

Relationship building in a reductionist world

by Barbara Wilmot

In philosophical terms, the current world view is a reductionist one. Whether or not we are consciously aware of this, we are all conditioned by modern society and the Western world in which we live to have a reductionist approach to life. This is the concept of rational analysis that developed from the “Age of Enlightenment” in the 18th century.

Reductionism is the doctrine or philosophy that true knowledge must be proved, i.e. in order for something to exist, it must be proved by science or mathematics. Major exponents of reductionism, such as Stephen Hawking, contend that the nature of complex things can always be reduced (or explained by) simpler or more fundamental things.

All other knowledge which cannot be “proved” and which involves a *belief system*, such as holistic medicine or mind reading, for example, is viewed as “magical” and considered negative, unworthy, and is therefore ridiculed. There is, in fact, pressure in society to demean anyone who promotes these types of beliefs and practises and to view them as oddball (although this is slowly changing).

The dilemma

The very idea of “relationship building” poses a dilemma for reductionists because it is not tangible. There is no mathematically proven formula which says that: *x contacts = y projects*.

Relationship building with clients and prospects is all about intangible “touchy, feely” stuff such as human chemistry which can’t be proved or measured. What I’m talking about is the fact that for no apparently clear reason, some individuals are comfortable working together, while others are not. This is what gives rise to the well known saying amongst sales professionals that: *“people buy people, whatever the product or service”*.

No matter how formal the relationship may be, all clients at the end of the day are people – so the human dynamics involved are just as important as the product or service being offered. This is why a relationship management approach is vital and cannot be dismissed off hand.

How communications are affected

I believe that by exploring the different communications skills and styles of people, we are better able to manage the reductionist landscape in which we are endeavouring to build business relationships.

Being more aware of this landscape helps to explain some of the hurdles people experience with relationship building, either:

- Personally
- Internally, with other colleagues
- Externally, with clients and prospects

For these reasons, the area of “communications” is one that I focus on in my various training programmes. A questionnaire that I have developed indicates four distinct approaches to communications (i.e. thinking, learning and speaking) and aims to encourage a more considered approach.

This is also a way to get inside peoples’ consciousness in order to reach them with the important messages about relationship building. This includes revealing and exploring any blocks to an acceptance and understanding of the dynamics involved.

Your own approach to communications will have a major impact on how you try to influence and persuade other individuals or groups (e.g. your clients). The juxtaposition of your approach and that of the individual(s) with whom you wish to communicate will make the situation even more complex.

In my experience, it is the “sensation” communicators who seem to have the greatest difficulty with the philosophy of relationship building – for the very reason that it cannot be proved with a clear, scientific formula. These types of communicators appear to me to be inherent reductionists. This is why they may be surprised or even uncomfortable if you adopt a personal approach or demonstrate that you know something personal about them. They are also uncomfortable themselves with the “touchy, feely” aspects of relationship building and the social skills involved.

Yet for the other three communications styles (“thinking”, “intuition”, “feeling”), demonstrating a knowledge about a client or contact and what is important to them, and having the same interest shown in return (personally and professionally), has the power to surprise and delight all involved in the contact. It is this that enables the all important connection to be made that is the very essence of successful relationship building, even in a reductionist world.

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