

## Mehrabian's Communication Research

### Professor Albert Mehrabian's communications model

Professor Albert Mehrabian has pioneered the understanding of communications since the 1960's. He received his Ph.D. from Clark University and in 1964 commenced an extended career of teaching and research at the University of California, Los Angeles. He currently devotes his time to research, writing, and consulting as Professor Emeritus of Psychology, UCLA.

Aside from his many and various other fascinating works, Mehrabian established this classic statistic for the effectiveness of spoken communications:

- 7% of meaning is in the words that are spoken.
- 38% of meaning is paralinguistic (the way that the words are said).
- 55% of meaning is in facial expression.

Mehrabian's model above has become one of the most widely referenced statistics in communications. The theory is particularly useful in explaining the importance of **meaning**, as distinct from **words**.

Understanding the difference between words and meaning is a vital capability for effective communications and relationships. For example, as John Ruskin so elegantly put it:

"The essence of lying is in deception, not in words." (John Ruskin, 1819-1900, English art critic and social commentator)

### **Mehrabian's communications model is however on occasions applied in an overly simplistic or indiscriminate manner.**

The model is particularly useful in illustrating the importance of factors other than words alone when trying to convey meaning (as the speaker) or interpret meaning (as the listener), but care needs to be taken in considering the context of the communication: Style, expression, tone, facial expression and body language in Mehrabian's experiments did indeed account for 93% of the meaning inferred by the people in the study.

The understanding of how to convey (when speaking) and interpret (when listening) meaning will always be essential for effective communication, management and relationships. But using the Mehrabian percentages is not a reliable model to overlay onto all communications scenarios.

For example, Mehrabian's research involved spoken communications. Transferring the model indiscriminately to written or telephone communications is not reliable, except to say that without the opportunity for visual signs, there is likely to be even more potential for confused understanding and inferred meanings.

A fairer way of transferring Mehrabian's findings to modern written (memo, email etc) and telephone communications is simply to say that greater care needs to be taken in the use of language and expression, because the visual channel does not exist. It is not correct to assume that by removing a particular channel, then so the effectiveness of the communication reduces in line with the classically represented Mehrabian percentages. It ain't that simple.

It is fair to say that email and other written communications are limited to conveying words alone. The way that the words are said cannot be conveyed, and facial expression cannot be conveyed at all. Mehrabian provides us with a reference point as to why written communications, particularly quick, reduced emails and memos, so often result in confusion or cause offence, but his model should not be taken to mean that all written communications are inevitably weak or flawed.

If this were the case there would be no need for written contracts, deeds, legal documents, public notices, and all other manner of written communications, which, **given their purpose**, when well-written convey 100% of the intended meaning perfectly adequately using written words alone. When we enter a public bar and the sign on the wall says 'NO SMOKING' we know full well what it means. We may not know how the bar owner feels about having to bar his customers from smoking, but in terms of the purpose of the communication, and the meaning necessary to be conveyed, the written word alone is fine for this situation, regardless of Mehrabian's model.

A visitor to this page also made the fascinating observation that modern text-based communications allow inclusion of simple iconic facial expressions (smileys, and other emotional symbols), which further proves the significance of, and natural demand for, non-verbal signs within communications. The point also highlights the difficulty in attempting to apply the Mehrabian principle too generally, given that now electronic communications increasingly allow a mixture of communication methods - and many far more sophisticated than smileys - within a single message. (Thanks M Ellwood, Apr 2007)

Telephone communication can convey words and the way that the words are said, but no facial expression. Mehrabian's model provides clues as to why telephone communications are less successful and reliable for sensitive or emotional issues, but the model cannot be extended to say, for instance, that without the visual channel the meaning can only be a maximum of 45% complete.

Nor does Mehrabian's model say that telephone communications are no good for, say, phoning home to ask for the address of the local poodle parlour. For this type of communication, and for this intended exchange of information and meaning, the telephone is perfectly adequate, and actually a whole lot more cost-effective and efficient than driving all the way home just to ask the question and receive the answer face to face.

The Mehrabian statistics certainly also suggest that typical video-conferencing communications are not so reliable as genuine face-to-face communications, because of the intermittent transfer of images, which is of course incapable of conveying accurate non-verbal signals, but again it is not sensible to transfer directly the percentage effectiveness shown and so often quoted from the model. Video conferencing offers a massive benefits for modern organisation development and cooperation. Be aware of its vulnerabilities, and use it wherever it's appropriate, because it's a great system.

Mehrabian's model is a seminal piece of work, and it's amazingly helpful in explaining the importance of careful and appropriate communications. Like any model, care must be exercised when transferring it to different situations. Use the basic findings and principles as a guide and an example - don't transfer the percentages, or make direct assumptions about degrees of effectiveness, to each and every communication situation.

More information about Dr Albert Mehrabian and his fascinating work see his [website](#).