

- (1) Let's say that an individual needs to expand a nonprofit, revitalize a corporate division, or excel as the central figure in a political campaign.
- (2) Though the latter situation is the toughest -- so many listeners, so very much to convey -- all such communication depends on attention spans.
- (3) And each person's "span" -- their ability to devote attention -- turns out to be governed by how they hear, not just by what you say.
- (4) Producing a change-management manuscript during 2004-06, Jerry Climer and Frank Gregorsky found that one chapter appealed to a diverse group of reviewers. That chapter has been converted into this web essay.
- (5) Those reviewers looked past the political examples and saw the overall value of the method: Speeches and other presentations can indeed be sequenced according to how different listeners hear complex content.
- (6) And "different listeners" does not refer to ideological, age, or socioeconomic distinctions; the term used here is "Listening Types."

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## **ELEGANTLY SIMPLE -- Organizing Speeches and Text to Engage All Four "Listening Types"**

by [Jerry Climer](#) and [Frank Gregorsky](#)

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator -- "MBTI" -- has permeated corporate life, along with a few federal agencies. But it remains foreign to elected officials. The rare political leader who appears to be using MBTI to communicate might not even "know they know it." Nonetheless, the authors have seen it, and used it, enough to know that it works.

There is no need to attribute the good results to a presenter's personality or an audience's I.Q. As for the number of listeners? Surprisingly, size barely matters. The audience can be a few dozen, or a few million. It can be a TV or a radio audience, or 20 participants in a webinar.

Set aside other typical distinctions, too. Even if the audience is 100% of the same political persuasion, or 100% composed of people earning the median income, the message -- and therefore your agenda -- will run into four different sets of filters. The same four.

The complication is that, while certain people are naturally adept at two of the filters, no individual is strong on three or four. And this means that you, assuming you're the presenter, will forfeit a valuable portion of your listeners by slighting any of the four.

We'll begin with one of the four types: The Thinker. These people "process" the world around them in an analytical manner. If you inquire as to their stance on an issue, no matter how emotional it is, they'll start with "I think" rather than "I feel." Modern-era leaders as diverse as [Michael Dukakis](#), Mitt Romney, Al Gore, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Ted Cruz have displayed such characteristics. They are drawn to logic, data and concepts, even as a large portion of the electorate saw -- or sees -- them as somehow [less than approachable](#).

Still, driven by a mix of self-confidence, operations, and ideas, many manage to get elected.

Thinkers are even better at being appointed to governmental posts, along with other settings where the work product is analytical and large in scale. They typically seek to implement some big changes, which will require enlisting colleagues and voters. So the Thinker, backed by aides and like-minded peers, delivers facts and figures about what is wrong with things as they are, after which they make the facts-and-figures case for a major change. And?

And, if that's all they do, they risk failing in their communication. Not only should any ambitious change advocate not stop with the Thinkers in the audience, they shouldn't even start there.

**Note #1:** The authors will be using examples from their governmental careers. To keep the focus on Listener Types and Applicability of Method, we'll maintain a partisan balance and leave out sensitive policy issues. **Note #2:** This essay began life as a chapter in a manuscript about communicating and implementing complex change projects in large settings, up to and including the entire United States. So, as you encounter terms like "change sponsors," "change agents" and "leaders of change," please keep that original setting in mind.

## They'll Let You SIFT >>> Sensor, Intuitor, Feeler, Thinker

Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were regarded as extremely effective communicators. Whatever you thought of their political agendas, both Presidents were effective at using all styles of communication -- four distinct types of conveyance, and all in the same address. And they usually remembered to start with the most real-world and least patient group of listeners:

- Of the four types of people in a typical audience or meeting, we give the priority rank to **SENSORS** -- people who want to know what's happening, when and where. They are reality-based and eager for movement. They will tune out very quickly -- leave the room if they can, or log off without guilt -- if any presentation starts by ignoring what, when and where.

- Those listeners who are more interested in the Big Picture and a long-term perspective are **INTUITORS**. Help this part of the audience grasp your strategy -- but don't rush the explanation. Indeed, our experience is that Intuitors are the most patient in terms of willingness to wait to see the pattern emerge. Intuitors are also prone to leaps and bounds, and occasionally to flights of fancy. After awhile, they might even interpret and define your agenda more grandly than you have: "Have you considered taking your core concept and applying it to...?"
- Those most interested in the human dynamics -- especially the emotional ramifications of your proposal -- are **FEELERS**. They want to know: Who will be helped? Who could be hurt? And how might the latter's pain be minimized? Feelers are not swayed by fact sheets or studies; you'll get nowhere by offering them logic and pie charts. And there are certainly times when your speech should focus on Feelers immediately after providing the Sensors with enough tactical info so that they don't head for the exits. In any case, it's the Intuitors and the Feelers who deserve the broad middle of any change-advocacy presentation.
- Lastly come the listeners who display a different kind of patience, so much so that your presentation might conclude by giving them assignments! After all, these **THINKERS** won't stop thinking just because you've stopped presenting. They are the logical (highly logical) audience for your bar graphs and web references, to the point of asking you to write out URLs on the whiteboard. And they are -- if we could say it a second time -- definitely not the group you should devote the first 10 or 15 minutes of the presentation to.

To those familiar with Carl Jung's interpretation of "psychological types" in a landmark 1921 [book of the same name](#), or the methodical follow-up work of Katherine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, the above foursome will not come as news. Yet we look far and wide for political leaders who consciously cover "sensor-intuitor-feeler-thinker." On the national stage, we might go so far as to say that Messrs. Reagan and Clinton were the exceptions that prove the rule.

And that's a shame, because the "SIFT" framework for effective communication -- in settings large and small, governmental or business, charitable or classroom -- is not hard to adopt.

## An Unconscious Desire to "Receive" in Certain Ways

"The belief that people are fundamentally alike appears to be a 20th-century notion," concluded *Please Understand Me* authors [David Keirse and Marilyn Bates](#) in 1978. "Probably the idea is related to the growth of democracy. If we are equals, then we must be alike." Again and again, pioneering thinkers and theorists felt compelled to go for "universal" explanations:

Freud believed we are all driven from within by Eros... His colleagues and followers took issue with him, though most retained the idea of singular motivation. Adler saw us all seeking power (and later other things). Sullivan took up the later Adlerian theme and put social solidarity as the basic intellectual craving. Finally, the Existentialists... had us seeking after Self.

So -- one secular motivational theory or "truth" and it would be allowed to recede or be suspended only in extreme cases. Referring to Freud, Adler, Sullivan and Fromm, authors Keirsey and Bates wrote that "each made one instinct primary for everybody. In 1920, Jung disagreed. He said that people are different in fundamental ways even though they all have the same multitude of instincts (archetypes) to drive them from within."

In other words, just about all the preferences and modes turn up in each of us, but different "types" of people balance them differently, as a matter of normal daily functioning.

When it comes to humankind, most political leaders (except for the ideologues) avoid universal theories. Occasionally they declare that "people are basically the same" because "they all want the same things." These same individual officeholders then sort through poll numbers that quantify demographic or regional differences while confirming profound gaps between groups of Americans on social and "values" issues. Often enough, people don't want the same things.

We're not saying those value-based differences don't matter, just that they aren't the critical distinctions when you're dealing with the "how" phase of communication. Even when "we all want the same thing," we still hear information and proposals differently.

President Reagan invariably began by addressing the sensors and telling them what was going to happen, when and where. He would then go into some detail -- for the thinkers -- offering authoritative sources and analysis to justify the action. Moving on to a more nebulous description of the long-term benefits of the change, he'd engage the intuitors. Toward the end of his remarks -- in the gallery of the Congress, or on the White House lawn -- he'd introduce an individual or family who personified, in warm feeler fashion, the result of the change.

President Clinton made sure to touch the same bases but varied the order. Like Reagan, he knew that sensors lack the patience to wait for what they consider essential details; that's why both men started their communications with what, when and where. Then Clinton frequently shifted to the emotional or feeler component of the message -- "I feel your pain" -- which was often derided, but always effective. This left enough space for both the thinkers and the intuitors in the audience: Being an academician and a policy wonk, Clinton would offer an analysis of the change before concluding with a big-picture view of its benefits.

As President, Clinton's appeal and judgment were constantly underestimated by his enemies on the right, just as, a decade earlier, Reagan's leadership skills had been laughed off by his foes on the left. But the majority of Americans usually backed each of these Presidents against his partisan and ideological foes. Around the world, too, many found Clinton and Reagan to be powerful communicators, which in turn made each one easier to reach agreements with.

Political and media foes wrote that off to Reagan's training as an actor and Clinton's intelligence and articulation. Clinton was dismissed as a "quick study" and glib, while Reagan "knew how to read his lines." These traits boosted each President, but not to the point of being their core asset in communicating. Their effectiveness as communicators had much more to do with appealing -- in speeches and as well as other presentations -- to each type of listener.

Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan recognized in their audience an unconscious desire to receive communications in certain ways; they satisfied those desires; and the pattern they relied on will be a great help to -- among many others -- individuals who seek to expand a nonprofit, revitalize a corporate division, or make an effective run for county sheriff.

Now let's contrast Presidents Reagan and Clinton with the chief-executive who served in between them: George Herbert Walker Bush.

## Losing a Third of Your Support in Four Years

Except for his public communications leading up to and during the execution of the war to free Kuwait from Iraqi domination, the first President Bush came across as clipped and struggling -- as if he had been conditioned to speak in sound bites and sentence fragments. One of this chapter's reviewers boiled it down to a quip: "He couldn't see the 'Vision Thing'."

Elected in November 1988 with an eight-point victory margin and 40 of the 50 states in his column, Bush was relieved to be out of "the campaign mode," which he separated from the duties of holding high office. "Governance" would be a series of conversations and arrangements with other powerful decision-makers, of whatever philosophical persuasion.

Just as this Vice-President was being promoted to President, CNN pundit William Schneider reported: "Bush, according to a Washington wag, has 'hit the ground coasting.' He says he has no special agenda for the first hundred days. He prefers to take the thematic approach, defining himself in terms of symbols and values rather than programs." Five weeks later, columnist Richard Cohen saw "a fellow without theme or program who looks like he can be pushed around. This is a prescription for a one-term presidency."

Those who knew the new President found him articulate and thoughtful, and also a warm individual who showed exceptional kindness to staff. Yet how much of this mattered in the public arena? His mass-communication behaviors suggested impatience, uncertainty, and occasionally boredom with the entire business of democratic leadership. Schneider quoted one Bush advisor: "George Bush is the only man in town who knows precisely what he wants his Presidency to be about." And it pretty much went on like that, year after year.

One domestic-policy aide, [Charles Kolb](#), wrote a book called *White House Daze*. Throughout April 1992, the year his boss would lose to challenger Bill Clinton, Kolb recounted:

[T]he President described himself in several speeches as an agent of "change" but presented very little of substance or novelty to show what he meant... The White House was now seen as bouncing around from one issue or message to another... None of those agendas was ever taken seriously inside the White House... By late spring Americans were beginning to catch on to the game. Too many patterns were becoming evident, but perhaps the most damaging was the inability or unwillingness to follow through on an issue or a message.

Now let's return to the four listener types. The first President Bush's speeches were typified by "sensor" messages about what was going to happen. Watching this President during 1989-92, voters could expect to receive plenty of "thinker" materials -- fact sheets, data displays, legislative updates -- offering detailed justification.

What was being left out? Actually, it's not what but who: Roughly half of the electorate, namely (a) those guided by emotional or feeler imagery, and (b) intuitors who needed to see the long-term ramifications of the change, which definitely came under "the vision thing."

Despite a successful and very brief war to liberate Kuwait, and only a mild recession, the Bush political team dwindled from 54% of the vote in one election to 37% in the next. In May 1992, commentator Morton Kondracke marveled: "It is distasteful to these people to say anything strong. They think that a declarative sentence is merely an opportunity to make enemies, not to lead." (Source: "Who Will Rescue this Presidency?," in *Roll Call* 5/28/92)

Kondracke, Kolb, [Schneider](#) and dozens of other critics had their own ideas of what the first Bush Administration should do. Specific policies aside, we can only add, looking back 25 years, that "sponsor intent" was never fundamentally dealt with inside that Administration. Even when priorities were set with some firmness, the communications shortfall was plain.

An effective leader of change must be an effective communicator, and this is true even if you'll never be speaking to millions at a time. In the private sector, longtime General Electric CEO Jack Welch was known as an effective communicator. An [account of his rules for communication](#) shows characteristics similar to those manifested by Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton.

Whether in business or government, purposeful change will be resisted, and that resistance can only be addressed -- assuming bribes and violence remain off the table! -- by effective communication. Sponsors and agents therefore need to be outstanding at it, or at least effective.

The rest of this paper will appeal to Thinkers, including those who have studied MBTI -- because our analysis and recommendations so far have left out a couple of the fine points. Not only that, but -- as lifelong "NT" types -- we can't leave without submitting a diagram...

## Perception vs. Judgment: In Each Plane, a Dominant Preference

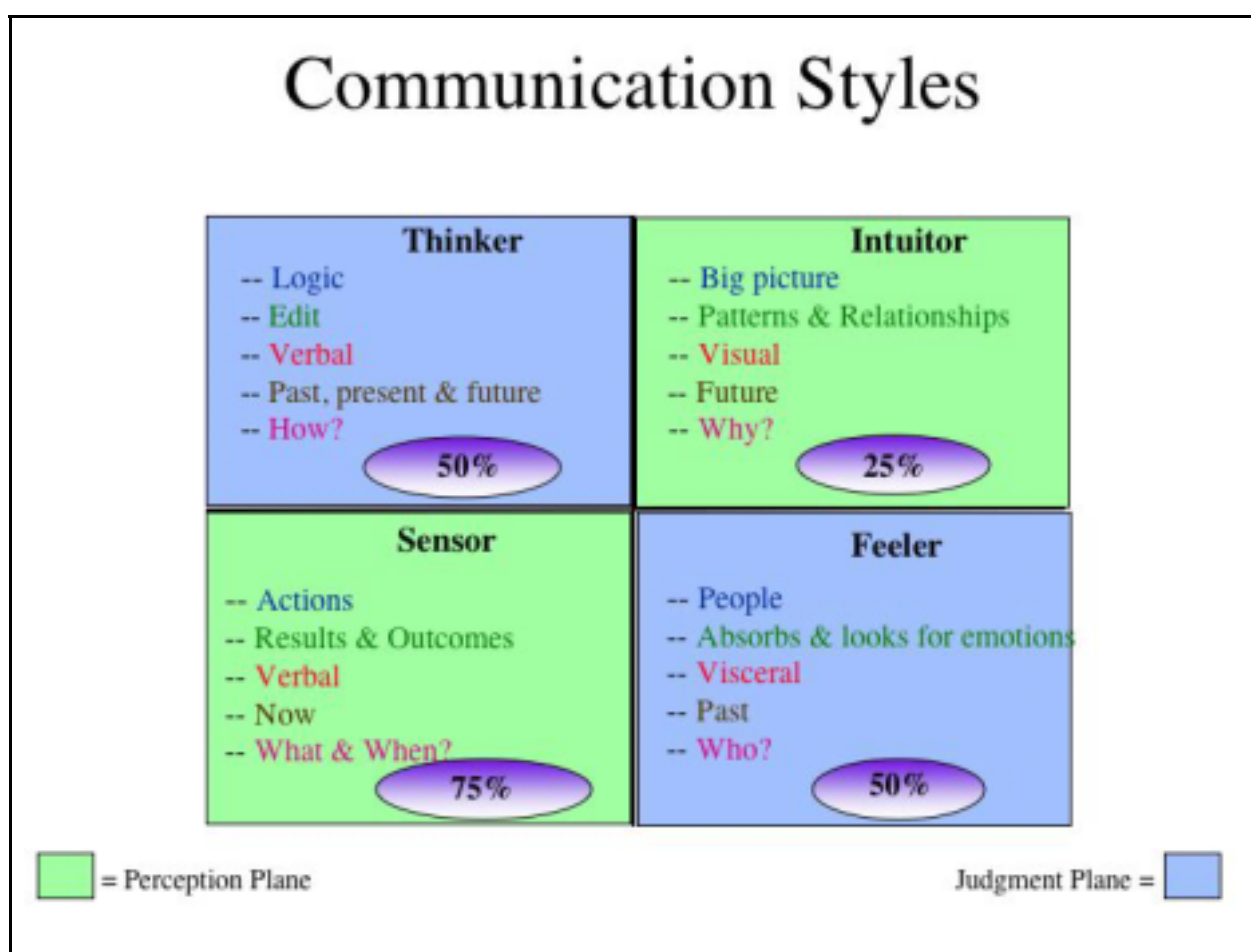
Understanding all four communication preferences does not get you out of the woods. And the Reagan and Clinton methods are not perfect for all audiences -- large audiences yes, but smaller audiences could end up with skewed preferences. When this happens, it tends to be because of the nature of the topic and, especially, the occupational alignment of the listeners.

Expressed in simplified terms: A gathering of scientists at a government lab will want to see the studies that show the validity of your proposal. A group of moms at a school will want to hear how the children might be emotionally affected by your program. A team of foreign-policy strategists will want to know how your grand strategy will alter the nation or region by 2025. And speaking at a think tank could trigger a cross-examination about some of your footnotes.

Corporations have the structure to administer Myers-Briggs tests and avert the worst communication breakdowns. Political leaders lack that sort of orderly universe. So -- beyond knowing the four types and how much they can help -- how does one get a handle on communication style preferences? As implied at the outset, listening is itself a communication skill. So, having become aware (or been reminded) of Sensor-Intuitior-Feeler-Thinker, it's time to enhance your listening.

Early comments tend to reveal preferences. The participant who asks, as the meeting starts, "What is our purpose here?" is also saying "I'm a sensor." The woman who expresses a concern for the longer-term ramifications of the change agenda has signaled that her intuitive side is on full alert. As for the fellow who tells you and your staff to set aside the studies because he's ready to help alleviate the suffering and you should be too? No doubt -- a feeler.

In addition -- as long as it doesn't trigger mental overload -- you could use this diagram as a sort of Communicator's map...



Roughly 75% of the population is Sensor and only 25% are Intuitiors. (That statistic alone clinches the case for addressing Sensors first -- to orient and reassure them.) Feelers and Thinkers each account for about 50% of the population. And these portions add up to 200% because they represent two different aspects of communication: Sensing and Intuition are "perception" styles whereas Feeling and Thinking are "judgment" styles. Each person you encounter will have a dominant preference in each plane, i.e. perception and judgment.



As the word indicates, the perception plane refers to how an audience, of one or a thousand, first screens information. Most people want to know what is happening while only about 25% hold out for the long-run implications. The judgment plane is that audience's preferred way of evaluating information. Thinkers want facts; feelers are looking for the human ramifications.

A good communicator handles the perception plane first. Conversely, if you start by talking about human emotions, many will not hear, since their minds drift to tonight's soccer game or fixing dinner. Recognizing that most perceive from a sensor perspective, tell your audience up-front what you are about to discuss and how you plan to proceed. As soon as the audience knows what is going to happen during this speech, event or workshop, you can turn to the intuitor, feeler, and thinker messages and cover those bases.

And -- in case you're still skeptical -- this chapter is based on research conducted around the globe and the authors are not aware of any significant deviations related to language, geography, or economics. Happy Communicating!

## TAKE-AWAYS and GO-TRYs

- ▶ Leading change? Okay, why you? What has equipped you to push a given project or program, describe it, implement it -- if need be over a sustained stretch of time? Allowing for scale, do you have the intensity of a Teddy Roosevelt, JFK or Reagan for this ambitious endeavor? Become clear on "Sponsor Intent," and you'll develop an exceedingly clear picture of the change -- the desired state -- and then have the chance to persuade a majority to "desire" it as strongly as you do.
- ▶ When a goal is foggy to the leader, it will be foggy to his or her agents, and even more anxiety-inducing to the targets and beneficiaries (i.e., that part of the company or economy likely to be the most affected). Or, if the goal is clear to the leader, but the commitment is halfhearted, implementation is likely to fail.
- ▶ The leader needs to communicate the benefits of the change, so that agents and targets alike have a mental image of its value; from there they can gauge the benefit of going along for the ride, or perhaps even lending a hand.
- ▶ Not everyone in an audience processes information in the same fashion. Even if the audience is 100% of the same political party, or 100% from the same set of occupations, or 100% comprised of people that you hired and can also fire, the information about your change agenda has to meet the same set of four filters.
- ▶ SENSORS are action-oriented and concerned about what's happening, especially during the next hour. INTUITORS have a long-term outlook and crave the big picture -- they might even help you paint it. FEELERS are emotive and seek to know



human consequences: Who will be helped? Who could be hurt? And THINKERS are fact-conscious and reality-based; they engage in analysis as a form of relaxation, so save the bar graphs and web references for them.

- ▶ Communication is basic to implementing all major changes as well as a surprising number of minor ones. You must communicate in the preferred style of your listener. When addressing larger audiences, emulate the sequencing methods of effective communicators. When speaking to an individual, listen to that person as he or she reveals a preferred style -- and then sense, intuit, feel or think (SIFT) your way to a productive exchange of views.
- ▶ Try this: Think about one of your best efforts to explain a complicated policy and reflect on why the audience, or too big a part of it, never seemed to get your point. Did you paint a beautifully detailed and logical picture, but neglect the human consequences? Conversely, did you rely on a passionate string of assertions that excited half the group while leaving the other half looking pensive or quizzical?
- ▶ And, most immediate of all: For the next several days, listen to almost every person with whom you communicate, and see how quickly you can determine their preferred communication style.

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