

1. ESSENTIAL UNCOMMUNICATION

We first look at the building blocks of uncommunication, the tools and techniques to which you will find yourself returning again and again. Mastery of these will enable you to move through life in a haze of obscurity.

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- ▣▣▣ Statements of Fact
- ▣▣▣ Undenial
- ▣▣▣ Unbriefing
- ▣▣▣ Unanswers
- ▣▣▣ Pivots
- ▣▣▣ Unbusiness Meetings

The Statement of Fact

A basic tool in any uncommunicator's armoury is the Statement of Fact. This is a truth placed before your audience not to impress in its own right, but

to act as scaffolding from which the rest of your uncomms can be hung.

A good Statement of Fact is incontestable. Your goal is that no one should possibly be able to criticise you for it. Its chief effect is what it leaves unsaid.

You can see this effect in the following 2006 *Washington Post* interview with Gordon Brown, who at the time was working to shift Tony Blair out of Downing Street and replace him. The interviewer asked if he was happy with the way Blair was giving up power. Brown responded: 'It's a matter for him and the Labour Party. It's not really a matter for me at all.'

The interviewer asked about his relationship with Blair, which Blair would later compare to domestic violence, to which he replied, 'We've been working with each other for more than twenty years ... I've been chancellor while he's been prime minister for nine years, and we continue to work together.'

To see how effectively a Statement of Fact can be deployed, let's look at an area where they come into their own: when you are called upon to say something nice about someone towards whom you have absolutely no nice feelings. Perhaps you've succeeded in persuading a hated underling to quit, and now have to give a speech at their leaving party. Or maybe a lifelong enemy has finally died.

In this context, the Statement of Fact should sound like it might be admiring, without quite managing it. No one will be able to deny that you've 'paid tribute', and yet at the same time, if the subject is later shown to be a bad 'un, no one will be able to use your statement in evidence against you. It's the equivalent of writing 'Good luck!' on someone's leaving card.

Drafted correctly, Statements of Fact can fill all of the space between 'many people will be sorry to hear of the death of ...' and 'my thoughts are with their family at this difficult time'.

Here is Ed Miliband, leader of the British Labour party, following the death of the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 2013:

She will be remembered as a unique figure. She reshaped the politics of a whole generation. She was Britain's first woman prime minister. She moved the centre ground of British politics and was a huge figure on the world stage. The Labour Party disagreed with much of what she did and she will always remain a controversial figure. But we can disagree and also greatly respect her political achievements and her personal strength.

Note the use of 'controversial figure' here to mean

‘person whose death is being marked with a party in Trafalgar Square’. In the same vein, most people can safely be described as a ‘towering figure’, which sounds like a compliment but might, at a push, just mean they were over 6 foot.

The Tory prime minister, David Cameron, repaid the compliment upon the death of Labour politician Tony Benn in 2014:

He was a magnificent writer, speaker, diarist and campaigner, with a strong record of public and political service. There was never a dull moment listening to him, even when you disagreed with everything he said.

Given the increasing odds of much-loved TV stars turning out to have been child molesters, a Statement of Fact is also by far the safest tribute to offer any recently deceased celebrity who wasn’t actually a member of your family.

Unplain Speaking

Having introduced some of the basic ideas of uncommunication, some examples may help. Note how the surface meaning is never quite wrong, but it’s never quite right, either.

be honest with me • lie to me.

can you write to my office about it? • they've got a special shredder for letters in green ink.

cautiously optimistic • I think it'll either be fine, in which case I want you to thank me, or it won't, in which case I don't want you to blame me.

community • any group of people who don't get on, as in 'the theatre community'. Or a euphemism for ethnic minorities.*

could you put your request in an email? • I stopped listening about five minutes ago.

expression of concern • statement that, if accurately reflected in print, would be a string of asterisks.**

for your convenience • for our convenience, we have done something inconvenient to you. Useful in hotel signs explaining the shower will only work between 6.15 and 6.28.

humbled • proud. As in, 'I'm deeply humbled to accept this award, as I shall now demonstrate by gently boasting for the next three minutes.'

* This second definition may explain the 'community favourites' section that every Blockbuster Video shop used to have, in the baffling pretence that the most popular movies in the East End of Glasgow were made by Spike Lee.

** As in *The Lancet* journal's 2010 'expression of concern' after learning that one of the researchers associated with a paper on cancer it had printed might have fabricated data.

To describe people who've actually been humbled, try 'humiliated'.

I can't promise that • there is no way in Hell I'm ever going to do that.

I genuinely think • the other stuff I've been saying, on the other hand, you should take with a pinch of salt.

I make no apology for saying • things for which no one has called for me to apologise. Also 'unashamedly', for things of which no one has suggested I should be ashamed. For example, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's statement that their 2014 legislative programme was 'unashamedly pro-work, pro-business and pro-aspirational'.

I'm not justifying it, I'm explaining it • I'm justifying it.

I'm sorry, but ... • I'm not sorry, and

I'm sympathetic to that proposal • I feel sorry for it, because it's doomed.

I think you'll find • that I'm right and you're wrong. But also that the depths of my loathing for you are unplumbed.

let's be honest • let's agree with me.

let's face it • let's agree you're wrong.

passionate • the standard unit of interest in a

subject. As in this IBM job ad: ‘The ideal developer will be passionate about cloud computing.’
per se • ignore what I just said. As in, ‘we have no plans, per se’ – we have plans.

quite • means either ‘very’ or ‘not at all’, as in ‘she’s quite pretty’. There is a danger of accidental uncommunication here, especially when Americans are speaking to the British. Also ‘some’ – when Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling told US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson in 2008 that he had ‘some concerns’ over Barclays buying Lehman Bros, both men thought he was being clear. Paulson thought he meant ‘not very many’, and Darling knew he meant ‘an awful lot’.

respect • sounds like ‘admire’, but doesn’t quite mean it. As in: ‘I always had huge respect for his opinions.’

technical issues • you really don’t need to worry your head about these. They’re very dull.

technocrat • someone who understands the subject, but whom I wish you to ignore. Antonym: ‘independent expert’.

this is the right thing to do • this is the thing we’re going to do.

we do not suggest • it should be perfectly clear that we’re suggesting this, but if you ask us, we’ll deny

it. Also ‘no one disputes’ – actually, we’re disputing it very hard, but we’re not going to admit it.

we must focus on the immediate issue • and not the thing you keep asking about.

we need a grown-up debate • I will only engage with people who agree with me.

we need to look more widely • until we find some evidence that supports my conclusions.

we rule nothing out • we’re ruling lots of things out, including the thing you just said, but this isn’t the moment to tell you.

we’re transparent • we’ve inundated you with data in the hope that you’ll be too busy to notice the stuff we’re keeping under wraps.

we’ve decided to go in a different direction • from you. So please would you go in a different direction from us. Now.

what you might call • what you would call.

with respect • please die.

with the greatest respect • please die now.

without wishing to criticise • we’re about to criticise someone, but it’ll hurt us more than them. Probably.

you’re not allowed to say this sort of thing any more • I will now disprove this statement by saying the sort of thing that I am in fact quite clearly *allowed* to say, it’s just that people wish I’d stop.

A State of Undenial

The next unit of uncommunication is the Undenial, or what journalists sometimes call the ‘non-denial denial’. We don’t like that phrase, which was coined to describe the White House’s perfectly reasonable responses to perfectly unreasonable questions following the Watergate ‘incident’. However, we have to admit it’s a very good description of something that sounds like a denial, but which you can point out, if cornered, actually isn’t. So President Richard Nixon’s press secretary Ron Ziegler would describe the *Washington Post*’s coverage as ‘shabby journalism’ and ‘character assassination’. Its stories were based on ‘hearsay, innuendo, guilt by association’.

The virtue of undenials, as *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee was good enough to acknowledge in his memoirs, is that most people, including many journalists, can’t tell the difference. ‘Some of the denials sounded technical, almost hair-splitting to us,’ Bradlee wrote of his Watergate experience. ‘But if it looked like a denial, smelled like a denial, and read like a denial, it was a denial, as far as the readers were concerned.’

Even when Ziegler was forced to deny his previous undenials, he found an elegant way to do it. ‘This is the operative statement,’ he told the Press Corps