

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Understanding Communication

Webster defines communication as “a giving or exchanging of information, signals or messages by talk, gestures, writing, etc.”. This definition says nothing about the factors that make communication effective.

To begin to understand communication in both its complexity and its simplicity, it may be useful to look at a metaphor:



Imagine for a moment that two people are stranded on what each presumes to be a deserted island.

Imagine further that these two individuals are both endowed with English language ability that is the norm for modern society.

Imagine still further that these two individuals venture out of their respective camps.

They then catch sight of each other somewhere in the middle of the island wilderness.

One can gain insight into the process of communicating effectively by answering the question “**Would the two communicate and what would they communicate?**”

Communicate or Not

Once these two individuals get a glimpse of one another, it is impossible for them to not communicate. The difference between this scenario and most communication exchanges is that almost every nuance of this island interaction is going to be noticed:

- If one person is a trusting fellow and waves a friendly hello, and the other person responds by running in the opposite direction, then this says something.
- If in response to the friendly wave, the other person picks up a rock or a club and begins to run toward the waver, this says something else.
- If instead, the person waves back in a similar fashion, the interaction has another message.
- And if the person who has been waved to begins to break out in wild erratic dance, the actions could have still another meaning.

Note that in any of these scenarios, there has not yet been a verbal exchange.

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Notice that different meanings are associated with each of the responses to the friendly wave:

- Running in the **opposite direction**
- Picking up a **rock or club** and running toward waver
- Returning the friendly **wave**
- Breaking into wild erratic **dance**

To understand what would actually be communicated, it is worth exploring how a person arrives at meaning.

A useful explanation is that meaning comes from something called a “**world-view**”. This world-view can best be described as the climate of attitudes, beliefs, truths and opinions that an individual holds as valid with regard to how the world works.

With this definition in mind, any meaning that we give this metaphoric island communication comes from our world-view. The **actual meaning** would depend on the world-views of the castaways. Erratic dance may mean “Woo, this cowboy has fallen off his horse a few too many times. I’d best be careful.” or it may mean “Wow, the customary Lower Slobovian dance given for returning friends, I haven’t seen this since childhood. This must be a friend.”

Regardless of the assessment, the pattern is the same. There is the recognition of new circumstance. This is followed by an evaluation, which consciously or unconsciously asks “**What does this mean and what should I do?**” This evaluation effectively decides if the person is friend, foe, or of no importance.

This ‘friend, foe, important or no’ decision dictates the course of further action.

Bringing the Analogy Closer to Home

How does this relate to the real world? This question can be answered by looking at another analogy, this one from modern society.



Imagine that a couple has just moved to Anytown, USA, from Europe.

This couple considers themselves to be sophisticated and polished.

They happen to meet some neighbors at their son’s soccer game.

They chat about soccer, and enjoy the exchange.

The newcomers invite these neighbors to a dinner party at their home.

Let’s add some life to this analogy:

- To the **sophisticated couple**, a dinner party means “cocktail attire, linen napkins, china, and polite conversation about world events”.
- For the **neighbors**, it means “a chance to be themselves, put their feet up, relax, discuss football, and have some red wine of no particular vintage”.

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The guests arrive fifteen minutes after the appointed hour in jeans, tee shirts, and tennis shoes and are greeted less than warmly as they are invited in.

During the meal, one of the neighbors asks the host if she would mind turning the game on during dinner so that he can see how his team is doing.

Is this budding relationship off to a good start? Of course not. Will it develop any further? That depends on the flexibility of the individuals in the relationship. It depends on whether the individuals allow their own world-view to be their own world-view. It depends on whether or not they require others to share their world-view as a necessary factor for continued association.

Let's look more closely at this.



Prior to the dinner party circumstance, several individuals came together in the context of a soccer game.

The individuals in all likelihood offered each other a friendly wave that sounded like "Boy that was a nice kick your son just made."

The newcomers then waved back, in language that was understood and appreciated.

Conversation ensued, and further commonality, such as proximity of living quarters was established.

The individuals made an effort to deepen the relationship.

The newcomers assumed that the rapport that was occurring would naturally flow over to another context like "dinner party". The neighbors assumed the same thing, not realizing that each held a very different world-view regarding what a "dinner party" means.

An Opportunity for True Communication

Within the context of the dinner party is the seed of an unfortunate misunderstanding that could result in estranged neighbors and a breakdown of community. The friend, foe or no importance distinction could get readily drawn based on such limited interaction.

Why does this happen? Why do innocent mistakes get blown out of proportion?

The problem begins when an individual defines himself by his world-view. When this occurs, he cannot shift his world-view without causing his identity to come into question. In this circumstance, shifting the world-view (looking at things from a different perspective) jeopardizes his **self-esteem**. If the newcomers are attached to how a dinner party should be, and make having a "correct" dinner party more important than having a budding relationship, they might view their neighbors as cultural oafs and avoid them in the future. If the neighbors are so invested in being ardent sports fans that they make preserving this identity more important than having a budding relationship, then the newcomers may be seen as pretentious snobs who will be avoided in the future.

Within the context of this same dinner party is also the seed of greater understanding and a greater level of community. If one of the individuals is wise enough, and it only takes one, to see himself as bigger than his world-view, true communication can begin. If one of the individuals is wise enough to set aside his or her world-view, and enter the world-view of another, and communicate with him there in small ways, magic can happen.

What if the person hosting the party said something to the neighbors like “you obviously didn’t realize that I meant this to be a formal get-together. Why don’t I throw on some jeans so that we can all relax and be comfortable?” Or what if the neighbor, sensing the lack of comfort in the host said something like “Please forgive me for asking that, I’m an ardent football fan and not everybody is. What is really important to us is to enjoy this meal with you and get to know you better.”

Would the relationship be off to a better start? It is almost certain that it would.

Learning to Communicate Effectively

Learning to engage in more effective communication is really a matter of learning language and behavior patterns that work, and applying them until they become second nature.

The first thing to realize is that like most activities in life, effective communication is a **learned art**. Most of us learn the art’s brushstrokes, our core communication patterns, in childhood. Unfortunately, if the people who raised us did not know how to communicate well, they couldn’t teach us to do so. Acknowledging that there may be a better way is an important step to improving our skill. A person can move miles, or --in the case of the football fan-- yards down the road to effective communication if he recognizes that it is safe for him to set aside his world-view.

A person can move further down this road if he learns to enter a another person’s world in a way that honestly and appropriately says “friend and important”.

How can these skills be quickly acquired? That is what ABR’s “Unlocking the Secrets of Effective Communication” is all about.

