PART 5: IMPLEMENTATION

Chapter 13: Developing capability

This chapter divides advice on getting better at using RF/FP into two parts:

- Learning and practising the skills of brief exchanges within a conversation, which can be learned completely because there are not too many and they are used often.

- Solving problems arising in encounters and campaigns, which usually involves hunting through the many recommendations to find ideas for specific solutions.

How to develop your basic skills

To develop basic conversational skills you need to practise. This is easier at first in a situation with low stakes and time to think. Social media (e.g. Facebook comments, Twitter tweets, YouTube comments) are good for this unless you are a celebrity or make risky posts.

In writing

Choose a social media page about something you know well that has activity every few minutes. You may prefer to use an anonymous profile.

Start with easy topics and safe contributions but gradually increase the challenge.

Initially focus on making valuable contributions clearly and precisely without unnecessarily antagonizing anyone. Most people find this discipline challenging. Start new threads rather than replying to other comments.

You may get few responses to your posts, which is a good sign. Antagonizing posts usually get more responses. Responses may identify where you have accidentally written something unnecessarily antagonizing.

It is easy to make a valuable contribution by posting facts or links to further information. You often do not need to be smart or expert; just search the internet for authoritative sources of statistics or details from official investigations. Often you will be the only person to bother.

To develop your contributions further, try to generate useful insights by critical thinking about the topic and issues. See what others have to say but take care. Most people are wrong. Validate every claim they make against your knowledge and look for self-contradictions. You may have to drop a person as a source of ideas if one or more of the following is true of them:

- They write using a lot of words whose meaning is unclear to you.

- They talk quickly.

- They often use emotive terms and other trick arguments or push conspiracy theories.

They may occasionally say something that makes sense, but it is hard work protecting your thinking from errors and all their tricks.

To practise responding to tricks in a discussion, look for comments that make over-generalizations or otherwise incorrect or misleading points. Make replies that briefly neutralize the point and then make some relevant valuable contribution as your continuation.

Reactions to this are more likely and you will soon be attacked personally. Practise responding by neutralizing and continuing. It is vital not to be unnecessarily antagonizing whatever the provocation. Social media attract some commenters who behave atrociously in almost every posting and when accused of doing so get even angrier.

Even if you behave impeccably, you will be accused of bad behaviour and being a bad person. The accusers want you to stop posting. Be direct but stay polite, respectful, avoid being unnecessarily antagonizing, and keep making sensible, valid, valuable contributions. If the insults make you angry then think of your calm, valuable contributions as the best revenge. You are continuing to do exactly what the attackers want to stop.

People who control an online group are sometimes as bad as anyone else and may have the power to block you from their group, page, or even the platform. If that happens you may find all your postings disappear. Beware of discussions with group administrators and moderators.

You may be tempted to do more than simply neutralize, link, and continue. Resist that temptation. It is extremely difficult to do better than this pattern and there is no need to make the effort. Do not try to be friendly, to apologize for something in the hope of making peace, or to 'destroy' someone with your arguments. Most people you try to help online will be angry as a result and only a few will stop arguing just because they have been comprehensively debunked.

If you want to stop someone repeatedly making incorrect, inflammatory comments then neutralize-link-continue repeatedly, staying calm and polite. Each of their angry, attacking comments prompts a further burst of information and reasoning. Eventually some will lose interest or perhaps realize their actions are giving you the opening for more of your good material.

To increase the difficulty level, try switching to a page on politics or religion with thousands of comments every day. Pages for major political parties are ideal. Your chances of facing savage commenters will increase and you may occasionally be mobbed by several at the same time. Be patient and keep up the quality of your comments. You may have to repeat your points with several attackers.

E.g. In 2021, researching for this book, I posted a comment on YouTube saying I had been vaccinated against COVID-19 and briefly explaining how vaccination provides a defence against illness. I was mobbed online by several people who

attacked this. All were confident the vaccines were much more dangerous than the disease and did not want people to be vaccinated.

It is rational to have some small anxiety about vaccine safety and accept that, despite the medical testing, some adverse reactions occur and a very few are serious. However, it is not rational to be certain that deadly reactions will be common. One person thought that a long-term risk of bone cancer was not just a theoretical possibility – it was a certainty. Some had anecdotes about people who had been vaccinated and then suffered in some way. When I pointed out that these proved nothing because the suffering might have another cause, they became angry because I had not caved in to their personal experience. Others kindly pointed me to sources they thought I would 'find interesting' that turned out to be pseudo-experts warning of the dangers of the vaccines (but making elementary factual mistakes in their presentations). My failure to take much interest in this flaky material was criticized as selective, narrow thinking. More than one derided me for accepting everything I was told by the BBC[6].

If you are not used to this sort of barrage, the pace of the attacks and number of people involved could be frightening. Many of their arguments were superficially plausible; all started with something true then veered into misconceptions and trickery. Much expert effort had gone into crafting many arguments and generating videos and other materials that support the overall conspiracy theories involved. Several attackers mentioned things I had never heard of. It takes focus and skill to keep pushing for the truth against such a mob but I succeeded using my knowledge of the pandemic, some internet searches, and just the techniques explained in Chapter 6 of this book.

If you learn from all this experience, you should find it takes less time to formulate your replies and it becomes easier to stay calm. It may be time to try discussing difficult topics in conversations.

In real time

Your opportunities for participating in discussions may include:

- meetings at work

- discussion groups (e.g. with U3A)

- discussions at school or university

- a debating society, and

- conversations with interested friends or family.

All these should provide opportunities to practise making valuable contributions clearly and precisely without antagonizing unnecessarily. They might not provide so many opportunities to respond to bad behaviour.

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[6] I try to avoid the BBC and do not accept what it broadcasts. My preferred sources on the pandemic were publications by scientists and statistics from the UK's Office of National Statistics, which typically provides better data and analysis than other government departments.

Take your time. Listen at first to understand the patterns of discussion. You may not have noticed before how often contributions are unhelpful, mistaken, tricks, or even veiled personal attacks. Become aware of this aspect of discussions before weighing in.

Responding with almost no time to think is much more difficult than responding in writing at your leisure. You will need to keep your body language neutral and unprovocative as well as your words. This is another big challenge.

Although improving your skills at the conversational exchange level will make a huge difference there are many other influence skills that can contribute. These require more understanding of the situation – the people and their behaviour – and your overall strategy.

How to solve influence problems

Influence is a huge, complicated subject and we each face individual challenges. It is probably unrealistic to learn and practise all the recommendations in this book, covering all the Cases. It is more realistic to hunt through the book for ideas that help with particular challenges you face.

This book has presented recommendations within a meticulously structured set of Cases that provide cumulative advice for increasingly difficult and large-scale situations. You can search forwards from the most generic Cases through to Cases that seem most directly relevant to your specific challenge. Alternatively, you can start with the Case that seems most directly relevant and work back to more generic recommendations.

Either way, some difficulty is inevitable. You may still struggle to match the recommendations to your most pressing problems. Perhaps you have a situation in mind (e.g. selling) but do not see it listed. Perhaps you are missing opportunities to apply recommendations because you do not realize influence is involved.

The only way to overcome this is to continue thinking and learning, but this chapter offers just a few more tips. It considers some areas of life where influence is important and identifies applicable Cases and recommendations. Each area begins with an explanation of its underlying principles related to influence then discusses variations within that area with relevant Cases and recommendations.

Advertising, sales, and negotiation

These activities usually aim to make deals to exchange goods for money. There are buyers and sellers, and usually buyers have alternatives to choose between. Sometimes there is a discussion about how much the price should be.

It is a mistake to think only of reasons why people should buy your product or service and then try to persuade people to do so regardless of their best interests. It is better to understand the decisions faced by a wide variety of potential customers, how they should approach those decisions, how they should use your product or service, and who should choose you instead of doing something else. Your sales approach should be to gain the attention of likely customers (usually by being

factual and newsworthy in a context where people are looking with relevant interests) and help them decide correctly and efficiently whether to pay further attention, then (in stages perhaps) help them through a sound decision process that leads to buying from you or doing something else, whichever is best for them. This might involve helping them structure a complex decision and find facts that support the evaluation.

This more objective approach helps you identify and abandon weak products and services more quickly, helps you find likely customers, reduces the risk of gaining a reputation for unscrupulously pushing poor products and services, reduces time wasted pursuing poor opportunities, reduces sales lost to customer indecision and errors, and helps you understand the appropriate prices to charge.

With complex, expensive goods the salesperson must sometimes design a solution for and with the customer. If competitors do that design work less effectively then their final offer might not be as attractive. An outstanding salesperson might even overcome the disadvantage of selling inferior product components.

> E.g. Over the decades I have repeatedly been repulsed by a style of selling that was common for kitchens, double-glazed windows, conservatory blinds, and some other categories of product. This involves a home visit by a smartly dressed salesperson with a big briefcase who goes through a laborious process of 'design' before spending a few minutes calculating a final price. That price is usually much higher than the customer expects or is willing to pay so the next stage is an elaborate discount negotiation with various stories used to justify dropping the price drastically to something still rather expensive. I do not trust people who work this way and now avoid them completely. Instead, my wife and I design what we want using elements whose price is advertised publicly and make our buying choice without interference.

The recommendations for conversational exchanges in Chapter 6 are always relevant.

When discussing the choice of product or service, try to be objective and work towards the best decision for the potential customer, even if that is to buy from someone else. At worst you will establish that they should buy from someone else quicker and waste less of your time.

Explain objectively what the buyer can expect from your product or service, good and bad, being open about uncertainty. Do not play tricks on people.

People often think that advertisements should have minimal words because so few people will read or listen to a long advertisement. However, those that do attend to a lot of relevant, useful information are much more likely to reach a decision and make a purchase. Length is not the important factor. What is needed is material worth reading, so focus on that and do not worry about length.

> E.g. It seems generally accepted that you cannot advertise perfume with facts. Instead, advertisements show attractive models or celebrities being confident, seductive, or stylish in glamorous locations. As a result potential buyers have no clue what the perfume smells like, what other people think it suggests about the wearer, how long the smell lasts after application, or how much it costs per use.

Have perfume advertisers got this wrong? What if a manufacturer of several scents for men produced a buyer's guide to their products based on facts, including results from large scale surveys of people smelling the scent after it has been on someone for a couple of hours? Buyers could select from the range with more confidence in their choice.

Advertising, sales, and negotiation activities vary from the very simple (e.g. a customer enters a shop and buys a bar of chocolate) to the very complex (e.g. a company wins a contract to operate a train line for 5 years). The product or service might be anywhere between already famous (e.g. the Ford Mustang car) and unknown (e.g. a newly developed meat alternative from a small company).

Consequently, the influence effort needed to complete a sale can vary from none to months of meetings and other work. Similarly, the mental effort required of buyers can vary from almost none to months of meetings and other work. All the Cases in Chapter 7 on One-to-one encounters could be relevant.

In the worst case the buyer must attend to material that is unfamiliar, unlearn misconceptions, and work out behaviour changes with colleagues to make the purchase successful. A group of buyers will struggle with each other, bringing internal politics into play. Competitors will use dirty tricks.

The sales process might drag on for a long period with many meetings, making the advice on campaigns relevant, particularly Chapter 10, Case 16 on Key decisions.

Getting a job

The process that matches people to roles is one of mutual information exchange and evaluation. The employer wants to know about the candidates to decide who is suitable and who to offer the job to. The candidates want to know about the role and associated pay and conditions so they can decide if it is suitable and if they would accept the role.

A promising candidate or job may be rejected due to uncertainty. Doubt is a key problem to overcome.

The employer is not looking for the best person. The best person may be over-qualified and unlikely to accept the job and stay. The candidates are not looking for the most prestigious and highest paid job. That job may be too hard, stressful, or far away for them to survive let alone succeed.

Despite this logic desperate employers sometimes exaggerate the attractiveness of a job to get someone to accept it or accept it for lower pay. Also, candidates sometimes exaggerate their abilities because they fear they are below requirements and other candidates may be better, or they hope to be offered higher pay.

Consequently, both sides know the other side may be motivated to exaggerate their attractiveness. This increases the problem of doubt and means that providing credible information, especially with independent corroboration, is powerful.

The employer often writes a job description with some blurb about the organization included and asks for information through an application form or request for a CV.

The candidates may be required to take a written test, make a presentation, or attend an evaluation day.

Of these the most reliable predictors of job performance tend to be scores on directly relevant tests of ability and biographical details, yet even these are not particularly reliable.

In addition to these typical formal elements, the employer can show candidates the workplace, the products, the client list, details of the company pension scheme, and so on. Likewise the candidates may be able to show examples of their past work, academic certificates with detailed results, and written endorsements by clients posted online. In an interview they may be able to talk about technical subjects in a way that clearly demonstrates knowledge, describe past experiences in such detail that they ring true, or speak with fluency required by the role.

Job interviews tend to provide far less useful information than most people think but there is the possibility of providing relevant, verifiable information that adds value. Just being calm, polite, sincere, and agreeable under the pressure of interview is only helpful if the role requires that ability.

Surviving bureaucratic processes and errors

Almost everyone suffers problems with bureaucracies many times in their lifetimes. Typical perpetrators include tax authorities, pension companies, justice systems, broadband service suppliers, hospitals, and letting agents, but almost all organizations have processes that create problems for customers.

A typical problem is that the processes are over-complicated and hard to understand. There may be pages of complicated terms, conditions, disclaimers, warnings, forms to fill in, and instructions that must be followed for the process to proceed to the next step. Consequently, we spend much longer trying to work through the process than should be needed and often make mistakes.

Some processes are inflexible and insensitive. Process designers, trying to achieve efficiency or guard against fraud, create something inconvenient for customers.

However, the most common reason for serious frustration is when a mistake is made and a problem needs to be sorted out. The mistake is often that a case is overlooked until the worried customer calls to ask if there is a problem. The steps needed to identify what has gone wrong and correct it are often much more complicated than the steps needed if everything goes through in the usual way.

One common reason for a process failure is that the customer makes a careless mistake. However, more often the customer's mistake is understandable and caused by over-complicated instructions, misleading forms, and unreasonable requirements. Processes (including forms to fill in, websites, and instructions) are usually designed by intelligent people with a deep knowledge of the process and its complexities. They sometimes behave as if everyone else understands these as well as they do – or should. In other cases the design is careless and the flaw should have been obvious to the designer.

Another very common problem is a system bug. This may be in a computer system used by the bureaucracy you are dealing with directly or a system behind the scenes, perhaps in another organization altogether.

Just occasionally the reason for a failure is that a lazy, careless, or muddled administrator has made a mistake. They may have a negative view of customers after years of dealing with them.

If your case is messed up by a bureaucracy then it can take skill, persistence, and patience to get it sorted out. Many people who call with a problem are angry, confused, and unsympathetic to the person they are complaining to. If you can do better than this you should get more help and faster responses. Nobody will be reluctant to call you back.

The guidelines for exchanges given in Part 2 of this book will help. You will need to keep going until your problem is solved and you may need to explain how important the problem is to you to ensure that you get the level of attention that is fair. However, avoid antagonizing unnecessarily. Do not assume the person you speak to caused your problem. More likely it was nothing to do with them and they would be happy to help you. Even if your problem is their fault, if you are more focused on fixing the problem than in blaming, you should find they are happy to help you.

Make valuable contributions to the conversation by explaining clearly and factually what has happened and what you wanted or expected. If the person you speak to says something that does not makes sense to you then ask for more explanation so you can understand. Welcome their valuable contributions and give feedback on your understanding and agreement.

The guidelines on receiving unfamiliar reasoning (Case 4) are also applicable. Mentally prepare by carefully reading everything you can in advance of calling, such as information on emails you have been sent, the organization's website, and official forms. Think about what must happen at their end. Pick up clues about their systems.

If the problem is not solved in one call then make sure you understand and agree with the next steps towards resolution. If you have to wait for something to happen then you should be told how long to expect to have to wait. If not then ask how long you should wait before calling again. Most administrators agree that it is reasonable and helpful for customers to call when something seems overdue. This helps catch those errors when something has been missed. When sorting out a problem, further errors and omissions are more likely than usual.

In those rare cases where you have to escalate the problem, stay calm but persistent. Do not get hostile or threatening. Continue explaining the problem, how it is affecting you, and what still needs to be corrected for you to be satisfied.

Calling on powerful help (e.g. an industry regulator, a lawyer) is a last resort.

Developing friendship and romance

The core of friendship is voluntary reciprocal helping. This is a form of cooperation without contracts or payments. Friendships develop as people disclose information and assess each other's ability and willingness to cooperate in this way.

Romance is friendship plus sex. The sexual element relates to a life challenge best tackled with massive voluntary reciprocal helping: producing children.

If this seems remote from the raw emotions of flirting and courting then remember this is the result of evolution, so driven more by instinct than conscious calculation.

Evaluating a possible friend or mate is time consuming and risky. It should happen by small steps, with each positive indicator leading to another investment of attention and time by each person. (These progressive investments are similar to Case 3 on Sending unfamiliar reasoning.)

> E.g. Suppose you have just started an educational course where everyone is a stranger to you. A few people go to the same classes as you and you often see them around. Some of them recognize you and nod or raise eyebrows in greeting. This leads to conversations where you learn that some speak the same language as you and live nearby. Some take an interest in you, what you are doing, and what you are trying to do. You do the same with some of them. Some offer to help with something, like holding your stuff in the canteen for a few minutes, getting something from the shop for you, or sharing ideas on a homework problem. You make similar offers. Within a few weeks a network of friends has developed around you that makes life easier for everyone. This includes entertainment and extending your social network through introductions, including new contacts that might lead to romance.

This is a surprisingly logical and straightforward process once you understand it. Sadly, some people use unreasonable tactics. They may try to trap another person as a kind of 'friend' (more like a follower or subject) through bribes, shaming, or bullying. They may lie or create false impressions to appear more attractive as romantic partners. It may be worth neutralizing their tactics and exploring a relationship on a fairer basis. Sometimes people have respect for that and, surprisingly, become genuine friends. Otherwise avoid them.

Influencing yourself

Sometimes we need to influence ourselves. That is, to reach a good conclusion and take all of ourselves with us.

> E.g. Imagine an 18 year old is trying to decide what to do after leaving school. She thinks her parents want her to do one thing, her friends are urging something else, and she has ideas of her own. So much is uncertain she does not know what to do. She is running out of time so chooses at random. She writes the options on slips of paper, folds them, and puts them in a bag. She shakes the bag, closes her eyes, then pulls out one slip of paper. This method has selected one option but she realises she will struggle to stick with it, distracted by worries that she has done the wrong thing. Any setback will be evidence that perhaps she should have chosen something else and will lead her to consider a late change.

> Still uncertain she arranges to speak to a careers expert at school. The expert quickly points out that one of her options is impossible and shows her statistics showing that one of her other options is the outstanding choice for career prospects. This is also the option she already felt most confident about tackling so she chooses it with relief and a greater sense of focus and determination.

Reason also helps deal with stress and discouragement.

E.g. Suppose you are at work trying to complete a document before a deadline when your computer crashes. You feel a surge of stress but remember that you are not in physical danger now and do not need to run or fight. Resolving the computer issue and redoing any lost work only requires sitting still and thinking carefully. At worst your boss will be angry but will not physically attack you, and anyway that will not happen for hours. These factual thoughts calm your instinctive fears.

E.g. Imagine you are running in a 5,000 metre race with three laps left. You are tired but in fourth place. You would love to finish in the top three but the person ahead looks comfortable. You think 'I cannot beat them and might as well settle for fourth place.' This is factually incorrect because it is too certain. You reason more carefully and think 'No, I am not sure I cannot beat them. If I raise my pace a little I may close this gap. Perhaps they are more tired than they seem and lack a sprint finish. The person behind me looks beaten so it is worth the risk and effort of pushing myself more for the chance to finish third or better.' Perhaps surprisingly, being rational and realistic acknowledges uncertainty and often justifies more effort.

Changing society

This book was partly motivated by the angry mood of the UK during 2016 and subsequently. The way people fought each other over whether the UK should leave the European Union was the worst I personally can remember in my lifetime. Politicians behaved badly, but so did journalists, activists, lawyers, judges, business people, and millions of ordinary people expressing themselves online, on the streets, and even at home. More people than ever saw people on the other side of the argument as not just incorrect but evil or stupid. Even today, half a decade after the referendum, it is still unwise to reveal how you voted in case the other person decides they hate you or do not want to work with you.

Since that time two further issues have provoked similar dissent. Climate change has become a big talking point and the issue beyond all others where people cannot be friends with others on the wrong side of the argument. Protests in 2019 and 2020 by Extinction Rebellion intensified division.

Similarly, Black Lives Matter in the USA took the death of a black suspect, George Floyd, as a result of being held down by three police officers for about 10 minutes and used it to attack the police in the USA, the USA as a whole, and white people for being racist (even though there was no evidence that Floyd's death was racially motivated). This spilled across the Atlantic to the UK where it exacerbated an established pattern of insinuating more racism by white British people than actually exists today.

Many journalists have praised protests that were disruptive, aggressive, or unreasonable. Being an 'activist' and 'protesting' are often lauded by mainstream news media even when there is violence and disruption. This unhelpful approach is sometimes taught in schools.

E.g. My home town of Epsom now has a statue in the market place to honour Emily Davison, a Suffragette (member of the Women's Social and Political Union) who was killed when she ran out in front of the horses racing in the Epsom Derby in 1913. The typical perception is that Emily Davison's reckless and counter-productive act was heroic and helped to win votes for women. It did not. Votes were won for women despite the actions of the Suffragettes, whose terror campaign featuring arson, acid, and bomb attacks caused anger across the country. More important were the efforts of the Suffragists (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) led for a long time by Dame Millicent Garrett Fawcett, which were peaceful, constructive, and eventually successful. Dame Fawcett is honoured by a statue in Parliament Square, London but is still largely unknown to most British people today.

Using reason and fairness for influence is better.

Many of us value having something to talk with people about. Starting a family often brings a couple many new friends in the same situation. When the children are older, some people get a dog, and with it new friends or opportunities to spend more time with, and talk to, existing (dog owning) friends.

But sadly we often cannot talk to friends about current affairs because things rapidly get heated. Imagine many, many more people learning to discuss such issues in a constructive and intelligent way so we can raise them without fear of an argument. It would be a pleasure and promote friendly relationships.