Into the Net: An Interview with Viswa Sadasivan

by Radhika Jaidev

National University of Singapore (Singapore)

“Strategic Communication is striking the ball into the net!”

“Erm…I beg your pardon?”

“Imagine a hockey forward who is able to dribble the ball all the way past the ‘D’ line, fending off all opposition, but is never able to strike the ball into the net.”

This is the analogy that Viswa, Nominated Member of Parliament (Singapore) and master trainer, used as he described “very highly qualified people who are holding key positions in the private and public sector” but who “have a distinct problem putting their point across in a manner that’s cogent and with a certain logic, focus and clarity.”

Viswa attributed the lack of clear expression, in part, to the gradual but significant loss of the oral tradition in Singapore. “When we had the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) Debates in the 1970s and 80s, we had the junior colleges and the tertiary institutions debating against each other in alternate years,” observed Viswa. He pointed out that there was an excitement and interest that came about as a consequence of being able to stand up and convey a point of view, borrowed or otherwise, with conviction.

When asked why he decided to go into corporate training after holding a successful position as the controller of current affairs in the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, Viswa replied that it was precisely his role as the anchor of a popular current affairs programme that jolted him into making the move. Explaining further, he added that it was during that time that he realised how many good ideas were lost because the speakers or presenters had not given enough thought to why they were delivering what they were delivering.
“In spite of my many valiant efforts at trying to ferret out the point, it never came out,” he said. Viswa decided then that he would launch his career in training people to communicate strategically and that he would target top management in both the private and public sectors because he believed that that was the only way to affect change.

So what is strategic communication? Most strategic communication is face-to-face communication, according to Viswa. It is not about conveying information, which can easily be done via email or fax, but rather about making the other person see your point, the value of that point and then convincing him that that value is critical. Viswa explained that strategic communication had nothing to do with speaking in British-accented English or even with using perfect grammar because one does not necessarily have to have perfect facility for the language to be an effective communicator.

An example of this that had stuck in his mind was that of a janitor that he once interviewed. Viswa felt that the janitor was as an effective communicator over many luminaries because he had a point of view, which he was able to put across with clarity in a persuasive fashion.

“The biggest culprits are the more educated ones because they are more conscious of creating an image; they are more conscious of how people will view them than they are in getting the point across,” he added. He explained that being self-conscious sometimes forces people to be “someone that they’re not.”

This was essentially why he switched careers. He felt that it was a tremendous waste that people went through so many years of education, developed their capacities for analysis and actually came up with great ideas which they couldn’t effectively communicate. He firmly believes that people in their natural state are built by design to be effective communicators and that it is when one assumes an alternate state because he is self-conscious or because he is trying to emulate somebody else that his capacity to communicate effectively diminishes.

“You think about it, people who are effective communicators are people who are similar on and off stage. A classic example is Obama. By all accounts, he is the same person in the bedroom tucking his kids in as he is in the Oval office, with the same sense of alacrity, commitment, conviction, belief, sense of purpose and the same speaking style. So people get
to see this person in his natural state, communicating from his heart, because he’s confident enough to let people judge him warts and all.”

Viswa summed up the point he was making by saying that people would be more willing to accept a point of view from someone who is similar to them: “I’m prepared to listen to you, to understand and accept your point of view if I find that you are not too dissimilar from me, i.e., I can relate to you.”

When asked what the elements were that made someone relate to another, Viswa replied that it was things that mirrored one’s own personality, like a smile, which could be very disarming. Another element was the thought process. He elaborated, saying, “If I’m a logical person, I would expect a certain logic from a person who is communicating with me. So if you are communicating with a logic-driven person, you need to adapt your communication style to suit that person because your aim is to persuade that person. On the other hand, if you are speaking to someone who is essentially emotional, you need to play down the logic and play up the emotional aspects of the argument.”

This is important, he claimed, as it would enable the speaker to take the discussion to the areas that he wanted to speak about, one which the listener may not have thought about. Viswa asserted that “strategic communication is a fine art that enables a speaker to fascinate a listener enough to tune in, so much so that the speaker’s agenda is pushed through without offending the listener. In fact, the satisfied listener may even feel elated because he feels he got more than what he bargained for. That’s effective negotiation.”

Viswa started coaching in 1997 from his office at Temasek Polytechnic, and he stated categorically that it had been exceptionally satisfying because he had seen people change. He admitted, however, that his workshops were tough, based on the feedback he had received, but added that this was because he forced people to think. CEOs of large multinational corporations told him that they had never been challenged so much before. “Some of them even complained that they started getting brain cramps midway through the workshops,” he said.
When asked about how much he needed to prepare for these sessions, he replied that typically he had to read about 500 to 1000 pages of compressed information for one workshop. “And you’re talking about hard information, technical, number-crunching type of information.” He further explained that this was because it was important for him to stay on top of the domain of knowledge of the particular group he was coaching. “If I’m talking to a particular CEO of a bank, I make sure I understand everything I need to know so that I’m always talking to him at the same level,” explained Viswa. One of the advantages of conducting these workshops, he added, was that his overall domain knowledge in several sectors had gone up multi-fold.

Finally, when asked if he employed a specific methodology in delivering his coaching sessions and workshops, Viswa replied that he simply practiced what he preached.

About the Author
Dr. Radhika Jaidev teaches advanced business communication to international MBA students as well as critical thinking and writing to engineering undergraduates at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include group work at the university level, writing for both academic and business contexts, and speaking in formal and informal contexts.