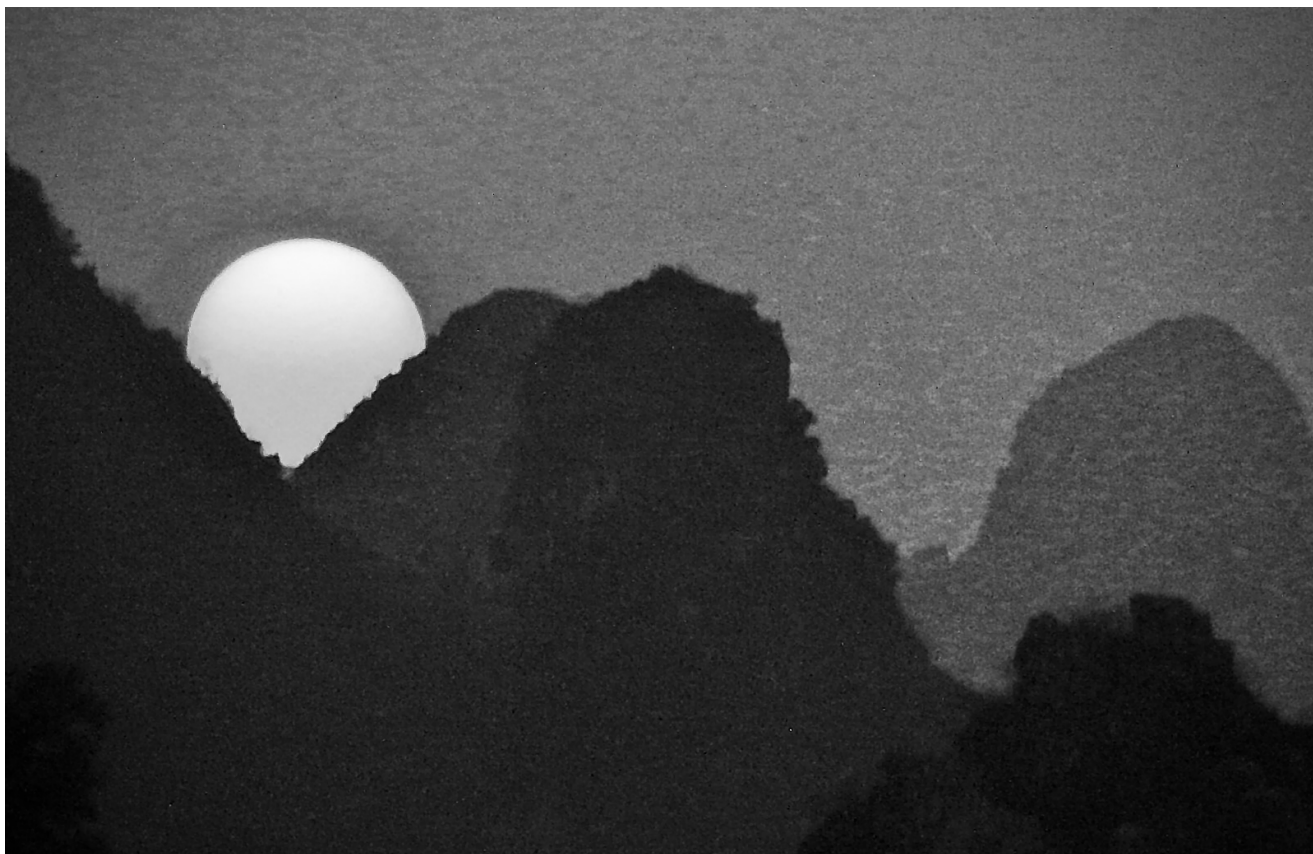


# CHINESE WHISPERS



## Chinese whispers in the workplace

Professor Hans Arendzen came into my life around 2007.

Hans had, and still has, a quiet calm about him. He became someone I looked to for help in understanding the world of golf for the disabled, G4D. That world was, and remains, far from simple. Yet despite his deep knowledge, Hans never rushed to give me answers. He had the patience to guide me towards my own conclusions.

That is a rare skill.

When I asked Hans to send me some words of advice that had served him well during his distinguished medical and management career, he kindly obliged. What follows is my interpretation of the wisdom he shared.

## **Doctors need to listen.**

Not just hear, but listen. Then they need to ask open questions that allow the patient's words to gather depth and meaning. We have long known about the importance of a good bedside manner. In any other profession, we might simply call these human skills. They help build trust between people who may be meeting for the first time, often in difficult circumstances.

There can be few places where this matters more than when someone who feels unwell is speaking with someone whose role is to help them.

## **But the lesson does not belong only to medicine.**

Good listening sits at the heart of all communication. The old game of Chinese whispers gives a simple example of how easily a message can change as it moves from one person to another.

The game begins with a short message. It may contain a few facts, a name or two, perhaps a date, a time, or something that someone is supposed to have said. The first person reads the message, memorises it, and then passes it on verbally to the next person. That person then passes it to someone else, and so it continues.

By the time the message reaches the third, fourth or fifth person, it is often very different from the original.

The same thing happens in the workplace.

A manager says, "We may need to look again at the budget."

By the time it has travelled through a few conversations, someone has heard, "The business is in trouble."

By the end of the day, someone else is wondering whether jobs are at risk.

Most workplace misunderstandings do not begin with bad intent. They begin with partial listening, rushed assumptions and the human habit of filling in the gaps with our own version of the story.

That is why listening properly matters.

Really listening means trying to understand not only the words being used, but also the meaning those words are trying to carry. Hans knew this well. As Director of a physical rehabilitation facility with 700 highly educated professionals, he learned how important it was to listen, question and show genuine interest in people and their problems.

Having listened, Hans was often reluctant to offer a ready-made solution. He found it more effective, and I suspect more satisfying for everyone involved, to ask questions that helped the person bringing the problem to discover a way forward for themselves.

That requires discipline.

Early in my coaching and mentoring career, I was far too quick to come up with what I thought was the answer. Even today, I have to catch myself. There is a temptation to be quick on the draw, to move straight to advice, to solve the problem before the other person has finished explaining it.

But sometimes the better thing is to wait.

Listen a little longer.

Ask one more question.

Allow the other person the space to think.

A consultation room and a workplace meeting may seem far apart, but they share one important truth. People rarely arrive with facts alone. They arrive with concerns, assumptions, fears, frustrations and partial information. If we listen only to the surface, we may miss what is really being said.

Hans believed that leadership was not simply about taking action. It was about listening, questioning for greater understanding and then guiding. Many of his colleagues struggled with this.

Perhaps many of us do.

Yet when he had the opportunity to share this approach with students and junior staff, he noticed something important. Those who were able to grasp the message were far less likely to come into conflict with patients, colleagues or management.

Hans embodied these skills.

His patience helped me. I am sure there were times when he wondered whether I was ever going to get it. If he did, he never showed it. He understood that for me to really understand something, I had to go through my own thought process. I had to arrive at a point where I could own the decision.

That, I think, is the lesson.

In work, as in medicine, the first answer is not always the best answer. The first version of a story is not always the full story. And the person who speaks the most quickly is not always the person who understands the most deeply.

Chinese whispers remind us how easily messages become distorted.

Hans reminds me that the antidote is patient listening, better questions and the humility to let people think their way towards understanding.

## **A Moment to Reflect**

When someone brings you a problem, do you listen to understand, or do you listen while preparing your answer?

When a message reaches you at work, do you check what was actually said, or do you pass on what you think was meant?

And when someone appears to be asking for an answer, might they really need help finding a better question?

Tony Bennett (based on the thoughts of Prof Hans Arendzen)

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