Person-to-Person Communications: Models and Applications

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by
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Building State-of-the-Art Teamwork In Problem-Solving Organizations

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A note on format

• Underlined items are live links to articles on my Web site or elsewhere
• To get a copy with working links, go to:
  http://tinyurl.com/26rs5g2
• To get a copy of the handout, go to:
  http://tinyurl.com/2abmgoy
• To get both as a ZIP archive:
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Please ask questions as we go along
Core Message

• Person-to-person communications are complex
  • Problems that do arise are difficult to fix
  • Prevention is easier than repair
• We do better when we slow down
• We have little control over what others do with what we say
• How we cope with what we don’t like does matter
• Communications within groups can determine their effectiveness

Work on preventing problems by changing our inner processes
How we’ll work together

• We’ll be dealing with some personal stuff
• To go for the gold we need safety
• Some norms that I need
  • Non-attribution
  • Suspend judgment
  • Do no harm
• Some norms you need:
Learning is the art of acquiring new ideas

- Whatever you’ve been doing is the best you know how
- Honor what you know as good
- You might someday learn something better
- Your toolbox isn’t full—you can add new things without discarding the old
The menu

• Communication as a process
  • What are communications?
  • Examples of problem communications
• Levels of communication
  • Self: How we cope with what we don’t want
  • Other: A model of human interaction
  • Group: Communication in meetings
• A technique for surfacing Truth
What are communications?

• A process in which information is exchanged
• Requires a common system of tokens: symbols, signs or behavior
  • Pheromones in insects
  • Words, expressions, body language in humans

When we do well, we communicate with each other.
Examples of problem communications

- Living the catastrophic expectation
- Implied accusations
- The Tweaking CC
- Commitment by implication
- Mind-reading
- Culture/gender/generational differences
- Hat-hanging
- Mistakes
Living the catastrophic expectation

- Receive an email query “how did we decide this?”
- Respond with defense of the outcome
- Problem:
  - The query asked only about the decision process
  - The response went immediately to defending an attack on the decision

Living the catastrophic expectation can shift us into a high-stress mode unnecessarily
Implied accusations

- An accusation presumed as true and contained within another statement
- Examples:
  - I will agree to invite you to the meeting, if you will agree to be polite and not interrupt other people
  - You can join the team if you agree not to pout if your ideas are not accepted

Implied accusations can put your communication partner on the defensive
The **Tweaking CC**

- The tweaking CC is a pressure tactic
- A CC to the recipient’s supervisor or other powerful people
- Message usually contains embarrassing information

Pressuring your communication partner rarely has the intended effect
Commitment by implication

- Someone else rephrases your words so as to commit you to something you didn’t intend
- Example:
  - You said: “Yes, I’ll get you a few names—not many—soon.”
  - Response: “Great! I’ll take quality over quantity any time!”

Commitments are real only if they are made with freedom
Mind-reading

• None of us can *really* read minds
• We just *think* we can
  • “You’re only saying that because you want me to agree with you”
  • “I don’t believe that because you would never do that unless there was more in it for you”
• Conclusions based on mind-reading are suspect

Mind-reading is so pervasive that we no longer recognize it as such
Culture/gender/generational differences

- We all use similar communication forms
- Different cultures and sexes attach different meanings to the same forms
  - “Would you like to”
  - Politeness/wimpiness

When we assume that communication tokens have universal meanings, we’re headed for trouble
Hat-hanging

- People we meet sometimes match up with people we knew long ago (parents, old bosses, etc.)
- We tend to attribute characteristics of people we knew then to people we know now
- Basis of advertising and con games

Hat-hanging is very difficult to detect and almost always a disaster
Mistakes

- We’re all imperfect
- We make “simple” mistakes, especially under stress
- When our communication partners are also under stress:
  - They interpret the mistake on as-if-intended basis
  - This is also a mistake

Mistakes, especially under stress, can damage a relationship irreparably
What we learn from all these problems

• Person-to-person communication is riddled with problems
• The possibilities for defects seem endless
• Fixing defects in this system is a lot harder than fixing a production process
• To improve quality, work at a deep level

A case-by-case approach is unlikely to make a measurable difference—too many cases
Levels of communications

- Within the self
  - Personal, emotional
  - Delivery technique
  - Interpretation technique
- Between two people
  - Negotiation
  - Conflict resolution
- Among many people
  - Meetings, discussions, debate
  - Mass communications
  - Image management
Communications at the level of Self

• Before we consider interaction, make sure our inner process is effective
• Tools for improving our inner process
  • Awareness of our freedoms
  • Awareness of our coping strategies

Mastering communications at the level of Self really pays off
Our Five Freedoms

• The freedom to see and hear what is here, instead of what should be, was or will be
• The freedom to say what one feels and thinks, instead of what one should
• The freedom to feel what one feels, instead of what one should
• The freedom to ask for what one wants, instead of always waiting for permission
• The freedom to take risks in one’s own behalf, instead of choosing to be only “secure” and not rocking the boat

Virginia Satir, *Making Contact*
Some communications bring us bad news

• When we learn about something we don’t like, we must cope
• To cope with problems and difficulties is to deal with them or maybe to try to resolve them
• How we cope determines how we communicate
We all have to cope with reality

- We receive messages from the world
- We process those messages
- Some are not what we would like
- We cope
- We respond on the basis of our coping

When our coping has balanced regard for all elements of reality, and it is emotionally honest, it is congruent.
Coping stances

- Blaming: “You’re always late!”
- Placating: “Whatever you say, I’ll get it done.”
- Love/hate:
- Super-reasonable: “I’ll work 24/7 if needed.”
- Narcissistic: “I’m God’s gift to this company.”
- Infatuated: “We’re lucky he’s in charge.”
- Irrelevant: “What’s for lunch?”
- Congruent: “It’s not perfect, but
Coping stances and elements of reality

Congruent coping has balanced regard for Self, Other and Context
Incongruent coping stances and reality

Blaming

Placating

Super-reasonable

Love/Hate

Narcissistic

Infatuated

Irrelevant
Homework: keep a coping journal

- When we cope incongruently, we often experience strong feelings
- Keep a little journal for a week
- When you notice strong feelings, make a note of what was going on
- At day’s end write no more than one page about it. Note what your coping stance was.
- Read your journal at the end of the week
Communication with Other: Interaction

- When we converse:
  you talk, I talk, you talk, etc.
- But it’s way more complex than that
- Things happen inside us
- To improve effectiveness of communication:
  - Create a system model of the inside and the outside
  - Use the model to understand defects
  - Devise approaches to limit the occurrence of defects
A model of human interaction

The World

Sensing → Make Meaning → My Feelings About My Meaning

Response

Rules for Commenting

Defenses

My Feelings About My Feelings

Inside
Example: Sensing

- Taking in data through the senses
- “She fidgeted as she spoke, and backtracked several times.”
Example: Make meaning

- Making meaning of the data we take in
- “She seemed nervous and unsure of what she was talking about”
Example: My feelings about my meaning

- How we feel about the meaning we made from the data
- “I feel bad for her and want to help her if I can.”
Example: My feelings about my feelings

- How we feel about having those feelings
- “I shouldn’t want to help her. I feel guilty about wanting to.”


Inside

Response → Rules for Commenting → Defenses
Example: My defenses

• Protection from our own feelings “I’m angry about being sympathetic. There will be none of that.”
Example: My rules for commenting

- Rules governing disclosure to others
- “I must not let anyone know that I feel sympathy. I must be tough.”
Example: My response

- What we do about what we took in, subject to the constraints of our rules and defenses
- “Pull yourself together!”
Exercise: Interaction model
Errors and interventions: Sensing

- Errors
  - Not seeing what is here
  - Seeing what is not here
- Interventions
  - Center
  - Breathe
  - Five Freedoms
  - Retrospectives
Errors and interventions: Meaning

• Errors
  • Attributing my meanings instead of yours
  • “Rushing” to a meaning without considering alternatives
  • Mind-reading, hat-hanging

• Interventions
  • Data question: “What did I see or hear that I used to make that meaning?”
  • Rule of three: think of three possible meanings
Errors and interventions: Feelings about meaning

• **Errors**
  • Feeling about a meaning like (but not the same as) the actual meaning
  • Extrapolated meanings—living the catastrophic expectation

• **Interventions**
  • Slow down
  • Ask: “What meaning did I notice that I used to let myself feel that way?”
  • Be here now
Errors and interventions: Feelings about feelings

- Errors
  - I feel bad that I feel like that
  - I will not feel that feeling

- Interventions
  - Five freedoms: I am free to feel what I feel
  - All feelings are valid
  - “Stuffing” isn’t possible
Errors and interventions: Defenses

- **Errors**
  - I shouldn’t have these feelings
  - I (you) should not do (say, think, …) that

- **Interventions**
  - Know your survival rules
  - Transform rules into guidelines
Errors and interventions: Rules for commenting

• Errors
  • Rules for commenting prevent collaborative exploration of problems
  • “I must not comment” becomes “I must not feel”

• Interventions
  • Five Freedoms
  • Transform rules into guidelines
Errors and interventions: Response

- **Errors**
  - Knee-jerk responses keyed on past experience
  - Creativity limitations; habits
  - Pressure, blaming, manipulation

- **Interventions**
  - Slow down
  - Center
  - Conscious awareness prevents knee-jerk response
Homework: Interaction model

• Find an interaction at work that stirred up emotions
• Try to reconstruct the part of the interchange that got hot
• Play out the interaction model—what happened in each step?
Communications at the level of Context

- Groups, meetings, email discussion lists
- Non-human factors
  - Communication medium
  - Environment
  - Law, regulation, policy, security

The larger the audience, the more significant Context is
Communication and meetings

- Knowing the failure modes helps reduce their frequency
- Agree on names for the modes
- Agree on a way to call a “process check”
- Track incidence of failure modes organizationally
Some failure modes for meetings

- Muzzling
- Running on and on and on
- Reruns
- Tree slaughter
- Serial status report
- Duels and explosions
- Interruptions
- Information hoarding
- Rhetorical fallacies
Muzzling

- Muzzling is the practice of stifling comments by certain individuals
- Often used for political advantage
- Techniques
  - Abuse of the parking lot
  - Preferential recognition
  - Commentary by the chair

Muzzling deprives the group of alternate points of view
Running on and on

- Long commentary with low issue density
- Excessively formal presentations
- **PowerPoint abuse**
  - Gratuitous graphics, video, animation
  - Unnecessary background content
- Excessive detail that almost nobody will ever remember

Sometimes the chair/group *wants* to chew up time
Reruns

- Plowing over already-plowed ground
- Recapping material
  - From previous meetings
  - From other sources
- Requiring reports from attendees who have nothing to report (again)

Use the “cockpit principal”:
Let me know if anything changes
Tree slaughter

• Here’s a still-warm slide-for-slide copy of my presentation
• Keep the slide-to-page ratio as high as possible
  • Page flipping by others distracts the audience
  • Page flipping requires attention
• Not all slides need to be in the handout
• Use printer settings to increase slide-to-page ratio
Serial status report

- We each, in turn, take 2-3 minutes to report that everything is under control
- Brutal honesty is rare
- Instead of status:
  - Report issues
  - Report future risks

Success is not news—at least, it shouldn’t be
Duels and explosions

- Sometimes a pair will polarize
  - Emotions are involved
  - If chronic, it can become a duel that transcends the meeting context
- Rarely are the players restricted to the pair
- The problem is never the problem
- Long-term solution is intervention
  - Best: an outside facilitator
  - Alternate: The two respective supervisors
  - 2nd alternate: The lowest shared supervisor

Don’t let a meeting explode: call a break
Interruptions

• When we interrupt each other
  • We disrespect each other
  • We deprive the group of a chance to hear each other’s contributions
• A sidebar isn’t an interruption—it’s disorder
• Don’t interrupt yourself
• Repeat offenders must be dealt with
  • Interrupting others is a performance issue
  • Failure to address the problem is a performance issue for management

Some interruptions are OK
Information hoarding

- Practice of withholding info until the meeting
- Especially “unpleasant news”
- It’s unethical
  - It’s disrespectful to attendees
  - It prevents attendees from preparing responses
  - It makes the meeting less productive
  - It stifles discussion

Distribute information in advance. Give people time to mull it over.
Rhetorical fallacies

- Any of dozens of deceptive debating techniques
- All fallacies carry risk
  - They cloud reasoning
  - They lead to bad decisions
- Examples:
  - Straw man
  - *Ad hominem*
  - Slippery slope
  - False dichotomy
  - False cause
Straw man rhetorical fallacy

- Technique: exaggerate partner’s premise, then refute the exaggeration
- Warning signs:
  - Feeling the need to say “I never said…”
  - Someone characterizes a position, then draws inferences
- When you see a position being characterized:
  - Call a halt
  - Check that everyone is OK with the characterization
**Ad hominem rhetorical fallacy**

- Attacking the advocate, not the position
- “Your estimate was wrong before, so this one is probably wrong too”
- Defending yourself against *ad hominem* is very difficult
- When you see an *ad hominem*, on someone else
  - Call a process check
  - Get consensus on whether it is *ad hominem*
  - If it is, backtrack

Bystanders are best able to deal with *ad hominem*
Slippery slope rhetorical fallacy

- Technique:
  - If we accept your premise, then we’d have to accept my exaggerated form of your premise
  - Usually the exaggerated form is scary
  - “If we include these fixes, we’ll have to include the whole B list, and we’ll be a year late.”
  - Check carefully: Is the conclusion correct?

The slippery slope is an appeal to fear
False dichotomy
rhetorical fallacy

• “Black-and-white” thinking
  • The only solution to a problem is an extreme and over-simplified path
  • Often stated elegantly—that’s part of the deception
• “You’re either part of the solution, or part of the problem”

Think in living color
False cause rhetorical fallacy

- Mistaking proximity for cause
  - Correlation isn’t cause
  - Time sequence isn’t cause
- Example:
  - Every project you’ve managed has been late and every other project has been on time
  - Neglected to mention: you get all the high risk projects

This one is especially insidious
A technique for surfacing Truth

- Truth isn’t always evident
  - Sometimes we’re afraid to reveal it
  - Sometimes we don’t know that others are unaware
  - Sometimes it good news, but we’re uncomfortable
- We can provide a structure that makes it easier to reveal truth
- Virginia Satir: The Temperature Reading
What is a Temperature Reading?

- Structured conversation for a group
- Five parts:
  - Appreciations and excitement
  - Complaints with recommendations for change
  - New information
  - Puzzles
  - Hopes and wishes
- When you want to make a contribution:
  - Facilitator recognizes you
  - You come to the front of the room
  - You can request others join you if you wish
- No comments about contributions
Appreciations and excitements

• This section is first because it builds positivity
• You can express appreciation for
  • A specific person
  • A group
  • Anything—even the Law of Gravity
Complaints with recommendations for change

• Complain about anything
  • Things that bother us
  • Things we find irritating
• Gives everyone a chance to get the group’s attention
• Recommendation of something to change
  • Should address the complaint
  • This would be better if…

Complaints are solutions in disguise
New information

• Anything you know that you think:
  • Others don’t know
  • Others would find helpful to know
• Tends to trigger others to offer related news
• Revealing new information
  • Can resolve problems before they cause trouble
  • Can prevent situations from becoming problems
Puzzles

- Sometimes we’re reluctant to reveal our puzzles
- Sometimes we don’t realize we have puzzles
- Often what puzzles us puzzles others too
- Revealing the puzzle can
  - Send the group in a profitable direction
  - Motivate others to reveal or seek answers or useful info
Hopes and wishes

- Expressing our dreams gives us energy to make them real
- Any hope or wish is OK
  - The project, the company, the world
  - The team
  - Yourself
- When we exchange our dreams, we make it easier to help each other to achieve them
Exercise: a temperature reading
Final Word

- Much communication training emphasizes repair (e.g., conflict resolution)
- The real payoff is in damage avoidance
- We cannot control
  - What others communicate
  - What others do with what we say/do
- We *can* control
  - What we do
  - What we communicate
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