

PAPER

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Tight-rope

Bob Dick (1987) *Tight-rope: a video script on telephone communication skills*. Developed for Department of Social Security, whose film unit prepared it for training their front-line telephone staff.

The purpose of this video is to provide realistic models of good telephone communication skills in situations which might arise in DSS offices. It forms part of the resource material for a programme where experienced mentors help less experienced officers improve their telephone skills by providing guidance, support, and a model to emulate.

In the script that follows, George provides one model for the way a mentor might approach the development of staff. Julie is the newcomer, trying to learn how to cope on the telephone. Ann provides a model of good telephone skills.

In what follows, the effect to strive for is utter believability. The acting will do better to err on the side of understatement. If the acting is realistic, camera angle and other editing effects can then be used to focus attention and to avoid distracting details.

It is particularly important that the telephone skills are not made to appear too polished or too effortless. A level of skill that is well within the reach of typical DSS officers is appropriate. Anything which makes it appear too easy is a trap

for viewers; anything which is too polished presents a model which is outside the reach of viewers. In conversation people stumble, and sometimes have to pause to think, and sometimes even garble what they are saying. To be polished and articulate is to present a reality beyond the easy reach of many, and is therefore to be avoided if possible.

The key message is this: It isn't the polish of the communication skills that matters; if you persist, showing concern for both the department and the client, then most issues can be dealt with constructively.

Technical polish is a different matter. It is better if training material is technically polished. Its awkwardness may otherwise distract people's attention from the message. Too much striving after effect is also distracting; all else being equal, subtle effects are better than obvious ones in this type of training film.

George and Julie and Ann are ordinary people with ordinary skills. If the dialogue as written cannot be said naturally and believably, then it is better to change it. The message is the thing, and details can be modified in the light of experience as production proceeds.

In one respect, George does sometimes show particularly good communication skills. He usually tries to give whoever he is listening to one hundred per cent of his attention. He doesn't always remember to do this, but usually he succeeds in doing so. In addition, he usually checks that people he talks to are paying attention to him. It is on this strategy that his communication skills are based.

The scenery should be authentic, and likely to be accepted as such by DSS officers. The editing and camera work may be used to introduce interest, though not at the expense of intruding on the dialogue or the situation. The sort of clutter that typifies most offices at the end of a busy day should be apparent. Careful selection of camera angles can prevent the clutter being a distraction.

Cues should in most instances be picked up quickly — a rather short film is likely to be more effective than a long one. On a few occasions a slower pace is used for effect; these places are indicated.

Production details (e.g. about camera angles) are occasionally provided. These need not be taken too literally. The production team best knows what can be done with their expertise and equipment to focus attention on important features, to maintain interest, and to be esthetically pleasing. Technical effects are used to reinforce or amplify the key messages; people in the production team are the best judges of how this should be done.

A slow pan reveals a DSS office. The office is in the state of clutter that indicates a busy day, though it seems to have quietened down now. The officers are clearly tired.

Titles are interspersed with the pan. Snatches of barely decipherable conversation are heard. The camera slowly dollies in towards the cell where Julie works.

During the opening titles, the camera takes in brief glimpses of a poster over George's desk, illustrated with cartoons. It says ...

1. FEELINGS FIRST
2. one thing at a time
3. PAY ATTENTION

The camera rests for a moment on the face of a woman in her late teens or early twenties. She is engrossed in a serious conversation on the telephone while she simultaneously checks enquiries on a visual display unit. She is extravert, bubbly, and seems to like the work. She is Ann.

The camera pans. In the foreground, is Julie, a Class 1. Over her shoulder, out of focus, is the face of a slightly older man. Julie is young and inexperienced, and hasn't been working here for long. She is keen to learn. George, the man, is her supervisor. His

apparent reserve conceals a skill with people that is the result of several years of experience. He can be a bit of a rough diamond, Ocker style, he seems to enjoy whatever he does, and isn't easily ruffled.

The camera, in a low-level shot, slowly comes into focus on George's face. We can now see he is a man in his late twenties or early thirties standing in the background looking away to the right. As he looks through a file, shades of puzzlement sometimes fleet across his expression. In general appearance and speech, George could be a next door neighbour in a working class suburb: laconic, a dry sense of humour never far from the surface; you would expect him to enjoy an afternoon at the football with his mates, or a day fishing. And you would be correct.

The focus transfers to Julie's face. She is now speaking on the telephone; and as the focus becomes clearer it is evident that she is having difficulties with whoever is on the other end. Julie is in her late teens or early twenties. She is dressed in the manner of her age group, though not outlandishly so. She looks vaguely ethnic, as do many of the younger employees, though her accent is Australian. Her general manner is usually reasonably assertive; but at the same time she is keen to achieve, and willing to try to fit in with others.

Julie: No. No. No, Mrs Telford, I'm sure it will ...

The phone clicks audibly. Julie sits there, holding the mouthpiece of the telephone, staring into space. George looks idly in her direction, not having overheard the conversation.

*George: Julie, would you pass me that file please. (Julie doesn't hear.) Julie ...
 Julie, would you ... (George pauses and looks more closely at Julie.) Julie,
 are you OK.*

Julie (quietly): Sure. (She continues looking into space.)

George: Can I have the file, please?

Julie *(finally looking at him)*: What?

George *(speaking slowly and deliberately, though with the trace of a smile)*: The ... file. F-i-l-e. *(Normally)*: You know, that strange-looking yellow and green doorstop disguised as a manila folder. Near your left elbow.

Julie: Yeh. OK. *(She passes it to him, somewhat distractedly)*.

George swivels his chair around until he is closer to her.

George *(in mock curiosity)*: Can you always do that?

Julie *(suddenly paying attention)*: What?

George *(obviously having a friendly "go" at her)*: Sleep with your eyes open. *(He smiles at her.)*

Julie really has been trying hard in this job. But, like many new jobs where workloads are heavy, it has at time been traumatic for her coping with the detail, the amount of work, the difficult judgments, and particularly the strong feelings of some of the clients. Sometimes she realises all will be well in time. But sometimes, like today, it all gets to be a bit much.

She decides the time has come to admit that she is having trouble, though she is not sure where it might lead. She hasn't been here long, and has made a few mistakes, as anyone would. And her speed could improve quite a bit.

She has actually done quite well under the circumstances, though she doesn't realise this. George really is pleased with her performance. Perhaps he has been taking her a bit much for granted, however, and could provide a bit more support.

Julie *(a "colleague to colleague" request)*: George, can I talk to you about something? *(The camera stays focussed on her face.)*

George *(realising that despite the lightness she is serious)*: You must be just about due for a break. *(She nods.)* I know I am. Come and have a coffee. *(Calling out:)* We're taking a break, Ann. Can you hold the fort?

Slow fade to coffee room. Julie and George are sitting down over coffee, though Julie is clearly just playing with hers rather than drinking it.

Julie (*shrugging*): ... not sure I'm cut out for this. Perhaps I should go back to working in the shop. (*Her expression implies that she doesn't think much of shop work.*)

George: Been a bad day, has it? (*Julie nods.*)

Julie (*animated and a little disjointed as the story pours out*): That last caller. That poor woman had just lost her husband, and was being thrown out of her home. She was half crazy. And angry. I didn't know what to say to her. I felt so sorry for her I ... (*her tone changes and she slows down*) I sort of half agreed to something I wasn't sure about. And then before I could check it she hung up.

George (*He has a sister just a little younger of whom he is extremely fond. He is obviously touched by Julie's distress,. He can also remember similar feelings from his first few weeks in the job, though being a little bit stiff-upper-lip about it*): Hold on, I'm not sure I've got the gist of this. Um. Were you trying to put the client first? So when you ... got hooked in to her troubles, you got upset too?

Julie senses George's concern.

Julie (*tonelessly*): Yes.

George: And there's more to it than that ...

George moves closer and waits until he is sure he has her attention. Cut to a CU of his face. What follows is important ...

George (*speaking very deliberately*): It gets to be a tough job at times. So you have to put yourself first. (*Cut to CU of Julie.*) You have to find some way, you know, of looking after yourself.

Julie (surprised, staring at him): Are you serious? I thought my job was to look after the clients.

The camera stays on Julie, but zooms out to pick up George too.

George (sensing that Julie is somehow disturbed by what he said): The customer is always right, huh? (He leans back.) OK. I'm not arguing against that. But there's another side to it too, you know. If you don't look after yourself, you aren't in any condition to do much for anyone else either.

This is too much for Julie. She has been trying to do the right thing by client and Department, and finding it painful. Her pain and anger show through in her eyes and tone of voice. Her hands clasp the cup so tightly that it almost breaks.

Julie: What do you expect me to say? (Looking away, she puts on a caricature of harshness, though it isn't entirely convincing.) "Can't you understand, Mrs Telford. It's no good being upset because you lost your man and your home. I've explained your entitlements to you. If you're not prepared to listen, I can't very well help, can I? Why don't you try again when you're able to be a bit more reasonable about it?" (She glares at George.) I was happy to join this department; I thought it would give me a chance to help people. (Now visibly angry.) Now you're telling me I'm not supposed to.

Julie takes a breath as if she is about to speak, but then clamps her mouth shut. Fearing that she has said too much, she draws into herself, and says no more.

George: I haven't explained myself very well, have I? (She glares at him.) I bet you didn't know I do a bit of tight-rope walking. In a (cut to CU of Julie) local activity group for kids. (Julie is absolutely non-plussed, wondering what is going on.) It's a bit like walking a tight-rope, doing the right thing by Department and client. Balancing the Department's

needs and Mrs Smith's. Much too hard unless you look after yourself. You should see me in my circus togs, a real handsome young feller.

Julie: Just what do you mean, George, look after myself?

George: If you're burnt out by the job, it's going to be pretty hard to do it well. (*Slowly:*) I think maybe I've been so lost in my own concerns that I've been a bit thoughtless. (*With a wry smile:*) You've been tossed in the deep end, it's that kind of job. And I haven't been around to find out how you got on. (*More businesslike:*) How about we add this to our list of topics to look at during our meetings? You can write it down in your diary.

Julie: OK.

George (*after a pause, almost as an afterthought:*) I am very pleased with your work, you know.

Julie doesn't know what to say. She shrugs, and shakes her head. But her anger seems to have gone. We hear a number of telephones begin to ring in the background.

George: Let's get back to the trenches. I'll try to explain on the way. (*A sudden bright idea:*) If you like, you can pass the next tough customer on to me, or to Ann, to hear how we handle it. I'll clear that with Ann now.

George crosses to the sink to rinse his cup. Julie does the same, pouring her undrunk coffee down the sink.

Julie (*with some enthusiasm:*) That'd be good.

They walk back to the office. Slow fade to Julie jotting down some notes in "The new starter's guide". As she writes, the phone rings. She picks it up.

Julie (*for the moment in control, but still upset:*) Social Security, Julie speaking. Can I help you?

Although we can't make out the words, it is clear that the person on the other end of the telephone is angry and abusive. Something along the lines of "Where's my #\$\$%^ payment?"

Julie (a mixture of annoyance and uncertainty): Just a moment please.

She looks to Ann, and signals that this is a difficult call. Ann smiles at Julie, and picks up the phone.

Ann: How can I help you? (*The angry voice continues.*) Your payment didn't arrive? Yes, I can understand that you are upset. (*More anger from the other end.*) Let's see if we can sort it out. Let me have your name, and I'll find out what happened to the payment. (*A pause, then a reply.*) Burns? Graham John? OK. (*Ann brings up the details on the screen.*)

Ann (*Aside to Julie*): Could you get me the file please Julie? — Graham John Burns.

Ann (*to Mr Burns; her tone throughout is understanding and helpful*): Now, let's see, Mr Burns.

Ann checks the screen for information. In the meantime, Julie hands her the file.

Ann (*from the screen*): You visited this office to lodge your application on Thursday the 14th, is that right?

Ann (*leafing through the file*): Ah, here we are. It says that you didn't produce proof of identity, ... um ... and you were asked to return with better documents.

There is an audible explosion from the telephone. Julie watches with obvious interest and a little dismay. Ann speaks calmly.

Ann: There does appear to have been some misunderstanding, then. ... From interstate? You mean you don't have much documentation with you? ... Yes, I can see that would make it hard for you. Let's see if we

can work something out. Do you have a driver's licence? (*More explosion.*) You produced it at the counter. Mmm. Is it a licence from your home state, by any chance? ... It is. I'm sorry, but a current local licence is what you need.

Yet another explosion. Ann shakes her head, and pulls a face, then resolutely returns to the conversation. Julie continues to watch with obvious interest.

Ann: I'm sorry you feel that way about it Mr Burns. I am here to help you. I am not allowed to accept your application without acceptable proof of identity. ... Would you like me to help you find acceptable proof of identity? ... OK. If you present your licence at a licence issuing centre ... Just a moment, I'll find you the address. (*She checks Mr Burns' address from the screen and then opens a telephone directory.*) Do you have a pencil and paper there? There is one in Railway Terrace in your suburb. You should be able to be issued with a new licence. And it needs to have your current address on it. Now, what else ...

Julie hands Ann the list of acceptable documents. Ann smiles and nods her thanks.

Ann: Do you have a tax assessment notice form? ("No.") How about a recent telephone receipt, or electricity or gas receipt, addressed to you? ... You think perhaps a gas bill. For your current address? Good! A reference from an employer, which we can verify? ... For example, can we phone the employer? ... You do? Good. When can you be here? Fine. And what are you going to bring with you? — the new licence? ... Mmhmm. And a gas bill to your current address. ... Right. And the reference from that employer. Well, if there are no hitches we should be able to process that almost straight away. ... Yes. That's fine Mr Burns. ("Thank you".) That's quite all right, Mr Burns. Good afternoon.

Julie: Thanks Ann. (She turns to George). That just makes me feel worse, George. It's easy when Ann does it, or you do it. But how can I do that?

George (*calmly and sympathetically*): Which bits can you manage, do you think?

Julie: I can see now what you mean by doing the right thing by the Department and by the client. Ann just explained the situation from the Department's view, and then just helped as much as she could. And I noticed that she repeated what the other person said. Was that so they knew she understood?

George: Mmhmm. It also lets them know that it's OK for them to sound off if they have to. That way they are more likely to talk out their anger.

Julie: Maybe if I didn't get too upset I could manage that. And Ann didn't get flustered, she just got the information she needed to be able to help.

George (*sensing that there is more still to come*): Mmm?

Julie (*sounding quietly desperate*): There's something I just don't understand at all, though.

George: What's that, Julie.

Julie: How on earth do you keep your cool when someone is abusing you like that?

George (*smiling, as if something important has just dawned*): Ah. (He turns to Ann and calls out ...) Ann, you made it look too easy.

Julie looks puzzled.

George: Ann, what were you thinking when you were being abused? (*It's a rhetorical question — he knows the answer.*)

Ann (with a peal of laughter): I was thinking “Graham John Burns, I am not going to let you upset me”.

George: Julie, how easy do you think Ann and I find it?

Julie: I don’t know what you’re asking. Quite easy, I suppose — You just don’t let it bother you at all.

George (moving closer to her, to be sure he has her attention): Can you drive a car?

Julie (surprised): Yes.

George: Drive it well?

Julie (with an expression that suggests she thinks George is off the track): Yeeessss?

George: What was it like when you were just learning?

Julie (daylight and hope dawn!): I didn’t think I’d ever learn. In fact one day the driving instructor even said I’d be better off learning to drive an automatic. I stormed off and had a good bawl. I almost gave up.

George: Sounds as if it was pretty discouraging.

Julie: Well, yes. Oh, I kept at it. It came good in the end. (She takes a deep breath.) So where do I start if I want to handle difficult clients?

George (smiling): What did you do about the driving lessons?

Julie: I just kept on trying.

George: Right! (A note of confidentiality:) Actually, when clients give me a hard time, I keep saying to myself: “Why should I get upset just because they are upset. Upset people are people who are having trouble coping. What can I do to help them cope?” (With a broader smile:) And if I get desperate, I say to myself, “C’mon, Graham John Burns or whoever, try to upset me. Come on, I dare you”.

Julie (this is a new thought for her): You’re still learning to drive ...

It is important at this point that George doesn't pontificate. He is just offering, as a friend, some information he finds helpful. He doesn't want to make a big deal out of it.

George: Yes. Look, I wouldn't want you to think I'm the world's best communicator. I'd be hopeless at Lifeline. And in any event counselling takes more time than we have. There are a few things that help me, though. You want to hear a few?

Julie nods. George pauses to collect his thoughts.

George: I remember learning to drive, and there were just too many things to do at once.

Julie: Yes!

George: But I had a good instructor. She gave me a few important things to focus on until it became more automatic. When I was learning the ropes in here I applied the same logic. I needed something important and easy to help me keep my balance. Like fishing with a float. Very relaxing — just forget everything else, and watch the float.

Julie: Yes?

George: I decided that if I could pay more attention to people I could do a better job.

Julie *(not sure how much use this is)*: How do you mean?

George: Well, when I'm talking with someone and she opens her mouth *(he uses his hand like a puppet)* that doesn't mean there's communication. Communication doesn't happen until I've understood. And I'm not communicating just because I'm opening my mouth and making noises. I have to get the message across. *(He shrugs.)* So I figured that if I didn't pay enough attention I'd miss out on information. And if I didn't get attention it wouldn't matter what I said: the other person wouldn't hear.

Julie (somewhat doubtful): Yes.

The next point is important. It can be marked with a change of camera angle, or a change of pace.

George (in CU): When I listen, I try very hard to give the other person absolutely all of my attention. When I talk, I try to check that the other person has paid attention to me. Every now and then I forget, and the system breaks down. (He is thinking of the opening scene, when he didn't at first realise how upset Julie was.) But mostly I find that if I give and get enough attention then the rest is not too hard.

George is writing on a piece of paper as he talks. He writes near the bottom of the page: "3. Pay attention." The camera picks up what he writes. (It is important that this appears natural rather than forced or artificial.)

Julie (a little incredulously, as she isn't sure if he is pulling her leg): Is that all?

The telephone rings. Almost without thinking Julie reaches for it. But then as she picks it up she takes on a determined look.

Julie: Social Security, Julie here. (She is obviously trying to give the caller one hundred per cent of her attention.) Can I help you?

We can just make out the voice of the person at the other end, though not clearly.

(*Caller:* I certainly hope so. I haven't got my payment.)

Julie: You were expecting a payment, and it didn't arrive?

(*Caller:* That's right. I've got bills to pay, and I was counting on that payment. And it isn't here yet.)

Julie (letting her concern show in her voice): So you'd like to clear this up as soon as you can? ... Can I have your name please, and I'll check our records for you?

(*Caller:* June Telford.)

Julie (*friendly*): Yes, I remember. (*Bringing up the record on the screen.*) Can you give me your address please? Thanks. ... Yes, here it is. The payment was sent the day before yesterday. You checked it this morning did you? ... Mmm. What bank should it be paid into? ... You've opened a new account and closed the old one? Oh, that's the problem then. It's gone to the old account.

(*Caller* (*obviously very irate*): This is tremendous. My landlord is having a fit, I need money to live, and so of course some fool sends it to the wrong branch. Tremendous. What am I supposed to do now?)

Julie: You were counting on the payment? Let's see what we can do about it.

(*Caller* (*shouting*): Obviously it's too simple for you lot, but I expect my money right away. Right away.)

Julie (*grimacing and then taking control of herself*): I'm very sorry that the payment went to the wrong bank, Mrs Telford. Let's see how quickly we can arrange a replacement. Can you visit this office?

(*Caller:* This is crazy!!! You lose my money, and I have to make a trip into your office.)

Julie (*taking a deep breath*): I can understand that you are upset. I want to help. To do that I need your cooperation.

There is what appears to be grudging agreement from the other end of the telephone.

Julie: The quickest way we can arrange payment is for me to take some details from you. ("I don't have time now!") There are a number of things I need to do before I can promise you a replacement payment. Can you phone me in the morning, then?

Julie winces as the caller hangs up noisily in her ear. She writes a few notes to herself, then turns to George.

Ann: That was great, Julie. I'm taking my coffee break now, George.

George: Righto, Ann.

Julie: George, you were talking about giving and getting attention. Is that the whole story.

George (*laughing*): Not exactly. You handled that well (*indicating the phone with a nod of his head*). What did you do?

Julie: Actually, trying to pay attention did help a lot. (*Her tone brightens as she remembers that he had more to say, and was interrupted.*) You said there was something else too?

What follows is important.

George (*still in a very friendly and matter-of-fact way*): I also try to remember that it takes two sets of information to resolve most issues, mine and the other person's. I deal with one at a time.

He writes: "2. One thing at a time".

Julie: You mean, first you get the other person's information, and then you give yours? Like Ann did?

George: Right. It's the reason I gave up smoking.

Julie (*who is beginning to think that she will never get used to George's apparent changes of topic*): What?

George: Interfered with fishing. One thing at a time, I figure, is better.

Julie: OK. Is that the whole story?

What follows is important.

George (*just a trifle abashed; he is beginning to feel a little self-conscious about the advice he is offering*): Almost. I ... uh ... left out the most important thing. (*A change of tone.*) Upset people can't listen, you know. They

just can't.. Until I help the other person to get rid of any bad feelings, I'm wasting my time trying to explain anything. And before I can listen properly I have to get rid of my own feelings.

He writes: "1. Feelings first!"

Julie (as if it explains something which had puzzled her): That's the sign, over your desk, isn't it. (Another insight:) And you've got it where you can look at it while you're on the phone!

There is a brief pause. George starts to move back to his desk.

Julie: George ...

George: Uhuh?

Julie (sincerity apparent despite the light touch): Thanks for giving me one hundred per cent of your attention.

George (obviously touched and delighted): A pleasure. (He covers up his embarrassment by clowning: he mimes walking a tightrope.) Nothing at all for such a masterful tightrope walker.

Julie (Laughing): You idiot!

Ann returns from her coffee break. As she does she opens the blinds, allowing the warm glow of the almost setting sun to spill across the room. (Don't overdo it.)

Ann: Trying to prove you're sober, George? (To Julie): Finally got to him, has it?

George (a trifle embarrassed, though not much): Hmph. You need a hand with that misdirected payment?

Julie (feeling back on top of things, and obviously ready for anything, but glad for the help): Yes, thanks, George, I'm not sure I understand what to do about it.

George's telephone rings. He glances at the notice above his desk and picks up the telephone.

*George (obviously giving it one hundred per cent of his attention): Social Security.
Can I help you?*

Fade out as the camera pans to show Julie picking up her own telephone in the background.

Fade in on graphics to summarise the main points:

"If you persist in showing concern for

- 1. the client, and*
- 2. the Department*

then most issues can be dealt with constructively.

"Take care of yourself. Be realistic about what you can do.

"Give it 100% of your attention.

"Make sure the other person gives you 100% of their attention.

"One thing at a time.

"Feelings first. Upset people can't listen."
