

# Zoom In, Zoom Out

*By Bill Young*

*“Let me count the ways.”*

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

Replay the last strategy discussion you had with your CEO. What do you remember? Do you remember the words he said to you?—probably, a few memorable ones anyway. How about the expression on his face? How animated were his hands? Why do you think he clenched his jaw when you were talking? What about the feeling in the middle of your stomach? Maybe the thermostat was too high in the room and you were afraid you might begin to perspire. What were you saying to yourself in the silence of your mind as you processed his ideas? Just as there are many kinds of love, as the poet says, there are countless ways information is presented to us as we converse with a colleague, a friend, our boss.

## **Knowledge—Zoom In**

Let’s eaves drop on a conversation between two women. One, the publisher of a well-known family oriented magazine and the other, the magazine’s editor-in-chief. An elegant fifty-ish woman, the publisher, sits behind her big glass desk. Looking over the top of her glasses, she says:

- “We have to put celebrities on our cover.”
- “But our research shows that our readers don’t relate to celebrities,” says the editor, a new high-potential hire from a competing publication.
- “Too bad,” says the publisher. “Our advertisers want a glamorous environment for their ads, so we’d better figure out fast how to give them what they want.”

Finding herself sitting in a physically uncomfortable position, the editor is thinking, “I’d better be careful, I just got here. I don’t know how hard I can push back.” Cautiously the internal monologue begins. “I’ve got to make sure I handle this one right,” whispers a voice inside her head. “Listen carefully.”

Lots of money and many careers ride on the ability to listen well. Certainly, the exchange of fact-based information—what I’m calling knowledge—begins with listening. However, in high stakes environments in which many of us find ourselves, we place such value in knowledge—intellectual, factual, technical content—we disconnect from the rich, less definable information found in the experience of conversation.

## **Experience—Zoom Out**

Every conversation has a context. There's the physical setting, the surrounding symbols of authority and power, the pecking order of the organization levels, transactional pressure to make the deal. There's also the psychological ambiance, personal and professional agendas framed by background, gender, culture, likes and dislikes, the list goes on and on.

Discussions about money, performance reviews, strategy talks, editorial policies, and trust within a team—focus on knowledge exchange. If the news is good, that's great; if it's not so good we try hard to understand every detail influencing our future. We listen with a white-hot intensity. When the news is tough, there's another kind of information that may tell you something you literally can't *rationally* figure out.

Our body knows everything. Shoulders are the usual hideout for tension. The big muscles—our thighs and hips—tighten as we intensely ponder the answer to a complex question. Wrinkled foreheads, darting eyes, fidgeting hands all have some message attached. The term, “it takes my breath away,” speaks to the sudden intrusion of an idea, or event unexpectedly before us. Constriction in the chest, shortness of breath, accompanies anxiety and fear. Experience is a collection of similar kinds of knowledge taking residence in our body. Habits reside in our muscles as well as our brain. Habits are experiences.

## **Where's the Balance?**

An integral part of the Strickland Group's communication coaching practice is a video immersion process. From the moment the client comes through the door, he or she is on tape. Everything one does is available for study and analysis on a VHS format. It was the camera which provided a visual model for a way of seeing the relationship between knowledge and experience when involved in a conversation. The camera has an adjustable aperture. If I zoom in on a client I get close-up details of her eye contact when I ask her a question. When she looks at the tape, she'll see that her eyes glance sharply toward the ceiling as she's thinking about the answer. The closed aperture, providing the close-up, is a simile for knowledge: tight concentration, minimal context, detailed information. As I zoom out, she can see her eyes move and also observe her ankle twitching awkwardly as she answers the question. Deep in thought, her shoulder line folds forward against the backdrop of the velvet curtain revealing her exasperation and stress. The open aperture allowed the bigger picture to reveal a larger perspective, a holistic (wholistic) context, broader, thematic information, eventually expanding to take in the whole room and everything in it.

## **Give your Body the Lead**

As people sit across from each other they maintain a spatial relationship between themselves and everything else in the environment. They also maintain a time relationship, however. We tend to notice more easily the spatial context: I'm over here, she's over there, "the other team members are looking at me." What all parties also have in common is the time spent together. The common time denominator is our breathing patterns. When we start to feel uncomfortable, uncertain, under pressure, one simple activity will always bring back relative personal tranquility: a conscious breath.

Identify those parts of your body that first show telltale signs of stress or agitation. Maybe it's your neck, perhaps you start to cramp your toes inside your shoes. Everyone of us has stress indicators. Open your perspective, zoom out. Settle into your body; pull back from the exclusivity of words: take-in the experience of the discussion as well as the exchange of knowledge. When I first suggest this to my clients, most of them feel if they start thinking about the experience, they'll miss some vital part of the content. In fact they find, first of all, they don't miss the knowledge exchange; and more importantly, as they relax, they actually gain a much larger sense of what's going on. The entire environment becomes information—including our internal monologue, or reaction to what's happening. This technique is especially useful when you know you cannot do anything in the moment to change a difficult communication situation.

## **Zoom In, Zoom Out**

Imagine an invisible meter, like the one that shows the volume on your CD player, or the needle gage in the light meter inside your point-and-shoot. On the far right imagine "Knowledge," on the far left, "Experience." Place the imaginary meter on top of your field of vision. Read the meter at critical times when you are in the midst of an important, stressful conversation. Watch and see the more senior the person to whom you are talking, or the more critical the stakes become in the deal negotiation, the meter is inclined to move over, often quickly, to the right—to "Knowledge." You're in a *zoom in* mode.

Open the aperture; *zoom out*, take-in the "Experience" of the discussion. You won't lose anything, except the habitual tension in your body. Breathe deeply—take a conscious breath. Put your breath into those parts of your body that immediately enter your consciousness. Use your imagination. Visualize all that fresh oxygen rushing to the stress, alleviating its gnawing presence, bringing you relief and a much more expanded perspective: *less about you, more about the potential of the moment.*

## Epilogue

So, what ever happened to the editor-in-chief as she pondered her celebrity dilemma? After a pause that seemed longer than a freight train, the editor-in-chief realized she'd been listening to the publisher, but she was also drawn to a sense of urgency conveyed in her tone. Something in the sound of the publisher's voice set-off her discomfort. The editor, *zoomed out*, took a deep breath, relaxed her back, as she found herself leaning forward in an uncomfortable slumped posture. Suddenly, her eyes caught a glimpse of a large award plaque, next to a picture of the publisher and Bruce Willis. That very moment she realized she was using the reader's surveys as a pretext for her own resistance to the glitz and spectacle of Hollywood.

Relieved to have at least figured out why she was resistant, she wasn't expecting the final pay-off. Along with the relief came the realization that family values, and role model mothers are very much a part of the Hollywood scene. So many well known actresses are having children, and actually sharing the experience with their public. With a generous, insightful smile the editor said, "I bet I can get Annette Bening on our cover, just for starters."