

The Nature of Inter-Personal Communication

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Communication can occur in situations involving various kinds of distances between the source and the receiver. Often there is a time difference between the encoding of the message by the source and the decoding of the message by the receiver. Messages can span entire continents, many countries. When people respond to traditions within their culture or organization, they are responding to messages that were encoded a long time ago. When a high government official or national leader gives a speech over television, or writes a memo to be distributed throughout a large organization, he is encoding a message that will be received at far distant places.

From this large field of communication, we can select a set of situations which we can call inter-personal. Most of us do our communication in a person-to-person situation. Supervisors talk to their employees inter-personally. Teachers talk to students inter-personally. Friends and families have inter-personal conversations. Inter-personal communication includes situations in which two or more people can see each other, can talk back and forth, can interrupt each other, can make responses which can be observed immediately, etc.

In inter-personal communication, the distinction between the source and the receiver is difficult. A person may act as a source, then a receiver, then a source again. In fact, in inter-personal communication we often act as both a source and receiver at the same time.

Inter-personal communication differs from other communication situations only in degree. Just as in other communication situations, we have to take into account the communication skills, attitudes and knowledge of both the source and receiver. We have to understand the social relationship, or organizational relationship, between the receiver and the source. We have to understand the kinds of standards and expectations that each has and how these influence the messages that are intended, encoded, decoded and understood.

There are at least three major differences between inter-personal communications and other communications situations. An understanding of these is useful in explaining our own communicative weaknesses and strengths, and in predicting success or failure when we communicate face-to-face with other people. In the following pages, these differences are discussed under three headings: multiple channels, feedback, and interaction.

Multiple Channels

We can define a communication channel as a way of getting a message into the mind of the receiver using one or all of the five senses. One of the advantages of face-to-face communication is the ease of using several of these channels at the same time. We can tell the receiver what we want him to know. Often, we can show him at the same time. We can draw him a picture. We can write it, draw it, talk about it, show it—often at the same time. We can even let the receiver touch an object we are describing or practice a skill we are instructing him about. These are illustrations of the use of multiple channels. In any communication situation, we often can use more than one channel or several different treatments of one channel. For example, the same material could be presented through the visual channel but in several different forms. The idea could be presented by film, slides, charts, etc. Within one of these forms, such as slides, the material could be presented through words, bar graphs, line graphs, pictures, or cartoons.

In general, two or more channels are better than one. The source has a better chance of getting understanding from the receiver if he utilizes several channels. We learn something from listening to someone. We often learn more if we can read what the person is saying too, or look at a picture of it, or get our hands on it, to, as we say, "get the feel" of it. In person-to-person communication, we often are benefited if we will find ways to treat our message so that we can send it over several channels.

Most of us would agree that two or more channels are more effective than one. Yet, we forget it in our day-to-day communication. We call our staff together to

give them information. When they are assembled, we make a short talk—and that is the end. In short, we tell people. Afterward, we find that many of them did not understand us. What do we say? "I told them." This is not good enough. Communication does not consist of telling someone, of encoding a message. Communication requires that the receiver decodes the message. Effective communication requires that the receiver first understand then accept the message as well.

Often we ask people to perform tasks. In doing so we tell them what we want them to do when it would be much easier if we would draw a picture or give a demonstration. Better yet, we can let the receiver practice what we want from him. If we use these several channels, the chances that we will understand, that he will be able to make the response that we want him to make, are greatly increased.

Feedback

No matter how many channels we use in person-to-person communication, there is still considerable doubt that we will be effective in obtaining the responses from people that we want. If we look only on ourselves as sources, we have even less chance of success. If we are willing to serve as receivers as well, the chances go up. Feedback is one way of looking at ourselves as receivers.

By feedback we mean that the source observes the receiver's responses to the message; i.e., the reaction of the receiver to the message sent out by the source is "fed back" to the source. The source can interpret these responses to evaluate his own success in getting his message across. He can use feedback to determine whether the receiver is paying attention, whether

the receiver understands what the source intends, whether the receiver accepts what the source says, etc. By making these checks during the process of communication, the source can alter techniques of presentation to take the receiver's reactions more into account. He can repeat, explain in more detail, give more arguments in support of his thesis, or use devices to increase attention.

When we say that communication is a two-way process we assume continual feedback from the receiver to the source and from the source to the receiver. When we ignore feedback, or do not even notice it, we are not looking at our purposes from a communication point of view — we are not taking the receiver into account.

Person-to-person communication allows maximum feedback. The source can see the receiver, can hear him. The source can watch facial expressions, gestures, as well as the words which the receiver uses to respond. When our messages are difficult and our purposes are important, interpersonal communication is extremely useful — in large part because of the opportunity for feedback from the receiver.

There is another kind of feedback available to us. When we serve as a communication source, we also receive our own messages. We read what we write, listen to what we say, observe our own behavior. Often we can detect a lack of clarity or understanding in ourselves. By listening to ourselves, we can remove these defects and improve our own effectiveness with others.

Interaction

We can look on communication as the taking of an action by a source (encoding a message) plus a reaction from the receiver (response). Sometimes this is all we

do. Other times, however, we can add a third factor — interaction. We say that two people interact, rather than act and react, when each takes the other into account throughout the communication process, and even before communication takes place. In a sense, a source and receiver interact when they switch roles for a moment, when each puts himself in the place of the other, and tries to look at a situation from the other person's point of view. In person-to-person communication, feedback (the receiver's reaction to the stimulus provided by the source) is desirable — but interaction is better.

Through interaction, we can raise the chances that we actually are encoding messages that are understandable and acceptable to another person. By putting ourselves in another person's place and trying to look at the world through his eyes, we are more able to select messages, to treat our ideas in such a way as to appeal to him.

What do we do when we interact? How do we go about it? This is not an easy question, nor can we specify a set of techniques which enable us to do it. It is easy to suggest that we should try to look at a situation from another person's point of view. It is much harder to do so. In a sense, we can never be successful in looking at the world through another person's eyes. We do not have the same meanings that he has, the same experiences, the same goals. In fact, if we have little or no common experience, it is difficult to interact at all. Given some common background, however, we can make some predictions. We can attempt to think about his social roles, observe the things he knows about, perceive his attitudes. We need to remember that although we can never do a perfect job of playing the

role of another we can understand much more about the factors that operate in other people which affect the ways in which they behave and respond to our behavior. The sensitivities to people which develop from this kind of effort often are the most important factors in our success. They certainly contribute to our own happiness and understanding of ourselves as well as of the people around us.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these are at least three of the important ingredients of effective person-to-person communication:

1. We can use multiple channels, increasing the force and impact of our messages.

2. We can get immediate feedback, enabling us to evaluate our own efforts

at communication, and to change our messages, our treatment, to better accomplish our purpose.

3. We can interact with others, reducing the gap between source and receiver, increasing our understanding of the factors affecting the behaviors of others and of ourselves.

There are many other techniques of inter-personal communication. As we analyze each, we need to look at its contribution to the factors we have discussed. Some techniques increase the number of channels we use, other provide for greater feedback. Still others provide an opportunity for interaction among the people engaged in communication. Depending on our situation and purpose, we can utilize many techniques to improve our own effectiveness and the productivity of our organizations.

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