

Forge Podcast with Steve Adams.mp3

Peter Wooding: [00:00:07] Welcome to the Forge Leadership podcast. This week's guest is Steve Adams the author of CentreBrain and the founder and creative director of CentreBrain communications. Simon Barrington asked Steve how his revolutionary approach to communications can help leaders articulate their passion and vision more effectively.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:28] So welcome to the Forge Leadership podcast. Today, I'm joined by Steve Adams. Steve is the founder and creative director of CentreBrain communications. Steve welcome.

Steve Adams: [00:00:37] Thank you, Simon. It's good to be with you.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:40] Fantastic. So, tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey and how you came to found CentreBrain communications.

Steve Adams: [00:00:47] Okay. I'm married and have four children, married to Ruth and we live in south London. We have a family motto which is "so many ideas so little time" and CentreBrain communications came about because I was wrestling quite a lot with the question of why is it that myself that others I see, that organizations and leaders specifically, are not as persuasive or influential as they would like to be. Or as they know they can be. So that at the very heart of CentreBrain communications says - "How do you help leaders to become more persuasive, to hit their potential in terms of their influence". And we, I set out to try and answer that not just from saying well let's try this tactic, let's try that idea, start with a story then, use a stat or whatever, great as those are, but I said well surely in the brain we should be able to understand a little bit more about what it is that if you trigger in someone else's brain that is going to lead to action. So that's it CentreBrain - the CentreBrain is or call it the Limbic brain - I call it the center because it's in the middle of your brain - that is the brain's action area. And it's where leaders in this case need to speak if they want to elicit a response rather than a conclusion.

Simon Barrington: [00:02:08] Okay. So, was there an incident in your life that kind of catalyzed this for you is this something that happened to you that got you thinking about what happens inside our brains?

Steve Adams: [00:02:17] There was, and it was rather unusual. I'm 18 years old, I've done a year off before university, I've gone to learn French as part of a programme in Belgium, in a small French speaking village. I arrive and they give me a cassette, because this being the 90s you had Walkmans and they said listen to the recorded phrases in French and memorize them. Don't try and translate them, so I did that. I spent a week with the other members of the team and we just memorized these phrases. And essentially what it was saying was "Hi, my names Steve. I come from England. I'd like to learn French, I love your village, I'll see you next week. Goodbye". And then on week two I went and I knocked on 300 front doors to people I'd never met and I said these phrases in French. And at the beginning we didn't understand them and at the end of the week I somehow my brain had begun to begin to understand them. After six weeks I was dreaming in French, I had dreams in French. and I was thinking in French. For somebody who had not taken French GCSE after six months of trying the first year they'd said look stop this, this isn't you. I at that point said to myself there's something going on here in my brain that I've been able in six weeks to think in French. And so that was when I sat, I remember sitting on my bed in Belgium and thinking what is it about how I've set out to learn this, that has essentially triggered the CentreBrain. And that's where the journey began.

Simon Barrington: [00:03:41] And what did you, what conclusions did you come to.

Steve Adams: [00:03:43] Well, so what what I've since done is said well I think and this is through a lot of research and trying it out in scenarios but I think there are about five triggers in the centre brain any of which trigger or open up the action area. The bit of your brain that says we've got to do something about this. And one of those that I began to understand in France in Belgium, was that I would go and knock on people's doors and I would take with me sheets of pictures. So I might be learning about the car and I would go in and they would we would talk about the word in French for the car engine or the car boot or the back seat. And I think what I began to do is say hang on a minute. When I was at school we didn't use pictures. Is there something that with a lot more thought and a lot more processing that my brain is responding to here. And I think what I then did jumping forward 20, 30 years now, is I said let's consider now the primary language of your action brain - and if I said to your listeners now just shut your eyes or keep them open doesn't matter but think about the room you woke up in this morning. Now think about your mum or your wife or your daughter or somebody special to you and then think about a red double decker bus. And I'd ask you the question what did you see. Did you see the word b u s spelled out. No, you saw a picture. Because your brain, your action brains primary language is pictures and in our society today we don't instinctively use pictures enough. But I think what I found out and I tried this through about 20 years is if you pictorialise your point you speak to the limbic brain and you begin to activate the part of the brain whose job it is to say so what are we going to do about it. So that's one of five triggers. And that was that all began in Belgium when I started saying what is it about learning French that has enabled me to act on it and to get it. And it was pictures.

Simon Barrington: [00:05:42] So if you're speaking to me and you're trying to get me to think in pictures so that my limbic brain takes actions, what kind of vocabulary do you use to do that. How do you paint those pictures that enable that action.

Steve Adams: [00:05:57] So if you if you think about a great novel think of a John Grisham novel or whoever it is you like to read fiction or you know Harry Potter whoever the words are the vehicle. If you choose when you write or speak so you might be writing or speaking if you choose not to load those words the vehicle of the words with pictures then the result is you speak to the outer brain. When you read a fiction book your brain and mine they paint the picture of what you're seeing to the point where when you go to the cinema you then feel offended because you think that isn't how it looks. That's because your brain has done what it does best. So to answer your question if every time you know a leader is trying to motivate someone to win a contract, to do an appraisal, whatever it might be they have to work out what is my key message here, what is it I want to say and how do I pictorialise that. That doesn't obviously mean I show a picture or paint a picture, although I can. It means how do I convey - and one of the easiest ways to get into this is grab your favorite fiction book look at a page and work out how is the writer here beginning to paint a picture in my mind. Because the writer doesn't say I'm going to paint you a picture. They just do it. And that's one of the keys that it's about beginning to think pictorially. And because our brains are inherently wired pictorially and because the way we store our memories and make decisions is we have this huge photo bank in our brain. And if I walk out my house today and I run into somebody raising money for a great cause my brain will tell me what to do. By pulling out of the picture library the last five times this happened the photos that I stored and that will lead me to respond.

Simon Barrington: [00:07:44] Which is usually walking past them.

Steve Adams: [00:07:47] That's exactly it depending on the experience you've had last time. If last time the person turned round and said I'd like to give you a gold plated pen and a watch because you've listened to me. Your brain will say stop and listen to this guy or girl. My point being that the more you understand about pictures the more you understand that if I am wanting to introduce an idea - let's say I am having a conversation with somebody whose contract I want to win as a leader.

If I can introduce references to positive pictures they will have in their brain their brain will deploy those pictures as opposed to if I inadvertently reference negative pictures. But what I want to do ultimately is leave them with a picture. Because pictures are like boulders on a beach. When you talk just words it's like you've written in the sand and the tide comes in and goes out. When you plant a picture, it's like a boulder on a beach, it doesn't get washed away.

Simon Barrington: [00:08:42] So give me a real life example of maybe where a leaders doing a presentation and they've done that really really well. Make it really concrete for people.

Steve Adams: [00:08:51] Yeah okay. So let me give you an example that you've all possibly have had some experience with. So the London 2012 Olympic Games bid happened in 2005. There were four countries Moscow, London, Paris, New York or four cities rather. And they got through to the final. It was widely reported in the press that Paris were in the lead. So much so that when it was announced and we all remember the televised images when London won it. Fifty four of the 57 photographers were in front of Paris. It was so understood they'd won. Something changed in the final presentation and I know from somebody who was in the room and part of the creative team that around they can't be sure, but around 50 votes jumped ship. What was it that did that. Interestingly it was one of these triggers - and I don't claim here that I enabled that - I was involved in that - but it was the same trigger that was used. And so in terms of what this actually looks like. The other three - so New York Paris and Moscow had brought in directors Steven Spielberg, Luc Besson They'd had the chance to make two three minute films and you can see these films on Vimeo. They had all answered the question What is it that would make your city brilliant for the Olympics and they'd shown the great great hotels the great food great this that and the other. London said, we know we've lost, we've got nothing to lose. Let's go different. And they answered the why question which is another of the triggers for the CentreBrain. London didn't feature. It literally doesn't feature. It is mentioned twice but you don't see London. So as a film to sell London as a venue for the Olympics, you'd think goodness me they've really failed. But in fact what they did was sell the vision and the reason why the Olympics count. They answered, and this is one of the triggers - if somebody asks you a what question give a why answer - because that will speak to the action brain. If you respond with a what answer you'll speak to the outer brain with a conclusion brain - all you get is a conclusion. They did that and you can watch the film on Vimeo it's online and the essentially the answer is that the people viewing - it spoke to their action brain - they didn't see London and they didn't need to because what they understood is that we want this Olympic to mean something for the youth of tomorrow and that was the message London gave.

Simon Barrington: [00:11:05] And that's the why, that's why London.

Steve Adams: [00:11:08] Exactly, why London.

Simon Barrington: [00:11:10] It's going to leave a legacy. So exactly I remember the key message was this is about legacy.

Steve Adams: [00:11:15] Exactly and this was about legacy and what they'd done is gone around to different countries around the world different ethnicities showing children watching the London 2012 Olympics being inspired and then ultimately competing in the Olympics and the whole film was about Olympics is a level playing field, it doesn't matter if you're living in a poor community in Uganda or a wealthy house in Scandinavia they featured all of these. What the message was is the Olympics are an open playing field to inspire the youth of tomorrow. And that was the core message and that was what spoke because if you if you were to read the CentreBrain book and then watch these films you would see how they triggered each of these action areas.

Simon Barrington: [00:11:54] So I am Leader. I'm preach in my church on Sunday. Yeah. How

should I start applying some of these have to say you know. Yeah. It a problem solver goes to Sunday I talking about never giving up never losing heart. Yeah okay. Yeah. How do I go about using a picture of people. Great question. A great question.

Steve Adams: [00:12:18] So I would say there's this joke that says kids in Sunday School and the teacher says what's grey and bushy tailed runs up a tree and everyone says well I know it sounds like a squirrel but the answer must be Jesus. So let me answer your question by saying look simply at how Jesus communicated. If you lay at least five prompts over everything he said every time he spoke he he deployed the center brain action brain. To answer your question therefore when he had to talk about. A potentially controversial issue adultery so we had a bunch of men come to him stones in hand and a woman and it was a test but they brought stones. They were going to kill her. They were going to stand you according to the law. Jesus didn't answer by doing what we would instinctively do you know if we're asked to stand up and do a sermon or faithfulness crumbs you know how on earth that's going to go. Jesus simply wrote bent down and wrote in the ground. And there's debate about what he wrote. He might have written a bunch of names. Who knows. It's been theorized that he was writing the names of the previous adulterers which were a lot of the guys with stones in their hands. The point is sorry to root it in an example Jesus started all his talks and sermons with a picture and an idea.

Steve Adams: [00:13:28] So there was a man who was a fisherman who there was a landowner who was so contrary to the Pharisaic Pharisees at the time and contrary to how most of us when we hear preachers in church they start by saying you know here's what we're going to talk about. So Jesus didn't do that. He always started with the y by telling a story he painted a picture so his listeners imagined you know oh I can see the farmer now. There were two men who went and built houses one on sand and one on rock. I can picture them. So I guess the first thing is when I listen to keynote speeches and some sermons it's always obvious when the person speaking hasn't started by saying instead of actually saying what they want to say through introducing a picture and letting the centre brain draw the message for itself out of the picture. The key point about the centre brain is it doesn't want to be told the answer. It wants to be given a picture or an idea from which it can deduce the answer. So I think by doing a sermon and engaging people in saying what what is the issue here and letting them work it out for themselves so start with a story or a picture. It could literally be I walked in here this morning and as I walked in I saw a homeless 18 year old outside. Let me just ask you guys you know whose fault is it that he's there you know he sat there now in it in the jacket with holes and he's got a fag in his hand you know youre creating a picture if you want to then go talk about what Jesus said to do for the poor. You started to open up the center brain.

Simon Barrington: [00:15:03] And what's the difference between telling a story and a page in a pick. Is there a difference or are they exactly the same in the way that they should act on one's brain or there or are there different elements of story that create pictures as some suggested and some stories don't help us or not.

Steve Adams: [00:15:20] No sure. So I think that stories always paint a picture of some description by definition they're a story they have key characters they have a narrative which are going to paint a picture that doesn't mean that the two can be entirely separate. You can you can create a picture in someone's mind as you have an informal conversation with them and not not look like you're telling a story. So to give you an example of a picture I have a friend who runs a trafficking charity Human Trafficking charity. And one of the examples that he and I have talked about around this area is if you want to introduce people to the issue of trafficking you want to use a picture or maybe a story about the tempting thing is to tell a story. This is a seven year old girl. Her family have been through an awful situation. Instead you could do it like this. You could say today every 30 seconds a child is going to be taken from their home forcibly because they're going to be trafficked. The world's fastest growing global crime is trafficking. The police that we've spoken to certainly when I

traveled in my development days I spoke to police forces around the world who said were outgunned by the traffickers. So the challenge we have. My French charity is what do we can do to stop this. How on earth can we stop it. So I painted a picture and I've said this is huge. The world's fastest growing crime and it's happening regularly. Is there anything big enough to stand up against this.

Steve Adams: [00:16:51] And then because it's a Christian charity he introduces and says the only thing that is capable of possibly standing against this is the world's largest voluntary network. Yes it's not driven by money it's driven by love is people all over the world networks and in that scenario it comes to a standoff a simple standoff between the worlds last year the fastest growing global crime in the world's largest voluntary network. And the question is which side will you be on. Because if you dont add your weight to one side the scales by not adding your weight will tip the other way and you've created a simple picture without telling a story I haven't mentioned names of children. But it's about using the things around you in that case the simple scales.

Simon Barrington: [00:17:32] Yeah I see that picture as being painted and all sort of great questions in there as well. Yeah. So what roles do questions play in this whole process of speaking to the Centrebrain and are there particular types of questions that work.

Steve Adams: [00:17:49] And so because as I mentioned because the centre brain likes to be given material or fodder to draw its own conclusions from that is why the prompts, these five prompts around pictures, around ideas, around contrast one of them is they all feed the centre brain. So this isn't about manipulation, you're not controlling anyone center brain, as if one could, youre simply giving it the material or fodder that will help it to be able to think okay I get this I can work out my own conclusions. So in terms of what the actual questions are I dont think are a specific killer questions but they link to each of the prompts. So one of them as I said is you know ask and answer why. So instead of what. Another is instead of just mentioning your point or your message give a picture. Another is, turn your message into an idea I'd challenge listeners to go watch a set of commercials on television and take a bit of paper and a pen and write down every single product and you will find not a single product being sold with the product - it is being sold with an idea. You know advertisers know this well. So that's the third prompt. Then there's contrast, use contrast and again when your when your framing questions give people a choice. If you give people one option their center brain wants two and therefore it'll put no as the other option. So when you're doing financial asks if you're trying to sell a product dont just say to someone would you like to support this child or would you like to buy this product. You've got to give an alternative. So I do it with my children now it is something I've learnt. If you're saying I want you to go to your room now and do your teeth then instead change it and say look if you go to your room now I'll set my timer you could do it for two minutes if you go up in three minutes time you'll have to do it for three minutes. Give them a contrast and they dont think. So it's about using the prompts to feed the questions.

Simon Barrington: [00:19:43] That's brilliant. Now one of the questions in my mind is is this universally applicable for all audiences so you know for leaders talking to staff or talking to a client or they're talking to their donors. You know what are the aspects of the environment in which you're talking to you have to be aware of or is it not applicable actually.

Steve Adams: [00:20:11] So my experience tells me and my research tells me that the human brain is the human brain. However clearly different people feed their brains different amounts of information different types of people have different abilities and perceptions. However my experience says that the same triggers work in all people but it's how you choose to apply them differs which I guess is common sense. If you were speaking to a group of high value multimillionaires trying to win a contract for something you might you would still use pictures but

you'd use pictures that are familiar to them. You would still introduce an idea but you would introduce an idea that had resonance for them

Simon Barrington: [00:20:52] And again Jesus was brilliant at that wasn't he.

Steve Adams: [00:20:54] Exactly yeah exactly. He would pick his story. Exactly. Pick your picture or your story for your audience. So you still have to have an understanding of your audience and their environment.

Steve Adams: [00:21:07] It's all exactly it's about understanding audience as it always is in anything that's going to be effective and using what you know of the audience and again without blatantly making it obvious that you're now telling them an idea just introduce this idea and you will find it really really is interesting how when you introduce an idea rather than a message that people's brains come to life and they're like I love that idea and the reason for that is ideas are generative. They spark in the center brain of the person you're speaking with then they start having the idea they start taking it forward. If you give someone a message they're simply going to say do I agree or don't. There's nothing really their brain can do with it.

Simon Barrington: [00:21:46] Now. You previously worked for Tearfund and headed up their global brand team for a number of years. You got to travel I've seen pictures of you travelling with your children as well. Does this work in Africa and Latin America and Central Europe. Are there differences.

Simon Barrington: [00:22:02] Good question. So a couple of answers to that. One is I've done this in different parts of Europe. I had the privilege of speaking at some conferences to marketing directors and it landed it landed absolutely. Recently one U.S. organization invited me over there I presented it to the whole organization and it again it landed there. But I suspect partly what you're asking is in countries which culturally may be more different than just Europe. And I've had the privilege of traveling to lots and lots of parts of sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia and in different ways I have in a sense tested this and interestingly what I've found is the lot of cultures certainly in Africa are far more naturally pictorial any way. So using pictures will communicate and cross huge numbers of cultural barriers. So I'll give you one example. I was in a community in a country in sub-Saharan Africa and we were introducing a program I won't go into details with what the program was because that's not particularly relevant but it's used in the program and we were sat round a log fire with a load of the village leaders and it seems you might say well it seems a little bit silly but in terms of memorability I just put a stick in the fire and it slowly caught and then we talked about how by coming together and working out what they had in the community they could in turn become the answer to their own problems instead of always looking around. And I said if you separate the logs out of the fire slowly they'll go cold go out. If you keep them together they bring their own heat. And I then said and look at what happens to this stick and lifted the stick out it's a light it can light another community and immediately they got it and it resonated they got it. And so the basic premises of use an idea use contrast, they all appear to cross barriers and much like you ask the question before with different sociological groupings of people in the same way different cultures you've just got to know the culture and know are they going to understand this culturally.

Simon Barrington: [00:24:11] Now have you used this idea personally in that pub, at the school gate and in your family life? Give me some examples of how that has changed who you are and what you do and how you live your every day.

Steve Adams: [00:24:24] Yeah I certainly have in scenarios from raising issues with my children's teachers. Again believe it or not it's really worth trying. If you can paint a picture again in

a subtle way it's not like you get a skateboard out but if you can paint a picture of what you are trying to suggest might happen create an idea based on something it works. But let me give you some specific examples. We with our children we went to we had the privilege of going to Malawi of giving them an experience of poverty we wanted it's important to us and we wanted them to understand how privileged they are in the world. We came back and said or while we were there we said okay how are we going to keep it's alive in their memories. Now because it's pictorial and so much what they saw as pictorial it always be that but it helps to have a reminder. So we one of the things we did we caught Chambo fish in Lake Malawi and we just got a local carpenter to make this fish a Chambo fish shape with all of our names carved into it. Now you might say well that's a really small thing and it is but because the brain is pictorial every day it's under our door every day when the kids walk past it that will trigger them to remember. Another thing Ruth and I wrote a book called "Music to move the soul" which simply said How do you how do you take songs which young people and our kids are listening to every day and infuse them with a meaning which has meaning for them out in the world.

Steve Adams: [00:25:53] We wrote a book with small group ideas when I came back from Malawi we cut together a small film for the family that we watched at Christmas and a few times since. And I deliberately layered over it a lot of the tracks that are their favourite tracks. So that when they're out walking home from school when they're on there headphones or on the car radio comes this track that reminds them of this thing. It's all about these triggers and prompts you know that allow them pictorially to be reminded.

Simon Barrington: [00:26:19] So when you're working with leaders or organizations to introduce the Centre brain techniques how do you start doing that. Do you make them do a speech or something and pick out all the holes in it. How do you work.

Steve Adams: [00:26:31] So I'll invite them all at the beginning of the session to write down the answers to several scenarios. One of them might be an elevator pitch you get in an elevator someone important says to you, we've got 20 seconds go up the lift, what is that you guys do and at the end we'll then go back and we'll review the answers against the lens of these five triggers and we'll say they'll work out for themselves. Am I triggering the bit of the brain that's going to draw conclusion. Now a conclusion can sound really positive you know it can sound like you know that's so interesting. Thank you. And you think great. No no. That's very different. You've prompted the outer brain. What you want is someone to say I would like to talk more about this. Some action. That's the action brain. When you've triggered when you go back through the session. These a lot of these people have what's called a defining moment genuinely. I've seen it happen again and people suddenly have that defining realization that the reason I haven't when I've communicated or when I've told the story of our organization been in any way compelling is because you know objectively I haven't triggered the action bit of their brain. And so I tend to work with organizations by starting from ground zero then helping them to see for themselves because the whole idea of center brain is that in car terms it's more of a Hayne's manual than a mechanic who you have to keep going back to who's sort of deep intake of breath and here's the cost. So yeah that's the kind of idea.

Simon Barrington: [00:27:58] Now who have you taught to do this who does it really really well or who is there out there who you haven't maybe taught who you see actually they do it really well instinctively.

Steve Adams: [00:28:14] So in terms of do you want names or so in terms of individuals or organizations that maybe do their messaging really well. So yeah there are a number of organizations who I've worked with CAP - Christians Against Poverty. And I certainly cant claim to be in any way responsible solely for what they do. But they are a great example if you go and look at their materials, their videos what they do is is phenomenal and the way they communicate it is

phenomenal. They give you memorable insight, specific pictures, specific ideas. They communicate who they are and what they do through ideas not just through stories. Another great example an American one is Charity Water. So again great example of an organization who who are built on an idea. So they have several ideas. In fact one of them is the 100 per cent model that simply says if you give us one hundred quid one hundred quid will go to those who need it. We won't shave off a single penny or cent for our own needs. They would be a good example. In terms of the corporate sector I'm working with a really interesting corporate change management company called Isoria who whose mission is something they've described as consulting reimagined. So their theory is and it's proving very successful that a lot of the big corporate change companies like McKinsey are driving some clients away because the idea that they come there is so big they come with a one size fits all that you see the MD on day one and you never see him or her again and so they're saying we've got a different model we're going to reimagine consulting. And again they are approaching and I'm working with them to approach how they frame what they do using these triggers and prompts for it.

Simon Barrington: [00:29:56] Fantastic. Now I'm sure you've inspired lots of our listeners want to find out more. I hope so. You've written a book tell us about that, you've got a website tell us about that. And where do people go if they want to find our more?

Steve Adams: [00:30:08] So if you go to Amazon it's on it's on. You can get it in Waterstones but it's on Amazon the book and it's just called The Centrebrain and it's by me Steve Adams so you can order at Amazon. I've got a website which is www.centrebraincommunication.com. And again you can email me through that that's got a few bits of information about you know the kind of the ways in which I help people ,leaders and organizations to work out and diagnose why am I not getting the influence I can get. And I guess the premise behind all of this is that every single person has the ability to be hugely influential. But I think as many as 60 percent of us don't deploy our potential. And so if you if you just get the book and read it its meant as a Hayne's manual its got practical outworkings in it so its not meant just to make you dependent upon coming to me and me having to charge you money. The idea is that you can you can absorb it and apply it yourself.

Simon Barrington: [00:31:07] Fantastic. Steve - great ideas, great insights there for anyone who is listening. Thanks so much for joining us on the podcast.

Steve Adams: [00:31:13] Pleasure. Thank you Simon.

Peter Wooding: [00:31:15] Thanks for listening to the Forge Leadership podcast this week. We'll leave you to spend the rest of the week honing your communication skills seeking to create better pictures and emotional connections as you share your passion with others. We look forward to connecting with you again next week. We will have another inspiring motivational guest.