

An Approach to Communication

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A Practical Definition

MAN FEELS an insatiable desire to communicate. In fact, scientists tell us that better than 70 per cent of our active hours are spent in communicating. From paid advertising to free publicity and from inter-office memoranda to elaborate computers, corporations seek to communicate. Recent figures from the broadcasting industry indicate that from the sale of time alone, the three major television networks realized an annual income of better than \$1 billion.¹ Print media and radio advertising income figures are equally impressive. Industry is seeking to communicate.

In a manner similar to industry, government and special interest groups are involved in the process of communication. How many governments of the world are willing to conduct the affairs of state without aides to perform acts of communication? If we examine the government of the United States, we find countless thousands of individuals employed for the purpose of communication. And we find that special interests groups, in the name of the American public, receive better than \$100 billion a year in the value of public service from television broadcasting.²

Let's examine man himself. He reads newspapers, books, magazines; he listens to radio programs and phonograph records, speeches, lectures; he views television, plays, and movies. He, too, depends on communication. In fact, in 1967, American con-

¹ "Networks Show Rosy '68 Financial Picture," *Broadcasting*, April 21, 1969, LXXVI, No. 16; (p. 76).

² "100 Billion a Year in Public Service," *Broadcasting*, May 5, 1969, LXXVI, No. 18; (p. 23-28).

sumers spent \$8 billion on radio, television, records, and musical instruments.³

Why is society so interested in communication? Corporations want to sell products and promote what is termed "the good corporate image." Government seeks to keep electorates and especially other governments informed as to the latest developments in social, political, and military philosophies. Man seeks to stay abreast of reality and too often escape into the world of fantasy. In all three examples, communication exists for one basic purpose: to stimulate change, to alter a relationship, to produce a response. Communication occurs because of a desire to affect. And such a desire must be included in any definition of communication.

The term "communication" includes a great deal of human behavior. Communication is the act of giving and receiving information, signals, or messages in any way by talk, gestures, or writing. However, an important consideration is missing from Webster's definition. FOR WHAT PURPOSE ARE WE GIVING OR GIVING AND RECEIVING INFORMATION, SIGNALS, OR MESSAGES IN ANY WAY BY TALK, GESTURES, OR WRITING? Are we performing this act just to be performing it? Or, do we have a purpose?

When a research scientist publishes or presents a paper on some astounding new discovery, is he communicating just to be communicating? Or, does he know that unless his information becomes common knowledge his research is in vain? In the morning, when you greet your wife or your friends, are you greeting them just to be doing so? Or do you have a purpose? I think such examples point out that we need to state the purpose of our act of giving or giving and receiving information, signals, or messages in any way by talk, gestures, or writing. We must define communication in terms of the "WHY."

Communication, then, is the act of giving or giving and receiving information, signals, or messages in any way by talk, gestures, or writing to affect a response. The type of response is immaterial. It is sufficient to say that every communication has as its basic purpose the necessity of affecting a response. Now, we need to answer another question. To whom are we communicating?

³ *Ibid.*

We have said that through communication we seek to affect a response. Now, we must necessarily discuss from whom we are trying to elicit such a response. Purpose and audience are not separable. All communication has as its purpose the eliciting of a specific response from a specific person (or group of persons).⁴ Thus, no analysis of the process of communication can isolate any one particular element without considering its position in regard to other elements in the process. We must know the "who" of communication before we can expect to affect our intended response.

We have now defined communication in terms of purpose and audience. Now, we must consider the how of communication.

To what extent does the communication affect a response? On one hand, an artist is concerned with communication—to sing, or play, or paint—primarily for the pleasure he and his audience receives from the communication. He affects a response of satisfaction from his intended audience. Thus, his purpose is clear. On the other hand, the artist may wish to perform for the dollar value—the pay he receives. In this case, his primary purpose was not simply satisfaction or enjoyment of the work. Rather, satisfaction and enjoyment are only instrumental in producing another response—income from the purchase of the work. Thus, in any situation, we must determine the nature of our purpose before we can affect a desired response.

Before we examine communication failures, I wish to make a final point. As we talk about communication, we need to remember that generally two basic forms exist: (1) personal communication, and (2) mass or impersonal communication.

Communication is personal as long as only two individuals are involved. Letters, face-to-face as well as telephone conversations, telegrams, memoranda—all are methods for personal communication. Such methods are personal because the person sending the message has only the one receiver with which to communicate. Thus, his purpose needs to be consistent only with an audience of one.

However, when a single message is intended for more than one individual, it then becomes impersonal or mass communication. Radio, television, movies, records, speeches, lectures, newspapers,

⁴ DAVID K. BERLO, *The Process of Communication* (New York, N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 14.

books, magazines, letters with carbon copies—all these are methods for mass communication. The individual sending the message has more than one receiver with whom to communicate. Thus, his purpose must be consistent with an audience of more than a single person.

The distinction between personal and mass communication is important in any analysis of why communications fail.

Thus, we have defined communication as an act of giving or giving and receiving information, signals, or messages in any way by talk, gestures, or writing to one or more persons for the purpose of affecting a desired response that is consistent with the needs and purposes of the individuals who are giving and receiving the information, signals, or messages.

When Communication Fails

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Similarly, an act of communication is only as strong as its weakest element. Thus, in striving for effective communication, we must attempt to focus our attention on those points in the communication process that can potentially be considered weak and attempt to strengthen them. Generally, the elements to be discussed include sender and receiver harmony; purpose of the sender; and communication interference.

Sender-Receiver Harmony

Probably, of the causes of communication failure, the most common of all occurs when the sender and receiver are in disharmony with one another. A sender has a purpose; a receiver has a need. A sender seeks to affect a response from a receiver. If the response sought by the sender is related to a need on the part of the receiver, all things being equal, communication will be successful. However, when purpose and need are inconsistent, communication will generally not achieve its purpose. The act of communication may occur. However, unless need and purpose are in harmony, communication will not be successful. Suppose a potential receiver has a genuine need for information about how to stretch the food dollar. An act of communication that sought to affect a response as to the use of low-cost but nu-

tritious foods serves as an example of a situation where sender purpose and receiver need are consistent. On the other hand, if the potential receiver wanted information about how to feed his family and the sender sought to sell him a fancy new automobile, then sender purpose and receiver need are inconsistent. The sender has a legitimate purpose. However, such purpose was inconsistent with the basic need of the receiver. Thus, sender-receiver harmony is a major determinant of communication success.

Purpose Must Be Remembered

Another communication failure occurs when the sender forgets his purpose. When purpose is forgotten, the sender may transmit an improper message, select an improper medium, or reach an unintended audience.

Many times, the sender who forgets his purpose in communications will transmit an improper message to his receiver. That which constitutes a proper message depends to a great extent on the characteristics of the receiver. The characteristics of the receiver will determine the message code, content, and treatment.

When the sender forgets his purpose, he may transmit the message in an improper code. For example, the message code of a particular communication may be the English language. However, if the receiver is unable to decode and receive meaning from the message—if he does not speak or read English—communication will not be successful. Thus, if the sender had remembered his purpose—if he had known the characteristics of the potential receiver—he would have coded the message for the particular receiver to insure a successful communication.

The content of a particular message may also prevent communication from being successful. And often the sender is so preoccupied with the act of communication that he forgets message content. The basic purpose of communication is to affect a response. Yet, we often become so involved with affecting a particular response, we forget the means for affecting such a response. In essence, the content of the message takes a back seat to the mechanics of transmitting that message. In part, I referred to such an instance in discussing the consequences of the sender who is in a state of disharmony with receiver needs. Sender purpose and receiver needs must be consistent for successful com-

munication. And if we assume that purposes are consistent with needs, then would it follow that message content would be consistent with needs? Such is not always the case. Consider the degree of purpose. Suppose our sender wanted to stimulate the acceptance of some low-cost but nutritious foods by a group of receivers. Suppose that the receivers wanted to know about such foods. The sender must communicate enough information to the receivers to stimulate them to action. It will not be sufficient to simply state that the new foods exist. The sender must relate the foods themselves and how to prepare them. And he must use a message code that the receiver will understand.

In addition to message code and message content, message treatment is an important aspect in determining the success of communication. The treatment of the message must be consistent with the characteristics of the receiver. Information, education, and entertainment are types of message treatment. Those terms are broad and can include many different aspects of technique. When using entertainment we may select one of many techniques for treating our message. In radio or television, for example, we may use a dramatic offering. Or, we may select the music and variety format. In both instances, we can communicate a particular message through a particular medium to a particular receiver or group of receivers. In the United States, many retailers reach teenagers through rock and roll music programs on radio. Thus, entertainment is the treatment and music is the vehicle—or technique for transmitting the message. Now consider what would happen if the retailer selected a serious music program on radio for reaching teenagers with a message. The communication may occur—it may physically reach the audience. However, I have my doubts as to the success of the communication. The characteristic of the teenage receiver dictates a music treatment other than that of serious music. Many other cases can be made for proper message treatment. However, I think it's sufficient to say that before communication can be successful, the message treatment must be consistent with the characteristics of the receiver.

We have considered message content and treatment as separate entities. However, the astute observer will realize that each depends on the other and both must function in a state of harmony in any successful communication situation. For example, the content of the message—its subject matter—will determine

to a great extent the treatment of the message. Subject matter that tends to be technical in nature will need a special treatment for clear understanding. On the other hand, even the most simple content can be made difficult to understand through improper message treatment. Two cases will illustrate this point.

A CASE OF GOBBLEDYGOOK. Gobbledygook is a term describing the use of superfluous and complicated words and phrases to state a simple thought.

A New York plumber wrote the Bureau of Standards in Washington that he had found hydrochloric acid fine for cleaning drains, and asked if it was harmless. Washington replied: "The efficacy of hydrochloric acid is indisputable, but the chlorine residue is incompatible with metallic permanency." The plumber wrote back that he was mighty glad that the Bureau agreed with him. The Bureau replied with a note of alarm: "We cannot assume responsibility for the production of toxic and noxious residues with hydrochloric acid, and suggest that you use an alternate procedure." The plumber was happy to learn that the Bureau still agreed with him. Whereupon Washington exploded: "Don't use hydrochloric acid; it eats hell out of pipes."

A CASE OF SLEEP-TALKING. Whereas gobbledygook is often intentional, to impress an audience with a knowledge of the language, "sleep-talking" is purely an unconscious action. We have all listened to speakers who are simply going through the motions of communication. They are either so preoccupied with simply "filling allotted time" or so unconscious as to the general intellect of their receivers that they put them to sleep with long and complicated dialogue. In either case, the speakers are "sleep-talking" only to themselves. What is needed in such an instance is an examination of the receiver's general background and a structuring of subject matter to fit that background. In some instances, the receiver's background may warrant the use of highly technical discourses. However, **NO REASON EVER EXISTS** for simply using flowery adjectives to kill time. For example, a phrase that could be shortened significantly might read like this:

"The problem of extending coverage to all employees, regardless of size, is not as simple as surface appearances indicate." Or,

"Though the proportions of all males and females in ages 16-45 are essentially the same . . ." Or,

"Dairy cattle, usually and commonly embraced in dairying. . ."

Before I leave this particular aspect of communication, I want to make one point clear. When I mention technical language, I am not suggesting that you should "talk down" to your receivers or audience. In many instances, the act of "talking down" will affect a negative response and may prevent successful communication. However, what I am suggesting is that senders should select the message code, content, and treatment that transmit the proper meaning of the message to the receiver in a clear, understandable manner. Thus, we need to consider the medium to use for transmitting the message.

Proper Medium Essential

Inherent in the purpose of communication is the proper selection of a medium. If we determine with whom we seek to communicate, then we can determine whether the communication will be mass or personal. Thus, we should select a medium that fits the communication. If we desire to communicate with only one individual, we would want to select a personal medium. However, if we needed to reach a group of one thousand, we might use a medium with a mass characteristic. Failure to remember purpose in communication can lead to an inconsistency between type of communication and medium for communication. For example, it would be embarrassing to send a mimeographed form letter to a close friend or relative in answer to a personal letter. The close friend or relative may be offended by your apparent impersonal attitude. Thus, while communication may have occurred, the communication might not affect the desired response. On the other hand, suppose one thousand receivers needed the same type of information as to a particular problem. Suppose you attempted to communicate with each of the potential receivers through a personal form of communication, such as a visit or a personal letter. You may communicate with several of the receivers in a given period of time. But, until you have communicated with all of your potential receivers, communication cannot be considered completely successful.

We have already studied media in terms of communication purpose and receiver. While purpose and receiver are the primary determinants, the message itself has an effect on media selection. We know that some messages are best transmitted by writing; some, by talking; still others, by signals. We may even cite ex-

amples of messages that need a combination of media for proper transmittal. I can illustrate this point with the observation that generally speaking, the more technical the subject (the content) the more personal the medium. And the converse is true. The less technical the subject, the less personal the medium. Thus, what may be communicated through the use of personal face-to-face conversations **MAY NOT NECESSARILY** be successfully communicated through the use of a mass medium, such as radio, television, or newspapers.

As has been discussed, the receiver is the target of the communication. The receiver, then, must be considered in every aspect of the communication—in determining purpose; in selecting a message code, content, and treatment; and in selecting a medium. When we forget that the receiver is the target of our communication, we will in all probability not succeed in affecting a response. Yet, sometimes we remember our purpose in communication—we transmit a message to a target audience—and we still do not succeed. Thus, some additional factors exist that determine the success of our communication.

When a particular message reaches the intended audience, we are engaging in a purposeful communication; we are one step closer to affecting a desired response. However, when a message is received by an unintended audience, the chances will be great that the communication will not affect a desired response. Unlike the example of the intended audience, where purpose and audience are consistent, a message received by the unintended audience may not be designed for that audience. That is to say, purpose and audience may be inconsistent. Thus, in the case of the unintended audience, the communication process will probably not affect a desired response.

I'm afraid that all of us have been eavesdroppers to communication that was not designed for our ears or our eyes. In such an instance, we are unintended receivers. The message code, content, or treatment may not have been consistent with our backgrounds. In addition, our personal needs were not considered in the sender's purpose. Thus, needs and purpose are not consistent. Further, suppose the sender selected a medium that is not suited to our characteristics. We are a party to the communication. Yet, our reception of the communication is unintentional. The situation I have constructed occurs every day. Simply, it's an overheard telephone conversation or a memo, which we accident-

ly intercept, from one individual to another. The use of one's imagination as to message content in such an instance will illustrate how unintended receivers may impede the success of communication.

Communication Interference

Another common cause of communication failure results when the process is interrupted by either factors external or internal to the process. The following examples will include common external factors that may prevent a communication from being successful:

1. Noise of static in broadcasting.
2. Extraneous noise and conversation.
3. Blurred print or misprints in writing.
4. Speech defects.
5. Hearing and sight defects.

Thus, we must turn our attention to overcoming these problems when they are encountered.

In addition, internal interference may create barriers to successful communication. Internal barriers usually occur in the reception of the communication. For example, a sender may actually reach an unintended receiver with a message which is consistent with the need of the receiver. However, suppose the receiver fails to pay attention to the message. Suppose the message, to be a little trite, "goes in one ear and out the other." Such is the nature of internal interference. The sender is competing with the receiver's interest level. What is needed is a technique to elevate interest levels—to insure that communication does not fail.

Numerous methods exist for overcoming what I call "internal interference" in communication. Radio uses a variety of voices, sound effects, musical effects, and electronic effects to increase the interest level of the program. Television utilizes all of those used by radio and throws in quite a varied number of visual effects, such as color or rapid picture changes to increase viewer interest. The print media—magazines and newspapers—use different size letters in printing as well as colors to enhance the message. Speakers use varied aural and visual aids to keep the audience "tuned-in" so to speak to his wave length. The list of techniques for overcoming "internal interference" goes on and on.

It is sufficient to say that often, messages must be decorated with a little garnish to increase the interest of the audience in the message to insure successful communication.⁵

Thus, in review, communications involve the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver through the use of a medium to affect a response. The process, to be understood, should be studied in terms of the sender's purpose; the characteristics of the medium; the message code, content, and treatment; and the receivers' needs, abilities, and knowledge.

Communication may fail if sender's purpose and receiver's needs are inconsistent; if the purpose of the communication is neglected; or if external or internal interference occurs.

Suggested Reading List

- (1) BERLO, DAVID K. 1960. *The Process of Communication*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, N.Y.
- (2) KLAPPER, JOSEPH. 1961. *The Effects of Mass Communications*. The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill.
- (3) SCHRAMM, WILBUR. 1954. *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Ill.
- (4) SCHRAMM, WILBUR, JACK LYLE, AND EDWIN B. PARKER. 1961. *Television in the Lives of our Children*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.

⁵ POUCHER, D. W., *Radio Production Factors as the Determinants of the Popularity of Aired Radio Audience Promotion Among Teenagers*. (University of Florida, 1965.)