

Successful Supervisor Part 34

Communication Improvement

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The “VAK” Model (Visual, Auditory, or Kinesthetic) is a wonderful technique to improve communication that any supervisor can use once she has picked up the necessary skills. Its origin goes back to some studies done in the 1970s by behavioral scientists Bandler and Grinder, who proposed that humans have preferred ways of learning information.

The model was part of a much larger system called Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP). The VAK Model hypothesized that each person has a preferred channel for taking in information: either visual, auditory, or kinesthetic (movement, as in learning by doing). The VAK Model is often used in teaching to ensure that people with different learning styles have the same opportunity to learn. It can be used in business and personal situations to establish rapport and increase understanding in communications.

The ideas have been debated by scientists over the years, and I have found the VAK Model is very helpful when it is applied to communications. In the 1980s, Neil Fleming expanded VAK to include Reading and Writing, so the model became VARK. With all the acronyms, it sounds like a little “hocus-pocus,” but the concept is very simple and amazingly powerful.

The idea is to find out what “channel” is the one that the other person prefers and flex your communication style to use that method of transmitting information. Rather than walk through the theory of why this can be helpful to a supervisor, I will share a story that illustrates the point.

Many years ago, I was teaching a Leadership Course at Syracuse University. I had just completed a module on the VARK technique, complete with how you can determine the preferred communication channel by listening to the words a person chooses when talking normally.

Before the class met the next session, a young female student approached me and said, “It works! That VARK system you taught us really does work.” As the class started I asked the student to tell the story to the entire class.

She said, “After our last class, I went to see my calculus teacher. I am having a problem getting the feel of double integrals. I understand everything he is saying in

class, but I just cannot make it happen by myself.” Notice the student said she could not get the “feel” of the content (indicating that she is a kinesthetic communicator).

She indicated that she and the professor seemed to be on two different planets in terms of communicating and that both of them were starting to get annoyed. She said the professor was getting red in the face and finally put his hands on his hips saying “I just don’t **see** what your problem is.” BINGO! A little bell went off in her head that she was listening in Kinesthetic, but he was a Visual communicator.

She immediately went to his white board and drew the sign for the double integral. She pointed to the place in the process where she was not visualizing the right thing to do. (Note: she shifted her communication mode from Kinesthetic to Visual by drawing on the board and using the word “visualizing” as opposed to “feeling.”)

The student related that the professor “melted and became like a puppy dog.” He said, “Oh, that is what you are not **seeing**, let me **show** you.” She said that in 5 minutes he had explained it so she understood it forever, and they parted the best of buddies.

For any supervisor or manager, having the ability to flex your own communication style to match the person you are trying to reach is like a magic potion. The trick is to pay attention to the words the other person uses to describe what is happening. Within a sentence of two the other person will tell you his or her preferred channel by the phraseology. For example, if you hear the following words, they give away the channel to use:

I hear what you are saying – Auditory

This feels a little dumb – Kinesthetic

He was texting my best friend – Read/Write

I don’t see your point – Visual

We have a procedure on that – Read/ Write

Looks like I will see you at the meeting – Visual

That sounds easy to me – Auditory

He was experiencing a deep depression – Kinesthetic

Also, it is important to pay attention to a person’s actions and patterns.

When you tell them something, do remember it? -- Auditory

Or do they have to write it down? -- Visual or Read/write

Can they learn from watching you do something? -- Visual

When they have to learn something new, do they have to do it over and over until it finally “sticks? -- Kinesthetic

The first order of business if you want to become a master of this technique is to determine what your own preferred channel of communication is. It may not be obvious to you, but if you simply go back and read some of your notes in your “sent” file, you will quickly determine your channel.

We all use all of the modalities in daily life. The trick is to determine which is used the most and your pattern of usage. Also, think of your learning style. Do you learn best by listening, watching, reading, or doing? It may be different depending on the subject. Doing this type of self-analysis will help you understand how you communicate and learn as well, saving you time in the future.

The second step is to **look** for situations where the communication with a particular individual seems to be not as smooth as it should be (by the way, I just gave away my preferred channel by using the word “look.”) If you can **see** (again, I give it away here) a potential problem, then pay attention to the specific phrases the individual is using. Once you determine his or her preferred channel, try flexing your normal mode to play into the way the other person receives information. You will immediately **see** (once again) a huge improvement in the ability to communicate with this individual.

You can play this little game without the other person even knowing you are doing it. It’s kind of fun, but it does take time and practice before you will **observe** improvement. People can be complex in their approach to their world. Keep with it, and you will have great rewards.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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