





Customer Relationship Lessons from the Top Golf Instructors in the World: *Introduction of the KT-Plex®*

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SUMMARY

This study was conducted utilizing in-depth interviews with 25 highly credentialed golf instructors, 24 of whom were ranked in either the prestigious *Golf Digest* Top 50 and/or *Golf Magazine* Top 100 lists. Interviewees represent the top 99.9% of all golf instructors, as there are over 25,000 golf instructors in the United States. The study determines how experts transfer knowledge and, in the process, create highly effective customer relationships.

The main discovery is a theory of how experts convey knowledge. We refer to this theory as the *Knowledge Transfer Circumplex (KT-Plex®)*. It unlocks the relationship between knowledge and communication. Second, our theory defines three primary communication styles: direct style (general and experiential communication), relational style (metaphorical and analogical communication), and analytical style (technical and causal communication). These styles in combination represent communication expertise and give rise to unparalleled customer relationship management (CRM). These six modes of communication are organized around a circle (referred to as a circumplex structure).

We review the KT-Plex® and discuss 9 implications for customer relationship management in all industries.

KT-Plex® Communication Styles

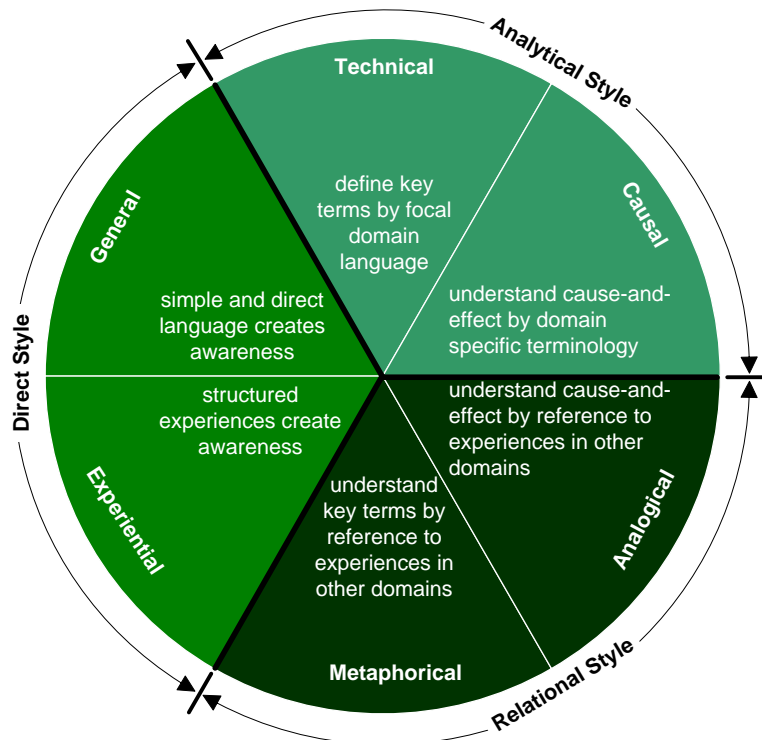
The knowledge-transfer circumplex (KT-Plex®) reflects how the best golf instructors in the world communicate. The experts used in combination three communication styles (and associated modes of communication).

- ❑ **Direct Style:** The Direct style uses experiential and general communication modes to communicate about the focal domain (e.g., golf) in a simple way. Examples of *general communication* by the golf instructors included verbal communication: “right hand over left hand” and “hit it harder.” No knowledge of the focal domain (golf) is required by the communication recipient to understand general communication. *Experiential communication* is defined by recipient observation (e.g., a student watching videotape of their golf swing) or participation (e.g., hitting golf balls on the practice range). Both modes are used in combination, for example, using a ‘show-and-tell’ approach a novice golfer would learn simple movements (*experiential communication*) and commonly understood terms (*general communication*) to describe these actions.
- ❑ **Relational Style:** The relational style should be used on recipients who need and can draw from other experiences in a base domain (e.g., business or sports), to make sense of the target domain (e.g., golf). For example, the following analogy draws a structural comparison (sustained effort → success) between the base domain of horse racing and the target domain of golf.

“If you’re a 5-handicapper on the tee for the 14th hole at even par (with five holes left: 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18) you might be standing there going ‘oh man, three pars and two bogeys, I’ll be happy as a clam.’ I’ll tell them, ‘you’ve got to keep the whip on the horse all the way to the end’... that is how a pro would be thinking.”

- ❑ **Analytical Style:** With an analytical style, the recipient wants deeper, domain-specific understanding of how something works. They will not be satisfied with simply being shown how to do something (associated with the direct style) or connections to another domain (associated with the relational style). Instead, they want to know how and why it works as well. For example, the nine-flight laws (*causal communication*) explain the cause-and-effect relationship between the golf swing and flight of the ball.

The KT-Plex® Communication Styles



KT-Plex® Implications

1 – Communication styles simplify and clarify: Based on our results, three communication styles are and should be used. With direct style, the recipient prefers or needs to understand the processes without the aid or help of references or connections drawn between domains. The relational style should be used on recipients who need and can draw from other experiences in a base domain, to make sense of the target domain. With an analytical style, the recipient wants deeper, domain-specific understanding of how something works.

Example of relational style: *“When you take people that have played tennis, baseball, hockey, or a sport [involving] any kind of a throw... and they were good at it [that can be used in golf]”*

2 – All six modes of communication are important: In order to be an effective communicator across a breadth of customer groups and constituents, it is vitally important to understand how all modes of communication in the KT-Plex® work and use them in combination and when appropriate.

Example: Novice learners often need straightforward experiences and simple language to understand new concepts (representing experiential and general communication, respectively). If a learner has little domain specific knowledge, yet the teacher prefers or insists on using domain-specific language (i.e., technical), the recipient will become confused, overburdened and ultimately turned off by the instructor, choosing instead to either drop the activity or seek someone else who can understand how to communicate in more harmonious manner.

3 – Experiential communication represents a first among equals: The golf instructors all emphasized high-quality experiences. Stated differently, when experts want customers to learn something new, they design experiences to transfer knowledge. Unfortunately, high-quality experiences are very difficult to create and often misunderstood.

Example: One golf instructor described valid experiences that entail self-discovery: *“You let them self discover what you already know they need to do. This is especially true of tour players. They are not open to information. They have to embrace it and really think that is their own.”*

4 – Honor thy request: The golf instructors in our study clearly position themselves as being customer-oriented. The instructors use an approach that puts the student’s preference for and way of learning at the forefront of the process.

Example: *“You have to fix what the student wants to be fixed, and the education is the process of discovery because they wouldn’t make the swing mistake if they knew they were making the swing mistake.”*

5 – Renaissance ready: Michelangelo is a renaissance person, an expert in many areas including painting, sculpting, architecture, poetry, and engineering. The professionals in our study, by and large, displayed remarkable knowledge across a wide variety of areas. One golf instructor had a personal library of over 2,500 interdisciplinary books. This allowed the golf instructor a breadth of knowledge important to relational style communication, that utilizes metaphors and analogies to make a comparison between golf (the target domain) and other base domains familiar to the client.

Example of expert analogy: *“The value of the drive in golf is similar to the value of the second serve in tennis. They both force us to start the game.”*

6 – Expertise is a verb: The golf instructors recognized that credentials were a factor that brought clients to their door. However, the golf instructors indicated that they left credentials at the door with their clients; in their view expertise represents action (a verb). In short, the expert golf instructors have a direct and immediate impact that demonstrates their expertise.

More generally, the expert golf instructors constantly looked for ways to demonstrate their expertise in all communication modes as necessary. For example:

“If they’re doing their part and they’re not improving it’s my fault. That’s when I got to think of finding a different way to make them play better, finding something different that can help them.”

7 – Less is more: The old adage that less is more certainly holds true in this context. Comfortable with all their expertise and knowledge, our professionals claimed that they focus on parsimony, only communicating the most important and crucial information. This often entailed the use of the direct style of communication (focusing on general communication and experiences).

Example: *“You wouldn’t add anymore complexity than you need; students are on a need to know basis. Teachers that lack experience tend to talk too much; they say too much.”*

8 – Emotional intelligence enables: The ability to communicate knowledge is enhanced by one’s emotional intelligence (EI). Goleman (1995)¹ refers to EI as the master aptitude because it profoundly affects or interrelates with so many activities. Our results indicate that the professionals in our study have a high degree of emotional intelligence, which gives them the ability to establish rapport and gain crucial insights into a recipient’s knowledge base and then communicate in a way that allows for maximum understanding and absorbability.

Example: *“In the beginning of a lesson, one of the first things I do is just try to find some things that we have in common. I know that the more we have, the more rapport that we build in the beginning to where they trust what I say, and it’s easier to heed to the lesson.”*

9 – Unparalleled customer relationships: The expert golf instructors were successful with customers because they effectively used all three KT-Plex communication styles (direct, relational, analytical) in combination and when appropriate. Because the pros in our study could reach students on multiple levels and with different communication styles, they were able to reach the upper echelon in customer relationships, going from satisfaction, commitment, involvement, all the way to evangelism. Evangelism is getting to the point where the pros no longer have to promote themselves because their clients (the evangelists) are doing the work for them, as exemplified in the following:

Example of Evangelism: *“I think ultimately that the pupils did most of that [promoting]. I couldn’t tell you the last time that I ran an ad or anything.”*

¹ Goleman, Daniel (1995), Working with Emotional Intelligence, New York: Bantam.