternative. This happens when people instinctively disguise their real purpose when they've got something difficult to say, because they think that if they come straight out with it, they will immediately frighten the other person off – so they adopt a more circuitous route.

Far from endorsing manipulative behaviour, the book will demonstrate that, whether applied deliberately or through force of circumstance, it is unnecessary and counter-productive; and that it is possible to influence and persuade far more effectively without recourse to such behaviour.

The approach on which this book is based and which we teach in organizations around the world is resolutely not called “The Interactifs Technique” or the “The Interactifs Methodology”. Instead, we call it “The Interactifs Discipline”. We believe the distinction is an important one. This approach is not something which you apply to other people in the expectation that IT will be effective; it is something which you apply to yourself in the expectation that YOU will be effective.

2

## **All different . . . and all alike**

### **What you will have acquired by the end of the chapter:**

An awareness of the universal hunger of human beings, wherever they come from, whatever they do, whoever they are, to be spoken to in a way which is consistent with the principles exposed in the preface to this book.

**T**he human race is both extraordinarily rich in diversity and extraordinarily homogeneous. There are around seven billion of us and until cloning becomes a reality, we all remain totally unique. No two of us have exactly the same DNA or the same set of fingerprints (or even, a recent discovery claims, the same-shaped ears). But despite our uniqueness we're also all recognizably members of the same species. A medical student cutting up cadavers will find the same bits in the same places whatever the origin of the specimen; and although our DNA is unique, 99 per cent of it is shared across the entire human race. We all need air, warmth, food and water to survive. We will all die. Our homogeneity is not limited to the physical – we also share basic psychological traits. We like to be loved or at least liked or respected; and we hate being deceived and or belittled.

Many approaches for dealing more effectively with other people focus on the differences between people rather than on the similarities. They identify broad psychological categories (there were 23 of them in a book I read recently which took this route) and ask us when dealing with someone from whom we want to obtain something – a prospective customer, a prospective employer, a prospective mate – first of all to identify, at lightning speed, to which of these categories the person belongs and then to modify our behaviour accordingly.

This seems to me both difficult and dangerous. Trained psychoanalysts spend hours with their patients on the couch before making a diagnosis or drawing a conclusion. Cynics may draw a link between this and psychoanalysts' hourly rates, but cynicism aside, a human personality is a deeply complex thing and it's asking a lot for someone with no psychological training – the average businessman or woman, the average mother, father or spouse, you or me in other words – to make an accurate analysis of someone's personality type within a couple of minutes. Even if you WERE able to make an accurate analysis, IT'S NOT YOUR JOB TO DO SO! You're in a business meeting, not a consultation and you have no legitimacy in probing the psychology of your interlocutor. In addition, if you modify your behaviour based on the conclusions of your analysis, whether it's an accurate one or not, you're now doing something which would make the other person very uneasy if they suspected what you were about.

If you're on a date and find that your body language is spontaneously mimicking that of the other person because you fancy their socks off, that's fine (and good luck with that!). But if you deliberately start mimicking their body language because you read in a book that it'll give you a better chance of seducing them, that's cynical and manipulative and I hope they'll see through you. (Of course if you TELL the other person you fancy their socks off and you're deliberately mimicking their body language because you read in a book that it's an effective strategy for seduction, that makes all the difference. You're no longer being manipulative because you're no longer hiding your intentions.)

The differences between human beings are one of the great riches of the human experience so I'm not going to suggest that you ignore them. But when dealing with other people, I firmly believe that it's a lot simpler to focus on the things that the seven billion of us have in common rather than on the things that make each of us different and unique.

Luckily, as you discovered – or had confirmed – in the preface to the book, it turns out that when it comes to dealing with other people one of the most fundamental points of commonality between human beings is a desire to be spoken to in a way which reconciles candour with courtesy.

You may retort that there's huge variety in the ways in which different human beings speak to you and that very few of those are simultaneously both direct and polite. Remember, the question in the preface was “How do you like to be spoken to?” and not “How ARE you spoken to?” or “How do YOU speak to other people?” Those last two questions would inevitably produce very diverse responses, conditioned by the personality, culture and nationality of the person answering the questions. There are huge differences, both personal and cultural, in the way that people actually do speak to each other. But there's surprising homogeneity in the way that people want to be spoken to. The adjectives in the table in the preface represent *universal human wishes*. But the daily experiences of most people lead us to have very low expectations of those wishes being fulfilled.

Human beings are often so concerned with preserving the relationship at all costs that if they've got something difficult to say or to ask for, they end up going all round the houses and can't get to the point. And then sometimes when circumlocution, which is often confused with politeness, doesn't get them what they want, they end up getting frustrated, politeness flies out of the window and they become brutal and harsh – and probably still get nowhere.

Some people – the “bluff northerners” of legend, the “shoot-from-the-hip straight-talkers” – are very good at getting directly to the point, but often at a cost of being perceived as brutal or insensitive. The people on the receiving end know exactly what's expected of them; however, depending on the relative hierarchical relationship, they may end up either carrying out an order, but begrudgingly, or

putting a request right at the bottom of their “to-do” list because of the way it was made.

Most people oscillate between these two alternatives, depending on the context, on their mood and on who they’re talking to. They may be harsh with their subordinates or family but hopelessly submissive and/or manipulative with their clients or bosses. Unhappily, experience suggests that the more people go to one extreme with one audience, the more likely they are to go to the other extreme with another audience.

Whilst culture is surprisingly absent as a factor when it comes to how people like to be spoken to, it clearly plays an important role in how people actually do speak to each other. Cultural stereotypes are oversimplistic – but they are often anchored in some truth.

The British are usually so concerned with not ruffling feathers or hurting the other fellow’s feelings that if we’ve got something difficult to say we end up beating around the bush by using what we believe to be politeness and courtesy (“How are you today, old boy? Good, good. Do you have a minute? There’s a little thing that I wanted to float by you. Would that be all right? Blah blah blah . . .”). In France, the British have a centuries’ old reputation for untrustworthiness, distilled in the expression “perfidie Albion”. This is (hopefully) not an indication of any endemic dishonesty but more a consequence of the British reluctance to say what they really feel or want.

(*The Economist* newspaper once provided a helpful guide for Europeans dealing with British representatives at the EU and interpreting their usually indirect phrases. “Oh, incidentally . . .” should not be understood as meaning “What I’m about to say is not very important . . .” but rather as “I’m getting to the primary point of our discussion”. “I agree with you up to a point . . .” does not mean “We’re almost there” but “I disagree with almost everything you’ve said”. “With the greatest respect” implies no respect at all and should be interpreted

as meaning “You’re a complete idiot”. It is easy to see how a lack of straightforwardness can result in communications mayhem.)

The Germans, Dutch and Scandinavians are generally assumed to be more comfortable with speaking their minds. But whilst this often means that they have fewer inhibitions, it doesn’t mean that they are any more direct. A question like “What the hell was going on in the meeting yesterday?” is more brutal than “Would you mind if we had a little chat about yesterday’s meeting?”, but it’s just as indirect with regard to the speaker’s wants. Many Asian cultures put far more emphasis on social harmony than on individual needs – to the extent that however much the situation requires it, some Asians are reluctant to pronounce the word “no” in case it results in a loss of face for the other person. They will find it uncomfortable to be told “no” themselves for the same reason.

The approach described in this book is anchored in the premise that if you took the time to ask the person you’re dealing with – whatever the context, whatever the relationship, whatever their age, sex, relative hierarchical position, nationality or culture – how they’d like you to speak to them, you could be confident that they would answer: “clear, direct, straight to the point, concrete, precise and concise, as long as you’re also polite, courteous, respectful and calm.”

This is emphatically not the same as recommending that what you say in a given context will be exactly the same regardless of the identity of the person to whom you’re talking, or that one reader of this book should say the same as another who applies the principles in identical circumstances. There will be significant differences in the verbal outcome as a function of your own cultural background, of how well you know the other person, of your relative hierarchical level, of your degree of cultural homogeneity and so on. Whilst all human beings carry the same range of emotions within their heads, what provokes these emotions – and their intensity – will vary significantly from culture to culture and from individual to individual. My ambi-

tion for the book is to suggest standards of behaviour in meetings and conversations which will increase your effectiveness – and certainly not to impose standardized behaviour.

## Chapter Summary

- When trying to deal effectively with other people (in terms of both the results and the relationship), it's simpler to focus on the similarities between human beings rather than on the differences.
- From a communications perspective, the most important similarity among disparate individuals is the universal wish of human beings to be spoken to in a way which marries directness, concision and clarity with respect, politeness and courtesy.
- It follows that speaking in this way in a meeting or conversation is most likely to put the other people in the frame of mind you need them to be in to have the productive and comfortable conversation you want.
- Despite this universal wish and what it implies in terms of common standards, most human beings do not consistently speak to other human beings in the way in which they would like to be spoken to.