

## Lesson:-15

### The Case for Ambiguous Communication

The argument for mutual understanding and openness, while honorable, is incredibly naive. It assumes that communicators actually want to achieve mutual understanding and that openness is the preferred means toward that end. Unfortunately, that argument overlooks a very basic fact: It's often in the sender's and/or receiver's best interest to keep communication ambiguous.

“Lack of communication” has become the explanation for every problem in an organization. If the newly *II* empowered” workforce is unmotivated, it's a communication problem. If the quality-improvement program fails to garner the promised benefits, it's a communication problem. If employees ignore or abuse customers despite training that instructs them otherwise, it's a communication problem.

We're continually hearing that problems would go away if we could “just communicate better.” Some of the” basic assumptions underlying this view need to be looked at carefully.

One assumption is that better communication will necessarily reduce strife and conflict. But each individual's definition of better communication, like his or her definition of virtuous conduct, becomes that of having the other party accept his or her views, which would reduce conflict at that party's expense. A better understanding of the situation might serve only to underline the differences rather than to resolve them. Indeed, many of the techniques thought of as poor communication were apparently developed with the aim of bypassing or avoiding confrontation.

Another assumption that grows from this view is that when a conflict has existed for a long time and shows every sign of continuing, lack of communication must be one of the basic problems. Usually, if the situation is examined more carefully, plenty of communication will be found; the problem is, again, one of equating communication with agreement.

Still a third assumption is that it is always in the interest of at least one of the parties to an interaction, and often of both, to attain maximum clarity as measured by some more or less objective standard. Aside from the difficulty of setting up this standard-whose standard? and doesn't this give him or her control of the situation?-there are some sequences, and perhaps many of them, in which it is in the interests of both parties to leave the situation as fuzzy and undefined as possible. This is notably true in culturally or personally sensitive and taboo areas involving prejudices, preconceptions, and so on, but it can also be true when the area is merely a new one that could be seriously distorted by using old definitions and old solutions.

Too often we forget that keeping communications fuzzy cuts down on questions, permits faster decision making, minimizes objections, reduces opposition, makes it easier to deny one's earlier statements, preserves freedom to change one's mind, helps to preserve mystique and hide insecurities, allows one to say several things at the same time, permits one to say “*No*” diplomatically, and helps to avoid confrontation and anxiety.

If you want to see the fine art of ambiguous communication up close, all you have to do is watch a television interview with a politician who is running for office. The interviewer attempts to get specific information, while the politician tries to retain multiple possible interpretations. Such ambiguous communications allow the politician to approach his or her ideal image of being *It* all things to all people."

Based on C.O. Kursh, "The Benefits of POF Communication," *The Psychoanalytic Review*, Summer-Fall 1971, pp. 189-208; E.M. Eisenberg and M.G. Witten, "Reconsidering Openness in Organizational Communication," *Academy of Management Review*, July 1987, pp. 418-26; and B. Filipczak, "Obfuscation Resounding," *Training*, July 1995, pp.,29-36.

## LEARNING ABOUT YOURSELF' EXERCISE

### Listening Self-Inventory

Go through this IS-item questionnaire twice. The first time, mark the yes or no box next to each question. Mark as truthfully as you can in light of your behavior in recent meetings or gatherings you attended. The second time, mark a plus (+ ) next to your answer if you are satisfied with that answer, or a minus (-) next to the answer if you wish you could have answered that question differently.

	Yes	No	+ or
1. I frequently attempt to listen to several conversations at the same time.	_____	_____	_____
2. I like people to give me only the facts and then let me make my own interpretations.	_____	_____	_____
3. I sometimes pretend to pay attention to people.	_____	_____	_____
4. I consider myself a good judge of nonverbal communications.	_____	_____	_____
5. I usually know what another person is going to say before he or she says it.	_____	_____	_____
6. I usually end conversations that don't interest me by diverting my attention from the speaker.	_____	_____	_____
7. I frequently nod, frown, or whatever to let the speaker know how I feel about what he or she is saying.	_____	_____	_____
8. I usually respond immediately when someone has finished talking.	_____	_____	_____
9. I evaluate what is being said while it is being said.	_____	_____	_____
10. I usually formulate a response while the other person is still talking.	_____	_____	_____
11. The speaker's delivery style frequently keeps me from listening to content.	_____	_____	_____
12. I usually ask people to clarify what they have said rather than guess at the meaning.	_____	_____	_____
13. I make a concerted effort to understand other people's point of view.	_____	_____	_____
14. I frequently hear what I expect to hear	_____	_____	_____

rather than what is said.

15. Most people feel that I have understood  
their point of view when we disagree.

Turn to page A-28 for scoring directions and key.

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

### **Working with Others Exercise** **An Absence of Nonverbal Communication**

This exercise will help you to see the value of nonverbal communication to interpersonal relations.

1. The class is to split up into pairs (Party A and Party B).
2. Party A is to select a topic from the following list:
  - a. Managing in the Middle East is significantly different from managing in North America.
  - b. Employee turnover in an organization can be functional.
  - c. Some conflict in an organization is good.
  - d. Whistleblowers do more harm than good for an organization.
  - e. Bureaucracies, are frustrating to work in.
  - f. An employer has a responsibility to provide every employee with an interesting and challenging job.
  - g. Everyone should register to vote.
  - h. Organizations should require all employees to undergo regular tests for AIDS.
  - i. Organizations should require all employees to undergo regular drug tests.
  - j. Individuals who have majored in business or economics make better employees than those who have majored in history or English.
  - k. The place where you get your college degree is more important in determining career success than what you learn while you're there. .
  - l. Effective managers often have to lie as part of their job.
  - m. It's unethical for a manager to purposely distort communications to get a favorable outcome.
3. Party B is to choose his or her position on this topic (for example, arguing *against* the view that "*some* conflict in an organization is good). Party A now must automatically take the opposite position.
4. The two parties have ten minutes in which to debate their topic. The catch is that individuals can only communicate verbally. They may *not* use gestures, facial movements, body movements, or any other nonverbal communication. It may help for each party to sit on his or her hands to remind them of their restrictions and to maintain an expressionless look.
5. After the debate is over, the class should discuss the following:
  - a. How effective was communication during these debates?
  - b. What barriers to communication existed?
  - c. What purposes does, nonverbal communication serve?
  - d. Relate the lessons learned in this exercise to problems that might occur when communicating on the telephone or through e-mail.

#### **Have We Got a Communication Problem Here?**

"I don't want to hear your excuses. Just get those planes in the air," Jim Tuchman was screaming at his gate manager. As head of American Airlines' operations at the Mexico City airport,

Tuchman has been consistently frustrated by the attitude displayed by his native employees. Transferred from Dallas to Mexico City only three months ago, Tuchman was having difficulty adjusting to the Mexican style of work. // Am I critical of these people? You bet I am! They don't listen when I talk. They think things are just fine and fight every change I suggest. And they have no appreciation for the importance of keeping on schedule."

If Tuchman is critical of his Mexico City staff, it's mutual. They universally dislike him. Here's a few anonymous comments made about their boss: "He's totally insensitive to our needs." He thinks if he yells and screams, that things will improve. We don't seat that way. "I've been working here for four years. Before he came here, this was a good place to work. Not anymore. I'm constantly in fear of being chewed out. I feel stress all the time, even at home. My husband has started commenting on it a lot.

Tuchman was brought in specifically to tighten up the Mexico City operation. High on his list of goals is improving American's on-time record in Mexico City, increasing productivity, and improving customer service. When Tuchman was asked if he thought he had any problems with his staff, he replied, "Yep. We just can't seem to communicate.

## Questions

1. Does Jim Tuchman have a communication problem? Explain.
2. What suggestions, if any, would you make to Jim to help him improve his managerial effectiveness?

## Does Women's Communication Style Hinder Them in Business?

Deborah Tannen says there's a distinct difference between the genders in the way they communicate. She calls them male and female rituals and she says they can get in the way of achieving work-related goals.

One of Tannen's findings relates to directness. Tannen says women often tend to avoid directness and east themselves in an inferior light. This is seen in the following conversation between two *Money* Magazine writers, Lesley Alderman and Gary Belsky.

*Gary:* Well, do you have anything that you're considering?

*Lesley:* Here are things we . . . We were. . . that we've been thinking about. I'm just throwing things up.

*Gary:* Go on.

*Lesley:* So that's good. Then this one's really out, but. . . you're going to think I'm completely insane. . . but you know, there's like this whole like spiritual kind of drive thing. I can see you. . . like you're saying, "Oh, no. "I don't even know if that's the angle, exactly. I'm not sure if that's the angle. All I'm saying is . . . I'm sort of throwing that out something. . .

*Gary:* OK.

*Lesley:* Maybe there's something in that. It's a little way out, perhaps.

Another gender-related ritual is apologizing. Women tend to apologize when they haven't done anything wrong. Why? They use it as a ritual way to get into the interaction. Men, on the other hand, seem to apologize only when they absolutely need to.

Tannen says women use a communication style that allows others to save face. They avoid directness and prefer subtlety. This can create real problems in organizations. Female managers may appear to be lacking confidence. They may also appear to be tentative when giving orders.

According to Tannen, these conversational rituals can be the basis for underestimating a woman's capabilities. She can be seen as incompetent, whereas she thinks she's being considerate. She can be seen as lacking in confidence, whereas she feels she's simply being a good person by not flaunting her authority.

Women may be: In a "can't win" situation. If they try to be considerate through indirectness, they may receive lower performance evaluations. Their bosses may assume they are not aggressive or confident enough *to* handle their jobs. But if they talk too much like men, they suffer because their bosses and subordinates may see them as too aggressive.

### **Questions**

1. Do you think gender stereotypes of communication styles can be generalized to the entire workforce?
2. Do you think these gender styles are influenced by national culture?  
Explain.
3. Do you think adults can unlearn specific gender-related communication styles? Defend your position.
4. 'What suggestions would you make so women can communicate more effectively at work?
5. What suggestions would you make for men?