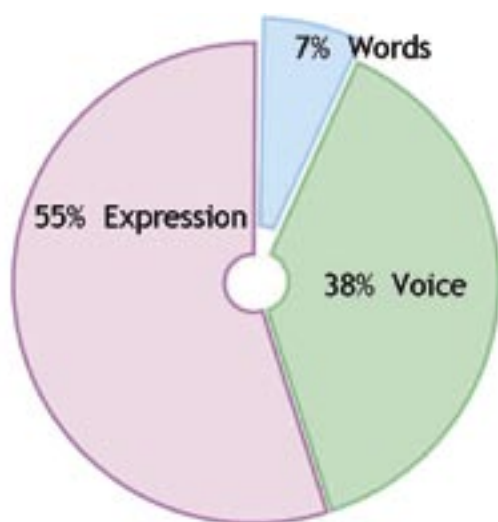


SUPER MODELS

In a series of articles examining learning models, **Dr Mike Clayton** looks at Mehrabian's 7%:38%:55% rule of communication



Perhaps the most widely used model by soft skills trainers is Albert Mehrabian's assertion that only 7 per cent of our message is carried by the words we use. It is also often misinterpreted. Why is it that so many trainers use it incorrectly? Let's start by looking at Mehrabian's experiments.

In his first test, working with Morton Wiener, subjects listened to words conveying liking, neutrality or dislike. These were spoken in different tonalities and subjects were asked to rate the attitude of the speaker. They found that subjects used the tone far more than the content when deciding how positive the speaker was.

The second experiment, done with Susan Ferris, asked subjects to interpret the emotion in a recording of a speaker voicing a neutral word with different intonations, conveying liking, neutrality, or dislike. At the same time they were shown photos of actors portraying one of the same three emotions. Subjects rated the emotion of the speech-photo pair. When there was a mismatch, subjects chose the emotion in the photo more often than the voice.

In combining the results of these two studies, Mehrabian and his collaborators concluded that, when the message conveyed *emotional* content and there was a *mismatch* between what the speaker says and how they say it:

- 7 per cent of the interpretation derives from the words
- 38 per cent of the interpretation derives from the vocal patterns, and
- 55 per cent of the interpretation derives from the facial expression.

Note that this is not the same as asserting that words convey only 7 per cent of a message. If this were true, what hope for Dickens or Austen? It does mean that when we lie, it is our face and our intonation that give us away. And

when we seek to influence, a flat delivery has far less impact than an animated, committed, impassioned presentation.

Mehrabian himself has been at pains to repudiate the simplistic interpretation that many trainers give, which is also found in a number of popular source books. He makes it clear that his work only applies when all three channels are visible and there is a mild mismatch between the impressions we get from them. Indeed, he found that if the incongruence between the words and the expression is too great, we suspect that the expression is being faked.

Mehrabian's work remains controversial. Perhaps most important, the 7-38-55 rule is based on just two experiments. Further, there are concerns about experimental design, sample size and the way the results of two independent experiments were combined. We must conclude that the specific ratios of 7:38:55 are questionable.

What I think *is* certain is that the general principle of 'it ain't what you say it's the way that you say it' holds. This is so important in many areas of training and coaching that I am sure we will continue to see Mehrabian's work quoted for many years – at least until somebody finds new ways to measure the ratios. This is as it should be. My only plea would be that more trainers take time to put this important work into context and to explain it fully. ■

Further reading

1. *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes* (2nd ed.), Mehrabian, A. (1981), Wadsworth.
2. www.kaaj.com/psych/smorder.html

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