

[HOME](#) // [IDEAS](#) // [WORK BETTER](#)

POSTED ON

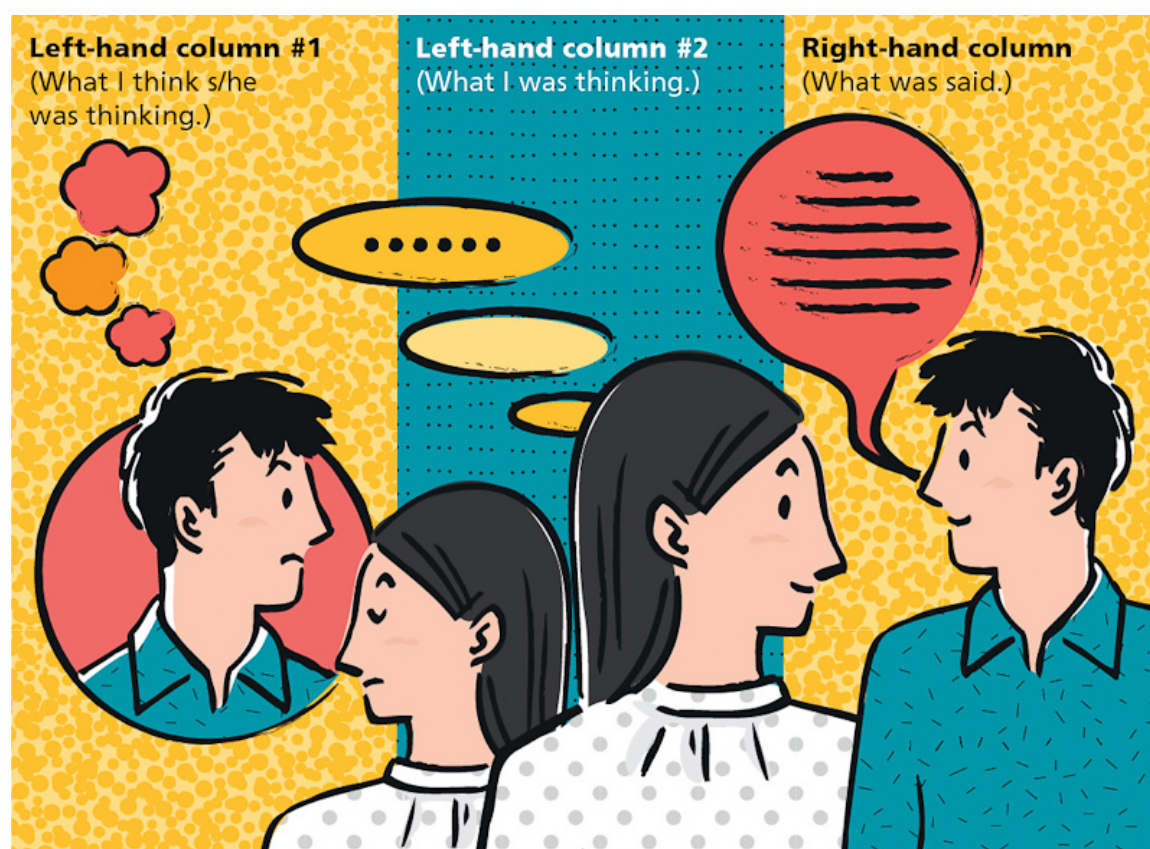
Jan 12, 2015

Communicate Better With The Left-Hand Column Technique



Mr K. Achuthappa, who attended the Leading & Sustaining Change Programme at the Civil Service College, learns how the “left-hand column” technique can help him at work and at home.

I attended the Leading & Sustaining Change Programme not expecting it to be a life-changing experience. As it turned out, the trainers shared techniques and concepts that were of practical use not only for work but for other aspects of life too. The course made me reflect on who I am and how my actions affect others. It has made me a better listener and manager of change.



The left-hand column technique

Dr Chris Argyris, Professor Emeritus at Harvard Business School, developed the left-hand column technique to help people understand exactly what assumptions are communicated behind words said. To practise this technique, individuals write out a conversation they had participated in, listing their spoken dialogue on the right-hand side and their internal dialogue (what they were really thinking) on the left-hand side. The goal is to become more conscious of the dichotomy between their words and their thoughts.

Professor Sue Faerman at the University at Albany extended this technique in 1996 by adding another column. This column is for recording what you believe the other person meant by what he or she said, making it possible to expose both the surface and unconscious perceptions and assumptions.

Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, says that with practice, we will eventually be able to mentally fill in the lefthand columns in real time, which should significantly aid our communication.

How I have applied it

The technique has helped me handle difficult conversations and better manage meetings. I now better understand the motive(s) behind what I say and what I hear others say. It has also helped me to clarify my assumptions and facilitate others to share their thoughts, in a give-andtake manner, during a real-time discussion. Practising the technique was particularly useful in managing the sentiments of my staff who had to be redeployed when my unit's services were moved to another agency. It helped me understand their concerns and I was



relationship with my colleagues and supervisors. When I was managing deadline-driven projects, I applied the technique to reflect more on the processes and the people, not just the outcomes. For example, although an IT project I helped to oversee had a tight deadline for completion, I allowed for more time for discussions and clarification. This contributed to the smooth implementation of the next stage of the project.

At home, the technique has helped me improve my parenting skills and relationship with my two teenage children. Whenever I communicate with them, I try to understand their frame of mind, and try my best to provide appropriate responses.

For example, the following is a conversation that I had with my son after he got his JC2 preliminary exam results:

Right-hand column (what was said)

Me: I notice that you did well for Economics. What did you do to get this good result?
Son: I had a study plan and stuck to it. My tutor taught me how to dissect and interpret the questions. This strategy I think helped me very much. Why are you asking this, Dad?

Left-hand column #2 (what I was thinking)

My son is already under pressure to do well in the A-level exams. I should not add more pressure on him.

Left-hand column #1 (what I think he was thinking)

Is my father going to lecture me for not studying hard enough? What is he trying to do by asking this question?

Outcome (what I then said)

Me: Son, I think you may want to consider replicating for your other subjects what you did when studying Economics. What do you think? How do you think your mum and I can help you perform better for the A-level exams?

As shown, thanks to the left-hand column technique, I was able to come up with an appropriate response to encourage my son and help him manage the stress of preparing for his A-level exams. Our bond was thus strengthened.

Mr K. Achuthappa is Senior Assistant Director of the Community Engagement and Professional Development Branch, Ministry of Social & Family Development.



WORK BETTER
5 Energy-Boosting...



WORK BETTER
Are You Getting Enoug...



YOUR SAY
Public Officers' Advice...



YOUR SAY



LETTERS



OUT OF OFFICE

