INFLUENCE

What Is a Penguin?
Why We Talk Past Each Other

B. Kim Barnes
THE INFLUENCE GURU

Even a simple noun can call up dozens of different concepts.
Balancing expressive and receptive communication closes the gap.

A recent study by psychologist Celeste Kidd and her collaborators at UC, Berkeley[1], showed that even a simple noun such as this could elicit dozens of different concepts in the minds of their study participants. They also found that the participants assumed that most people shared their understanding of a word, though the study showed that to be untrue. The authors of the study noted that the findings could explain why people so often "talk past" one another. While we might expect that people would have different associations with conceptual words such as "freedom" or "fairness," the study demonstrated that even a straightforward noun like "penguin" elicited many different concepts.

In our flagship program, Exercising Influence,[2] we emphasize the importance of balancing expressive (sending) and receptive (receiving) communication behaviors. We often assume that we are communicating clearly – especially when speaking with someone who is fluent in the same language – and then are startled to find that the other person has misunderstood or misinterpreted our words.

There are three issues here: first, people generally don't listen very well. Researchers at several universities have recently found evidence that people forget half of what they have heard immediately and much of the rest in a few weeks. (Anyone who has been a teacher is very aware of this!) But secondly, when we express our ideas, we seldom stop to check whether we are being understood as we intend – or to learn how the other person or group conceptualizes the topic we are discussing. When we express ideas without interruption and frequent feedback, others (if they are listening at all) are thinking about the topic in terms of their own understanding, not necessarily ours. If we don't stop to ask a question – or even to leave space for others to speak – they may lose interest or continue their own mental journey, getting farther and farther away from the shared understanding we may have assumed. And third, there is evidence that attention spans are getting shorter in this age of information overload.

So, for those of us who have a lot we would like to say and who wish for others to understand and accept our ideas, it's important to balance expressive and receptive communication. Here are a few ways that can work:

> WAYS TO BALANCE EXPRESSIVE AND RECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION
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> - After a brief statement of your idea or point of view, ask, "How do you think about this topic?"

- Listen actively and check for understanding before continuing to develop your point. "So, from your point of view…"
- After you state your idea, leave enough silence for others to speak – this is especially important when conversing with anyone who is an introvert and needs a moment to formulate their ideas.
- Solicit questions when you finish expressing your thoughts.

Always assume that others are likely to see things in a different way and use your curiosity and ability to question and listen to learn about how people to whom you speak understand the subject of your communication. Stay open to the possibility that their understanding of the topic may be better than your own or, at the least, worth considering. Someone I once knew used to say, "No great idea ever entered the mind through the mouth."

No great idea ever entered the mind through the mouth.

NOTES

[1] "Latent Diversity in Human Concepts," Open Mind 7:79–92 (2023).

[2] Exercising Influence is a copyrighted program of Barnes & Conti Associates, Inc. www.barnesconti.com

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B. Kim Barnes

Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

bkimbarnesconsulting.com · hello@bkimbarnesconsulting.com · linkedin.com/in/bkimbarnes

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