



The language of leadership

Introduction

Leaders spend the vast majority of their time with others in communication. Arguably, language is the primary tool available to them and yet as we know from our work, much communication can happen as an habitual, rather than as a conscious, act. If our responses in dialogue are habitual there is a chance that they follow some particular patterns. We are interested to discover what some of these might be and the SoundWave self-perception instrument gives us a number of clues.

Of greater interest to us still, are the results of SoundWave360, where social data represents the interpretations of distinct social groups of respondents. Here, individuals can see how they are heard in the aggregate and how they are heard between each of these social groups. In particular, we seek to determine the extent to which leaders, managers and professionals, offer *consistent* or *variable* verbal strategies when they communicate.

In helping individuals to see, understand and make sense of these patterns, we can help them to adjust their styles of social interaction to achieve outcomes that are even more desirable. Small changes in the way we interact can have, it seems, disproportionately positive effects.

Used well, SoundWave's verbal strategies (or voices) have a direct impact on how others think, feel and behave. The model below outlines this.

Articulate for influence	Create the space for the involvement of all and become quietly influential
Advocate for impact	Take clear positions to assist the process of decision making
Advise for credibility	Offer professional perspective to assist others helping them to feel informed
Challenge for Change	Interrupt commonly held thoughts and actions to promote change
Critique for judgement	Offer neutrality and impartiality to build trust
Correct for improvement	Guide others in the necessary way to do things helping them to feel competent
Probe for insight	Discover new possibilities and surface new issues on behalf of the team
Inquire for innovation	Open up the discussion space. Widen the range of what is possible.
Diagnose for solutions	Move self and others towards answers through deductive reasoning



Our research - unique, consistent or responsive communication?

1. SOUNDWAVE SELF-PERCEPTION - SOME FINDINGS

SoundWave is not a typology, it prefers to identify the more particular ways in which different people express themselves through the lens of the nine verbal strategies. In this respect, SoundWave identifies a huge variation in results between people.

Whilst there are no *types*, there are patterns. For the more technically interested, here are some of the most typical:-

Patterns of Low, Medium and High Scores

On average people have 2-3 High, 4-5 Medium and 2-3 Low-range voices. However, there is very wide variation around this arithmetical average.

Theoretically – from the available points in the questionnaire and from where the High Range boundaries fall in the observed distributions of results - it is possible for an individual to obtain as many as 8 High range scores. The largest number of High scores obtained in a profile to date is 6 (the other 3 voices scored low). Only about 10% of cases have as many as 4 or more High range scores in their repertoire.

Theoretically – since respondents always have the option to assign no points to a question – it is possible to score in the Low range on all 9 modes. This has occurred in several instances to date, and is a pattern which perhaps suggests an ultra-cautious or guarded approach to speaking out. Having no Low range scores, no apparent 'gaps' in the profile only occurs in about 15% of cases .

- The 'Limited Repertoire'

The premise behind SoundWave, is that, at one time or another, a leader or manager may be called upon to use any and all of the nine verbal strategies. It is therefore desirable to have as complete (and as competent) a repertoire as possible. One approach to developing an individual's SoundWave is therefore to focus on the Low Range scores and, if they are potential limiters to learning, to performance and to the individual's prospects, to fill these 'gaps' in the individual's repertoire.

One type of 'pattern' that we are exploring further in order to understand its causes, consequences and remedies is the Limited Repertoire. How many Low Range scores does it take before an individual can be regarded as having a Limited Repertoire? (Partly this depends on how many High scores they have.) About 25% of cases have as many as four or more low scores in their repertoire.



- The 'Balancing-Act'

The single most common type of SoundWave pattern is some form of Two-Legged Balancing Act, in which the individual's high scores are located around two of the three cardinal points (Inquire-Correct - Advocate) in the SoundWave model. This pattern occurs in about *30% of cases*. In about half of these cases the remaining 'angle' is scored in the mid-range, but in the other half some or all aspects of the third angle are missing. We would expect the former to be a generally more effective, or at least less risky, form of balancing act than the latter.

- 'Taking an Angle'

A pattern which occurs in some *15% of cases* is where the individual has two or three high scores and these are concentrated in one angle of the model. By definition this is a more partial, and riskier, approach, although again much depends on whether the other voices are present in moderation or simply absent. This pattern occurs with similar frequency for each of the three angles. Where low scores are concentrated in an angle, it is more commonly the Controlling or Exploring angle that is weak; the Positioning angle is less frequently neglected.

- 'An Axis to Grind'

A rather less common pattern, which could perhaps also be regarded as a simple form of two-legged balancing act, occurs in about *10% of cases*. This is where the individual has three (or very occasionally all 4) voices in the high range along one of the three major axes of the model. For example, Inquire-Diagnose-Articulate or Advocate-Advise-Challenge-Correct. The question of the interplay between these verbal strategies always needs to be explored. It cannot be assumed that there is a straightforward set of steps along the axis, in one direction or the other. However, the pattern does suggest a certain 'linearity' of approach or 'flatness' in the repertoire. The 'softer' and inter-personally safer axis, centred on Diagnose & Articulate emerges as the dominant axis about twice as frequently as either of the others. Conversely, the 'sharper' and inter-personally riskier axis, centred on Probe & Critique is twice as likely as either of the others to be the weak or neglected part of the repertoire.

- 'The Distinctive Voice'

In about *20% of cases* there is only one High range voice in the SoundWave. This suggests that the individual has – for whatever reasons - one particular favoured verbal strategy. As always much depends on whether the other verbal strategies are present at a moderate level or absent in practice, but the relative frequency of this pattern supports our proposition that many people lack range, probably have limited impact in consequence, and would benefit from training and development to extend their repertoire of voices.

Is there an ideal language of leadership?



As a generalisation it is preferable to have as complete a repertoire of voices as possible. To be ideal, that repertoire would have to be deployed appropriately in practice, in a timely manner, with skill and effective impact. The SoundWave self perception instrument cannot reveal whether that actually happens in practice, although SoundWave360 can get closer to this. The self-perception profile can, however, give an indication of the potential completeness of the individual's repertoire.

The pattern of having all nine voices at a moderate level suggests a full repertoire. It is a comparatively rare pattern, occurring in some 2% of cases. (In a further 5% of cases there are 8 mid-range and one low range mode). In the absence of any high range scores, these 0-9-0 and 0-8-1 patterns might best be interpreted as a relatively Balanced but somewhat Muted SoundWave. As one example with this pattern has put it, 'I'm a bit of a conversational chameleon, but I am concerned that I may have lost something of my own distinctive voice in acquiring the range that I've now got.'

It may be that a 3-6-0 pattern is a stronger candidate for being regarded as an 'ideal' profile. In this case there would be no gaps in the repertoire and a realistically achievable number of distinctive, High Range modes. A hypothesis which we are investigating is that high scores on the 3 'cardinal voices' – Advocate, Correct and Inquire – is actually a difficult profile to manage, the 3 high modes being markedly different and therefore shifting among them making the individual seem inconsistent or hard for others to understand and follow. To date there have been no examples of an individual with this pattern.

2. SOUNDWAVE360 - CURRENT RESEARCH

SoundWave360 data allows us to hypothesise patterns against a particular frame of reference, namely, the extent to which social interaction (through the medium of talk) is on the one hand, consistent, or as an extension, rigid; or on the other hand, responsive, or by extension, reactive. The model below, illustrates this.



SoundWave360 receives data from four social groups who are important to the individual; manager, peers, team members and independents.

In its simplest terms, some individuals receive a set of results from their respondent groups that differ quite strongly one from another. This could indicate a greater sensitivity to the demands of the group in question or a more socially habituated response. For example, individuals may behave in a more conforming ('adapted child') or a more challenging ('rebellious child') pattern as a result of earlier life experience and conditioning and this is evidenced by the way they express themselves through SoundWave's nine verbal strategies.



Other individuals, receive a strikingly more consistent set of results. In other words, irrespective of who is hearing them talk, they broadly hear the same style and pattern of communication.

Depending on the strength of either consistency or responsiveness, one can imagine advantages and disadvantages to both of these positions.

An individual offering a more *consistent* style of communication across social groups and possibly across time, might quickly develop a reputation as 'knowing where you stand with her', as someone who is 'reliable'. Alternatively, such an individual may be perceived as too fixed or insufficiently flexible in their style as in, "we've heard it all before; it's relentless".

By contrast, an individual offering a more *responsive* style, might be thought of as someone who is 'situationally sensitive', who reads the context and adapts their style. Too much responsiveness might lead to accusations of, 'blowing with the wind', of being unable to reveal a clear inner style indicative of solid character.

OUR RESULTS

Our method has been to compare consistency in *the sequence* of voices used. So, at the extremes, an entirely consistent (or rigid) set of results would be one in which the sequence of nine verbal strategies was the same across the four social groups. An entirely responsive (or reactive) set of results would be one in which the sequence was randomly mixed across the four groups. Neither of these two theoretical possibilities has emerged from the data to date.

Initial findings suggest that *consistency* is most evident in the *least used* voices. Almost 40% of respondents (an initial sample of N. 42) have the same least preferred voice across all respondent groups. In other words, we seem to know what we are *not* hearing. 9% of respondents have the same 'top voice' across all respondents with a further 9% having the same top 2 voices across all respondents.

Further research using larger data samples will test our hypothesis further and shed deeper insight into the language of leadership.

Kevin Eyre
Director
Talk is Action Limited