

Richard Higginson interviews author Fiona Brennan-Scott

Richard: Fiona, it's great to talk to you. Can you begin by telling us a bit about the work that you do?

Fiona: Of course I can, yes. I'm a voice and speech coach, which means that I help people to engage with their audience. My clients are generally people who have reached the stage in their careers where they want to go to the next level. But they've realised that the barrier preventing them from doing that is their ability to effectively engage their audience, whether that's in a meeting facilitation context or presenting to senior leadership or at a conference. Or it could be that they've already been promoted and they've realised they're ill-equipped for this new role that is less involved with software or laboratory work. Many of my clients are in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Medical, Maths such as Accounting or Manufacturing), but now that they've moved up to management level, they need to engage with the people that they're leading. Or the third possibility is that they are going for an interview and they need to feel confident and engage with their interviewers, in a way that really sells who they are and what they do. I add that into a training as well as a coaching environment.

I'm also a certified *Time to Think* Coach because when I transitioned to working exclusively with adults, I couldn't call myself a teacher anymore, so Coach was the best title. I found *Time to Think* to be the least prescriptive form of coaching methodology because you don't advise people, you help them think generatively and independently for themselves.

Richard: Okay, that's very helpful. Can you just explain what you've done previously that prepared you for this work as a voice and speech coach?

Fiona: I studied to become a speech and drama teacher at 29 and I opened my first speech and drama studio in 2000 in Gauteng, South Africa. And the reason for that? I was in the corporate world of International Marketing, having studied Marketing in Dublin; I grew up in Ireland. But when we started a family, I was burning the candle at both ends and needed to do something that would fit around my new life.

The passion that I had carried from my teenage years for drama was then realised in the desire to become a speech and drama teacher. But after 16 years, once my children started going

off to university, I decided to focus on the business world and that's when BESPOKEN was born.

Richard: Fantastic! So, is the book that you've written a natural outcome of your work? Do you see it as a summing up of all that you've been working on and learning over the last 20 years?

Fiona: Yes. First of all it's a legacy book that passes on everything I learned from some wonderful speech and drama teachers. It's also a way of putting everything I know in one place but also acknowledging that I can only work with so many people at a time. Instead, people who can't access my services can actually read and learn the tools and techniques to become great speakers - all that they need to know is in a book! And if they put that into practice in their lives, they will have breathtaking communication and audience engagement skills.

Richard: Wonderful. I really like the title, *Breathtaking Communication*, but I wonder if you could tell us more about it? I mean, you could have called a book *Effective Communication* or *Successful Communication*. Why *Breathtaking*?

Dance studio in
Gauteng, South
Africa

Photo: Jozikids



Fiona: Well, I like to think I've an ulterior motive or three for everything I do, Richard, and the title is no exception. Firstly, you need an attention-grabbing title for a book, don't you? I was trying to think of something imaginative and creative. But the second reason is that breath powers the voice. If we have good breath force, good breath control and good connected breathing, we will speak better and we will engage with our audience. And for that, we need relaxation techniques as well because a restricted, tense body will restrict the voice. The third reason is that Breathtaking says that it'll take your breath away because it'll be so amazing!

Richard: So with your clients, do you work a lot on breath techniques?

Fiona: Well, I consider foundational work, below-the-waterline work, essential. Because when you listen to somebody, there's something that goes on in your brain - communication on a subliminal level either works or it doesn't work. If you aren't trained as a voice in speech coach, you won't necessarily know what it is, but the message may not grab you. You won't engage. You may switch off, you may even be repelled.

But if it works, I guarantee that a lot of what works is below the waterline. So the first four hours of a private session will cover below-the-waterline - breath work, relaxation, connection, resonance, breath control and finally, projection. That is where the power, the clarity and the confidence come from. After that, we can add anything - modulation, articulation, presentation tools and techniques of effective slide use. But actually, if that core and that below-the-waterline work isn't in place, everything is superficial and it's not sustainable.

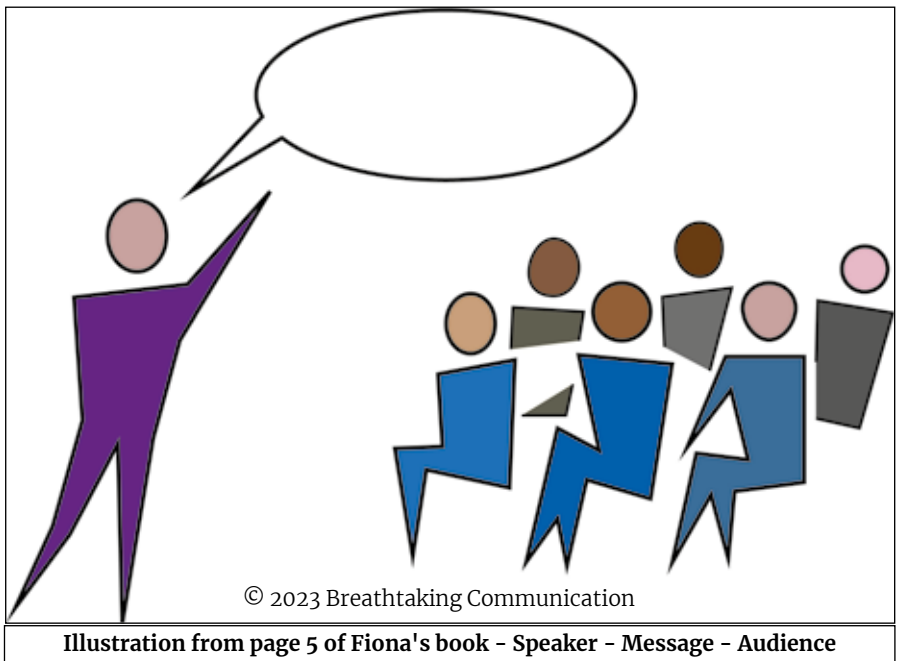
One of my values is to be sustainable. It's about fruitfulness and for something to be fruitful, it has to be sustainable.

Richard: As you know, Marjory Mair is reviewing your book in the journal, so she will give readers a good idea of

its contents. But I wondered if there's any aspect of the contents that you'd particularly like to draw attention to - perhaps something that you see as the most important part of the book.

Fiona: Yes, page five. I say that because I refer to it in training sessions and I come back to it over and over again. And when I do my keynote speaking, I use a model on page five, that invites people to think about priorities when it comes to public speaking. The image has been rendered by my youngest son. It beautifully represents what you heard at the Faith in Business Retreat about Speaker, Message (represented by a speech bubble) and Audience (which is three or more people). I think three or more people constitutes public speaking and anything less is a conversation. All three of them are essential - would you agree?

Richard: Sure.



Fiona: For verbal communication to take place we acknowledge that all three are important. When you are first asked to speak, what's your first thought? Is it about yourself, about being prepared and your nerves or how you stand and how you look? Is it content? Is it about what you'll say? Your message? Or is it about the audience? And my thesis is that knowing where your first port of call is will define the success of your speech and your ability to really engage your audience effectively.

Richard: And you think it should be one of those three for every person?

Fiona: Yes, since there are problems with beginning with either of the other two, but there is no problem with starting in the right place.

Richard: And the right place is...?

Fiona: Ah, you'll have to read the book to find out! I'd like people to be intrigued as they think about that.

Richard: Okay, that's interesting. Can I ask: do you think that communication is getting better or worse in the business world? Is there a big problem to be fixed here? If there is, hopefully you're doing your bit to fix it but I'd love to get a sense of the way you think things are going.

Fiona: I think the truth is that communication is probably as good

and as bad as it's ever been, but what has changed is the complexity. Because we're living in... you've heard the cliché, a global village. When we just had to communicate within our community, our tribe, then our village, it was so much simpler. But when a town or a city develops, communication becomes more complex and therefore more challenging. We talk about community spirit - we rented in the town of Didcot before buying in the village of Harwell and it's remarkably different. You can

just feel the sense of communication breaks down much quicker in a bigger community. I think on a business level and a worldwide scale, communication has just become more complicated.

I love the George Bernard Shaw quotation: "The problem with effective communication is the illusion that it has taken place." Communication is much easier the more that simplicity is maintained. We now have at least ten different levels of communication, the first being spoken word, face-to-face.

Layer ten is Twitter and we've got emails, Facebook and Instagram somewhere in between. We've got Instant messaging and online communication: the more complicated it gets, the more that can be lost and the more assumptions we make. Assumptions are a beast when it comes to communication.

Richard: That's a very interesting statement. So, assumptions are a beast. And you say that because people often have mistaken assumptions...

Fiona: Yes. For instance, if we sent an email, we could assume that it's been read. And people have to assume our tone of voice. We assume that they understand what our message meant as it applies to them. And if it's to several people and we want action taken, then we're assuming that they know who's to do what, unless we've been quite explicit. We're assuming that our communication is good, but actually we don't know until the hoped-for action is taken in response to it whether it's been good or not. And that can be too late!

So, it's delayed, whereas with spoken communication, feedback is fairly

immediate. Once we go to speaking to three or more people, i.e., public speaking, we're having to be more careful about how we're reading people and how that two-way communication is going. What effect is the communication having, what is it accomplishing?

Richard: This interview will be published in *Faith in Business Quarterly* and that leads me to ask: how you see this topic as relating to *Faith in Business*, and in particular, *Christian faith*?

Fiona: A beautiful question. I have an appendix in the book, right at the back called 'A Special for Faith Leaders and Communities'. The reason: What is the most important message we can ever speak? What are the most important words we can ever share? They're our faith and they're God's word and God's message. There will never ever be a more important message. And that message is for everybody and anybody according to the New Testament.

Therefore it's critical that people who know and love the Lord know how to communicate that message effectively. In that appendix, I say that on occasion, it can be apparent that a preacher is speaking to a captive audience, and it's by their good grace that he or she is getting away with speaking badly. Speaking badly is either being boring, not using their voice effectively, or not engaging with their audience, not connecting with their audience. And you know what, Richard? That comes close to being a sin. Because how awful that something as awesome and exciting as the gospel gets murdered in church.

Richard: Yes. That's very challenging. It's very timely, I think something we need to heed.

Fiona: There's no excuse but the bottom line is we are not given the tools and techniques in schools. Teachers are not taught effective communication skills, but it should be prioritised at theological college.

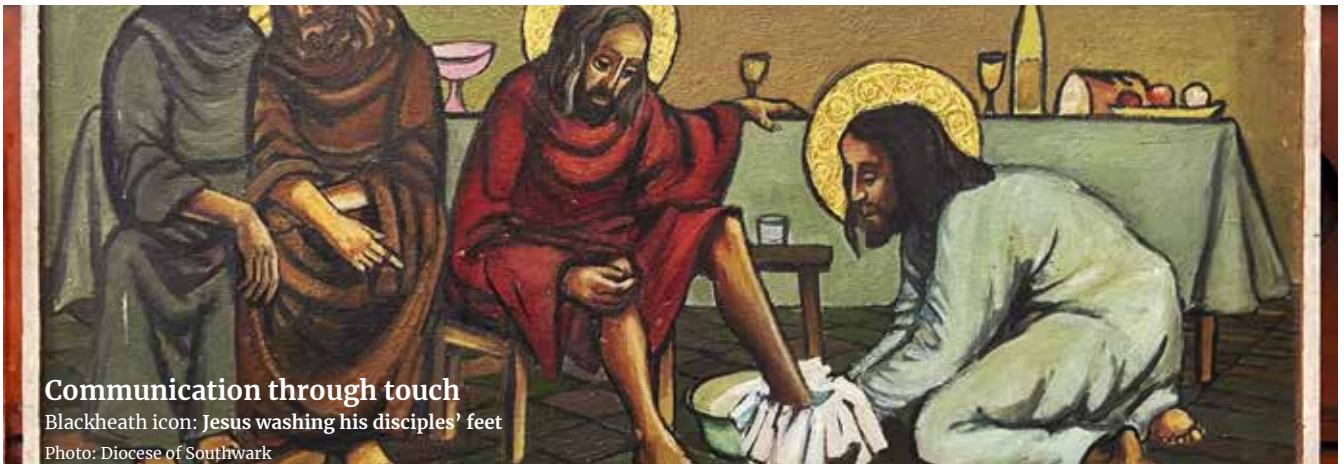
When I studied these skills through Trinity College London, 25% of my written and practical exams were about voice production, and it featured heavily in my thesis. With a pass mark of 70%, it was rigorous. And the part I disliked and found most boring was Voice Production because I'm not a scientist and I found the physiological stuff hard. I thought: give me the plays, give me the history of theatre and theatre practitioners, give me performance techniques. But when I started my studio, I realised this Voice Production is what really matters, what makes the difference.

Richard: You talk about the communication of Christians and the gospel in church. What about Christians in the workplace? Do you have any advice about communication there? How can they communicate better? How can they spread the gospel in a breathtaking way, in what might perhaps be a more informal setting? But perhaps this is beyond the scope of your book.

Fiona: It is beyond the scope of my book, but it's a lovely question and I think it does fall into effective communication. Therefore, I am happy to consider it and to give my response.

My motto has been the same for 23 years. It has never changed: "Never





Communication through touch
 Blackheath icon: Jesus washing his disciples' feet
 Photo: Diocese of Southwark

underestimate your ability to enhance and influence the lives of others.” And how can we do that? By fulfilling our potential and our purpose in Christ, by living a full life. I'm sure you'll agree and think of John 10:10, “I have come that you may have life and life to the full.” If you're sitting with and walking around with and working with and engaging with people in the workplace and you're 'living life to the full', who's not going to want a piece of that? It's contagious.

I get people saying things to me about my enthusiasm, my passion and my energy. I was told by a colleague that my Virtual Assistant is excited about working with me because “she loves you, Fiona” and used the word 'light' at least three times to contrast to the 'darkness' she feels about another client she works with. Whenever I hear these words like enthusiasm, passion and authenticity, I know it's Christ in me.

Richard: I understand that. I love that word enthusiasm and originally - in the Greek, you may be aware of this - it actually means full of the spirit of God, that's the middle bit from the Greek word for God 'theos'. So there's a God connection there.

I'd love to know what you think we can learn from Jesus as a communicator.

Fiona: So much, so much. Jesus was an awesome storyteller firstly. He told the best stories.

He also showed up as his authentic self; he knew who he was, so he had power, he had confidence, he had clarity, which

are the three words I really love in terms of what I want my clients to accomplish – power, clarity and competence in their communication.

He gave up those three final years to just go all out and spread the Word and he did it in words and deeds. And love. Communication with him was a whole-body experience because he saw, he engaged, he worked. But he loved, and he loved, and he loved. He did everything in love: that was the theme and the tone of everything he did. That picture that God gave me for the Faith in Business conference of Jesus standing on the Mount, looking across thousands of people and his first priority was based on his recognition that the people were hungry. He was loving them and he saw them through the eyes of God. So he fed them.

Whether Jesus was dealing with thousands or one individual, such as the woman caught in adultery, he knew how to home in on the real issue. He never ever got distracted ever. He knew. Stephen Covey in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* uses the phrase “start with the end in mind” and I quote that in various forms throughout the book. Jesus knew what the end game was, and he kept the end in mind in every transaction. I believe he also embodied the Ten Components of the Thinking Environment©, which is the Time to Think work that I do, where he treated people as equals. He saw difference and he showed up, no matter how diverse people were and whether they were able-bodied, disabled, male, female, old, young.

You know that expression 'rose-tinted spectacles', I think there's such a thing as love-tinted spectacles. That when you look at the world through that perspective, the way you communicate is just irresistible. And he was. We know from Isaiah's prophecy that Jesus was plain and unremarkable in appearance. But he was irresistible – an irresistible communicator.

Richard: I fully agree. I'm very struck by the fact that in a number of stories in the Gospels, Jesus engages with someone in a very deep and personal way even when surrounded by the cries of others, such as the woman with the issue of blood or Zacchaeus. He gives that person his full attention. In the midst of the crowd he's engaging with these individuals in such a personal direct way, as if they were the only person that mattered.

Fiona: Yes. Last year I really fell in love with John 13 – 17, where Jesus gives the longest speech of his life, starting with washing his disciples' feet. That's kinaesthetic learning – learning through touch – and he just manifests the Trinity in what he says.

The Trinity is very big and very popular in Irish faith-thinking and there are very well loved and beautiful symbols of Trinity. Really weirdly, the Trinity doesn't happen without us. If you think of that beautiful symbol of the Trinity, it's God, Jesus and Spirit, and the Spirit goes right through us. Emmanuel is God with us but Spirit is God in us, which is mind-blowing. And Jesus is communicating that as a parting speech.

Richard: Yes indeed. Thank you very much Fiona. This has been a fascinating interview from my point of view. May God bless you with your book. 🙏