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Influencing Skills to Leverage Your Career

Summary of seminar delivered by Andrew Hennigan at
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To succeed in any field, you have to have both technical expertise and the ability to influence other people. Without this ability you might have the best ideas but they will not be recognized and you will struggle to persuade other people to listen to your ideas, give you the funding you need, hire you for that dream position, invite you to speak at conferences or anything else. But fortunately, these skills are not difficult to acquire. Once you break the problems down into basic concepts are simple to grasp and easy to implement.

There are three of these basic influencing skills. First of all, you need to learn how to write effectively. This means that when you write an email, a letter, a grant request or anything it should have the desired effect. Secondly, you need to be able to speak persuasively in all situations: one-to-one, one-to-few and one-to-many. This means that when you speak you can convince people to adopt your ideas. Thirdly there is strategic networking. A strong network is essential not so much for finding work but just to be taken seriously. When you are personally known and trusted by many people it is much easier to get your ideas taken seriously.

Effective Writing

Everybody has learned the fundamental writing toolbox in school. You might also have attended other workshops to master academic writing and writing for non-scientific audiences – both

available at KI. But writing workshops rarely focus on persuasion. For this we need to look elsewhere. You can, in fact, learn some very interesting techniques from both journalists and

Focus on the Idea: Very often what looks like unclear writing is in fact very clear writing about an unclear idea. Start by clarifying this idea in your mind before you start writing. It is very helpful to start by brainstorming several ideas and then choosing the one that seems most relevant. Journalists call their idea for an article the "angle", and it is always clearly defined, usually before they start writing.

Structure logically: Journalists always structure their content logically, but they follow an "inverted pyramid" approach that is very unlike academic writing. In this style the most important part comes first and then you gradually add more details. Don't save the best part from the end – that makes more sense for fiction. Editors often comment that the easiest way to fix most people's writing is to put the last paragraph first.

Simplify: In writing, too, everyone says too much. Read through your drafts and delete everything that is not needed. Delete needless words, sentences that are not really needed and even entire sections. Ask yourself, is this really needed? Don't be afraid to use precise technical language where needed but don't use complex words that are not necessary.

In addition to these basic lessons from journalism, there are many tricks we can learn from diplomacy.

Focusing on Objectives. Nobody is measured by the number of email wars they win, or given prizes for especially ironic or sarcastic messages. You will be judged instead based on the results of your work and the messages used to achieve these results are just a tool. For this reason, it is important to always remember that the real purpose of any written message is to help you to achieve one of your goals. Focusing on objectives in this way is a good way to avoid sending needlessly hostile or provocative messages that cause or sustain conflicts.

In 2001 the CEO of Cerner Corporation, Neal Patterson, became famous for a badly-conceived email to his company's managers that caused the share price to fall 22%, costing the company $300M in lost value. Patterson was annoyed that there were empty spaces in the company parking early in the morning and wrote to his reports a long and hostile message telling them that they should fix this in two weeks or be fired. One manager sent a screenshot to a local newspaper and if Patterson's goal was to get people to start work earlier his effort failed spectacularly. He should have considered first his goal.
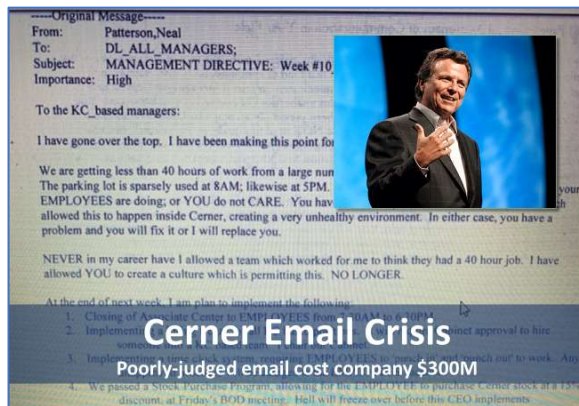
Before you send any message always ask yourself if that message will contribute to your goals. If it doesn't then maybe you have chosen the wrong approach. And in the case of a provocative incoming message, don't respond in the same way because that will also not help you to achieve your goals. One good way of dealing with hostile incoming messages is to ignore the tone and address only the substance, sending a polite reply with the information requested. Trying to reply to a provocative message in the same way is a waste of time because nobody ever wins an email war.

Using Neutral Language. In any message you should also take care to use neutral language, avoiding words that take sides or could provoke anger. Some words are simply neutral all the time, like issue instead of problem, while some others depend on the specific case.

In April 2001 a US Air Force spy plane was captured in Hainan Island, China and the crew arrested. In the subsequent standoff the US ambassador wrote a message to the Chinese Ministry for Foreign Affairs that began "I now outline steps to resolve this issue…", a perfect example of how you can find words that soothe the receiver even in a tense situation. You can find examples like this in published diplomatic cables and also in replies to complaints from companies.

You should always use neutral words to avoid confrontation, but at the same time there are some other less obvious things to consider. First of all, it is best to avoid using capitals as much as possible because they are interpreted as hostile. It also helps to avoid listing complaints with bullet points or, much worse, numbered points, which are often interpreted as being more aggressive than simple text.

Slow Down the Message Cycle: Many email conflicts are simply caused by the rapid cycle time of modern electronic communication, where people respond to a message while they are still angry and the other person is still upset, leading to an escalating conflict.

Surprisingly, this is a 19th century problem. Already in 1875 the French historian Charles de Mazade wrote in his book about the Franco-Prussian War was in part caused by hasty responses to messages sent by electric telegraph. We know now that the leaked messages were manipulated to provoke this conflict, but at the time diplomats blamed the speed of the telegraph.

Franco-Prussian War 1870
Blamed by French historian on speed of telegraph

Slowing down messaging is another effective technique to reduce conflict. One way is simply to reflect before sending any message. Another is to avoid responding when you are angry. In any case it can be helpful to generally slow down message cycles by leaving messages before answering. This is another reason for having scheduled email windows at certain times of day.

Create "We" Feeling. You can also avoid many conflicts by taking advantage of the ways in which our brain divides other people into ingroups and outgroups. Psychologists have known since the 1950s that people separated by any barrier or label tend to develop some distrust and hostility. Muzafer Sherif at Oklahoma State University studied this with a series of famous experiments in Robbers' Cave National Park, where boys divided into two groups developed some hostility for no rational reason. More recently, Jay Van Bavel of Ohio State University published research in 2008 about the neural substrate of these effects.

In-group & myside behavior
Confirmed by fMRI experiments

But the good news is that you can easily move someone from an outgroup to an ingroup simply by redefining the boundaries of the group. You can do this in practice by adopting language like "How can we move forward with this issue…" rather than "what are you going to do?". Concretely, you can use "we" based language, focus on problems not people and look for solutions, not blame.

Sometimes I call this the "Pandemic approach", after a board game where all the players are on the same team and play against the game. A truly inspired concept that is much more fun that the usual you-against-them games.

De-escalate Tensions: The final lesson from diplomacy is to always de-escalate tensions. Very often when there is a diplomatic incident like the expulsion of spies the response will be carefully calibrated to be slightly less than the first move. This avoids escalation of the situation.

We can learn from this by adopting the same approach. First of all, take care that the response to any hostile message is carefully measured to be clearly less intense. It can help also to focus on just the most important point or points and ignore the smaller ones. This can also have the effect of making your response stronger, since the work of researchers like Zachary Tormala has demonstrated that fewer points make stronger persuasion. Finally, when an email conflict is serious the easiest way to de-escalate is often to stop the message thread and switch to an alternative channel. You might try a phone or skype call, a face-to-face visit, or the help of a neutral mediator.

Culture Risks. In addition to these five techniques, many message conflicts are actually caused by cultural misunderstandings. While I was preparing this seminar, I saw a question on quora.com saying "I get offended by business mails with no salutation…" In fact, come people dislike salutations and others get annoyed when they are missing. The easiest way to find out what one person likes is to look at the messages that they send.
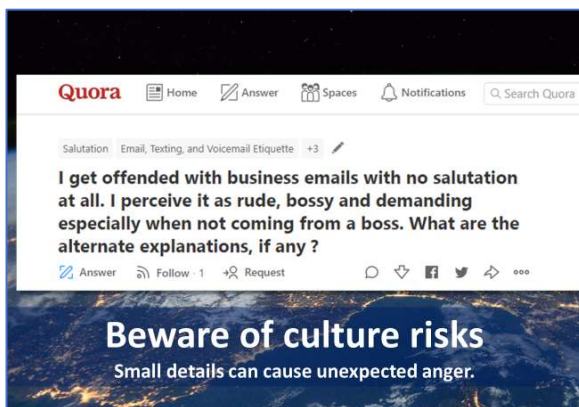
You can also cause cultural misunderstandings simply by sending messages to the wrong person or by copying a boss. In strongly hierarchical societies the boss is always in the loop, while in very flat hierarchies like Sweden the boss is usually only copied when there is a problem.

Whether you begin a message with small talk or not is also important, since some people find it annoying and others find short messages rude. There are also many misunderstandings caused by the conflict between direct and indirect speakers.

All of these culture issues can be avoided simply by taking the advice from the start about ignoring the "tone" of a message, because very often that tone is entirely unintended.

Persuasive Speaking

When people learn that I am a speaker coach at TEDxStockholm they invariably ask me if there are any lessons that people can learn from TED format that are useful in everyday speaking and presenting. There are, in fact, three key elements of the TED format that compel speakers to make their content and delivery more effective: be brief, have a clear idea and prepare.

Be brief: TED talks are limited to a maximum of 18 minutes though many are around ten minutes and some shorter than that. By limiting time speakers are forced to be more selective in the content that they include and more focused on their goal. This is better for the listener because it is easier to absorb and easier to remember. It is also much better for the speaker because a shorter talk is much easier to deliver. I can practice a five-minute talk ten times in an hour. A one-hour talk I can practice just once in the same time. Everyone talks too long and it is always possible to cut some unnecessary words, sentences, paragraphs and sections. But the most important advantage of a short talk is that it helps focus attention on the central idea.

Have a clear idea: One of the TED rules that has the most impact on the quality of talks is the requirement that every talk should be built around "a well-formed idea worth spreading". This means that they are not general tutorials but always focus on one single idea. Identifying this idea worth spreading is the hardest part of creating a TED or TEDx talk, and often takes more time than writing the first draft script. Once you have defined this idea then the rest of the process becomes much easier. The talk is also much easier to understand and absorb. Test the idea first conversationally with friends or colleagues to make sure that it makes sense.

Avoid distractions: Finally, the TED format requires that people stand still on a red carpet and speak from memory. This has the interesting effect of forcing people to speak in a way that builds a stronger connection with the audience. Most speakers do not actually memorize a talk but learn the key points and then improvise the actual words. But they are always looking towards the audience, avoiding distractions like looking at the screen or at a script. Needing to memorize the content also forces people to practice many times, and this positively impacts the quality of the talk. Always practice standing up, speaking out loud and changing the presentation slides with a clicker like in a real presentation.

Anyone can benefit from these techniques in every day presentations just by always being brief, focusing on a clear idea and practicing until the presentation is very smooth.

Speakers can also learn some interesting techniques from the writers of movie and TV scripts.

And-Then-But-Therefore. Just recently someone remarked that a short talk I had done was "riveting". An interesting comment because it was designed to do exactly that. You can keep people interested and stop them changing channel just by connecting together all the ideas like a mathematical proof. The creators of South Park, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, call this the and-then-but-therefore rule. If you can connect the "beats" of your story with "and then" your story will be boring. But if each part is related in some way so that beats are connected with "but…" or "therefore…" then the story become more compelling, more "riveting". This requires some effort, but it has a dramatic effect on effectiveness.

And-then-but-therefore rule
South Park's Matt Stone & Trey Parker

Be Concrete, Tell Stories. Another scriptwriter rule is to be concrete. Give names, places, dates, numbers, cases, examples, stories. People can process abstractions but they remember concrete facts and stories. Especially the stories. In a leadership workshop I once told the story about the traveler who gift wrapped a bicycle to get it on a train. Years later an attendee could still remember that story.

Evolve Your Content. One thing that all writers know well is that you have to "evolve" your content. The first draft always sucks. Look at the early versions of popular books, songs and movies and you realize that the result came from developing a weak idea into a strong finished product. Take Star Wars, for example, where the first drafts were all really awful. Even in the third draft Han Solo was a giant green frog, rather than a young Harrison Ford. Explore new ideas, test them and keep the best ideas.

First drafts always suck
Star Wars' Han Solo was froglike alien
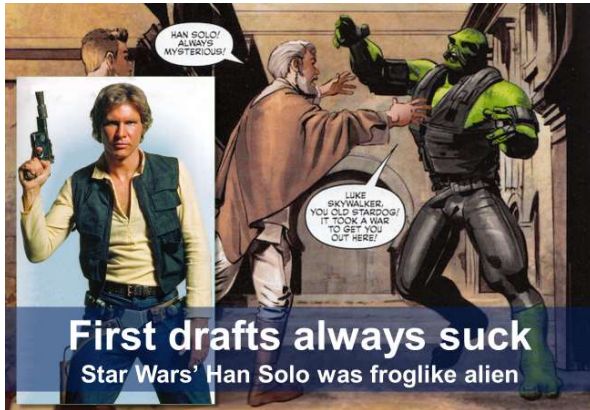
Budget Your Time. But one hazard of trying to deliver the best result is that sometimes you spend too much time on something that isn't so important. The way to avoid this is to use what I call "bank robber time". Decide how many minutes you will spend on part of the work and when that time is passed just move on.

Strategic Networking

Since the time of Aristotle we have been aware that to persuade people there are three elements: logos, the appeal to logic, pathos, the appeal to emotions, and ethos, the appeal to authority. Without ethos you have no credibility to persuade people. Part of your ethos comes from your own position; much of the rest comes from how well you are connected.

Humans as a species rely on complex social interactions based on teamwork and forms of networking. Indeed, Michael Tomasello's team at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Biology in Leipzig suggest that humans have become interdependent, unable to survive alone. Archeological evidence supports this, showing that humans have been working together in this way for at least 380,000 years, so developing and maintaining social relationships with other humans is deeply rooted in our behavior.

Interdependence Hypothesis
Michael Tomasello, Max Planck Institute, Leipzig

Yet people are very often unaware of this. They think that they can manage on their own, but they are mistaken. Even when you accomplish a task on your own you have been helped by hundreds or thousands of other people. This becomes clear when someone actually *does* do something on their own and this is treated like an adventure. Climb mount Everest by yourself and you make news

headlines, and this is often the central theme of adventure fiction like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Andy Weir's *The Martian*.

Sometime efforts to accomplish an apparently "simple" task without help have hilarious results. Inspired by a line from a Douglas Adams book, Thomas Thwaites attempted to build a toaster by himself, failing miserably. The whole process is documented in a 2010 TED talk. More recently, in March 2018 a Frenchman, Benjamin Carle, attempted to make a tuna sandwich by himself, taking ten months to finish it.

Most of the time the help that we need is knowledge rather than physical assistance. Nearly everyone overestimates their own knowledge, a phenomenon studied by Leonid Rozenblit et al in a 2002 Yale study describing an "illusion of explanatory depth". What appears to be happening is that we tap into a shared community knowledge and forget sometimes that we carry in our own head only part of the answer; we rely on the support of people around us to succeed.
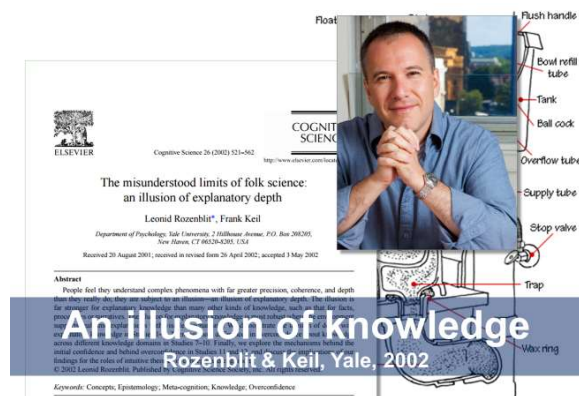
Because of this reliance on community knowledge, having social connections with other people is not an extra but something we struggle to manage without. This means that networking is not something you can choose to do or not do; it will happen anyway though you can encourage it. At the same time there is also a penalty for not having social connections. People naturally organize the people that the know into ingroups and outgroups. This happens subconsciously, but if you are in the outgroup for another person they are less likely to help you. Networking is doubly critical for everyone.

This thinking explains why networking is more important than we think, but what can you do with it? Far too often people turn to networking only when they need a job, but in reality, jobs are just one of the benefits and are, in fact, a consequence of other benefits. Your network brings three key benefits: information, influence and performance. Someone with an effective network can obtain better information more easily, convince other people to follow their ideas and work much more efficiently, tapping into the support of others.

In a typical scenario when someone needs to choose another person, for a job, an assignment or whatever, they choose from people who are at the intersection of two sets: the set of people who are able to do the task and those people who are known or knowable through another trusted person.

The Power of Connections
"It's who you know..." Or is it?
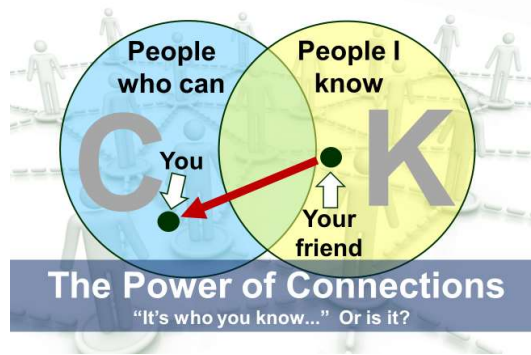
Because of this networking is essentially just the systematic application of a three-step process: to build a healthy network you need to get to know more people, you need to make those people trust you and you need to make sure that people know what you want. It really is that simple.

You can meet more people both face to face and online. For face-to-face interactions the most effective opportunities are usually those involving some activity – perhaps volunteering to help organize a conference. If you have to attend traditional mingles you can always achieve much more by planning ahead, focusing on a few people and arriving early. During the COVID-19 pandemic many events were moved online but there are still online networking opportunities at these events and the organizers are still working together.

Building trust is partly achieved by having a robust online footprint, but mainly by keeping promises and by being helpful. People often forget their promises, possibly because of the Location Updating Effect where you wipe your short-term memory every time you go through a door. Don't be that person! Never forget the small everyday promises – write notes to help you -- and always try to offer at least a small help when asked. Don't refuse help, too, because accepting it also creates a bond.

You can also build trust passively by exploiting the *Mere Exposure effect*. Simply by attending department meetings, symposia and conferences people will get used to seeing you and begin to like you even if you say nothing. Then when you do introduce yourself the ice is already broken.
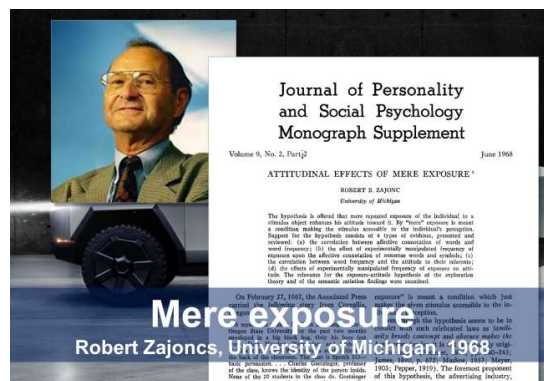
Sharing your needs should be simple enough but in practice very few people do this well. You will have to be clear in telling people how they can help you, and don't be afraid to repeat it.

Follow these simple methods and you will be able to leverage your networking brain, building on hundreds of thousands of years of evolution and continuing the great human tradition of survival through cooperation.

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*Like all the lectures, workshops and courses created and delivered by Andrew Hennigan, this one comes with the standard **Lifetime Guarantee**. If you have a question about the workshop you are always welcome to ask. You can ask me directly at Impact Hub Stockholm or through email and social media. These are the channels where I am most likely to see messages quickly, but I am also on many other social media platforms and messaging apps.*

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If you attended the workshop you are also welcome to send connection requests, but on LinkedIn please add a note explaining where we met. To do this you need to send the request from my profile page and select the option "add note".