



# GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

Finance professionals have to master the art of good communication skills or their technical expertise will be redundant, says **Peter Shaw**

**A**sk any senior executive what they think makes an effective finance professional and they will talk about the themes of clear judgment and effective communication. Rigorous financial analysis and discipline are essential but not sufficient. The senior leader in any business wants to work with finance professionals whom they trust as competent but can also understand.

Often the rhetoric is about rigour, thoroughness, accountability and professionalism. But if communication doesn't happen well, all those wonderful professional skills can become sidelined and irrelevant.

The consistent picture is that the finance professional who can communicate effectively becomes a crucial and influential part of a leadership team. The finance

professional who doesn't communicate well is regarded as a necessary evil, an encumbrance, a tedious part of the process and a bore. The finance professional can either be at the centre where they are influential, engaged and vital to success, or they can become sidelined and, at worst, regarded as a liability because of their inability to communicate with stakeholders.

So how is this best avoided? The finance professional has so much to offer. Key principles are about clarity, curiosity, thinking through consequences and being corporate.

## Clarity

Clarity is about effective preparation, identifying key points, keeping it simple, ensuring that the message is

**It is about listening, and listening again.** It is about conversations that operate on a range of different levels; some will be very focused and others will be more open and creative

not too cluttered. It is a relentless focus on what is most important and not being diverted by the irrelevant.

### Curiosity

Curiosity is about listening hard, sitting inside the shoes of the people you are talking to, trying to understand where they are coming from and what their concerns and priorities are. Curiosity can be about different ways of engaging with people, talking to a range of different individuals to try and test out your own perspective. When there is an impasse, a strong sense of curiosity to look round corners and try to find a way through the problem can be such an asset.

### Consequences

Always looking for the consequences is a central skill of the finance professional as they look at the effect on the financial bottom line or the audit reputation. It is allowing alarm bells to ring when the concern is purely about the short-term, but it is also seeing the consequences in wider than just financial terms. Is what we are talking about going to make a real difference to the client or the customer? Is it going beyond a short-term palliative to meet the long-term objectives of the individual or organisation?

### Corporate

Being corporate is about measuring success in terms of an organisation's overall priorities and not purely the needs of the finance function. It will be being willing to engage openly, looking at an issue from different perspectives and being willing to balance financial considerations with other factors. There will be fixed points from the perspective of the financial professional in terms of the rigour of the analysis, the financial accountability and the effect on the bottom line, but this reinforces the need to engage effectively and not go back into a professional box.

Communication skills for finance professionals are becoming increasingly important. For example, the recent report by the Treasury Financial Skills Advisory Panel about embedding financial management skills

in government put as one of the key steps to success: 'Remember the importance of communication and engagement skills'. It talks of the need for a step change in the quality of engagement between finance and non-finance professionals, which includes skills in relationship to building, communication, listening and influencing.

The report saw potential elements that can enhance engagement skills, such as:

- mentoring from an experienced finance professional;
- learning sets involving finance professionals sharing their experiences; and
- mutual mentoring between a finance professional and a non-finance colleague working broadly in the same area who can give feedback to each other about what is working well and what is working less well.

### Value of coaching

The panel's report also emphasised how one-to-one coaching can focus productivity in key areas through helping an individual to focus on:

- Who is it important to build networks with, and how is that best accomplished?
- How effectively am I listening?
- What is the impact I want to have on key individuals?
- How best do I communicate with key stakeholders and customers?
- How do I ensure I get effective feedback on the impact I am having?
- What are the win-win situations I want to create with other key stakeholders?
- How do I ensure that I am embedding the learning of how best to make the strongest impact within the organisation?

### Quality of engagement

Crucial next steps for any finance professional wanting to increase their impact is increasing the quality of engagement with their colleagues and key stakeholders. It is about listening, and listening again. It is about conversations that operate on a range of different levels; some will be very focused and others will be more open and creative. Effective communication is about a dynamic relationship where the finance professional is influencing, both through the quality of their argument and the depth of their relationship with key individuals.

The finance professional starts off in a much stronger position than many individuals because they have vital data and an awareness of risks that others do not have. What matters is using that access in as positive and influential a way as possible. This opportunity to influence can so easily be dissipated. But the finance professional who communicates well can be the most influential player in any group.

## 12 practical tips

- Be clear about the key points
- Simplify the language
- Keep consistently on message
- Don't dilute the impact
- Be focused and persistent
- Always look engaged
- Look at the issue from a range of perspectives
- Experiment with different approaches and see what works best
- Think through where action is leading
- Draw attention to short-term problems
- Bring people back to long-term outcomes
- Understand where others are coming from



**Peter Shaw was a former director general for finance and analytical services in government. He worked in five government departments and held three director general posts. He is now a partner at Praesta Partners, a specialist coaching organisation. His latest book, *Making Difficult Decisions: how to be decisive and get the business done*, was published in June 2008 by John Wiley. Shaw can be contacted at [peter.shaw@praesta.com](mailto:peter.shaw@praesta.com) and on 020 7478 3107**