soundwave®

Introducing SoundWave

The Official Whitepaper

Leadership Development

SoundWave is a suite of assessment tools and development resources which aims to improve the quality of dialogue between people at work.

It is an original concept and model, created by Kevin Charles Eyre, a British Organisation Development consultant.

Conceptually, the SoundWave concept belongs to a tradition of three-dimensional models in social science which includes frameworks such as Vroom & Jago's Eras of Management (The Craftsman Era – Scientific Management – Participative Management), Lewin's Social Climates (Laissez-fare – Autocracy – Democracy) and Ansoff's Power Processes (Bargaining – Coercive – Consensual). This tradition is perhaps most elegantly summarised in Robert Keidel's notion of Triarchic Theory.[2]

While many models in organisation and management development rely on two-dimensional matrices as a means of exploring and presenting alternative patterns of relating, SoundWave adopts the three-dimensional approach as being both more realistic and more useful in practice.

Two of the three original cardinal points in the SoundWave model – Advocacy and Inquiry – are well-established concepts in discourse psychology (see, for example, the work of William Isaacs on Dialogue[3] and the work of Peter Senge (4). The voice 'to correct' (to call someone's attention to their responsibility) is added as an additional primary voice, both because of the intrinsic organisational requirement for this voice and because of the observation that it is a form of expression that is commonly used, but typically done badly, or omitted altogether, by managers in practice. SoundWave's triangular framework consequently provides a more thorough and a more nuanced picture of the choices, dynamics, tensions and opportunities present in human social interactions.

SoundWave is unique also in that it looks to establish perceptions about the quality of people's listening as well as of their talk. It seeks to challenge the erroneous belief (based often on a mis-understanding of the experiments of Albert Mehrabian 5) that so much the greater proportion of communication occurs through 'non-verbal' communication. Listening is pivotal to effective dialogue and the creative potential of human beings is bound to this capacity to listen, talk and then to dialogue unselfconsciously.

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What's different about SoundWave?

SoundWave is a model of competence in talk-in human social interaction, or, perhaps, competence in dialogue as a form of action. Its premise is that, 'talk is action', the primary form of action for those who work with others, especially those in leadership and management roles.

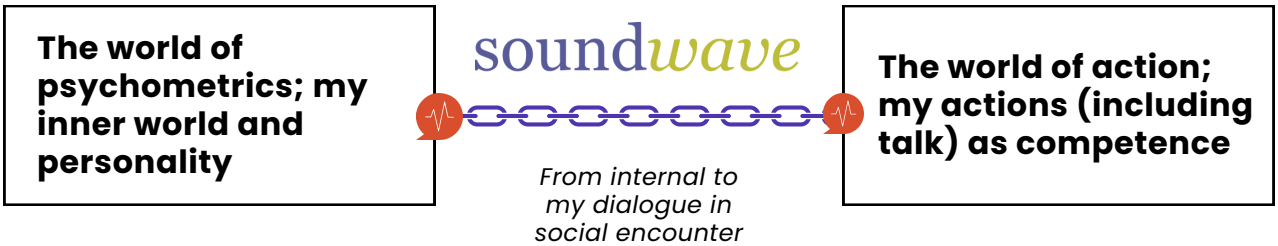
This makes the competent use of talk a meta-competence, an underpinning skill for many of the other capabilities (such as inter-personal skills, communication skills, team working, leadership and so on) that regularly feature in organisations competency frameworks.

SoundWave describes dialogue at the level of what is best termed 'verbal strategies' or 'voices', broad brush strokes of linguistic artistry of which we are variously aware and perhaps sometimes held captive.

These brush strokes of speech define something of who we are in the ears of other people allowing us to be categorised, pigeon holed and enjoyed. They have a pronounced and sometimes profound effect on the thoughts, feelings and actions of others impacting their engagement and motivation in working contexts. 'Voices' are not the nitty gritty of day-to-day chit chat, although they will influence the direction and use this.

SoundWave, the assessment suite, might best be described a locating itself between the worlds of psychometrics (for which the world is well-served) and the world of competences (for which the world is also well served); it is in many ways a bridge or missing link.

It helps to bring life to the underlying characteristics of our personalities and a pragmatism to the world of competence frameworks with their penchant for abstraction. Increasingly we refer to the SoundWave assessment as a 'socio-metric'.



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The Brilliance of Our Ideology

SoundWave proposes that our use of language is malleable so long as we become conscious of its design and use. Rather like habitual behaviour, we tend to talk in particular ways. This is a consequence of who we are at heart and of our environmental influences.

The hard evidence for the variability in our use of talk and in our preferences for listening resides in the results of the SoundWave360 in which we see how an individual alters the way that they hold dialogue depending on who they are in dialogue with.

The secret to changing how we talk is to change our perception, to make a leap of imagination, of what talk the social encounter requires. This is conscious dialogue, a situation that positively seeks to influence dialogue for the better. It requires good emotional understanding and control and the skilful creation of dialogue.

Unlike personality instruments, SoundWave is both descriptive and prescriptive. It is prescriptive in its proposition that there are nine distinct modes of expression, or voices, all of which are, at one time or another, necessary competencies in the context of dialogue and interaction. It is descriptive in that it provides profiles, both through self-perception and 360 degree feedback, of the extent to which an individual (or team) uses these voices in practice. SoundWave is normative in explicitly inviting individuals to reflect on and address any apparent gaps in their repertoire of voices and also in their potential over-use (accentuated) or under-use (passive) or unskilful use.

SoundWave is therefore a developmental model. It assumes that assessment of the individual or team is only a starting point and that this needs to be followed by the development of further skill and sensitivity in the use of the different voices and in recognising the contexts in which they are appropriate. As an offering, SoundWave comprises not only its analytical questionnaires and reports but also an extensive and continually expanding suite of developmental resources, made available to accredited SoundWave practitioners through an online 'Practitioner Dashboard'. Our objective is to make real differences in practice, to go beyond the point at which so many psychometrics stop. In support of this ambition, SoundWave incorporates methods and techniques from outside of mainstream psychology including such things as Conversation Analysis, 'pragmatics' (a branch of linguistics concerned with establishing meaning in talk) and sociology. The philosophical premise is that people are 'meaning making mammals' and that it is through their use of talk that they create social reality. This is sometime known as 'social constructivism'. A SoundWave intervention is designed to start with knowing-what, but then to proceed to develop both know-how and, crucially, know-when.

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The Relationship Between Competence & Personality

Competencies describe the behaviours associated with effective performance. Competencies are what organisations want. Psychometrics serve to describe the personalities that different individuals bring to the challenge of becoming competent. An awareness of personal styles and inclinations is therefore useful in helping people to develop more competent use of talk.

Although the SoundWave self-perception questionnaire is not a psychometric, personality preference is one of the factors, along with role, learning and other situational influences, which can shape an individual's SoundWave profile. The SoundWave self-perception profile therefore can and does provide insights into the effects of personality on competence and provides a point of departure for developing the competence.

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Validity, Reliability and Continuing Research

The conceptual soundness of the SoundWave model has been supported by a series of studies of the correlations among the nine voices. This demonstrated, as is the model hypothesises, that there is no significant correlation between the 3 primary voices of Inquiry, Advise and Correct. Between each of the voices clustered around each of these angles, however, the correlations are highly significant, growing weaker with greater distance from the cardinal point. All these correlations proved statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, where the probability of the result occurring by chance is no more than 1 in 1000. At the same time, the 'overlap' between constructs is relatively small at an average of 16%, which is important because it indicates that while the nine voices are related, they are also essentially distinct, which is the SoundWave proposition.

Construct validity studies have also been conducted to explore the correlations between the SoundWave 'voices' and other well-established personality psychometrics, including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Belbin's Team-Roles Inventory, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict-handling modes, Honey & Mumford's Learning Styles and Holland's Vocational Interests. Statistically significant correlations have been identified with all of these instruments, throwing light on the sometimes clear but often complex and varied personality factors that can influence the use of particular 'voices.' What this ongoing programme of correlation studies underlines is that the nine voices of expression identified in the SoundWave model are distinctive constructs in their own right.

The issue of test/re-test reliability needs careful consideration for SoundWave. Because it is a developmental model, and the intention is that it should stimulate change, we would hope and expect that re-test would produce a different pattern of results, reflecting the learning and development that had taken place. As such we have not and do not intend to conduct this analysis in the foreseeable future. The sequence in which the questions are currently presented in the SoundWave questionnaire was randomly generated.

The face validity of the profiles produced by the SoundWave questionnaire is acknowledged by most subjects, as is its practical utility in highlighting effective and ineffective behaviours. In the business context, this pragmatic level of endorsement is generally regarded as sufficient to demonstrate Sound'wave's perceived validity. No formal outcome, or before/after, studies have yet to be conducted although there are many anecdotal examples of change have occurred and having lasted.

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Validity, Reliability and Continuing Research

The norms which SoundWave uses to determine upper quartile (strong use) and lower quartile (potential gap-in-the-repertoire) scores are carefully monitored and progressively refined. Interestingly, the underlying pattern that emerged during the development phase as early as n=100 has remained substantially unchanged. As would be expected as the size of the norm group (currently n=4000+) increases, the boundaries marking the middle 50% of the distributions have come somewhat closer together, making it easier to identify 'low' and 'high' range results, and differentiating individual SoundWave profiles more strongly. The range of reported patterns remains extremely high, and this capacity to individualise a person's profile is emerging as one of SoundWave's most useful and distinctive features.

An international managerial, professional and technical population (n=4,000+) provides the norms that SoundWave currently uses. Our own research programme includes a series of studies to investigate and understand whether and how SoundWave patterns and norms differ across national cultures as well as between business sectors and occupations. The quality of such research is, of course, highly dependent on continuing to grow the database across a broad organisational and cultural spectrum.

Our hypothesis is that the 'nine voices' exist in all cultures, but the manner in which these different voices are expressed and perceived is likely to vary widely. We are committed to researching and understanding these very important issues, and to producing insights that can be applied in very practical ways to improving the quality of cross-cultural interactions.

Many different nationalities have already contributed to the results which comprise the SoundWave database. Our premise is that talk matters in every domain of human endeavour and our ambition is to make communications and social interactions more productive and more satisfactory in all quarters of human activity in the global economy.

NOTES & REFERENCES

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