



Think Straight. Talk Straight.

by Ed Maier

When I was asked to prepare a commentary on leadership for this newsletter, I was not sure where to start. After a 34 year career at Arthur Andersen, I stepped out on my own six years ago to become a leadership coach. In struggling with my own thoughts on how to coach leaders, I kept coming back to the primary tenet I learned from my first day at the firm – “Think Straight. Talk Straight”.

In a book about the history of the company that carried his name, Arthur Andersen wrote: “About forty-five years ago, my own mother told me in Norwegian, ‘Think Straight, Talk Straight.’ No finer heritage could possibly be passed on from one generation to another. It has been as a firm rock to which I could anchor in a storm. Never has it failed me.” Ever since I heard the phrase on my first day of employment with Arthur Andersen, it has never failed me either. It resonates deeply with me in my personal life and in my professional life. And in my dealings with clients, I lean heavily on the value I find in its meaning.

So, what does this mean? How can this help you be a better leader?

While I heard this statement for many years, I confess that other than the above reference, I never saw or heard a definition. It finally dawned on me one day that, by saying this again and again, Arthur Andersen (the man) wanted me to “think straight” and draw my own conclusions about what this meant for me. He wanted me to “talk straight” to everyone in my life. So, here is what “Think Straight. Talk Straight.” means to me.

Think Straight.

- Gather the facts. Whenever you are faced with a problem, try to assemble the relevant facts to help you think about the problem. Verify those facts if time allows. Try to make your decisions based on the correct facts.
- Understand the context. The same facts may have different meaning in a different context. An aspiring college student may have an “outstanding” grade point average, based on the point system in their own local high school. It may be equal to the grade point average of another potential college student from a different high school. But the accepting college may view the two different high schools as having different quality college prep programs and give more credit to the accomplishment of the second student over the first. Context counts.
- Avoid noise and fluff. Decisions based on straight thinking are not made in a vacuum. There is always a great deal of “noise” in the system. If it isn’t a fact that is relevant to the problem at hand, and if it isn’t necessary to understand the context of the situation, then it is unnecessary to consider in the decision making process.
- Keep it simple. Even the most complex facts can be broken down into simpler parts. I have always found it helpful to do this to the greatest extent possible. It tends to clear the air and help me focus on what is relevant about the decision or choice I am going to make.



- Apply logic to the facts gathered. Philosophically, two basic forms of reasoning exist – deductive and inductive.
 - Deductive reasoning uses deductive arguments to move from given statements or premises to conclusions which must be true if the premises are true. “All men are mortal. He is a man. Therefore, he is mortal.”
 - Inductive reasoning makes generalizations based on a number of specific individual instances. “Many young drivers receive speeding tickets; therefore all young drivers like to drive fast.”

Admittedly, flaws can occur in either reasoning, but the point is to apply appropriate reasoning to the facts you have.

- Conclude. Once you have the facts you need, understand the context of the problem, filter out the noise and fluff and apply logic to the situation, draw your conclusion from it and get ready to “Talk Straight”.

Talk Straight.

- Tell it like it is. Explain the facts to your listener, express the context in which you understand the problem or the issue and present your conclusion. Don’t sugarcoat your answer, but be respectful of the impact of your conclusion on others. Keep your own presentation simple and devoid of noise and fluff.
- Keep it simple. Be brief and to the point. Add facts and context as necessary. Try not to be a clock builder. A clock builder is someone who, when asked, “What time is it?” builds a timepiece for the other person rather than just telling them the hour of the day. Don’t build a clock unless someone asks you how to build a clock.
- Ask if you are understood. Inquire if your listener understands what you have told them. If necessary, ask a few questions to validate their understanding. Two people can look at the same sky and one sees it as partly sunny while the other sees it as partly cloudy. Make sure you agree on what you both see.
- Consider the other’s perspective. Recognize that your listener may not have the same point of view on the issue that you have. People come to conversations with different viewpoints based on their own organizational, cultural, familial, political, educational and behavioral backgrounds. You cannot just “Talk Straight” without considering these nuances; but once you do, you should still deliver your message succinctly and directly. Be thoughtful and polite in listening to others’ arguments or presentation. Perhaps explain the context of your conclusion in greater detail, or if available provide more data in support of your conclusion.
- Be willing to modify your conclusion. If in the course of the argument or discussion, you obtain new facts or additional context, be willing to build them into your own “Think Straight” process. Change your conclusion as you deem necessary. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge that there might be a different answer. But, do not modify your conclusion if the facts don’t support the new point of view, if the context is too muddy, or the logic is flawed. It is better that the two parties in a discussion respectfully disagree than one agrees for inappropriate reasons.



- Be courteous and respectful. Control your emotions and recognize you cannot control the emotions of others. Respect the viewpoint of others.

If you practice and learn to apply these principles to your own communications, I think you will benefit. Do I “Think Straight. Talk Straight.” all the time? No, I do not, but I try. And, honestly, those times in my life when I have not done so have resulted in unpleasantness of some form or another. I strongly believe these principles. I value them. I try to use them in my professional and personal life. I hope they are important to you. I hope you benefit from using them in your own way and in your own lives.

Does “Think Straight. Talk Straight.” mean something to you? I would appreciate it if you would share your ideas or stories this with me. Send me an email at Ed@ThinkStraightTalkStraight.com and let me know your thoughts. Thank you.