The Foundations of Interpersonal Communication

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Introduction

Mark Twain famously said, “Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.” The same could be said about communication. There are thousands of books about it. There are no end of seminars, trainings, workshops, courses, and degree programs. Nearly everyone in and out of the business world pays lip service to the idea that it’s very important and that we should all do it better. But how much real effect has all this had on the quality of communication in our personal and work lives? Many studies show that it has been minimal.

Why is this? I suggest it’s because the whole field of interpersonal communication (as distinguished from media communications) lacks sound foundations. The field is just full of endless lists of miscellaneous tips, tricks, guidelines, good ideas, suggestions, hints, and nudges. Nobody can remember them. They don’t hang together. There are no “cognitive maps” or theories underlying them to make a coherent whole out of them. In addition, the whole collection is a very mixed bag: some good ideas, some terrible ones, with most in between.

By contrast, the information in this article is based on rigorous, theoretically sound, coherent principles and cognitive maps that are themselves derived from
the state of the art in the cognitive sciences, especially Information Theory. At the same time, it is extremely practical and has been tested, refined, and proven in decades of teaching, coaching, and consulting work.

Of course, this article is far from a comprehensive treatise on the subject. But it is enough to get you off to a good start, orient you correctly in the field, and teach some of the most important fundamentals that will help you.

Who Should Go First?

The first thing to know about communicating is who has the “problem.” By “problem,” I mean you want something, usually in a situation where there’s some obstacle to your getting it, so it’s a problem for you. If you have the problem, or you just want something, you should express yourself. If the other person you’re talking with has the problem or is the one who wants something, you should try to understand them (if you want to help). You don’t have to, of course. You can just walk away, fall asleep, or whatever you want. But don’t expect that person to come to you for help again.

So in any communication situation, begin by figuring out who has the problem. If both people have problems at the same time—which is very common—there are several ways of deciding who should go first. One test is whose problem is dependent on the other. If your problem is that you want to leave early today to run an errand, and my problem is that your leaving early will make me miss a work deadline, then my problem is about your problem. It is meta to your problem. If we can solve your problem, mine will disappear automatically. But the reverse is not the case. Solving my problem won’t make a dent in yours. So it makes sense for us to work on yours first. Then we may not even have to work on mine.

Another test is who’s more heated. Whichever person is more calm should try to understand the one who’s less calm. It’s hard to be understanding when you’re heated or upset, so it’s sensible for the less upset person to do the listening.
A third test is to let the less skillful communicator go first. Understanding someone else takes skill, so whoever's more skillful ought to give way to the less skillful person and let them go first.

Use these three tests in conjunction with each other. Don’t follow any of them slavishly. Learn when and how to apply them through practice, seeing what works best for you.

Once you figure out who's problem you're going to tackle first, the next step is to identify exactly what the problem is, whether it's yours or theirs. Try to get at least a preliminary definition of the problem right away—certainly before going on to consider possible solutions.

Why Do People Do Anything?

The next step is to categorize the message you’re about to send or the other person has sent. To do this, you have to understand why people communicate at all. It’s important to begin with this question so that we have an accurate context for thinking about our own and other people’s communications.

All communicating—like everything else in life—is for the sake of some purpose. Nearly everyone’s purpose in doing nearly anything in their lives is either to produce or increase their good feelings or to reduce or get rid of their bad feelings. That’s it. No other reason.

This may take some thought before it makes complete sense. Nobody ever does anything solely for the effect it has on others. Why would they do that? At bottom, what we care about is our own feelings, so everything we think, say, or do has to come back—ultimately—to the effect it has on ourselves. When we’re nice to someone, we feel good about ourselves. When we’re mean to someone, we’re trying to get something for ourselves by being mean—however obscure the objective may be, or however unlikely our efforts are to succeed.

Realizing the truth of this is crucial for communicating effectively, because unless you understand the ultimate reason why someone is saying something to you, you will have a hard time understanding them at all. Without remembering they are only trying to improve their own feelings, we are likely to impute ill
intent to them. This leads to criticism, blame, or condemnation—all failures of empathy on our part. On the other hand, realizing that everyone is only trying to get rid of some bad feelings or acquire some good ones helps us identify with them and empathize with them. This is the key prerequisite for understanding people.

This does not mean you agree with them or approve of the ways they are trying to improve their feelings. Understanding is totally separate from agreement. But it makes no sense to disagree before you understand. What are you disagreeing with? Once you understand, however, you may think the ways they are trying to meet their needs are dumb, counter-productive, and harmful to others. Still, their ultimate intent is unobjectionable. It’s only that they used poor means.

Why Do People Communicate?

Now that we’ve covered the general case of people’s ultimate purpose for everything they think, say, or do, we can turn to the sub-case of why people communicate. The answer must include a selection within each of the following four variables or dimensions (usually just one selection for each):

1. **Direction**
   a. Get help
   b. Give help

2. **Target** (to/from whom/what)

3. **Form**
   a. Goal
   b. Problem
   c. Decision

4. **Step**
   a. Clarify
   b. Plan/Solve/Decide
   c. Implement
As an example, a communication might be for the sake of asking (Direction) a manager (Target) for help in clarifying (Step) a problem (Form). Another could be offering help to an employee to make a decision. Another could be to ask a team for help in planning how to achieve a goal.

When you’re trying to figure out why someone is talking to you, what they want, or what kind of a message they’re sending, it’s helpful to get clear whether they are asking for help or offering help and to or from whom (occasionally to or from what), as well as whether it involves a goal, problem, or decision, and which of the three Steps is involved.

For example, it’s very different to ask someone to help you get clear about a problem than to ask them to help you figure out a solution than to ask their help in implementing a solution you’ve already decided on. Generally, the earlier in the problem-solving process you bring them in, the more willing and able they will be to help with it.

People are rarely 100% clear about things, including exactly what their goal, problem, or decision is. Before they are ready to go on to consider means, solutions, or alternatives, they need to be adequately clear about the definition of the goal, problem, or decision to be made. It is often very helpful to talk it through with someone else. In such cases, if you want to be helpful, your best response is to discuss the problem or goal with them until it is clear to both of you.

If someone is clear, or after you both get clear about the problem or goal or whatever it may be, and the discussion turns to considering solutions or means, your response is easy. You just brainstorm various possibilities with the other person and help evaluate them and choose the best one. Don’t take over. It’s still their problem or goal.

Someone’s offer to help you—especially an unsolicited offer of help—can be confused with wanting something for themselves. That is, they may express what sounds like an offer to help you, but really they want something from you instead. Before you accept their offer at face value, be sure that’s what they really mean.

In sum, before you go any further in communicating with someone, get clear why they’re communicating with you. Go down this list of five purposes and
decide which of the five applies to this communication. That tells you the type of message this is, and helps you understand the context for the communication.

When you’re getting ready to express something yourself, similarly get clear what your purpose is. It will help you express yourself much more clearly. You’ll know why you’re moving your lips.

The Four Goals of Communicating

Communicating divides neatly into self-expression and understanding others. There are goals for each. These goals clarify what you’re trying to accomplish when you express yourself or try to understand someone else. The goals are very carefully stated. They include everything required for success. They’re well worth memorizing, often practicing remembering them when you’re communicating.

1. **Self-Expression.** For you and your listener to have a clear, accurate, mutual understanding of the relevant aspects of your experience, as quickly and easily as possible, without the listener’s becoming defensive

2. **Understanding.** For you and the sender to have a clear, accurate, mutual understanding of the relevant aspects of the sender’s experience, as quickly and easily as possible, put in the most sympathetic light

3. **Empathy II:** To bring out what is implicit in the sender’s message, so that the sender will confirm that this is what they would like to have said

4. **Meta-Communicating.** To notice and be able to talk felicitously and effectively about improving the communication process in vivo (real-time)

For #1, Self-Expression, what you’re trying to arrive at is a mutual understanding of what you’re trying to express: you and your listener will have the same understanding. In the course of the dialogue between you, your own understanding of what you’re trying to express may very well change. That’s all to the good. It means you’ll get clearer by trying to explain it to the other person. By hearing
what they’re making of what you said, you’ll spot inaccuracies and things you want to correct or change.

You’re also trying to focus what you’re expressing on just the *relevant* aspects of your experience. (More about what the aspects of your experience are is contained in the next part of this article.) And you want to make it *quick and easy* for your listener to understand what you’re trying to convey. Most people’s communication skill (many studies have measured) averages about 2.5 on a scale of 1 to 10, so it’s unlikely that the other person will be super skillful in figuring out what you mean if you don’t give them a lot of help.

Finally, if your listener becomes defensive, you lose. All hope of getting them to understand you goes down the drain. (You do want them to understand you, don’t you? Otherwise, why are you talking to them?) If what you say leads to their feeling defensive—thinking you’ve attacked them in some way, however mildly—their attention is likely to switch 180° immediately. They will be completely absorbed in thinking about what they see as an attack on themselves. They will usually be figuring out a defense or a way to attack you in return. They won’t be listening to what you’re saying any more, much less trying to understanding what you really mean.

Now you can’t always prevent people from becoming defensive. It takes two. But you can learn to express yourself in ways that minimize the chances of provoking a defensive reaction. This is harder to do than it may sound. Unfortunately, guidance on how to accomplish this will have to wait for a future article. It’s not a quick discussion.

For #2, Understanding, the object is just the mirror-image of goal #1 for Self-Expression. It’s only that the shoe is on the other foot: you’re the one trying to understanding, instead of being the one who’s trying to be understood.

In trying to understand someone else, you must first adopt the attitude that they are the universe’s sole and final authority on their own experience. That isn’t to say they know exactly what it is or can express it perfectly at first. But you cannot assume you know what they want, for example, better than they do. This would be an insurmountable barrier to understanding them.
Your task is to paraphrase what they have said in your own words. Do not “parrot” them by just repeating their exact wording. Then let them tell you what you got wrong. Then correct your paraphrase until they say you have it right. Then and only then will you both know that you have understood them correctly. This process is sometimes called “reflexive understanding” (the best term for it), “reflexive listening,” or just “reflecting.” It is like being a mirror that reflects what they have said. Unfortunately, because mirrors are totally passive (being objects), they don’t take any active role in this reflecting—but you must.

It is a great mistake to say things like, “I understand.” You can’t know that. Only they can know that, and they can’t know it either until you tell them what it is that you think you’ve understood.

Much more could be said about skillful understanding (often called, somewhat inaccurately, “listening skills”). Space permits only one more thing, however: “put in the most sympathetic light.” Your job in understanding someone else is to be their advocate, their friend in court. You try to “clean up” what they’ve said, so that they come out smelling like a rose, not covered in shame. If they say, “I’m a complete failure,” you “reflect” by saying something like, “You think you’ve really done a poor job on that piece of work.” You make it less global and more specific (“that piece of work”). You make it about what they’ve done, rather than who they are.

Briefly, Goal #3—Empathy II—is an extension of Goal #2—Understanding. It is a more difficult skill to acquire. When you get good at understanding others, you may find yourself becoming more insightful about people, including yourself. This allows you to go deeper into what people are saying and experiencing. You can sometimes—only when it’s appropriate and will be appreciated, not resented—make what was implicit in what they said explicit. When done well, this can move things along much more quickly and will be greatly appreciated.

Finally, Goal #4—Meta-Communicating—is the skill of communicating about communicating. For example, if you’re trying to understand someone who’s going on and on, so much so that you are forgetting what they’ve said, you can interrupt with a “meta-communication.” You might say something like, “I’m having difficulty absorbing so much at once. May I try to see whether I’ve understood you
so far?” This can be a very effective “meta-communicative move” in the dialogue. There are many others. Again, it will have to wait for a future article.

The Five Modes of Experience

An extremely useful cognitive map that’s been around in various forms for thousands of years is the Five Modes of Experience. These are the five things that people (and all other living beings) do, and the only things they ever do. Living consists entirely of these five activities. Every experience consists entirely of these five modes (or aspects of experience). There’s nothing else.

So when you want someone to understand you or what you’ve experienced, these are the five things to express. When you want to understand someone else or what they’ve experienced, these are the five things to reflect. When you want to figure out what’s going on with yourself, what’s bothering you, what you want, or anything about yourself, these are the five things to identify. They are, in correct order,

1. Perceiving
2. Thinking
3. Feeling
4. Intending
5. Acting

Perceiving means sense data, the facts. What you see, hear, smell, taste, or physically feel. It is the foundation for the other four modes. It is what the next mode—thinking—is about. It is important not to contaminate your expression of your perceptions with any of your interpretations, thinking, or opinions about them. Don’t say, for example, “When you came in and gave me a cold stare.” That’s not direct perception; that’s your interpretation. Say instead, “When you came in and looked at me.” Just the bare facts. Note that in this context, the word “perception” means strictly sense perceptions. It does not mean, as is commonly used, your point of view or opinion about something. When people say, “My
perception is that you’re a jerk,” that isn’t really a perception at all. It’s an opinion being disguised and mischaracterized as a perception—as if that’s just what their eyes saw. Rubbish. Don’t use the word that way, please.

Thinking means your interpretations of your perceptions. “When you came into the room and looked at me, I thought you might have been surprised to see me.” It means your ideas about your perceptions, your opinions, analysis, conclusions, speculations, points of view, or any other cognitive activity.

Feeling is used here only in the sense of emotional feeling—not physical sensation. Sad is a feeling. Itchy is a physical sensation. It is important not to confuse the two. Feelings are a big subject. For now, the most important thing to say is that they arise from thinking. I think, therefore I feel. Feelings are really classes of thoughts accompanied by certain types of physical sensations. For example, when you sense a tightness in your lower abdomen and a tingling all over your upper body (to name only two of many sensations), while you think you’re life is in danger, that is the feeling we call “fear.” Feelings do not just fall on you out of the sky. You are not the victim of feelings. You generate your own feelings by how you interpret your perceptions. To change your feelings, change your thinking. This is the basic premise of the cognitive schools of psychology: Rational Emotive Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy.

Intending means what you want, desire, intend, or are aiming at: your purpose, goal, or objective. This is the mode of volition or will. It arises from your feelings, because, as explained earlier, what we want is to get or increase good feelings or to lessen or get rid of bad ones. Simple as that.

Finally, acting means your behavior, what you did, are doing, or will do. It arises out of your intentions (unless you’re under some compulsion or are crazy). What you do depends upon what you want (obviously). It is an attempt to get what you want by acting.

Try to express all five modes of your experience when it’s important to get someone to understand you fully. Sometimes, only one or two of the modes is relevant for your purpose in communicating. But usually—more often than we’re likely to realize—all five modes are worth expressing. When you leave any of them out, the other person is going to fill them in for you as best they can, and they’ll
usually get them wrong. Don't leave it to chance. Express all five yourself. For example,

1. **Perceiving:** I often wake up at night when you turn on lights or make noise after I'm asleep.

2. **Thinking:** I think you probably don't know you're waking me up, and I think if I tell you then, I might be angry and make a mess.

3. **Feeling:** So I feel somewhat torn, conflicted, and unsure what to do.

4. **Intending:** I'd like to avoid being awakened, and, at the same time, I don't want to attack you.

5. **Acting:** So I usually just lie there and wait to go back to sleep, rather than say anything about it.

Please check this message against the elements in Goal #1: Self-Expression. See how likely it is to be understood without provoking defensiveness, in a situation that otherwise could easily lead to a fight. See who has the problem and what it is. See which of the five categories of purposes this message falls into.

Another very important map for communicating is “The Eight Factors of Information Quality,” found in the Cognitive Maps section of this website.

I can't end without saying that improving communication skill is, at the same time, about the most valuable thing you can do for yourself and for others, while being one of the most difficult. I only hope this little article will be of some help in explaining the fundamentals and get you off to a good start.

Once more, your comments and questions would be most welcome. We'd be very interested to hear how you liked this paper, whether you found it to be valuable, or any other reactions. We'd also be happy to answer any questions you might have or discuss the ideas in this paper or how they apply to your management or organizational interests. Please e-mail us at info@developmentalconsulting.com or call (303) 468-1510. This paper is from our website, www.developmentalconsulting.com.