

## CHAPTER 9: THE POWER OF THE PHONE

I hate the phone. HATE it. I refer to my mobile phone as my *'damned umbilical cord'* – as long as it is turned on, I am never out of reach. The phone is impersonal, yet somehow callous, always relentless and I *detest* using it. Nevertheless, I recognise its value as a business tool and I *very* much recognise

**“Telephone. Noun: An invention of the devil which abrogates some of the advantages of making a disagreeable person keep his distance.” (Ambrose Bierce)**

its worth as a job-hunting tool. If you feel as I do about the phone, you are going to have to go on a crash course in getting past those feelings, because you are inevitably going to be spending a lot of time talking to people who matter on this *'invention of the devil.'*

**MOMENTS OF TRUTH**

Every time you talk to someone new on the phone it is a 'Moment of Truth'. They very quickly form a strong and lasting impression of you (under all the usual headings) and if that impression isn't particularly favourable, you are going to have a very hard time persuading them to do whatever it is you want them to do.

*Your* disposition at the moment of the call is irrelevant; to the caller that is. Hangovers, outrageous deadlines, screaming children, too much caffeine, marital tiffs, winning the lottery – it doesn't matter what it is that has altered your mood; you need to project an aura of confidence and positivity as you answer the phone. Snarling, *'Whaaat?'* and immediately and profusely apologising won't recover the image cast in the Moment of Truth.

**VOICE**

The person on the other end of the line has nothing to go on but your voice. Right from your greeting onwards, your tone must be appropriate and measured. One technique that has constantly proved its worth in tricky phone situations is to stand up as you say your piece. I am not quite sure what this does to your voice, perhaps it gives it more depth because you are able to breathe more fully (*see page 390, Breathing*), but it definitely works.

Ring your own answering machine and have a conversation with it for 30 seconds to one minute. Do you like how you sound? If you are not *delighted* with the impression you are conveying, start playing with it. I am not proposing that you develop a 1950s faked 'telephone' voice (*'How **naice** to hear from you, Vicar!'*) but if your normal mode of expression on this medium is not doing the job, get working on it.

**Greeting:** A cheerful *'Hello'* or *'Good morning/afternoon/evening'* is always a good start. Most people like it when you include your name in your greeting too – *'Good morning, it's Rowan here.'* Not too bouncy or effusive, but personable and upbeat nevertheless.

**Pace and Emphasis:** Most people speak far too quickly when they are on the phone. Remember the listener has no cues other than your voice to work with. In a face-to-face

conversation, that listener would be taking more than 50 per cent of your meaning from facial expressions, gestures, posture, disposition and eye contact. And people take the wrong meaning a *lot* of the time in face-to-face conversations! Give your listener a chance and slow it down quite a bit. Again, listen to yourself and get others to do the same. How does your opening pitch sound? Intelligible? Rushed? Overly slick? Are you placing emphasis on the right words? If your delivery is too speedy, not only does it drive down understanding, but your listener may also take the inference that you don't want to be interrupted and you might start to sound like a fast-talking, snake-oil salesman.

**Sign-off:** Have you ever found yourself saying, '*Oh! Just one other thing ...*' to the phone after the other person has hung up? For career management calls, always let the other person hang up first. Keep it controlled and err on the side of formality as you sign off. Develop three or four phrases to end your calls and rotate them:

*'Thank you and good-bye now.'*

*'Thanks again for taking the call.'*

*'It was nice to make your acquaintance. Good-bye for now.'*

*'It's good to hear your voice. See you later.'*

*'I look forward to meeting you.'*

*'Good to catch up. See you soon.'*

## POSITIONING YOURSELF

Regardless of the purpose of your call, you need to position yourself in the recipient's mind very quickly. Once again, we are back to *forethought*, *rehearsal* and *structure*. If you get a call back from a busy executive, leaving them hanging on while you rummage around for your 'script' is not going to win you any favours. Be ready.

If you are taking calls on a phone at home, have your materials clearly labelled and arrayed in front of you. If the call is taken while you are out and about, reach for the appropriate 3X5 inch card stack – for example, the one in your left pocket is for recruitment agencies, the one in your right is for personal contacts and the one in your inside pocket is for Prime Suspects (those rare people in positions of authority and decision making).

Make sure that the person calling you doesn't get an engaged tone. At the very least, put call waiting on your home phone and make sure that it diverts to voice mail after just a few moments. (If at all possible, it is very useful to put in an extra phone line reserved just for career management calls.) Likewise turn on the appropriate diverts on your mobile phone and, mobile or landline, check your voice mail religiously. Final finicky point here – make sure you have paper and writing implements *right beside* the phone. The '*Hang on a second, I'll just find a pen*' line gets stale very quickly for the listener. Thirty seconds of waiting time can seem like an eternity ... If, for some reason, you *do* have to root something out, keep talking to the other person: '*Okay, I've got the laptop. I'm just booting up now.*'

**VOICE MAIL**

BIG Moment of Truth here. Personalise your voice mail message and rehearse it a few times before laying it down:

*'Rowan Manahan's phone. I'm sorry that I am not available to take your call at present, but please leave a brief message along with your name and contact details and I will revert to you as soon as possible.'*

For added professionalism, you can update this on a daily basis:

*'This is Rowan Manahan on Monday the 10<sup>th</sup> of XXXX. I am in (insert location) today and I will be unavailable/in meetings/away from my phone/unable to take calls from 11.00am to 12.30pm and from 2.15 until 4.00 o'clock. Please leave a brief message along with your name and contact details and I will revert to you as soon as possible.'*

Polished, switched-on and mindful of the caller's needs – all good impressions to be casting from the outset.

**NETWORKING AND RESEARCH BY PHONE**

Where you can, save yourself a trip and make that call. You can frequently elicit the kernel of information that you need without having to do a face-to-face meeting. If you are courteous and to the point, most of the people on the other end of the line will be grateful for your clarity and professionalism. I would warn against (a) overdoing this – sometimes the face-to-face is worth way more than you realise and (b) making this a one-way street. If you are calling an old college chum on whom you haven't clapped eyes in eight years, don't expect him to be enthusiastic about giving free advice on a specific issue. If, however, your call comes in the context of a regular ongoing contact and the last three calls you made were to provide information/congratulations/advice or even to just stay in touch, then call away ...

**CALLER ID**

One of the few things that makes using the phone bearable on an ongoing basis. Turn yours on and use it to the hilt. Advantages:

- You know who's calling before you answer the phone and you can screen calls and only answer those that you deem to be important.
- Most modern phones allow you to have a directory list of recent callers for easy access to phone numbers of the people who have called you.
- Caller ID also allows you to see who has called even if they don't leave a voice mail message.
- On your home phone, if you see that the call is not for you, you can safely ignore it and not end up stuck in a conversation about Aunt Mabel's new dog

**SCRIPTING**

Do you have words at will or do you will your words to come? Even if you are fluent by nature, I would recommend at least thinking through the possibilities in advance of any important call and jotting them down on paper. What is your objective in making the call? If you get X are you

going to ask for Y, and if the person on the line offers you X and Y before you even ask, are you going to ask for Z? Be ready for both generosity and objections. Be ready to get through to the person in charge, even if you thought you were going to be speaking to an assistant (this happens most often at lunch time and after hours when the assistant has gone home. Accordingly, these are both good times to call if you want to speak to the person in charge.)

Draft out your thoughts and hone them down. You may not want (or need) to slavishly write out every word that you wish to say, but a few polished phrases on paper will give you a road-map for the call. This will also help you eliminate apologetic or equivocal terms, flowery phrases or insider jargon from your delivery. You should also notate everything that is said in an important call. You may prefer to record it, for the purposes of minuting it afterwards, but don't let important details slip for the want of a bit of paper and a pencil. If there are action points arising out of the call, transfer them on to the To-Do list in your diary system and you may need to follow up in writing to the person you were speaking to as a gentle reminder of action agreed or promised.

### **HERE BE DRAGONS!**

The dragons I am referring to are, of course, Personal Assistants and Receptionists:

*'May I say who's calling, sir?'*

*'And what is the nature of your call, madam?'*

*'Will she know what your call is in connection with, sir?'*

*'I'll put you through to her secretary, madam.'*

All you need is three minutes of the King or Queen's time, and here you are stuck talking to the dragon outside the castle! And that dragon's sole purpose in life is to stop people like you from getting an audience with the King/Queen.

Do you know the name of the person you are calling? *Always* try and find this out in advance. Call the organisation on Friday and ask for the MD's name and the name of his PA. Check the spelling/pronunciation, then thank the receptionist and hang up. Then when you call on Monday, you can confidently start with, *'I'd like to speak with John Brown please.'* If you get put through to the PA, you can start with, *'Josephine? It's Rowan Manahan here. Is John in today? I need him for about three minutes.'* Josephine, at this point, is wondering who you are, but is unlikely to challenge you too harshly in case she has spoken to you before and forgotten you.. Dragons are there to make the boss's life easier. They are *not* there to thwart you in particular, just anyone whom they deem to be an unnecessary waste of the boss's time. So start thinking about how you are going to get past these tiresome watch-dragons:

- Do not directly lie! Even if you get through to the boss, you will look snake-oily and the dragon will lose face for having let you slip through.
- Talk about providing *'feedback'* to the boss person on the basis of something recent or topical.

- Say that you want to register a complaint right at the top and that you don't feel that you have been taken seriously by the lower ranks (this would be true, for example, if HR keep sending you rejection letters).
- *'He's in a meeting.'* The classical defence, along with holidays, out of the office or similar. Ask what would be a good time to catch the boss person, as you would prefer not to leave a message (dragons *always* offer to take a message.)
- If it doesn't look like you are going to get to the boss, try and engage the dragon – be more than usually pleasant, courteous and cheerful. Explain that you always start at the top and work your way down (appeal to the dragon's empathy) and then inquire if there is anyone else the dragon would recommend you speak to ...
- If you don't get past the dragon, or if you get sidelined off to someone else, make sure you get the dragon's extension number for future calls.
- If you are sidelined or diverted to talk to someone of a lower rank, start with, *'I was just talking to Josephine in John Brown's office and she said that you are the person to talk with ...'*
- Call at odd hours when the dragon is not likely to be there. You never know your luck.
- If you do get to the decision-maker, or if you get some sort of result from your efforts (information, a lead, insight, a next-stage meeting or whatever) make sure you get back to and thank the dragon.

The business of getting to the people that you want to speak to is frustrating and nerve-racking at first. Practise. Call Michael Dell, Kunitake Ando or Tim Cook to thank them for the marvellous product that you have just purchased and don't give up until you get the message either into their ear or on to their desk. Then use the same techniques to get past the dragons in your target organisation.

### TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

This is an ancient protocol that has been modernised in recent years from an 'informal chat' to a highly structured, time-saving, money-saving step in the screening and selection process. On rare occasions, it will be you that has initiated the contact only to suddenly find yourself being grilled by the decision maker. Most of the time, you will be notified well in advance that the first stage after the CV submission is a phone interview of 20-45 minutes' duration.

If you are facing one of these, all of the usual conventions highlighted in the sections on interviews pertain (with the exception of your dress sense) but are made a little more difficult because you have to rely purely on the **words** you use and your **voice** (see above for Voice and Scripting) to convey the right impression and meaning. By now, you have probably realised that I am a demon for meticulous preparation. Here, yet again, is an opportunity to separate wheat from chaff. Are you going to be polished, (relatively) at ease, fluent and interesting to listen to or are you going to be humming and hawing your way through a series of makey-uppy-as-you-go-alongy answers. The interviewer is going to be working *very carefully* to a pre-determined script, why would you do any less?

(I am reminded of the hilarious confrontation between Kevin Costner and Nick Brimble in the otherwise execrable *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*. Brimble (Little John) is beating the hell out of Costner (Robin Hood) in the ubiquitous quarterstaff fight by the river. Robin looks to the Saracen, Azeem (Morgan Freeman) for help or advice. 'Move faster! Hit harder!' is all Freeman gleefully shouts. I *know* you know these simple, simple things and I know you're hoping that there is a short-cut. Believe me – there isn't one. Do the spadework!)

#### **FOLLOWING UP**

It shouldn't have to be noted, but just in case ... If you undertake to do something on the phone, DO IT! Don't go to all this trouble and then blow it for the want of a bit of follow-up. And yes, it happens every day. It's also a good idea to keep the ball in your court wherever possible, rather than relying on the other person to revert to you.