

“Chunking”? Sounds like psychobabble!

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So much of the business world depends on the fast, free flow of information - but does the “unit size” the information comes in have anything to do with its efficient transfer?

It’s the best kind of *technobabble*, because it’s so user-friendly. We could call it something else - indeed, you *can* call it something else - when you’ve mastered it and made it your own. I will continue to call it ‘chunking’ because I like to attribute what I use, and because my clients like the term, use it consistently - and the word itself makes them laugh!

So what does ‘chunking’ mean?

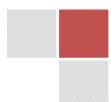
The term ‘chunking’ comes from the IT industry where people define the ‘chunk size’ of a piece of information with which they wish to work.

In business, sometimes we require information at the ‘big picture’ or ‘blue-sky’ level. In [NLP](#), we call this ‘large chunk’, or else ‘chunked up’. At other times, we need to be working at the level of more or less detail. In NLP, we consider this to be ‘small chunk’, or ‘chunked down’.

Simple, isn’t it?

Having borrowed the term, some people in NLP have developed a model which will assist you in learning how to apply an effective ‘chunking strategy’ to what you do whenever you choose to communicate with others.

You’ve been using parts of this model -we’ve all been using parts of it - all our lives. You can’t communicate without chunking at some level or another. All of us operate at a preferred ‘chunk size’, or within a ‘chunk range’ - within what I sometimes call ‘the envelope of comfort’. But developing our flexibility with chunking, stretching that envelope, will make a positive difference to the ways in which we communicate, negotiate with, and influence others.



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Why use it?

Let's consider a couple of stories to illustrate the benefits of becoming more flexible in this area.

First, imagine this scenario from five years or so ago:

A new MD with a marketing background is brought in to turn around a household-name company. Its products are sporting goods, the manufacture of which involves complex, and in some cases, heavy engineering. In the past, this company has been the market leader, and it still has the 'leading edge' with several innovative products that it sells.

However, the thinking of the board is locked into the past. The market is changing faster than they ever could have imagined. New players have entered the field, and are positioning themselves for making an all-out rout.

The board is made up of several engineers and one accountant, all specialists in their areas of expertise. All of them, with the exception of the MD, have been there for a minimum of 12 years, and all have lived through a period of unparalleled growth, before the recession of the early 90s.

The MD has been finding it impossible to have constructive conversations about the future because the rest of the board find it impossible to grasp the big picture - the one that he sees all too clearly:

- that, unless they change, they will die;
- that living on their past glories moves the focus away from what they need to do, now, in order to grow and develop into the future;
- that companies must be profitable to survive; and
- that there are huge opportunities out there for them, but they need to be grabbed and worked on - now!

The MD reports that all the engineers want to talk to him about is the detail of their technology.

He has told them that he wants to know nothing of the detail - it will only prevent him from looking at the vision of the future they must create together, and which he must drive through.



Second, another scenario from three years ago:

A Marketing Director has been head-hunted to be part of a brand-new team, developing new business for an insurance company. The other board members are actuaries and accountants. A few months in, and he thinks he is losing his mind.

Whenever he is asked to come up with a marketing plan - a practice which is a fairly speedy process for him, because:

- the market is transparent, and known;
- their niche is clear; and
- he sees the vision of what needs to be done. Whenever he comes up with such a plan, the CEO insists on making doubly sure by researching and checking all the figures.

On average, this process takes three weeks, and only serves to confirm the original plan. But then, just to make doubly, doubly sure, the CEO insists on going into some of those figures in even greater detail.

And another week or so goes by ...

The original plan is always confirmed by the figures, but the same (or a similar) process happens every time there is a decision which must be made.

The Marketing Director is rapidly losing his ability to see any patterns at all, let alone make suggestions for what the next steps must be.

I could give you dozens of similar examples, all, in my opinion to do with the level at which people do, or do not, ‘chunk’.

In both these cases, being able to understand what was going on (or perhaps more specifically, not going on) in these communications would have solved the situations internally, and much more quickly. Plans which needed to be started would have been put into action straight away.

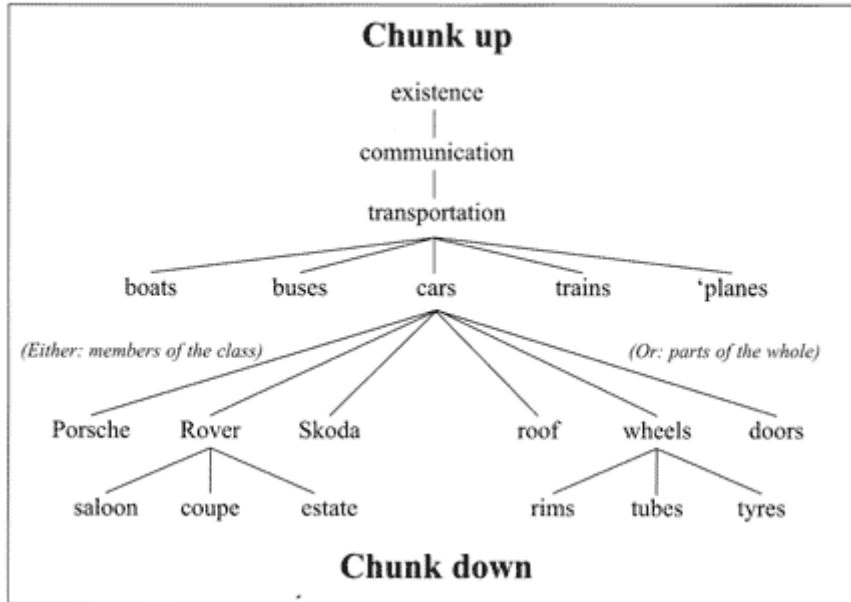
These two individuals and their boardroom colleagues would have avoided a great deal of stress, and they would have been better able to manage decision-making, do their own jobs, and deliver the bottom line.

All benefits which, I’m sure you’ll agree, would have been worth having.



The Model

Let's play. Let's say I'm going to buy a car, and let's gear the chunking model up to that.



The chances are that, once I've made my decision to buy a car, I'll start to do some car research. Now, I might do it in a 'large chunk' way - like the Communications Director of a large public company I know who simply saw a red one that she liked the look of one lunchtime, when she happened to be passing the garage that had it on display.

She hadn't a clue about what make or model it was. She only knew it was the one she wanted, the one that she liked. So she spent several lunch-times tracing and re-tracing her journey - with the fleet manager of the company by her side - until she saw that car again, and then, could leave him to do the detailed, 'small-chunk' stuff.

(Incidentally, this is a real-life example: she was a she, and he was a he, and I apologize for what may seem to be gender stereotyping.)

The only thing the fleet manager knew for certain was that 'she was mad.' He, on the

other hand, approached the matter in his usual small-chunk, logical mode. He spoke to a salesperson, and asked specific, precise, and detailed questions about the performance, the price, and about the deals that could be made. And then he bought it for her, in the right colour - and, happily, at an advantageous price.



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To do small-chunk research for my car, I would ask the salespeople specific questions like the following:

‘Tell me about the specific models you have?’

‘What specific features does this one have...?’

‘Give me some detail about the process here... how does it work?’

‘What are its benefits in comparison with X?’

‘What is the 0-60 acceleration like?’

‘How big is the engine? How many cc’s does it have?’

‘What brand of stereo comes as standard? with this model?’

And when I’m satisfied as to those, I’d buy the one which most fits my desires.

How high is ‘up’?

Now, to go the other way. I have, in fact, started this process from the premise that a car would solve my transport needs - but I haven’t questioned that. I’ve said to myself, I’m a consultant, I need to get to see my clients. Consultants have cars, so let’s get a car.

But, in reality, my processing has started somewhere just above the *middle* of the chunking model shown in the diagram (*see below*), and has moved downwards. An easy progression for me, and for most other people in the world.

So, let’s explore going the other way. Let’s say I’ve been reading everything I can about John Prescott’s future transport policy. Let’s say that, politically and philosophically, I believe we all need to cut down on the overextended reliance on the car, and let’s suppose I wake up one morning wondering if there might be another way ...

At this point, I might start to ‘chunk up’, and ask myself a different set of questions -ones, maybe, like this:

‘Why do I need a car at all?’

‘How else could I meet my transport needs?’

‘Where does having my own car fit in with the bigger picture of Saving the Planet?’

‘Do we really need to Save the Planet?’ Do I need to travel at all?’



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By chunking up like this, I may discover that the issue for me is one of communication as much as transport. It may be that I'm a closet megalomaniac, and think, like one of my clients, that the answer is a Learjet, or, like another client, a helicopter of my own.

Or it may be that, when I really think about it, it would be more convenient to me, and more useful of my time, to travel to business by train, rather than sit for hours, unproductively, in a traffic jam on the M25, or any of the major roads into the other big cities.

Or even that I need to upgrade my technological support, and communicate digitally, rather than in person.

What would happen if ... ?

So what if you were to become a more flexible chunker? What would be the difference then? How could you apply the model?

How would you use it to alleviate the problems that I described with my clients above?

The MD's issue was simple to resolve. I taught the board the model. The engineers learned to notice when the MD began to be uncomfortable with what they were saying, and immediately 'chunked up' in order to build and maintain rapport. In extreme cases, the MD himself cued them by sticking his thumb up in the air. The result: forward movement for the company, a speedy return to profitability, and much less tension all round.

The Marketing Director of the insurance company was reassured that the problem with the rest of the board was theirs, rather than his. He learned to listen with more of a 'process ear', and to let the rest of the board delve into all the detail they needed, while he did more blue-sky thinking - and waited for them to catch up. In time, they learned the value of his intuition, and began to chunk up to his level. Altogether, decision-making happened more quickly, and ultimately, became a process involving all the team's skills.

As the engineers discovered, chunking can be a very powerful tool in rapport building and negotiation. In fact, if you look at the famous 'Harvard Negotiation Process', you will notice that it is all about deft chunking. Part of what it says is: match your partner(s), chunk up for agreement, and *then* go into the detail. And when you get to the sticking points - and you will, that's what negotiation's all about - chunk back up quickly, to stay in rapport, and strengthen the feeling of a shared process, and ultimate agreement.

