

Communication Complexities

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Most of us have played the campfire game where a bunch of kids sit around the fire and pass a message from one to the other. It never fails that the message coming out at the end bears little resemblance to what was started.

The same kind of phenomenon is going on when two people try to communicate. There are many steps in the communication process, each of which might be pictured as an individual cub scout sitting around the fire. Here are ten steps that happen each time we say something to someone else:

1. I have a thought that I want to convey to you.
2. I decide how I am going to convey that message to you with my choice of words.
3. I send the message according to my interpretation of how my words will translate my true intent. (I will discuss tone and body language below.)
4. The information goes out from me through the air in sound waves.
5. You then pick up some portion of those waves depending on your level of attention and your physical ability to receive them. You never get them all.
6. You process the information based on your interest in what I am saying and your current level of distraction.
7. You make an interpretation of the information based on your biases and filters about how you perceive the world and what you were expecting me to say.
8. You make a decision how to translate the input into reaction thought patterns in your brain.
9. You make a determination about what you are going to do with the information.
10. You then give some external reaction, comment, or action based on your thoughts.

In each of these steps, there is the potential for tiny modifications of the original thought. Each modification may seem insignificant, but just as in the case with the campfire game, if you add up all of the minute changes, the final meaning may be quite different from the original one.

If the communication is reasonably good, then the thought in my head would be planted in your head roughly intact. If one step in the process modifies the input slightly, the

starting point for the next step will be different, and a significant distortion in the final received message is likely.

When you add in the infinite variety of signals included in tone of voice and body language, the complexity goes up exponentially. The complexity involved in getting the words right is a significant challenge, but studies show that the words contain only a tiny fraction of the meaning we get. In 1967, Albert Mehrabian measured that when talking about feelings or emotions, only about 7% of the meaning is contained in the words we use. The remaining 93% of content is in the tone of voice and body language.

If I say to you, "You couldn't have been any better in that meeting this morning," the message you will receive is highly dependent on my voice inflection and body language. The same words can have very different, even opposite, meanings.

Body language is so complex because we send signals on many different levels subconsciously. The meaning you get will be colored by my skill at accurately projecting the intent behind the communication and also your skill at picking up the signals and decoding them correctly. There may be cultural differences as well that can make the interpretation even more complex. That is why knowledge of and appreciation for the complexities of body language are essential for good communication.

When you consider the complexity of this process, it is not shocking that a fair percentage of meaning in direct communication does not even hit the target area, let alone accomplish a bulls-eye. I think it is amazing that we get as close as we do.

When miscommunication happens, it is a natural reaction to become frustrated and even angry. We may jump to conclusions about the worthiness of our partner in communication. We say things like, "You are not speaking so I can understand your message," or "You never listen to me," or "You just don't pay attention to what I am saying." All of these scape-goating expressions may make us feel better by putting the blame on the other person, but they do not identify or rectify the root cause.

What is needed when message content becomes garbled is a sense that the inevitable straying off message has occurred. It is not necessarily the fault of either person. It just may take more than one attempt to communicate a message. To mitigate the problem, we need to patiently verify the message internalized is the same as the message sent. That takes a verification step, either verbally or with body language. Since the original communicator is 100% sure of what he or she thinks was said, it seems redundant to go through a verification ritual, but it is really necessary, especially for important messages.

When communicating with another person, keep in mind the complex process that is going on. Use your powers of observation to detect possible visual or verbal cues that the communication did not work as intended. Try to not blame the other person,

because the truth is, it is a system problem, and you are also part of the system. Work on improving your own system both on the sending side and the receiving side.

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