

# The accountant as a facilitator of communication

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## Abstract

The broader view of accounting requires a new approach to the communication of accounting information than is reflected in current practices. Accountants' ability to communicate accounting information effectively is crucial to the bridging of the gap between the entity and the users of information.

Communication includes writing, speaking, reading, listening and questioning techniques. Research has indicated that decisions are increasingly being based on verbal presentations and that verbal communication skills accelerate career progress significantly. Verbal communication skills have therefore been selected as the subject of this paper.

The communication sciences were used as a source of reference taken to identify mechanisms and structures that can enhance the verbal communication skills of accountants. This study focuses on the enhancement of their verbal communication skills to enable them to facilitate communication between accounting entities and the users of accounting information.

## Key words

*Communication*

*Verbal communication skills*

*Facilitator*

*Non verbal communications*

## 1 Introduction

New definitions and descriptions of accounting have highlighted the importance of communication (Making corporate reports more valuable 1988 and Chambers 1995). Although these definitions and descriptions consider accounting to be a communication discipline, the role of the accountant in accounting communication is seldom mentioned (Madonic 1995, Gouws 1997 and Terblanché 1998). Although many books spoke of accounting as a communication discipline, the impact of communication on accounting is seldom mentioned.

Accounting was developed with the aim of providing a vehicle for observing, recording and presenting events and transactions (Lee 1990 and Straubus 1986). It follows that particular attention must be given to the nature of representation and the role of accountants in this regard. As observers and communicators, accountants typically select, observe and communicate information about events. Communication is a process in which accountants use language and presentations to convey meaning to users. Accountants own perceptions, language and interpretations influence the content, style and effectiveness of their communication to users (Laing 1967). Besides the traditional prescriptions of their role, why would accountants want to communicate? Communication is prompted by uncertain or unexpected events (Littlejohn 1989). When a problem is to be solved, communication is required at the research and evaluation stages. Communication is also induced by the need to obtain support from others for personal beliefs, assessments and events, and by the necessity to respond to communications received from elsewhere in the organization.

Accounting can undoubtedly benefit from adopting a communication approach but it seems that accounting text books consider communication skills in accounting as subordinate to technical accounting proficiency (Gouws 1997). Developments in financial reporting have been more concerned with content than the problems of language and communication. A traditional shortcoming of accountants is their inability to take accounting information further than the financial and other statements (Bedford 1986). Financial statements are only a part of a broader set of entity disclosures that range from written quantitative communications to verbal qualitative responses to shareholders' questions at annual meetings. Without proper communication, the users of accounting information are left in the dark and accounting forfeits its relevance and justification. Meaning and understanding arise from communication between the accountant and the user. Effective communication therefore becomes a process of establishing common ground between the sender and the recipient of the message. Among the traditional functions of the accountant (data collection, organization, analysis and communication), communication stands out as being crucial to the fulfillment of accounting responsibility.

Shotter (1984) believes that human experience cannot be separated from communication. Speech both reflects and creates experience of reality. Central to this link between communication and experience is the process of "accounting for something". People are constantly assigning meaning to and making sense of their experiences; they attempt to figure out what the event means. The

meaning assigned to an event is closely linked to the language used to articulate the event in communication among the participants. In short "*our understanding and our experience of our reality is constituted for us very largely by the ways in which we must talk in our attempts ... to account for it*" (Shotter 1984:171).

When selecting a medium for the transmission of a message, there are several alternatives. The most obvious choice to be made is between oral and written messages. Oral messages can be transmitted in face to face situations, in meetings, and via the telephone. Written messages can be transmitted by letter, memorandum, report, bulletin board or visual display unit. Surveys of executives (Hock 1994) have revealed their preferences for oral communication to subordinates (where feasible), although it is often supplemented by written communication. Oral communication, supplemented by written forms, have been found to induce the highest retention level amongst recipients, but it is more time-consuming and costly. Oral communication facilitates two-way rather than mere one-way communication between the sender and the recipient of the message.

In this article, the role of the accountant as a facilitator is explored with particular reference to oral communication skills. The first section describes the research methodology and main aims of the paper. The second section discusses the importance of communication for the accountant and the fact that serious deficiencies exist in respect of the communication skills of accountants. It also highlights the consequences of the lack of an awareness of the importance of communication on the part of the accounting profession. The third section identifies the various components of communication and provides reasons for the focus on oral communication in this article. The relevance of oral communication for the accountant is discussed in the following section with special reference to the symbolic and interactive nature of communication; non-verbal communication as a key component of communication; the need for anecdotes and humour in communication and the composition of users in an audience. The article concludes by redefining the role of the accountant and suggesting a paradigm shift for the accountant to become a communication facilitator.

## **2 Research methodology and main aims**

Littlejohn (1989 : 288) states that “... *communication theory is basically multi-disciplinary, but that more theory is being produced within the field of communication itself*”. For this reason the various facets of the subject were contextualised by extensive reading on the relevant issues in the several disciplines. The authors attended and participated in accounting and presentation seminars locally and internationally, and attended and presented courses on oral communication of accounting information in which theories on communication were applied. During the presentations the mechanisms provided by the discipline of communication for enhancing communication skills were applied and the reaction of users observed.

It became apparent from the application of communication perspectives in the accounting domain, practical experiences gained and feedback obtained that the accountant should take note of the research findings. Littlejohn confirms this observation when he states that “*Now the scale has tipped, and communication theory is primarily a product of those who identify with the field of communication. We once borrowed almost all our theories from fields tangentially concerned with communication; today, most important theories of communication are produced within the field*”.

The aim of this paper is to:

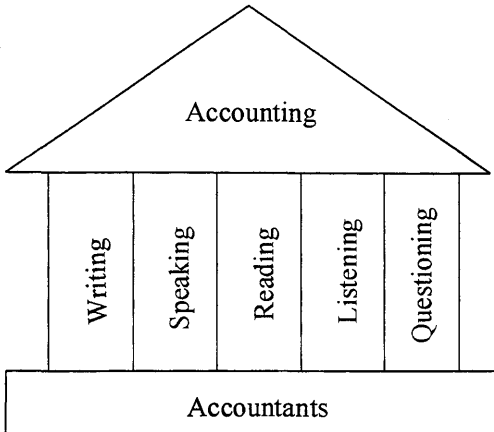
- Make accountants aware that their communication skills and in particular their oral communication skills, should be improved.
- Empower accountants with proven principles, mechanisms and techniques of persuasion that can be employed to consciously and directly as “...*creative, beautiful and effective means of illustrating and explaining the required statutory and quasi-statutory financial, quantitative and factual information*” (McKinstry, 1996 : 110-111).

## **3 Importance of communication for the accountant**

The importance of communication in the practice of accounting has been recognised by professional accounting bodies. “*It is of no less importance than that of developing the information itself*” (AAA 1996 : 30). Accountants need skills to enable them to be “... *good communicators... and ... public relations specialists...*” (IFAC 1996 : par. 8).

The following diagram illustrates how accounting executives spend an average working hour. On average, listening and talking comprises 65% of any working hour. An accounting executive spends nearly 5 hours of a 7,5 hour working day communicating *verbally*. Lyons (1994 : 54) states that accountants spend most of their working day communicating.

**Diagram 1**



Source: Kaiser Aluminum in Terblanché (1998 : 19).

Various researchers highlight the necessity for accountants to have sound communications skills: The following are examples of their viewpoints:

- Practitioners and academics view communication as “critical” (Ingram & Frazier 1980, Jurchan & Galvin 1984, McLaren 1990).
- There is a big demand for accountants with oral presentation skills (Morgan 1996).
- The attribute most required by accountants in order to remain competitive is the ability to communicate (Deppe et al 1991; Donovan 1995).
- Communication skills are crucial in converting accountants' observations and perceptions of reality into useful information (Gouws 1996).
- Communication helps the accountant to become more customer oriented (Gouws 1997).

Extensive research (Deppe et al 1991; Feinstein 1986; Hirsch et al 1994; Ingram & Frazier 1980; McLaren 1990) has indicated that there are serious

deficiencies in accountants' communication skills.

Research has also indicated that many accountants display a total lack of appreciation of the complexities involved in the communication process. Others underestimate the importance of communication and, therefore do not realise their full potential. Accountants' underestimation of the importance of communication is considered to be the single most important reason why otherwise technically competent accountants fail to progress in their careers.

It is of the utmost importance that communication is extended to areas beyond the technical ambit of an accounting practice. Clients perceive a professional accountant as a person that sit in a corner and only occasionally speaks to the client. Later they produce a report that does not tell the client anything he did not know and that serves as confirmation of their lack of imagination and originality (Terblanché 1998). If this reflects the limit of their communication with clients, shareholders and stakeholders, accountants should not be surprised if their discipline and profession is losing prestige and public support. The public should be informed and be kept informed of the accountant's role in the business world. This can only be accomplished if the accountant assumes the responsibility and the role of a facilitator of communication.

#### **4 Consequences of the lack of a communication awareness**

The general lack of communication awareness on the part of the accounting profession has resulted in the public viewing the profession as "*frowned faced individuals wearing white shirts adding columns of figures*" (Doherty, 1968: 69). Only when members of the public get to know accountants better do they discover dynamic, professional individuals who are involved in important decision-making processes. The accountant is currently conveying the wrong image (message) to the public (its market). The lack of proper communication has resulted in a misconception of what the profession entails. The wrong message has been received by the public and therefore the accountant has failed in his communication. Research performed and information gathered from more than 5 000 respondents reveals that accountants have an ivory-tower perception of themselves (Fourth National Congress of Chartered Accountants 1970:10):

- Accountants are inclined to view themselves and their profession as distinct from other people. They are "different persons" to "laymen".

- Accountants are convinced that the separatist attitude benefits the profession and commands more respect.
- They expect people to consult them because they practice a unique profession. They are entitled to a good living while exerting little effort and displaying limited entrepreneurial skills. The latter is superfluous in view of their superior profession.
- They are inclined to be more technically orientated than people orientated. People take second place. Their technical knowledge is not viewed as a useful tool in assisting people. Instead the public is viewed as an “area” in which to practice their skills. Personal relationships deserve little time and attention. Generally, they know little about empowering and motivating people.
- Paradoxically, accountants are convinced that they “serve” people. This is the reason why clients view the accountant as being cold, materialistic and distant.
- Accountants spontaneously oppose anything that they view as being “commercial”. In their view, a lack of business skills serves as proof of true professionalism. They are opposed to the art of selling and will never use legitimate methods of persuasion and motivation to get their suggestions implemented.
- They are vehemently opposed to change and believe only in tradition and the *status quo*. Office furniture and methods are seldomly changed. They do not stay up to date with technical changes “anything new is viewed with suspicion”.
- Ironically, the ivory-tower accountant is becoming increasingly despondent, as a result of his inability to influence his clients. They appear reluctant to accept his suggestions and do not display the required respect towards him. Questioning his suggestions is interpreted as an indictment of his judgement.

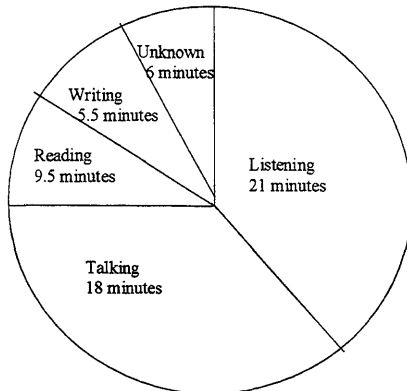
These findings indicate that accountants need to communicate more and better with non-accountants. One way the accountant can achieve this objective is that he should become a facilitator of communication.

## 5 Components of accountants' communication skills

Hirsch *et al* (1994) identified the following components of communication that are of importance to an accountant: writing, speaking, reading, listening and questioning skills. These components of communication that are essential for the accountant were confirmed by Novin *et al* (1990); Zelko & Dance (1965); an anonymous author (a) (1994); and the International Federation of Accountants (1996). The components of communication, that are applicable to the accountant, can be depicted as follows:

### Diagram 2

#### Components of communication applicable to accountants



The diagram indicates that the accounting discipline and profession is serviced by accountants. Accounting cannot survive on its own - it requires accountants to support and practice it. The accountant facilitates the use and application of accounting.

## 6 Reasons for focussing on verbal communication

Hirsch *et al* (1994) state that a large percentage of executives are relying increasingly on verbal communication and presentations, with an estimated 33 million corporate presentations being given each day. These authors continue to state that, although written reports are often supplied, the reports are usually filed for reference purposes, and that an oral presentation is often the “*genuine*



*basis for decision-making*" (Hirsch et al:150). The authors raise the stature of oral communication in decision-making to above that of writing, reading, listening and questioning. Kohler (1970 : 8) states that accounting and therefore accountants, should facilitate decision-making by users. Because the authors infer that oral discourse is the main driver behind decision-making, it follows that oral discourse will to a greater extent assist to fulfil his role as a facilitator of communication. It was, as a result of the high profile of oral communication in the decision-making process of facilitating that it was selected for analyses in this study.

There were also some secondary reasons for the selection of oral communication. Lyons (1994:54) identifies oral communication ability as the single most important attribute for the future accountant, stating that "*effective performances as a public speaker will ... enhance [the accountant's] career just as quickly as technical prowess*". Bryant & Wallace (1969) state that modern society associates important values with public speaking. People want to participate in public speaking because they want to improve their self-confidence. Other speakers want to persuade their audience, get their ideas accepted and win arguments. It is therefore contended that oral communication is the single most important vehicle for enabling the accountant to "*present and defend [his] views ... at a peer level with business executives*" (Bryant & Wallace 1969:5).

Oral communication was also selected for analysis because public figures are expected to speak well (Bryant & Wallace 1969). If they do not, their followers are disappointed. An accountant stands in a particular relationship to people who expect him to possess technical knowledge and to speak well. Professionals have begin to realise that there is a need for lifelong education and training (Baradat, 1979); Prequalification Education, Assessment of Professional Competence and Experience Requirements of Professional Accountants 1996), and that to remain marketable they should be re-educated several times during their careers. Oral communication skills constitute one such field of re-education. Commerce and industry have recognised this fact and have paid more attention to speaking skills during the past four decades than in any preceding period (Baradat 1979).

Janner (1984) warns that the greater a profession's success, the greater is the need for it to present itself with distinction and the more vital it will become for its members to articulate well. Paradoxically, the greater a profession's

technical skills, the more awful its image is likely to be. The public perceptions of accountants' communication skills were discussed above, and the present public expectation of accountants is that they should be able to articulate and present themselves with distinction. There is a clear and urgent need for the accountant to master oral presentation skills. The accountant is required to act as a facilitator of communication between entities and users. This role demands expertise in oral communication.

Oral communication is also a tool of power (Brown & Van Riper 1966:79) with leaders generally being speakers who have "high sending powers". It constitutes a powerful mechanism in the hands of an accountant to "present and defend [his] views". There is not another accomplishment which any person can have which will so quickly make a career and secure recognition as the ability to speak. The accountant should want to enhance accounting, and the one pillar (Diagram 2) that can best achieve this aim is skillful speaking.

## **7 The relevance of oral communication for the accountant**

### **7.1 Symbolic nature**

An accountant needs to understand complex symbols in order to utilise oral communication effectively and efficiently in improving his communication skills. He needs to understand that communication is a *process* and not a *product* (Zelco & Dance 1965; Jabusch & Littlejohn, 1981). The process of communication does not entail the wrapping of meanings in word packages and the sending of these packages to a user. Instead, the communication process seeks to awaken, through verbal and visual symbols, *meanings and experiences in the user* similar to those experienced by the accountant, or similar to those to which the accountant desires the user to respond (Zelco & Dance 1965). Communication is therefore *the eliciting of response*. Successful human communication is the eliciting of the desired response through verbal symbolisation (Bryant & Wallace 1969). An accountant needs to understand that he cannot *deliver* a product or a message by using verbal communication, he can only *arouse* a response.

When the accountant uses verbal communication to convey a message, he should seek to arouse a feeling, an experience and a picture in the mind of the user. Oral communication is not about "telling them", it is about the generation

of feelings and experiences in the mind of the user. This is of great importance for the role of the accountant as facilitator of communication between entity and user.

Brown & Van Riper (1966:52) confirm the nature of communication by stating that the word is not the object being referred to ... it is merely a symbol for the object. Hasling also echoes this view when he states that the meaning of a word is reflected in the *experiences* that the user has had. Therefore a word seldom has the same meaning for everyone. The accountant should realise that meaning is not contained in words, but is contained in the minds of those who use the words. Words and figures do not *contain* meaning: they *convey* it (Hasling, 1976:4). The accountant should proceed with caution: the more abstract the words are, the less meaning they convey. When the accountant seeks to use oral communication methods to transfer information, he should remember that communication is not a conveyor belt. He cannot *tell* his users the information, he should attempt to *arouse* it in their minds. Enthusiasm, empathy and people skills are required for this process. Communication skills are vital for the accountant who wants to interact with his users as a facilitator.

According to Jabusch & Littlejohn (1984), human existence is an interplay between a world of objects and a world of symbols (1984). Although human beings live in a real world, they do not experience the world in a pure sense. Their experiences are filtered through symbols that have meanings. Similarly financial statements do not reflect a company's results and financial position in a "pure" sense. Instead, it purports to reflect a company's results and financial position through the use of symbols. The accountant's task is to ensure that these symbols, these representations of reality, represent the actual situation fairly. To be able to express an opinion on annual financial statements, or merely to comment on an entity's financial statements, the accountant should be familiar with symbolisation and communication procedures and principles.

The accountant should not view financial statements, which representing another language by using symbols, as a *product*, but as a *process*. Accountancy cannot, and should not, cease with the publication and distribution of financial statements. If this should occur, it would reduce the discipline to a product, and it would no longer be a process. Financial statements should awaken in the user, through verbal and visual symbols, meanings and experiences similar to those of the preparer of the statements. The accountant who prepares financial statements, should in turn seek to experience the

thoughts and feelings he expects from the users. An experience to the contrary could place “fair” communication [presentation] in jeopardy.

The statement made by Brown & Van Riper (1966) that it is incorrect to assume that, because a user has been told something he has received, it can also be applied to financial statements. On certain occasions preparers of financial statements, believe that they can rectify non-compliance with Generally Accepted Accounting Practice (GAAP) by merely disclosing this fact. Brown & Van Riper state that meaning can only be aroused. The user can only have a meaning aroused when the *totality* of the information presented enables him to transform what has been said into something similar, yet different. Non-compliance with GAAP distorts the totality of the information even though disclosure thereof is provided. The user transforms this distorted information into a distorted “message”. As a result, fair presentation is put at risk.

Communication involves the awakening of perceptions and experiences. The accountant as communication facilitator between entities and users must bear this principle in mind. Oral communication should awaken feelings and experiences in the user's minds. This should be foremost in the accountant's mind when communicating to users in the facilitation process. It does, in addition, apply equally to oral presentations and the preparation of financial statements.

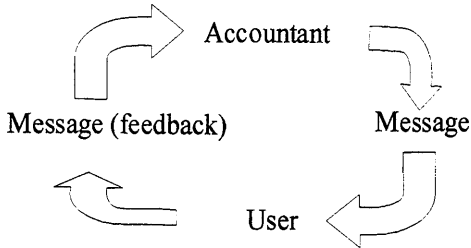
## **7.2 The interactive nature of communication**

In the past, oral communication was analysed from a transmission perspective (Jabusch & Littlejohn (1981). The accountant would “transmit” the message to the user who would “receive” it. The accountant would perceive himself to be the sender and would send the message one-dimensionally to the receiving, listening user.

Recent thinking on oral communication has gravitated from the transmission perspective to an interaction perspective (Diagram 3).

### Diagram 3

#### Interaction perspective on public speaking



Public speaking, in particular, was considered to be an action performed on stage in front of a large audience. The application of communication principles to this domain has resulted in a paradigm shift – from *transmission* to *interaction*. Public speaking is now considered to be a communication event that can be interpreted as elevated conversation (Jabusch & Littlejohn (1981).

When the accountant becomes involved in oral communication as a facilitator, he is interacting with society. If he approaches public speaking from the interaction perspective, he will obtain feedback. To date this perspective has been neglected. An accountant should therefore be encouraged to engage in oral communication, particularly public speaking, at every opportunity. Public speaking will raise the accountant's public profile, facilitate interaction with society and provide an opportunity for feedback in a two-way communication process (Diagram 3).

When an accountant makes in public presentations, he should not see his actions as a performance. Jabusch & Littlejohn (1981) state that when beginners are asked to state what comes to mind when public speaking is mentioned, they respond with the words stage, floodlights and podium. The accountant should maintain a spontaneous and conversational mode when speaking. He should remember that he is engaged to larger extent in a conversation than a performance. Communication is a *process*, not the *delivery of a performance* or a product.

The application of the transmission or performance perspective on public speaking had negative consequences, namely:

- It exacerbated speaker self-centeredness;

- it ignored the needs of the users; and
- it increased the accountant's anxiety (Jabusch & Littlejohn (1981).

An interactive approach to public speaking eliminates the negative consequences and also facilitates social interaction and feedback. The accountant should therefore adopt the interaction perspective to oral communication in general and not apply it to public speaking only. The adoption of the interaction perspective has even greater significance and relevance when the listening habits of users are analysed.

Zelko & Dance (1965) state that a good listener is subconsciously rehearsing what is being said as well as what he had previously believed concerning what is being said. They continue to say that neurophysiologists have determined that there are more than 12 000 000 000 nerve cells in the average human brain, and that the human brain is highly flexible. It allows a person to think many times faster than he can speak. If the speed of thought is compared to the speed of the spoken word, the average person can think ten times faster than the most rapid speaker can speak, and a good listener usually capitalises on this thought-speech differential.

A user can quite easily simultaneously attend to and rehearse what he is listening. He can even do more than that – he can:

- Anticipate what the accountant is going to say;
- envisage how that which the accountant has said fits in with his current knowledge and understanding; and
- estimate the congruence of the accountant's spoken comments.

A good listener makes constant and good use of the distinct ability to think faster than anyone can speak. Having this ability, the listener is not passive. The thought-speech differential effectively makes it impossible for the receiver to be passive. The listener continuously reacts to the message by agreeing, disagreeing, learning, switching off, trying to integrate the message into his world, relating his experiences to what has been said and matching it to his experience and knowledge. This reaction is subconsciously reflected by the listener's body language, which the accountant should interpret in order to adjust his delivery accordingly. The accountant therefore requires a basic understanding of non-verbal communication, because it will often be his main or only source of feedback. The full cycle of communication involves a *two-way process*, and the accountant should be sensitive to the feedback to facilitate two-

way communication. To increase its effectiveness, public speaking should be approached from an interaction perspective. The transmission perspective acknowledges the existence of a *passive* listener, while the interaction perspective assumes an *active* listener.

The accountant does not deal with a user who is a passive listener. Instead, he is faced with someone who is constantly providing him with another message feedback. Feedback is often non-verbal, which betrays its existence to the skilled accountant. Yet the user is not only a receiver, he is also a transmitter. It is therefore appropriate to refer to him as a *transceiver*.

Public speaking involves two-way communication. It is a process in which an accountant is sending a message, and the transceivers is listening to it, evaluating it, responding to it and providing the accountant with feedback. The accountant is sensing the feedback, adjusting his message accordingly and sending another message to the transceivers, who repeats the entire process. Communication is not a deliverable. It is an act of *mutual participation* and social interaction. The accountant as the nexus between entity and user should be acutely aware of the dynamic nature of two-way communication.

The accountant should seize every opportunity to facilitate communication between entity and user, speak in public, and apply the interaction perspective to oral communication. To improve social interaction and to obtain feedback, the standard annual report should be complemented by regular (oral) communication sessions with entities and users. An accountant's responsibility does not stop with the issuing of financial statements – “(t) *here is life after the balance sheet*” (Gouws, 1995:20).

### **7.3 Non-verbal communication - a key component of communication**

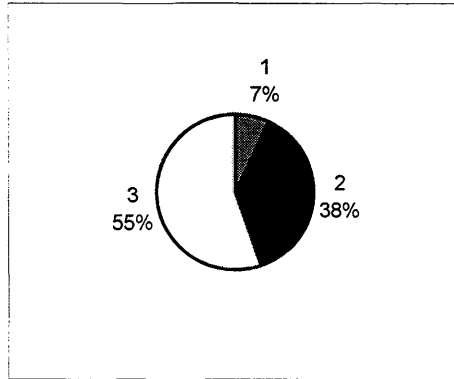
Beattie (1983:5) states that human beings use two separate languages, each with its own function. According to Beattie, verbal communication is used for conveying semantic information similar to the languages of the deaf. Non-verbal language is sometimes used as a substitute for verbal language for conveying semantic information in noisy surroundings and can do so with some success. Beattie states that both these languages are, however, outdone by the range and flexibility of verbal language that is used together with non-verbal language (ibid.), and adding that “*the results of empirical research showed that nonverbal*

*communication greatly outweighs verbal communication*". Hirsch *et al* (1994) state that the most valuable and reliable clues that people use to evaluate the feelings and moods of others are contained in non-verbal communication.

Pease (1994:6) states the verbal component of face to face conversation is less than 35% because more than 65% of communication is done non-verbally. Mehrabian found that the total impact of a message is approximately 7% verbal, 38% vocal (tone of voice, inflection and other sounds) and 55% non-verbal (body language).

### **Diagram 4**

#### **Composition of communication**



(1 = verbal; 2 = tone of voice; 3 = visible)

Source: Pease (1994: 11)

It follows from the foregoing that non-verbal communication is a key component of communication – a component that the accountant should be acutely aware of and have a thorough understanding of if he is to facilitate communication. An understanding of the power of non-verbal communication will enable the accountant to enhance his verbal communication skills and, ultimately, his skills as a facilitator of communication.

An anonymous author 'b' 1994:36 wrote: "*it's all in the body language*", stating that if the accountant wants to know what his users are thinking, he should understand what their >postures and gestures are conveying. Hirsch *et*



al (1994) support this viewpoint, stating that communication researchers estimate that between 67% and 90% of the meaning that humans generate while communicating arises from the interpretation of non-verbal messages. If an accountant wants to communicate effectively and efficiently, he should understand non-verbal communication, because it forms a key component of oral communication. Unless the accountant expands his expertise to include non-verbal communication skills, his application of oral communication to enhance his skills as a facilitator of communication will only be partially successful.

The accountant should not only understand non-verbal communication, he should also actively practice and use it. Zelko & Dance (1965) state that the effective use of non-verbal communication, such as body action and gestures, assists in getting the user's attention and support. The authors warn that incorrect usage can draw attention to the accountant, which will detract from his message. They continue to say that users are moved to a greater extent by accountants who are totally involved with their message than by speakers who appear as if the situation is depressing and want it to be terminated quickly. Non-verbal language can therefore be instrumental in persuasion, an aspect that is crucial to the accountant who has the responsibility to facilitate decision making. It follows that the accountant who has the objective to facilitate decision making should master non-verbal communication skills to maximise his potential for persuasion.

It should be emphasised that non-verbal communication is relevant to the everyday activities of an accountant. Diagram 1 indicates that an accounting executive spends close to 5 hours of a 7,5 hour working day communicating *verbally*. Diagram 4 indicates that more than 50% of "verbal" communication takes place in the form of *non-verbal* communication. The accountant who is sensitive to and aware of non-verbal communication will receive substantially "more reliable information" in a working day than someone who is ignorant of its existence. Accountants who are frequently requested to attend and/or chair meetings may use non-verbal communication to great effect. In these meetings, corporate practice and courtesy requires one person to speak at a time. It was stated above that while only one person may be speaking, the others continue to communicate. The accountant who understands non-verbal communication will be better able to:

- understand the politics within a meeting;
- gauge, anticipate and "read" the direction that the meeting is taking;

- ❑ establish whether there is consent, dissent or withdrawal by individuals *despite their* verbal assurances to the contrary;
- ❑ formulate arguments to obviate alienation of his audience. This is done by continuously adjusting his message to the feedback he receives;
- ❑ understand and interpret the group dynamics;
- ❑ influence the proceedings in the meeting, often in a subtle and indirect manner; and
- ❑ involve everyone, because he will not only be paying attention to the audible and vociferous members.

#### **7.4 Oral communication analysed to establish a need for anecdotes**

The question arises whether oral communication provides for the use of anecdotes, and, if so, what the benefits of anecdotes are for users. Wilder (1990) addresses this question when he states that anecdotes should be used in oral discourse because both the accountant and the user enjoy listening to anecdotes. He also states that they increase user attention and are remembered longer than any other part of oral discourse. Ross (1950) supports this viewpoint, stating that speeches are remembered only if they are accompanied by or incorporate vivid illustrations. Smith & Taffler (1984) state that narratives (anecdotes) are the “most efficient” format in which to digest accounting information for users and that they should be used to a greater extent in accounting. Anecdotes also enable the accountant to sound enthusiastic and genuine and to change the pace of this presentation. According to Wilder (1990) anecdotes enhance the accountant's credibility, because they indicate to the user that the theory being discussed holds true in practice. Anecdotes therefore give the accountant more power over his subject and the user. Wilder concludes that the user is made to feel important if the accountant has taken the time to think of examples and anecdotes to amplify his message. In this light anecdotes have the potential of enhancing the accountant's oral communication skills.

People tell stories and relate anecdotes to gain power and influence, and because they enjoy doing it. This is the view of Deal & Kennedy, who state that storytellers are in a powerful position because they are able to change reality (In: Wilder 1990) Storytellers simply interpret what occurs in reality, but adapt it to their own perceptions. This is how they gain power – they generate the ability to change the user's perceptions. Deal & Kennedy confirm that it is the

most powerful way to convey information and to shape behaviour. Brown & Van Riper (1966) support this viewpoint and argue for the *increased use of* pictures and anecdotes when the accountant deals with more sophisticated users. They blame a large part of misunderstandings on the accountant's inability to find the metaphor that his users can translate and relate to. The authors suggest that the accountant is sometimes unable to influence user behaviour because he does not translate their accounting knowledge into something concrete and familiar. Anecdotes represent an easy, effective method to convey accounting principles in easily understandable language. Anecdotes facilitate the user's understanding, which in turn improves the accountant's skills as a facilitator of the communication of accounting information.

The accountant should realise the importance and power of stories and anecdotes. If the accountant wants to influence behaviour, his presentations should include stories and anecdotes. Anecdotes are similar to evidence presented in court. The lawyer does not win his case by merely reciting the law; he proves his case by presenting actual court decisions based on evidence.

From the above analysis it can be concluded that oral communication provides for the use of anecdotes and that they have specific relevance and benefits for the user. Anecdotes result in the user remembering the presentation for a longer period, the accountant's credibility is enhanced, the user is made to feel more important, the accountant is able to influence behaviour and is given more power over his subject and audience. He should therefore incorporate anecdotes and vivid illustrations in his oral communication and presentations.

It was stated in the preceding paragraphs that the benefits of using narratives include improved retention, greater accountant credibility and increased power over the subject and the audience. These benefits suggest that narratives have a persuasive power with which the accountant can influence behaviour and belief. Mumby (1993:105) supports this inference by stating that through narrative discourse an accountant can make strongly persuasive assertions that are masked from the user's examination and challenge. He continues to state that narratives are more effective than facts and statistics in influencing the user's behaviour. The linguistic features of stories command attention and memory.

The unique power of narrative discourse stems from its ability to produce statements that are shielded from testing or debate, while being persuasive and

memorable (Mumby 1993). The truth claims regarding the statements are shielded, because of both the psychological effects of narration on users and the conventions of storytelling as a speech act. The narrative's emotionally compelling language deters the user's critical response. Although users do evaluate what they hear, their judgements are restricted to gauging the story's internal consistency (i.e. the structural relationship among characters, events and settings) and the relevance of the narrative to the main topic. In addition, the "rules" of storytelling and the conventions of the genre make it difficult for a user to question the content of the narrative. Narrative discourse suspends ordinary conversation, departing from a state of turn-by-turn talk among fellow participants. It is inappropriate for the listener to raise a challenge to a truth claim implicit in a narrative, even if a false claim is recognised. Mumby states that the presumption is shielded from testing or debate: it is a claim to validity that denies the need for justification or proof.

It can therefore be said that the narrative is a powerfully persuasive, presumed claim to truth and correctness that is not ordinarily subjected to challenge. It has the potential to become a powerful tool in the hands of the accountant to persuade users into accepting new, cumbersome and demanding developments such as increased disclosure requirements. The narrative offers the accountant a powerful opportunity and mechanism to influence and change behaviour.

## **7.5 Oral communication analysed to establish a need for humour**

An accountant is usually required to address users on business topics; he is seldom expected to entertain listeners. Why then should the accountant consider the use of humour if it is not expected by the listeners? Iapoce (1988) provides answers to this question when he writes that the use of humour by an accountant shows the users that he is a human being. Iapoce infers that, by showing that he is human, the accountant will be in a better position to interact with the users. Consequently, he will be able to enhance his facilitation of communication and his oral communication skills by the use of humour.

Users do not expect humour in a business presentation. If humour is used, users experience it as different and refreshing (Iapoce 1988). Consequently, it would be easier for the accountant than for the stand-up comedian to introduce humour. Listeners expect humour from a stand-up comedian, but they are surprised if the accountant uses it. For the accountant, humour is a mechanism for enhancing oral communication; it should not form the objective of his

discourse. As a result, the accountant should only expect a chuckle and not a belly laugh. The comedian should expect the latter, whereas the accountant should be satisfied with a gentler response. The accountant's humour should put users at ease, create a rapport with them and contributes in getting a serious message across more effectively.

Booher (1991:248) concurs that the use of humour improves almost any speech. He attributes this fact to the personal identification that it establishes with the user and his feelings. Humour allows the accountant to extend a verbal handshake to the users indicating that he wants to be the user's friend (Iapocce 1988). It provides the accountant with a real opportunity to become more "person orientated" and to establish a rapport with the users. Bryant & Wallace (1969) consider humour to be one of the most valuable sources of interest in a speech.

It follows that oral communication permits the use of humour in oral presentations, advocates its use because it increases user attention (Iapocce 1988), and shows the user that the accountant is an approachable human being. It improves interaction between accountant and user, and enhances almost any speech. The accountant is consequently strongly advised to introduce humour into oral discourse.

## 7.6 Composition and mechanics of users in an audience

There are, in the main, three elements involved in oral communication with an audience – the speaker, the individuals attending and the unity created by the individuals who are gathered for a common purpose (Mitchell, 1933: 34). The accountant should understand that these elements represent *three different personalities*. Individual users want to hear what the accountant has to say, and their unity stems from this common goal. Each one may have a unique background, education, tradition, outlook and status, but their common goal is to listen to the accountant. Because Messrs A and B have this common goal, they create a new identity, Mr A-B. In dealing with an audience this hyphenated "person" is important to the accountant. The audience wants the accountant to succeed: that is why they are present. However, they want to listen to him *and to experience the emotion* (Mitchell 1933). They come as willing listeners, willing to surrender some of their individuality in order to enjoy the emotion of being a corporate unity. They become an *audience*. The psychology of persuasion involves the accountant communicating with one of his users while

at the same time creating a mass mind, a Mr A-B, among them. “*They, as units, and the personality they create by being together of one mind, are waiting to respond to [the speaker’s] personality. They invite reciprocity*”. (Mitchell 1933:35).

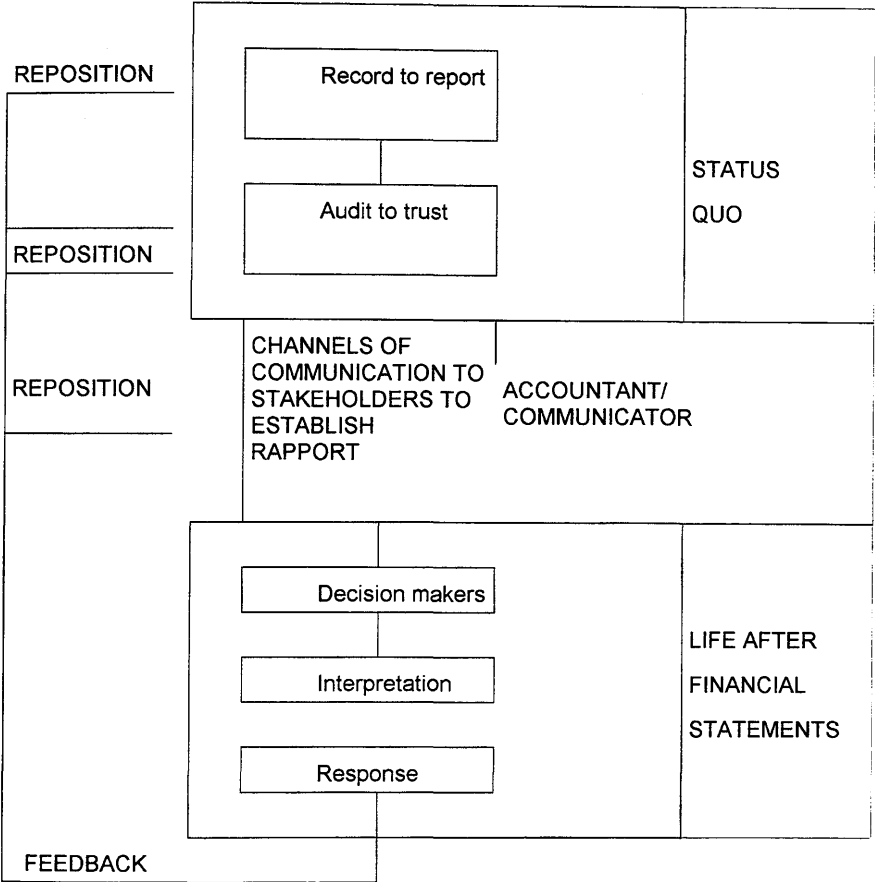
An audience is generally the accountant’s friend. Mr A-B will forgive squeaking voices, overlook bad grammar and forget stammering if the accountant gives himself. The accountant is most dominant when he is most himself, as oral discourse is elevated conversation. The accountant should similarly treat Mr A-B as a friend. If he is natural with him and if the oral discourse glows a little it will be well received. In his preparation, it is necessary that he should create in his mind the atmosphere appropriate to the occasion: he should *visualise* the setting and the audience. The accountant should focus his mindset on speaking to each user individually and to addressing the unit created by them collectively.

## **8 Conclusion**

### **8.1 The accountant’s role redefined**

Gouws (1997) states that the objective of financial reporting has moved from the narrow goal of stewardship to a much wider role of providing information to a heterogeneous audience. Accounting, and the accountant, used to focus on the past. Users, however, expect the accountant to look towards the future by being a multi-skilled executive. The demand for more information requires the accountant to have communication skills (Prequalification Education, Assessment of Professional Competence and Experience Requirements of Professional Accountants 1996). Only he can make this change. Only he is in the position to facilitate the change from providing information on stewardship to providing multidimensional information. Only he can facilitate the chance from what was to what can be. Gouws has depicted the accountant’s position in this regard as follows:

**Diagram 5**  
**The accounting system**



Source: Gouws (1997 : 64)

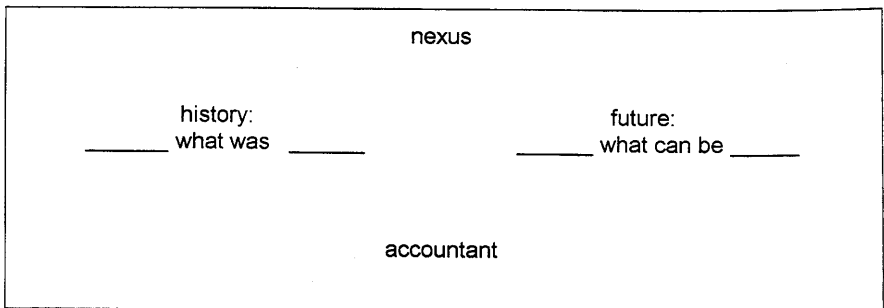
Diagram 5 indicates that the accountant should act as a facilitator to accomplish the change from the status quo to providing digestible information on financial statements. The accountant should realise that the accounting discipline cannot accomplish this change without him facilitating it. It is the accountant who needs to acquire communication skills to empower him to be a facilitator of change.

## 8.2 A paradigm shift required

Substantial attention should be given to the shortcomings of accounting and ways to overcome them. To mention but a few, the statement of source and application of funds have been replaced by the cash flow statement, a value-added statement has been introduced and accounting standards are being harmonised with international standards. The expectation gap has received increasing attention and new methods recording and reporting transactions are continuously being considered. Yet little attention, if any, is being given to the accountant who has to facilitate the changes. This trend may infer that accounting has always been seen as a support system for the accountant. Figures 2 and 5 depict the opposite: the accountant should be seen as a support for the discipline. More attention should be paid to the accountant, because he should ensure the continued existence of the discipline. It was stated that users expect more from an accountant - not accounting. If the accountant becomes more skilled in communication, his market will expand and the demand for accounting will increase. *The accountant should drive accounting.* The accountant forms the nexus between the historic and future roles of accounting, as depicted in diagram 6.

### Diagram 6

#### The accounting system





The accountant should enhance his skills of facilitating communication by applying the principles of oral communication. He should do this to improve his ability as a facilitator of change and in response to user demands. As he becomes more skilled in communication and responds to user needs, the demand for accounting services will increase and, possibly, the expectation gap will decrease. Oral communication provides a definite basis for enhancing the accountant's skills to facilitate communication with a view to achieving these objectives.

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