

# LISTEN AND REPEAT – BUT LISTEN CAREFULLY!

## WHAT LANGUAGE REVEALS ABOUT YOUR BUILDING PARTNER'S MOTIVATION TO ENGAGE IN RE-COMMISSIONING

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In Re-Commissioning – and when it comes to saving energy – advisers usually need to talk to building owners and staff in order to propose measures that help saving energy. These measures can either include technical changes but may also encompass behavioural strategies aimed at motivating building users to save energy. In any case, change needs to be implemented!

Imagine now, you work as a Re-Commissioning adviser. You have identified measures for a building partner that will save up to 15% energy. You have worked out your idea precisely, knowing each technical flaw of the building that leads to energy waste. You are excited to present your propositions to the management. As you start speaking to your building partner and explain which changes need to be realized in the operational system and how this might improve the building's energy performance you slowly realize your partner does not share the excitement. In contrast, you face scepticism ("I have doubts that this might work!"), counter-arguments ("I do not want to change this procedure, because it will affect the whole work flow."), or even bare resistance in form of cynical comments ("Exactly– for

you this makes sense, but in the end, you do not have to deal with the problems!"). It is quite hard to argue further against this form of verbal steel jacket. In fact, the more you try to convince your partner about the importance of changing, the more you encourage him to defend his own position. In any case, his/her concerns might be valid and you need to give him/her credit for that.

As a matter of fact, you are not alone when it comes to working with clients that are not willing to follow good advice. Literature in counselling psychology describes how therapists often deal with clients high in resistance (e.g., Arkowitz, 2002, Miller & Rollnick, 2004). However, considering these clients as being resistant does not actually help to work jointly with them. In contrast, it rather worsens the relationship between you – the "change-agent" – and them – the "change recipients". It is more helpful to use the term ambivalence (Arkowitz, 2002) instead of resistance in order to understand the kind of language that you might encounter. We describe this language as *Change and Sustain Talk* – a psycholinguistic construct that is used to describe how an individual expresses his intra-personal conflicts



**Figure 1:** Interaction analysis between a Re-Co advisor and a building partner in a 7-minute interaction

**Note:** Figure 1 was created by means of the software INTERACT (Mangold, 2010). Each event is depicted on a separate line. Lengths of events = duration of verbal utterance. Blue balloons = Re-Co advisor; Orange balloons = Building partner. Green bars = facilitate change; red bars = increase resistance.



about changing (Amrhein, 2004). So what actually happens during the communicative change process?

In fact, any verbal utterance within a communication setting that targets to change a specific behaviour or a specific situation can be classified as language that favours change (*Change Talk*) versus language that argues against change (*Sustain Talk*). More generally speaking, *Sustain Talk* reflects resistance to change while *Change Talk* reflects your communicative partner's motivation to change. It is also possible to further categorize *Change or Sustain Talk* into more specific units, such as reasons to sustain ("This measure costs me a lot of time"), lacking abilities to change ("We do not know how to carry out these procedures"), or – in contrast – needs to change ("We must change the energy system or we will lose money") and steps that have already been carried out ("We implemented the new system for another team").

Figure 1 gives an example about how a communication can be decoded utterance by utterance in order to reveal what happens during the interaction. We apply a method called interaction analyses in order to work out communication patterns (Klonek & Kauffeld, 2012a, 2012b; Mangold, 2010).

This method can give change agents a more detailed picture about their communication skills and may help identifying change-inhibiting communication. We can also use interaction analysis to help change agents develop a better sensitivity for *Change and Sustain talk*. Being able to "hear" or "decode" this kind of language is a prerequisite in order to use

active listening skills appropriately. Table 1 gives an example of two hypothetical communication scenarios. Note that both scenarios start with the same utterance. The first change agent shows improved active listening skills as he reflects the *Change Talk* part. In contrast, the second change agent uses a different reflection and hence stresses sustaining. As a consequence, the first change agent facilitates change while the second increases resistance. This also depicts how large-scale change management projects are dependent on the micro-verbal communication level.

Those who are actually responsible to carry out changes and to communicate it to stake-holders, employees and building users actually benefit if they develop their abilities to decode *Change and Sustain Talk* – e.g., by training active listening skills. The concept does not only apply to Re-Commissioning advisers but to anyone who works in change initiatives (cf. Ford & Ford, 2009). Furthermore, interaction analysis can help to show how communicative patterns are produced and provide a valuable feedback tool for Re-Co advisors.

#### REFERENCES

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Scenario	Qualitative interaction stream		
	Change Recipient	Change Agent	Change Recipient
A	"I am unwilling to go on with this. It is no fun! On the other hand, I have a lot of good ideas that I would like to try out."	„You say you have a lot of good ideas.“	„Indeed! I have so many ideas. For example, I know...“
B		„You think it is no fun?“	“Oh, of course it is no fun! I really would like to discuss other things...”
	Coded interaction stream		
A	[Sustain Talk][Change Talk]	[Reflection of Change Talk]	[Change Talk]
B		[Reflection of Sustain Talk]	[Sustain Talk]

**Table 1:** Two hypothetical interaction scenarios starting with the same initial statement of the change recipient but different active listening skills of the change agent





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