Communication Chameleons

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ABSTRACT

Some testers enjoy working in isolation to critically explore software to find bugs. Other testers work in solitude to find bugs while repeatedly running the same test scripts. The very best testers fit neither of these groups. While they maintain intense focus in their test activities, they also invest time in talking with colleagues about their work and the product – and are able to do so beautifully, regardless of who they speak with. These testers are chameleons. They communicate effectively with different stakeholders to engage in valuable conversations.

1.   INTRODUCTION

In the line of duty, testers are exposed to a variety of situations, and a variety of people. Testers spend a lot of time questioning assumptions, exploring ideas, and intimately investigating the innards of software products. They work closely with people across the organization to learn about the product, discover gaps in product understanding, discuss observations and problems, report on findings, and learn about customer needs and frustrations.

But wait!

Many testers do not perform all these activities.

They instead spend most of their time running test cases that find nothing new or interesting about the product under test. Or perhaps they focus on exploring the product to find new and interesting information, and in doing so, spend much of their time in isolation. Others spend a lot of time documenting information that rarely gets used again, or attending hours of meetings talking about the product.

So what is a tester supposed to be doing? Better yet, what does a great tester do?

In my experience the best testers do all of the aforementioned activities and more. These testers are adaptable in performing a variety of test-related activities and collaborating and communicating with a variety of people about many different topics.

These testers are chameleons.

2.   TESTERS ARE NOT LIZARDS

Figure 1: Chameleon, Flickr User "Today Is A Good Day"

This is a chameleon, let's call him Fred. He is flexible as he adapts to new situations and other individuals to communicate with. Chameleons are creatures who observe and are aware of their surroundings, are patient in waiting for the right moment to interact or proceed, and will appropriately change with the world around them.

If you were to research chameleons in mythology, you would discover that they were often associated with demons because they can change their appearance, and were thus believed to deceive mankind.

Chameleons are not demons.

Neither are Testers.

Though some people may claim otherwise, testers do not have horns, nor do they have claws. Yes, they seem to have an unusual ability to see details that most people can not, but assuredly, their eyes do not provide a 360-degree view around their body.

Though testers are the seeming harbingers of bad news about projects, it is because they take their job seriously as information-providers, and will speak the whole truth about what they have discovered.

Testers are not out to trick or deceive their fellow colleagues. While they have an ability to work with different facets of an organization with seeming ease, this simply showcases their adaptability and desire to do their job well. They seek information from everyone who plays a part in the effort to produce a product, and find ways to form the necessary relationships whilst still being themselves.

While testers share a number of characteristics with chameleons, they are not lizards. Testers are warm-blooded mammals who walk on two feet, have no tail, and live in a variety of climates.

Testers can be like chameleons in their ability to observe and be aware of their surroundings, both in the product they are testing, and in their environment working with other people. Many testers understand the importance of timing for initiating conversations about observations, concerns, issues, and even a job well done.

A successful tester is able to change with the world around them. Projects constantly evolve and need testers who can adapt and change their plans quickly to ensure the appropriate priorities are tested so to share the information that matters with stakeholders. They also adapt their communication style to match the needs of the different people they interact with.

As information service providers, it is the testers job to provide a service that is valuable.

3. MEET A TESTER

Figure 2: Tester, Simpsonized Character

This is a tester, let's call him Chris. Like many people, he has a job to pay his bills, enjoys long weekends, and despises management administrative tasks like filling out timesheets. He prefers to work in environments that encourage creativity and collaboration, but often finds he is stuck in a space that encourages isolation. Some testers can be found spending a lot of time playing online role-playing games when they are not at work, but Chris does not.

Like some other testers, Chris has some rather unique abilities.

When reading documentation, Chris keeps his mind alert searching for missing pieces of information to learn about what software is expected to do, and the value it is to provide. He makes a point of asking other project members questions about the inconsistencies and gaps he finds to ensure that he understands the intent – and so that other parties do too. He is more concerned about doing his job well, than about being the guy who doesn't ask questions so everyone thinks he is super-smart.

When testing software, Chris avoids executing scripted tests as much as possible. He recognizes that he often disengages from the work he is doing when running rote test cases, and even when he doesn't, he isn't looking for other types of problems. He likes to spend time on activities outside of work that engage his brain in different ways, so he can be an even better tester. Chris actively engages in exploring software to locate important bugs as quickly as possible. He understands that in business, time is money, and finding problems quickly will help his business save money, therefore making him a valuable asset.

Chris enjoys working closely with other testers on projects, as brainstorming ideas and solutions is more effective when a few people are involved. Determining plans and strategies together for testing a project, or even just the testing for the day, results in better breadth and depth of coverage than Chris could come up with on his own. He appreciates the perspectives that his colleagues bring in providing input into observations and problems he noted during his testing, as well as in identifying risks and issues. One activity he finds particularly beneficial, though he wishes he could do it more often, is paired testing sessions – where he and another tester sit and test for a period of time together. Many more interesting things about products are uncovered than he would find in isolation.

Chris also works closely with programmers. He spends time every week pairing with programmers on different tasks, as he finds that different perspectives help arrive at better results. Programmers he pairs with enjoy Chris' participation in software design discussions, programming sessions, root cause analysis efforts, and finding solutions to fix bugs. When he has questions about the software, they are happy to answer them and clear up inconsistencies in perspective about what the software should do. Everyone agrees that they are in this to produce the best product to satisfy a customer's need.

In questioning, clarifying, and testing things on a project, Chris finds it can be easy to get caught up in those activities. They are a lot of fun, and quite mentally stimulating. So, he makes a daily effort to respect the needs of the other stakeholders on the project. Not wanting to be distracted by well-meaning managers, project managers, and executives at inconvenient times, Chris purposefully shares information with them in different ways. He recognizes that each party is interested in

different information, so it is important that he finds out what they are most interested in, and how to provide that.

Chris has found it valuable to display big-visible-charts about testing progress on walls in work areas to fill some of those needs. He has made a habit of talking with different people regularly to provide information on what they want to know about. He emphasizes the big-visible-charts to encourage people to walk by, look at them, and ask questions. Chris finds he often has conversations about what different test results mean, project risks, explaining decisions about test strategies, sharing technical boundaries discovered with other team members, and gaining support for necessary efficiency improvements.

Chris is proud of the work that he does, though doesn't realize that many testers do not have a similar passion, interest, and skill sets, for testing.

Like Chris, great testers are observant in their interactions with software and people, recognize the importance of their role as an information service provider, and readily adapt to the changing people and project needs around him.

4. IT'S ABOUT COMMUNICATION

These great testers have come to understand something very important about excelling in their role: Making great software isn't just about the technical work, but about the people and relationships involved. Which of course, leads to communication!

Skill in communication isn't just for testers, but for everyone involved in an organization. Testers play a key role in projects as information providers though, so it is quite important for them to build good communication skills and maintain them. It is difficult to be an information provider if you are unable to communicate effectively with others.

4.1 COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Communication is a two-way street. It involves the exchange and flow of information and ideas from one person to another and back again. It includes content, spoken and written words used, and context (the way the message is delivered, e.g. body language, emotions).

Communication is effective only if the receiver understands the exact information that the sender had intended to transmit. Feedback is used as a mechanism to help confirm this. The primary intent for feedback is to first understand what the other party was trying to communicate. A type of feedback that is effective for this involves paraphrasing words the sender used to help ensure the receiver accurately interpreted and understood the intent of the sender.

4.2 COMMUNICATION STYLE

The communication style used can make or break an attempt to work with someone successfully or not.

Research completed by Wilson Learning has shown that assertiveness and responsiveness are two dimensions of interpersonal actions that encompass major behavioural tendencies we see in each other.[1]

Assertiveness refers to the way in which we are perceived as trying to influence the thoughts and actions of others, and will be either 'Ask' or 'Tell' directed. Responsiveness is the way in which we are perceived when we express our feelings when relating to others, and will be 'Task' or 'People' directed. [2]

Each approach across both dimensions creates a matrix of social style groups, that may be more appropriate to use in different situations, and with different people.

- *Analytical*: Ask Assertiveness & Task Responsiveness. Focuses on facts, acts when payoff is clear, and is careful not to commit too quickly.

- *Driver*: Tell Assertiveness & Task Responsiveness. Focuses on results, takes charge, makes quick decisions, and likes challenges.

- *Amiable*: Ask Assertiveness & People Responsiveness. Cooperates to gain agreement, provides support, and communicates trust and confidence.

- *Expressive*: Tell Assertiveness & People Responsiveness. Creates excitement & involvement, shares ideas/dreams/enthusiasm, and motivates, inspires & persuades.[3]

Regardless of the style used, an effective and healthy style in communication involves a natural expression of self, such that self-esteem is intact and have confidence. Using assertive behaviours, needs are clearly communicated, while you know your limits and refuse to be pushed beyond them. To work well, you must care about relationships, and strive to achieve mutually satisfying solutions.

I once worked with a new programming manager who bluntly said that he did not want testers involved in any meetings or discussions with his programmers. While my immediate response was surprise and defensiveness, I took

[1] Wilson Learning. The Social Styles Handbook. Canada: Nova Vista Publishing, 2004. 24.

[2] Wilson Learning. The Social Styles Handbook. Canada: Nova Vista Publishing, 2004. 25-26.

[3] Wilson Learning. The Social Styles Handbook. Canada: Nova Vista Publishing, 2004. 30.

a deep breath and reconsidered my approach. Instead, I calmly asked him if he had had a bad experience in a previous job, to get to the root of his concern. It turned out he had worked with a test group who consistently made his group look bad. We were then able to openly discuss his experience, and arrive at a mutually acceptable solution.

Aggressive behaviours on the other hand are ineffective, as they involve manipulation, guilt, intimidation, and control tactics. I once worked with a more senior manager who often used control tactics, and lies, to get people to do what he wanted. It was a demoralizing experience to work with this manager, which was visible and evident with those who worked with him. One particular team of people found themselves happier, more productive, more successful, and confident a few weeks after the aggressive manager was moved out of the organization.

Passive behaviours involve avoiding confrontation at all costs, not questioning things, talking very little, and tending towards compliance with others. Such behaviours will nearly guarantee that you will not be respected or listened to by your colleagues, particularly those who are behaving aggressively. This will limit your ability to do your job.

In my experience, the worst behaviour is passive-aggressive. I have worked both with an employee and a manager who preferred passive-aggressive behaviours. In both cases, I found it difficult to figure out their intentions, and for a long time was confused about what was happening. They both avoided direct confrontation, but indirectly attempted to manipulate myself, teammates, and situations. This lead to office politics and rumour-mongering. I strongly recommend avoiding this one.

Using an assertive communication style will help build strong healthy relationships with project members, which leads to a positive work environment where team members collaborate and work well together.

4.3   SEEK TO UNDERSTAND

In conversation with other people, it is necessary to understand a few things. First, what are they trying to communicate to you? Second, what information do they need from you? Last, how will you know when you've succeeded in providing it?

With each conversation, try spending more time listening to what the other person has to say than talking yourself. Asking open-ended questions will help you get more information to understand both what they are saying, and what they need. It may also be helpful to take notes so you can remember exactly what was discussed and refer back to them later.

Find out what type of information is valuable to the person in their job function. You may find that talking in terms of

business risk and financial costs is more meaningful to different levels of management than the number of bugs found. Programmers may tell you that they are interested to know as much as possible about the bugs you reported to help them better isolate the issue and fix them. They may also want to hear some good news about the areas you have tested that appear to be in great shape. Customer support may request access to training material or known issues lists so they can both train for supporting the product, but also be ready to help customers resolve problems quickly.

Beyond specific job functions, it is also helpful to understand what motivates the particular person you are conversing with, and the values that they have. Understanding what is personally important to them will allow you to tailor your communication approaches and information services to be more engaging and meaningful for them.

4.4   BE ENGAGED

In employing an assertive style, where you are seeking to understand both the intent, and what is important for the other person, you may tend to employ active listening techniques quite naturally. This involves listening to the conversation with purpose, with the intent of attending to both the verbal and non-verbal cues the sender is giving to understand the message they are sending. This is hard work! This activity supports the building of strong relationships.

The nonverbal behaviours you yourself are exhibiting are also important indicators as to how engaged you are in a conversation. Using good eye contact, keep your facial expressions, gestures, and body language friendly and positive, and monitor your vocal cues such as tone, pitch, loudness, timbre, and rhythm. All of these are silent indicators as to how you truly feel about the conversation you are involved in. [4]

4.5   INFORMATION RADIATORS

As information service providers, testers actively seek out information and report it to the people who need to know so they can make effective decisions. There are several critical aspects to performing this aspect of communication well:

- **Information is Relevant:** It must be relevant to the person who requested it, and be presented in a way that it is inline with their motivators and values. Remember the work you did to understand this persons needs and motivations? Be sure to wrap your message in a package designed for them.

[4]Robertson, Arthur K. Listen For Success: A Guide to Effective Listening. New York: Irwin, Inc., 1994. 137.

- **Information is Meaningful and Useful:** Similar to being relevant, it is meaningful if it is packaged in a way that the person can understand what you are trying to tell them, in terms that they understand. It is useful if they find value in it; if they don't find it useful, you either packaged the wrong information, or packaged the right information in the wrong way.

- **Information is Accurate and Complete:** It is critical that when sharing information, you have confirmed it to be accurate! Having to go back and change something you have communicated because you didn't have your facts straight will reduce your credibility. Having complete information is also important, as people tend to run with whatever they have been given, and acting as though it was complete.

- **Information is Timely:** Providing important information too soon will have a 'the sky is falling!' effect, and will not receive the attention it needs. Providing it too late will have you missing the boat entirely. Timing the delivery of information can be tricky. It is easier if you are using tools like big-visible-charts though.

- **Information is Actionable:** Sharing information that is interesting is not helpful to those you are sharing it with. They need it packaged in a way that they are clear on what needs to happen next. Do you need a decision made? Do you need their support on something? What do they need to do with what you have give them? If you don't make it clear, it will be lost in the land of "that was interesting (or not), what's next?".

5. CONCLUSION

Just as our chameleon friend Fred was able to adapt to his environment and the individuals in it by changing his colours, our tester friend Chris was adaptable in his communication approaches, as evident in his ability to positively interact with people in many different roles in the organization.

Great testers are not born, they are created with focus, passion, and a desire to do the best job they can. A part of that involves improving communication skills and relationships. Engaging in value-adding conversations involves being engaged and adapting your non-verbal receptors and behaviours to flow with the recipients, seeking to understand, listening actively, being an information radiator, providing the information the recipient needs, and being true to yourself while being personable. The result is the fostering of an open communication environment that is built on trust, and an environment in which teams accomplish amazing feats.

This is about acquiring new skills, or enhancing your existing ones, to help you be a great tester. Take the next step in your career, and make it happen.

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