

TALK  LEAN

*Shorter Meetings.
Quicker Results. Better Relations*

ALAN H. PALMER

“*Talk Lean* is powerful and practical! If you want to regain control of your agenda, become a more effective leader and have greater impact in your business, *Talk Lean* is an excellent reference. The methods shared by Alan Palmer in this book redefine the way in which you will prepare for and engage in meetings and perhaps most importantly, the ways in which you establish and manage key relationships in business and life in general.”

Tony Latham, Vice-President Finance, Unilever, North Asia

“Busy people do not have the time to misunderstand or be misunderstood, and building confidence and trust early pays dividends. This book identifies the traps we all fall into in dealing with others and provides unique insight in how to be more productive, open and straightforward, and hopefully feel better about the way we deal with our fellow citizens.”

Andrew Shilston, Non-Executive Director, BP; Non-Executive Director, Circle Holdings; Chairman, Morgan Advanced Materials

“Bored with long-winded, aimless meetings? Nervous about that difficult conversation with your boss which you’ve been putting off? Alan Palmer’s clear and entertaining exposition of the brilliantly effective ‘Interactifs’ training approach will transform how you deal with your colleagues, clients and friends. Thoroughly recommended.”

Antonio E. Weiss, bestselling author of *Key Business Solutions* and *101 Business Ideas That Will Change the Way You Work*

“Communicating clearly, effectively and directly is essential to our professional and personal lives. Yet most of us are very poor at it, particularly when faced with difficult or awkward situations. Alan Palmer’s refreshingly pragmatic and entertaining book shows us how to handle all these situations and talk to people the way they like to be spoken to: directly, to the point and with courtesy. This helps build trust and confidence in our relationships. It is full of practical examples and captures the essence of the highly successful ‘Interactifs’ training which I have found invaluable.”

Fleming Morgan, President, Danone Medical Nutrition Division; Member of Danone Executive Committee; Non-Executive Director, Agrolimen

“Even a small improvement in your communication skills can be life-changing. It only needs one or two people, in key situations, to say yes where they might have said no for the course of events to be radically altered. Just imagine if Chamberlain had been able to convince Hitler to come to Wimbledon rather than to invade Poland; or if Louis XVI had persuaded Danton to stay for dinner. *Talk Lean* will help you make major improvements in your communications skills. It shows you how you can systematically give yourself the best chance of achieving the outcome you want from meetings and conversations, swiftly and without upsetting the relationship.”

Hugh Easterbrook, Managing Partner, Flying Buttress Partners Ltd

“I LOVED this book. At a time when everyone, and especially busy executives, have to make the best use of every minute in their overextended lives, here is a book that is really helpful. Alan Palmer’s book is brimming with excellent insights and practical solutions to working more effectively with your colleagues, collaborating with your Board members and having more fun with your friends and family. This book delivers a message that needs to be heard and acted upon by many people in the business world and delivers it in an amusing and compelling manner.”

Vivien Godfrey, CEO, US National Milk Processors’ Organization (Milk Mustache)

“A clear and concise handbook for communicating efficiently and effectively with all types of people. It will help you to close the all-important but often narrow gap between success and failure in meetings.”

Ridgely Cinquegrana, President, Neptune Capital; President, United Perfumes; former President, Loewe LVMH

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On the basis of original ideas and a framework
("The Interactifs Discipline") conceived and developed by
Philippe de Lapoyade

With contributions from Clément Toulemonde



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*For my wife and children, Sarah, Katie, Alexander and Lizzie, and for
my sister, Diana*

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PREFACE

Try the following simple experiment: ask a dozen people in your circle of friends, acquaintances and colleagues, with as much diversity as possible when it comes to nationality, culture, sex, age, profession, social class and management level, to answer this question:

“If someone – a colleague, a client, a boss, a subordinate, a supplier, a spouse, a friend, a lover, a stranger – approaches you to ask you for something or to tell you something, how do you want things to be said, how do you like the other person to speak to you?”

Write their answers down in two columns, one for “Content” and one for “Manner”.

I am confident that their answers will be almost exactly the same as those in the chart overleaf:

TALK LEAN

Content	Manner
clear	polite
direct	calm
straight to the point	respectful
simple	courteous
precise	warm
concise	with humour if possible
concrete	etc
etc	

My confidence is born of hard data. Across 20 years, in the course of teaching people how to deal more effectively with others, trainers at our company, Interactifs, have posed this question to over 60,000 people around the world, of all ages, of both sexes, in diverse functions, at many different hierarchical levels and in all kinds of industries (and we continue to pose it). The answers – the ones you’ll find above – are ALWAYS the same. An ability to speak in a way which is consistent with these answers is the essence of “talking lean”.

Note that the question is about what people would like, not what actually happens. There is clearly a huge paradox at work here. Although human beings can identify very rapidly how they like to be spoken to and therefore, by extension, how other members of the human race may also like to be spoken to, very few people are consistently able to be direct without becoming brutal or unpleasant; or to be courteous without being submissive or manipulative. They are confronted with what they see as a stark choice between being direct or being polite.

Resolving that dilemma is the subject of this book.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The approach for “talking lean”, described in this book, for dealing more naturally and more effectively with other people, is called the Interactifs Discipline®. It is the fruit of many years of study, observation and reflection carried out by Philippe de Lapoyade, founder of the Interactifs company and my “Master” (please think “Zen” or “Jedi” and not “50 Shades of Grey”!) in every aspect of the Discipline. Without this work, my canvas would be blank; and I am happy to acknowledge my debt to Philippe, both for inspiring me to pick up my (figurative) pen and more broadly for changing the way that I interact with my fellow human beings and for increasing the pleasure which I derive from doing so.

Philippe and his colleagues at Interactifs have been teaching the Interactifs Discipline for almost 25 years to companies of all sizes, at all levels, from the executive board to the showroom sales force, and in many countries and many languages around the world. An

up-to-date list of our clients, who include many blue-chip multinationals, is available on our website, www.interactifs.com.

The Interactifs Discipline is protected under the laws of intellectual property, but Philippe has given me permission to describe it in these pages. Many of the examples and anecdotes cited were originated by Philippe or by other colleagues at Interactifs; but this text remains my own and any errors, either of commission or omission, are mine and mine alone.

As the originator of the Interactifs Discipline, Philippe could certainly write a more complete and definitive book on the subject than I; and I am optimistic that one day he will. In the meantime, I offer this volume to English-speaking readers, with thanks to Philippe and to all my colleagues at Interactifs, both past and present, for having introduced me to the Interactifs Discipline and for having helped me to achieve some level of competence in practising and teaching it.

In particular, as well as Philippe, I want to thank the following colleagues who have contributed to my apprenticeship: Laurent Allain, Philippe Beraud, Fred Blind, Alain Champagne, Mark Elliott, Alain Garnier, Nathalie Hammou, Sara Lucet, Patrick Maito and Annabella Silverio.

Special thanks are due to Clément Toulemonde, my fellow director in Interactifs UK, for his tireless re-reading, his invaluable advice, feedback and suggestions and for his rigorous editing of the text.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

1

**What the book
is about and
who it's for**

Consider the following probably all too recurrent situations.

- You don't like the way your new boss is managing you. He's constantly looking over your shoulder, checking not just whether you meet your objectives but also how you do so. He has criticized you in front of your subordinates and has taken decisions which affect you without discussing them. He's succeeded in thoroughly demotivating you but doesn't appear to be aware of that. You need to tackle him about this.
- At a conference, you spot a prospect you've been unsuccessfully chasing for six months. The person he's drinking a coffee with during a break suddenly excuses herself to answer a call, leaving your prospect alone and five feet away from you. Now's your opportunity!
- You're a senior management consultant. At the end of an assignment, your client has asked you to carry out some additional analyses. You agree to do so at no extra cost, but the analyses are more complicated than you envisaged and your team has spent a considerable amount of extra time interrogating the data. You think you're justified in asking for an additional fee but feel uncomfortable doing so after the work has been done rather than before. You hesitate before making the call.

WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT AND WHO IT'S FOR

- Someone you manage makes invaluable contributions to the project you're working on together, but he's always late for your team meetings and his lateness is starting to become contagious. You've already explained to him the problems this poses but it hasn't made any difference. Yesterday your boss came to the team meeting. She was singularly unimpressed by the fact that the meeting started 10 minutes late and asked you afterwards to sort things out. You need to do so.
- You've had a fire overnight on your production line and you've just been told by your operations manager that a big order to a major client can't be delivered on time. Now you need to pick up the phone and give the client the bad news.
- You're a front office manager in conversation with a customer. You feel the customer is being gratuitously rude to you but you ignore it in the hope of preserving the sale. But the more you ignore the insults, the worse they get. You need to address the situation.
- It's 2 o'clock in the morning. After a party in your flat, a member of the opposite sex to whom you are strongly attracted (and not just because it's 2am) has stayed on to help you clear up. Instead, you end up having a deep and meaningful conversation over the last bottle of wine. Your thoughts turn to romance – or at least to lust. Then he/she says: "I suppose I ought to be thinking about getting a taxi." You clear your throat to respond.

Situations like these will be familiar to anyone picking up this book. Who hasn't hesitated before leaping in? Who hasn't, on occasion, failed to leap in at all? Who hasn't had cause to regret the things left unsaid; or the things which were said, but ineffectually or maladroitly? Apart from those of us incarcerated in solitary confinement, marooned, Crusoe-like, on a desert island or pursuing careers as the loneliest of goatherds (and I'm guessing that if you're reading these words, none of those descriptions apply to you) then we all spend most of our lives

interacting with our fellow human beings, both professionally and personally – negotiating, selling, influencing, requesting, procuring, transacting, seducing, persuading, resolving; and our happiness and success at practically every level is in large part measured by how effectively we do so.

Dealing effectively with someone else doesn't just mean getting what you want from them. Being effective also means getting the result quickly rather than laboriously. And, even more importantly, it means doing so whilst maintaining or enhancing the relationship with the other person so that they'll continue buying from you, going out with you, living with you, working for you, employing you. It also means maintaining or enhancing the relationship even if, for objective reasons, you don't get the result you want – so that perhaps you'll still have a chance in the future.

It's my view that the "secret" of dealing effectively with other people is no secret – and not just because it's been exposed in the preface to this book. We all instinctively feel greater respect for someone who speaks candidly than for someone who beats around the bush. We trust them more and if their honesty and transparency is also accompanied by courtesy and respect, we are more likely to help them if we can. On the basis of "do as you would be done by", we automatically understand that we will have more impact, generate greater trust and confidence and give ourselves a better chance of the other person listening to us in an open and receptive frame of mind if we can speak straightforwardly and honestly – as long as we can manage to do so without also being blunt and abrupt.

Our instincts are clearly telling us what we should be doing. But how to do so? For there's the rub. The vast majority of human beings are faced with what they see as an insoluble dilemma: to be clear, straightforward and direct, but risk being seen as blunt and brutal; or to be polite, respectful and courteous but incapable of getting to the point. In other words, to have no inhibitions and trample heedlessly on the

sensitivities of the listener, or to be a slave to inhibition and tread so softly as to leave no trace.

This is of course a false dilemma, because how can you be truly respectful of other people if you're not also being straightforward with them? This book will suggest ways in which you can systematically square the circle – it will propose principles which will allow you to “talk lean”, to be both candid and courteous in every situation. If you apply these principles, you will give yourself every chance that other people will be open and receptive to what you have to say and ready to help you if they can.

Many years ago, I witnessed a scene on the London Underground which has remained vividly in my memory. A young man hanging onto straps near mine was clearly attracted to a girl who had jumped in at the same station – and it seemed to me that his interest was shyly returned. This scenario probably recurs a thousand times a day on the Tube in London and in other cities around the world, but in most cases nothing at all comes of it because neither party finds the courage or the words to say what's really in their mind. (I've noticed recently that rather than seizing the moment, these prospective lovers have started saying what's in their mind the next day in the columns of free commuter newspapers [*Rush-Hour Crush* in the London *Metro* is one such column] – by which time the opportunity has probably been missed, or at the least has now been entirely drained of the seductive power of spontaneity.)

But the young man in question clearly did have both the necessary courage and the words to grasp the moment. After a couple of stops, he spoke up (discretely, but I was an attentive eavesdropper) and a conversation ensued which went something like this:

Boy: Excuse me. Uhhh . . . I apologize if I'm being forward. I've been wracking my brains since you got in to find something original to say. But my mind's a total blank, you're probably going to get out at any minute and the moment