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Conditions That Hinder Effective Communication

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A person's interpersonal life is dependent on that person's facility for making his or her thoughts, feelings, and needs known to others and on that person's receptiveness to the attempts of others to share similar data with him or her. Communication, a multifaceted phenomenon, is the result of efforts by individuals toward this end. Communication can be considered in simplistic terms as the sending and receiving of messages, as both elements must be present for communication to take place. However, the fundamental transaction of message sent and received does not presuppose that communication has occurred. Often, it has only partially occurred or has been aborted entirely as a result of the circumstances surrounding the occasion when the communication attempt was made. These circumstances may be environmental, emotional, verbal-skill oriented, phenomenological, or resulting from a host of conditions present within the individuals who are attempting to relate.

An analogy may help to clarify the concept of the effect of circumstances on the effectiveness of sending and receiving messages. In the late afternoon when you observe a sunset, the sun often appears to be a deep red, larger

and less intense than it seems at midday. This is due to the phenomenon of *refraction*, the bending of the light rays as they pass through the earth's atmosphere, and the higher density of dust in the air through which the light passes as the sun goes down. The sun has already moved below the horizon, but it is still in sight because its emissions are distorted by the conditions of the medium through which they must travel. In a similar way the messages that we send to one another are often refracted by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental conditions that contribute to the atmosphere in which we are relating. I may distort my message to you by giving out mixed messages verbally and symbolically, and you may distort what you hear because of your own needs and experiences. The two of us may be located in an environment, physical and psychological, that contributes to the difficulty in clearly sharing what we intend. In an atmosphere of suspicion, for example, we may both become unduly cautious in our communication.

Although it is unlikely that totally nonrefracted communication is a possibility over time between any two people or with significant others with whom we must deal interpersonally, an awareness of conditions that block and alter the intention of sent and received messages may produce less refraction and better communication in the long run.

Some of the conditions that cause refraction can be labeled and examined in light of their impact on effective communications:

- preoccupation
- emotional blocks
- hostility
- charisma
- past experiences
- hidden agendas
- inarticulateness
- stereotyping
- physical environment
- mind wandering
- defensiveness
- relationships
- status

1. *Preoccupation.* A person who is focusing on internal stimuli may listen in such a way that none of the message comes through or so little of it that he or she cannot grasp the message appropriately and may respond in such a way that the blocking of the message is apparent. A story is told of a columnist in New York who attended numerous cocktail parties and had come to believe that a certain socialite was so preoccupied with making an outstanding impression on her guests that she was unable to hear anything they were saying. To test his theory he came late to her next party; when he was greeted effusively at the door by the hostess, he said, "I'm sorry to be late, but I murdered my wife this evening and had a terrible time stuffing her body into the trunk of my car." The super-charming hostess beamed and replied, "Well, darling, the important thing is that you *have* arrived, and now the party can really begin!"
2. *Emotional blocks.* A second condition may be an emotional block to the direction that the message is taking. Words may have become charged with emotion for a person, possibly due to that person's conditioning in childhood or to current circumstances in his or her life at the time the communication attempt is made. An example might be of the well-intentioned but unaware adult white male, who, in speaking to an adult black male, makes reference to "you colored boys." Similarly, a woman who is having difficulty in conceiving a child may not be able to discuss Aunt Mary's comment, "Now that you and Bob have been settled for a few years, it would be nice to start a family"; or she may find herself responding irrationally to a lecture on population control.
3. *Hostility.* Hostility may create refraction of messages. This can occur when communicating with a person with whom you are angry, or it may be a carryover from a recent experience. It may also be the subject matter that arouses hostility. When two people are engaged in a hostile confrontation, each often distorts messages from the other in such a way that provides fuel for further venting of hostility. A husband and a wife may have the following type of exchange of messages: *He*: "I really thought I was helping you when I . . ." *She*: "Are you trying to tell me that I was incapable of . . ." *He*: "You aren't capable of much of anything! Just look at the state of our finances." The husband's intended message was "I know I've made you angry by my action. Where did I go wrong?" The angry wife chose to interpret the word "help" as an accusation that she lacked the resources to handle the situation. Her message elicits further distortion and hostility from the husband. In another example, a woman may come home from

just having had a confrontation with her boss and may carry over her hostility to her family by overreacting to her husband's messages concerning the day's irritations, or she may simply filter out all messages and respond in monosyllables to any attempts at communication. The subject matter being dealt with may engender hostility and thereby distort the message. A father may comment that his son should plan to have his hair trimmed for his sister's wedding and find that his message has been refracted as an all-encompassing criticism of his son's life style.

4. *Charisma*. The charisma of the sender of a message may affect how the message is received. Political candidates are often chosen more for their possession of this quality than for their other attributes. A charismatic person can often make tired, trivial messages seem new and important to the recipient; however, this too can become detrimental to communication, as the receiver of the message is less likely to question or ask for clarification of the message. How often have we come away enthusiastically from having heard a dynamic speaker, only to discover that we cannot actually remember the content of the speech? Conversely, a person who has something important and unique to say to us may not be able to hold our attention in such a fashion that we hear the message he or she is sending.
5. *Past experience*. Our experience can predispose us to refraction. If our weekly staff meetings have always been a waste of time, we may come into each succeeding meeting expecting not to give the messages that are sent much consideration or to hear them as having no relevant implications. Staff meetings may also nurture another kind of condition that may create message refraction.
6. *Hidden agendas*. A person with a special interest, that is, a hidden agenda, may hear all messages only in reference to his or her own needs or may not be able to hear messages that do not relate to his or her own interest. If the hidden agenda is in competition with the message of another employee, he or she may reject all suggestions made by that other employee or may attempt to manipulate others into distorting the other employee's messages. The person with the hidden agenda might make such comments as "Of course, Chris has no real expertise in this area" or "We all know that the administration will never buy that, Chris." He or she may dismiss an excellent idea from someone with a fresh perspective.
7. *Inarticulateness*. Simple inarticulateness, or lack of verbal skill, may distort the intention of the sender. As clarity is essential for the true message to be received, a person may never be able to communicate effectively if he

or she has never developed verbal skills. If the receiver of the message is unaware of the sender's difficulty, he or she may dismiss the messages or distort them. Verbal patterns that are culturally determined may also hinder communication, as they could function as lack of skill when the message is received. A person from a minority culture may be quite articulate within his or her peer group but may fail to get messages through when speaking to a person from another culture. It is at this point that verbally administered standardized intelligence tests become invalid. An Appalachian child was once being tested by a psychometrist, who asked that the child name the seasons of the year. The child replied, "Deer season, possum season, fishing season . . ." The child showed an excellent grasp of seasonal variation throughout the year; but because his response was not the standard one, his score on the test was reduced.

8. *Stereotyping.* Culturally determined verbal patterns may lead to another type of communication distortion—stereotyping. Eliza Doolittle in the musical *My Fair Lady* was "heard" and understood as a charming, if unconventional, lady once her speech patterns had been altered from their original cockney flavor. However, Eliza had not changed her values or increased her worth as a person in changing her speech patterns; the only change was in her ability to send messages as a refined lady rather than as the stereotype of a thoroughly dismissable guttersnipe. Another type of stereotyping that causes adjustments in a person's perceptual prism is that of the visual impact of the speaker. A very conventional person may "hear" all attempts at communication as radical if the speaker has an unconventional physical appearance. A conservative member of the faculty at an urban university in the United States may hear a bearded colleague say "Perhaps some of the experimental programs, such as the bachelor's degree in general studies, would serve the needs of our particular group of students better than the traditional degree programs seem to do," and may angrily dismiss the idea as an attempt to downgrade the "standards" of the university. Yet a colleague with a conservative appearance might make the identical proposal, and the faculty member might respond with "Yes, we need to have more flexibility for our particular student population."
9. *Physical environment.* The environment alone may create conditions under which communication cannot take place effectively. A stuffy, warm room may make it impossible to send and receive messages accurately. A person's physical state may also be detrimental to communication. Any teacher will expound at length on the decline in understanding on the part of students as summer approaches in a classroom that is not air conditioned. Physical

environment may contribute to another condition that may get in the way of communications.

10. *Mind wandering.* This is a state to which all are susceptible. It distracts from the message sent in much the same way that preoccupation distracts, but the internal stimulus may never focus on any topic for more than a few seconds. This inability to focus for long on internal stimuli will generalize to the external stimulus of a sender's message.
11. *Defensiveness.* This leads to continual refraction of messages received. The insecurity of the person tends to distort questions into accusations and replies into justifications. A wife may ask her husband if he happened to pick up a loaf of bread on his way home from work. Her intention is informational, that is, she is planning to go out anyway and will pick up some bread at the same time, if he has not already bought some. The issue is duplication of effort. The insecure husband, however, may respond as if the issue were his ability to meet her needs. "No, I didn't. I can't think of everything, you know, when I'm busy with a huge project at work. I suppose you think my buying a loaf of bread is more important than concentrating on my job!"
12. *Relationships.* When we are attempting to communicate with another person, we are giving out two sets of messages simultaneously, content and relationship. The other person may be so preoccupied with hearing any cues about the latter that the content is lost or seriously refracted. For example, a boss tells her secretary that she has a set of instructions for her and that she wants her to be sure that she gets them right. If the secretary is insecure in her relationship with the boss, she may hear an implication that she is being evaluated negatively. Consequently, the secretary may distort her hearing of the boss's instructions.
13. *Status.* Perhaps the most difficult condition to overcome in communications is that of status, as it encompasses most of the elements that have already been discussed. A person in a position of high status may find communication difficult with most of the people with whom he or she must interact, as his or her perceived power differentially affects various people. One person may be preoccupied with impressing the source of power, while another may be defensive, feeling that his or her job or status is threatened by the powerful person. In addition, any high-status person must deal with the hostility of the envious, the stereotyping of the power worshiper, the past experiences with other high-status individuals that people may be generalizing from, and the emotional elements generated by all of these conditions.

The means of alleviating these conditions that interfere with the communication process are as varied as the people who must deal with them. The key, however, is in becoming aware of the conditions that are interfering with the process and attempting to modify behavior in such a way that messages are less often and less severely refracted.

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