



Arrows and Bananas – A
Discussion of Basic Communication
Theory, the Vagaries of English and
their significance in co-worker
conflicts

TIME FLIES LIKE AN ARROW

FRUIT FLIES LIKE A BANANA (GROUCHO MARX)

This paper discusses a number of elements of the theory of communication against the writer's experience that coaching of parties in identifying same empowers them to find simple solutions to improving relationships.

BASIC COMMUNICATION ISSUES

The most basic elements of successful communication are the intention to be understood and the intention to understand.¹

Communication is a complex process, and the wonder is perhaps that we achieve it effectively at all, rather than as successfully as we do.

The Process

Edelman and Crain categorise some 7 stages as follows:

- First a feeling – something one of the 6 senses is picking up and
- An awareness of the feeling that demands expression (hitting one's thumb with a hammer may demand expression, but it may preferably be private.)
- A wish to share that feeling with another
- Words are formulated in one's mind and then
- Transmitted
- The words are received and interpreted by the receiver
- This will form feelings in response
- These may or may not have relevance to the original feelings or intent of the speaker.

These steps are often abbreviated to "encode" "transmit" and "decode".

Encoding is forming words that the speaker thinks will be understood by the receiver, and will obviously vary according to the knowledge of and intimacy with the receiver. So the same message to a forecourt attendant will vary from a family member. It is said that only to the extent that one person's life experience is shared by another will effective communication occur with any certainty; that speaking outside that experience will be only supposition. (See "Metaphors" and "Attribution Error" below.)

¹ From Joel Edelman and Mary Beth Crain *The Tao of Negotiation* HarperCollins 1993

Transmit is the means of communication. If by spoken word, then a loud noise outside (truck or aircraft) can distort the meaning or invert it if a crucial word (like "not") is not received. Emails can be taken out of context. Body language may be incongruent with the words and the message misinterpreted.

Decode is the meaning the receiver places on the words heard. Again distortion according to different life experience, lack of empathy, different cultural expectations and other factors can affect the message.

A model for maximising effective communication

Given the difficulties, what are the best ways of ensuring understanding?

First a definition:

Successful communication can be said to occur when the thoughts, images and feelings that are generated in the receiver are the same as those intended by the speaker.

Note that agreement is not required. What is necessary is *being there* with the other communicator – that is focused and attentive. There are ten elements:

- Commitment to achieve understanding
- Self-observation (first understand oneself)
- Honesty (this can involve taking risks, and being prepared to listen to other's pain)
- Going beneath the surface (be aware of possible motivations and fears)
- Separating intention from conduct. (In short – clarify. We often say what we don't mean.)
- Separating facts from feelings. (Don't become victim to your feelings.)
- Using "I" messages. (Using "you" is accusatory and creates defensive responses. "I" reduces blame and also opens the door to the other to be equally open.)
- Listening. ({Passive listening can be a gift in itself – if the speaker needs to be heard. Active listening is a step further where the listener paraphrases what has been heard to check shared meaning.)
- Having the willingness to admit one doesn't know everything. (This is a specific of "honesty". It opens the way to the exchange of intelligent questions and helps avoid pitfalls such as attacking/defending, avoiding, accommodating or stalemate.)
- Having the willingness to admit mistakes. People need to be heard and understood – and perhaps have their pain validated. This ultimately is more important than money or revenge.

Listening

- Listening *Blue Jay noticed that bear had not said a thing. Finally, Blue Jay asked bear why was she so silent and bear replied 'I'm listening and learning. I don't need to talk; I already know what I know.'*
- Healing *Part of healing was the way she listened...she always reacted with sympathy and compassion. So it isn't just the treatment that heals it's the hands on understanding and cooling*

that sometimes make the mediation do its work. In truth, the caring and attention are part of the medicine²

- *Listen with your ears and understand with your heart³*

See also the International Listening Association online at www.listen.org.

Other Factors

Apart from the “encode, transmit, decode” concept and the “feedback” model above, there are further elements in interpersonal communication to be considered.

1. People will notice things that interest them and in some way affect their welfare. Other items will be consigned to the back burner. In short people are selective about what they hear. (For example in redundancy cases it is not uncommon for employers to discuss this issue in the context of consultation – but for the affected employee to focus only on the implications for them of redundancy, and not realise it is just the start of a process. A follow up written memo can help avoid misunderstandings.)
2. The human mind actively seeks consistency between an individual’s frame of reference and available information.
3. That need for consistency may lead to distortion or avoidance of information.
4. Active participation by the receiver leads to a better retention of the information.
5. Social systems significantly affect how, why, to whom and from whom, and with what affects communication occurs.
6. Speech communication is also symbolic. That is words have the meaning assigned to them in the community by consensus, even though that meaning may change. An old book on etiquette describes how a young man should “make love” to a young woman in a social context. The change in the meaning of “gay” is another example.
7. Accordingly communication will occur only in a shared symbol system. (Obvious issues arise in cross-cultural communication – but ambiguities arise also in more subtle ways.)
8. Words meanings change. Both speaker and listener must accept that words stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of the one who utters them.
9. Words are chosen by the speaker because of an assumption that the listener will share approximately the same meaning. But the listener will accept, distort or reject the information depending on their existing motivations and predisposition.

The following table illustrates a further aspect – we are not always aware of what it is we are communicating – or is going on for the other side.

² *Native American Wisdom: Lessons Learned from Mediation*
www.mediate.com/pfriendly.cfm?id=1715

³ Pledge #4 of the Taiping (Malaysia) Peace Initiative, found at
<http://www.everlastingpeace.net/ltu.htm>

Parts of a Person.	Levels of Communication
<p>Open Self. Those areas we are aware of and are willing to share with others.</p> <p>Concealed self. Those areas we are aware of but try to conceal from others.</p> <p>Blind self. Areas we are, or the speaker is unaware of, but nonetheless is communicated to others.</p> <p>Unknown self. Those areas of which both we and others are unaware.</p>	<p>Open. Conscious communication.</p> <p>Confiding. When we reveal something we would ordinarily conceal.</p> <p>Leakage. Signals or meanings that are picked up that the speakers are unaware of sending.</p> <p>Emotional. When a person influences another or is influenced unconsciously.</p>

Distortions and Problems in Communication

Peoples perceptions will arise from their life experience, which will militate their "model: or framework of understanding of the world around them. It will be from this perception that they will communicate (both imparting information and listening.) But people can be mistaken in their interpretation of the world. Such mistakes will limit their expected choices. Understanding those realities may lead to strategies that can be developed to explore and hopefully expand these misperceptions thus leading to unexpected outcomes and ability to intermesh mutual interests not previously recognized or identified.

Examples of such mistakes are:

- Strict rules* – over generalizations such as "all he wants is money"
- Absolutes* – I'm always bad at math", "nobody cares about me"
- Reading rejections* – "She thinks I'm stupid"

Language patterns can give room for vastly different interpretations: Accordingly understanding such systems can lead to ways of challenging or helping an individual past such blockages:

- Deletions* – e.g. "I'm confused" – leave blanks for the addressee to fill in.
Confused about what?
- Vague pronouns* – "That's a hard way to find happiness" – what am I doing that makes happiness unlikely?
- Vague verbs* – "She makes me mad" *In what way* ---
- Nominalisations* – abstract nouns that give a false impression of being concrete – e.g. "Our relationship", "your guilt", "The excitement has gone"
- Cause and effect* You make me sad

Mind reading – projections “Please don’t be mad at me”

Presumptions – “If only Tom would listen to me I could tell him how I really feel.”

Other problems may arise, including *variable ability to accept and process information*.

Have we all had the experience of listening to a lecture, picking up one point and thinking about it – till at a later time picking up another point in a dissertation, which may then be out of context?

Confusion between facts and stories. People remember past experiences in the way which shows them in the best light – selective memory. Their perspectives will vary sometimes dramatically. Those views will then moderate the way in which they receive further information from the other side about the same facts.

“Freeze, Fight or flight” impact on interpretation. The emotional context of information exchange makes a significant impact on reception thereof. In many cases of employment dismissal, whether for performance or redundancy, one would believe that the employer and employee had been to different meetings. In a state of emotional shock people cannot absorb what is being told them, and may also have a huge investment in not showing emotion.

Attribution Error

A school Head of Department fell out with both the Principal and the Board of Trustees. Matters were at crisis point. He was nearing retirement, and there were real issues over other job opportunities, superannuation and the like. He enjoyed teaching at the particular school and recognised for his ability. His employer was worried about costs of replacement and litigation, but the situation was desperate. In mediation each had the opportunity to speak of the issues that had lead up to the crisis. There had been 7 major events on which the facts were agreed, but the interpretation was dramatically different. An example – the local MP had turned up and the HoD had shown him around. The Principal and Board thought it had been orchestrated by the HoD for a time they were not present and they had been excluded on purpose. The HoD had managed a difficult situation where the MP had turned up unannounced, and he expected to be appreciated for coping at the drop of a hat. On analysis each event followed the same pattern – each side had attributed to the other unworthy motives, and were caught up in a descending spiral of mistrust. The turning point came when the mediator described to the parties what was happening and gave it the name “attribution error”.⁴ How could they deal with this dynamic? They agreed to check things out with the other in the future (using “I” statements so that neither would

⁴ Putting a name to a dysfunctional aspect is very powerful. The old stories of demons made it clear that if you knew the demon’s name then you could control it. If not it would tear you to pieces. Most 10 step addiction programmes commence with an acknowledgement of the condition. At a very different level describing and naming an unhelpful communication pattern empowers communicators to identify and manage the situation.

become defensive) and a progress report six months later was that the relationships had been restored.

Why "I" statements? If a person says "You made me feel terrible" is it received as an attack and an unfair prejudgement with no opportunity to respond. It generates a defensive response. Such attribution errors are a very common cause of employment dysfunction between co-workers. Use of "I" statements that describe the effect on a person enables the first speaker to clarify the intent of the message and will therefore trigger a dialogue. Checking things out is a process (When xx happened I felt (e.g. insulted; excluded; overlooked; etc) which may not be what you intended. What I would like to happen differently in the future is ...). This technique allows for explanation and correction, and a way forward to avoid repetition.

How does Communication Occur?

Studies show that the choice of words has, however only a minor part to play in communication. Out of a total of 1, communication comprises:
0.7=verbal (i.e. content); .38=vocal (i.e. tone, pace, emphasis, stress etc);
.55=facial (i.e. body language).

An example is the "John - Marsha" dialogue.
The transcript of a 3 minute record read:

John ---- Marsha.
John ---- Marsha.
John ---- Marsha.

The record was banned in a number of (Bible belt) US radio stations as being too suggestive!

The elements therefore of what is lost when speech is written down include matters such as intonation, tone, stress, length and frequency of pauses.

Sarcasm is a special case that illustrates the point – it may be defined as "a message in which information transmitted vocally contradicts the information transmitted verbally. Usually the vocal and body language is negative, whilst the verbal information is positive.

In summary, the experts suggest that the bulk of communication lies in body language; another important segment is in tone, pacing stress and emphasis, and only a moderate amount lies in the actual words used.

Note that if word content is incongruent with body language, tone etc. then it will not be believed.

Examples of common non-verbal behaviours are:

touching
facial expression

tone of voice
spatial distance
relaxation of posture
rate of speech
number of errors in speech (we all make them; but they are more frequent with increase in discomfort or anxiety.)
Utterance duration (i.e. speaking for more than 3 minutes at a time.)
Immediacy or directness
Distance – in forms of speech – e.g. (In descending order of relationship:
“These people need our help”, “these people need help”, and “those people need help.”
Changes in body position and head movements
Posture – leaning towards the addressee; relaxation
Eye contact

There are some limits on non-verbal language. Basically it is used to communicate feelings, likings and preferences, whereas verbal communication can cover almost anything. The non-verbal part can be positive in that it can either reinforce or contradict the feelings communicated verbally.

Metaphor Mediates Meaning.

It is appropriate to be aware of the way in which metaphor is used both by yourself and the parties themselves. Metaphor has been used probably since the dawn of time as a means of reaching shared meaning by finding common experience. As we have spent some time identifying the symbolism of words, it is often very useful to consider the derivation or etymology of the words we use.

In this case “metaphor” comes from Latin and Greek.

OED – from metaphora L. to transfer, bear or carry.

So the purpose of a metaphor is to carry meaning.

People fall into unconscious habits about metaphors and use those that are relevant to them. Assumptions about their applicability can be a real problem if the metaphor increases tension in the receiver. Commonly men will use sport (an own goal) war (a view from the trenches: blood on the floor) or sex (I want to screw the B!) These are competitive, violent, can be offensive and are at best oppositional. Usage can polarize debate even when not intended. They may be of little relevance to women who may nevertheless feel compelled to run with them as a form of “protective colouration”.

Stanley Posthumus uses metaphor throughout his mediations from a cooperative base. This approach can change the whole tone of conflict facilitation. Voyaging,

mazes, prisms of light, landscapes are all generic metaphors which allow cooperative elements to be present throughout the mediation process.

Tension Raising and Reducing Behaviours.

I am indebted to Rhonda Pritchard for the following lists set out in a paper written in 1992. This is a summary form, but I am making an assumption that the knowledge of the audience here will require no explanation. Probably you will have seen them all in practice.

Tension raising strategies

- 100% statements
- Labelling
- Put downs – excitable statements
- Subject changing/diverting/counterattack
- Threats
- Interpreting/analyzing/patronizing/matronising
- Collecting allies
- Non-verbal behaviours
- Preparing to attack
- Sarcasm
- Defensiveness Self justifying
- Over detailing

Tension reducing

- Acknowledging probable legitimate concerns
- Put in perspective
- Be specific
- Own the interpretation
- Own the personal response
- Invite response
- Invite feedback

The lists are included as a short hand way of indicating behaviours to avoid, to address if seen happening, and the corollary of strategies that will help throw “peace and light” on to a conflicted problem. The other advantage is to be able to identify why it is things are going wrong in some dialogues. It also leads to one of the most powerful tools for intervention and change: trust the process; describe to the individual concerned what effect his or her behaviour is having on the negotiation, check out if that is what is intended and describe the changes needed to make a difference. (Note that it may be desirable to speak privately with the party concerned in order that the power balance in a joint session is not upset if such coaching is done in a way the other side thinks they have scored a victory).

Some Concluding Observations.

This paper has not attempted to discuss the developing literature on the differences between the way men and women communicate, or the complexities of cross-cultural negotiations. The books set out in the reference section contain valuable information on these matters.

Also note that communication operates on various levels – from “openers’ (such as the weather) to intense connection between people sometimes at a deep spiritual level.

“Openers” is called (by the experts) *phatic* (as opposed to emphatic) *communication*. This is usually the most casual, even useless form of communication. It signals however that the door to communication is open. Even here mistakes can occur.

There is a story of the American sitting down to breakfast at a hotel’s communal table. He was joined by a French man who wished him a courteous “bon appetite.” The affable American responded in the manner he thought he was being addressed by giving his name – “Ginzberg.”

At lunch the process was repeated, - “bon appetite” – Ginzberg” – with the American assuming the other has forgotten his name.

By evening someone had explained to the American the meaning of the French phrase, so greeted his new acquaintance accordingly “bon appetite’. To which the ever courteous Frenchman replied – ‘GINZBERG.’”

Affective communication – is that in which the emotional feelings of the speaker towards the listener is conveyed. Note that this is usually recognized as convincing language – compare the definition of Edelman and Crain of successful communication (above). Moreover a kind or friendly remark often will do more for human understanding than any amount of “honest” statements.

Communication can also be *instrumental* in that it is desired to influence the behaviour of someone else.

Catharsis may be the purpose of communication. Release of the tension of feelings may also be expressed when no one else is there to hear – as where one hits one’s thumb with a hammer by mistake.

Words may be imbued with *magic*. “Don’t tempt providence” may be the reaction of listeners about to embark on an aircraft trip if someone talks about crashes.

In religious settings words may have very considerable power. This power may also be *ritualistic*. This is different from “*labelling*” although doing so may have considerable effect in limiting perceived options.

To end, an example of the etymology of words I find interesting is the word “enemy”. “Enemy” comes from 2 Latin words: in (the opposite of) and amicus (friend). From this comes inimical, and enemy. In short any relationship is denied.

Compare with the Maori:

Hoariri is also made up of 2 words: hoa – friend; and riri – anger. That is - angry friend. (The relationship is not broken, and the emotion is recognized.)

Case Study

Your briefing is from the Board of a small primary school whose concerns are with the relationship between the School Secretary, Anne, (who has been in her position for over 15 years) and the recently appointed Principal, Sarah, (who has been appointed to bring fresh initiatives and ideas to the School community). Anne has complained that Sarah interferes with her role. For example attending the counter literally behind her back (Anne's desk faces away from reception); and interfering with the notice book that contains daily information about attendance and school activities. This used to be kept on the counter for ready accessibility; but now Sarah takes it around the classes before the first lesson starts. Sarah is concerned that Anne's developing morose, unhelpful attitude is damaging to all staff. She has good reason to answer the counter if Anne seems busy (her office is close by); and delivery of the notices gives her a chance to speak to each of her professional staff before the day begins. Matters have got to the point that the two women communicate by email, and the tense atmosphere is impacting on staff, pupils and parents. The Board is very appreciative of the respective contributions of both and want to retain their services. In the Board's view there is an underlying mutual if somewhat grudging respect between the two for their respective skills. Can you help?

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David Hurley, Mediator,
Department of Labour,
Wellington NZ