

CHAPTER 7

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Sending and Receiving Messages

When things go awry in organizations (i.e. poor performance, mistakes, and bad decisions), after-the-fact analysis often comes up with an easy diagnosis: poor communication. Unfortunately, this simple answer seldom prevents recurrence of the same or similar situations. "Poor communication" is frequently a symptom of a problem but seldom a cause. It is a gross generalization of a highly complex series of interactions between organizations, groups, or individuals requiring both knowledge and learned skills of those attempting to communicate effectively.

All communication requires a transmitter or sender and a receiver. If both the transmitter and receiver are tuned to each other, operating properly and without noise or distortion in the system, the message gets through, or at least this is normally true when we are transmitting and receiving electronically. When human beings are involved, however, there is almost always noise and distortion bedeviling the interactive process, often caused by unrecognized differences in spontaneous responses derived from life experiences, lack of knowledge especially cross-cultural knowledge, failure to interpret correctly available clues, inaccurate perception, biases, or failure to differentiate between what someone said and what he/she meant.

A number of hefty books deal with the communication process in organizations. In this chapter, we will not attempt to cover all the bases nor deal with the total complexity of the process. Written communication takes time on the part of both the sender and receiver and thus is usually undertaken when we are reflective. Written communication is susceptible to some of the same problems and difficulties of verbal (i.e. spoken) communications but perhaps to a lesser degree. We will focus on communications that are usually spontaneous; specifically on three important elements of knowledge and/or skill of particular concern to managers who would hope to learn to communicate more effectively:

1. Sending/receiving/responding verbally, especially skillful listening;
2. Sending/receiving/responding physically (body language); and
3. Dealing with cultural differences, particularly those involving space, time and things.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The Power of Listening¹

Typically, our education has afforded us the opportunity to study grammar, rhetoric, public speaking, expository writing, or other related skills. However, these output skills of communication alone do not prevent problems of communication, for communication is a two-way street involving input as well. Most of the preoccupation with communication has focused on output and we still find on every hand courses in composition, effective speaking, and the arts of plain and fancy talk. Not surprisingly, experts writing about communication have begun to see that a large part of the problem is caused by faulty listening. As the noted general

semanticist S. I. Hayakawa² stated some years ago, "It does not avail the speakers to have spoken well if we as listeners have failed to understand, or if we come away believing them to have said things they didn't say at all." Listening is a problem when ineffective, and a source of power and a leadership skill when effective. Improvement in our ability to listen effectively will go a long way in improving communication.

It goes without saying that listening means not just maintaining a polite silence while you rehearse in your mind the speech you are going to make the next time you can grab a conversational opening. Listening also means more than just hearing words. In order to understand someone, you often must make an effort to know what the speaker means in terms of his or her spontaneous responses derived from his or her perceptions and life experiences, and not just in terms of your own spontaneous responses. In his article, "How to Listen to Other People", Hayakawa (op cit) writes:

Listening means trying to see the problem the way the speaker sees it -- which means not sympathy, which is feeling for him, but empathy, which is experiencing with him. Listening requires entering actively and imaginatively into the other fellow's situation and trying to understand a frame of reference (life experiences) different from your own.

Carl Rogers and F. J. Roethlisberger, in their treatment of "Barriers and Gateways to Communication"³ reiterated the importance of empathetic listening, saying that in order to communicate with understanding you have "to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference (based on his life experiences and perceptions) in regard to the thing he (or she) is talking about."

Recognizing the Speaker's Frame of Reference (Understanding his or her Perceptions and Life Experiences)

The first item of importance to be derived from this concept of effective listening is this: we must occasionally remind ourselves that a speaker may have perspectives quite different from our own and that what he or she means by a statement might be very different from what we would mean if we used the same words! Our common language is such that ordinary words mean different things to different people. It is an unreasonable demand on the part of the listener to expect everyone else to use words with the precise meaning he or she would use, were he or she speaking. To listen effectively, we must listen reflectively and with empathy.

Thus far we have said that communication may be impeded if we fail to allow for the possibility of a speaker having different experiences and perspectives from our own. Empathetic listening requires a sensitivity that goes beyond the speaker's words to get at the meaning behind the words. If we fail to understand the speaker's frame of reference and insist on hearing everything he or she says in terms of our own, the reason may be our mistaken assumption that words, independent of the people who are using them, have unambiguous meaning. It is the listeners job to understand what the speaker means, not what the words mean!

The Problem of Evaluating in Terms of Our Own Frame of Reference

Rogers and Roethlisberger (op. cit.) proposed that a "major barrier to mutual interpersonal communication is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve (or disapprove) the statement of the other person or the other group". They illustrated the point as follows:

Suppose someone, commenting on this discussion, makes the statement, "I didn't like what the man said". What will you respond? Almost invariably your reply will either be approval or disapproval of the attitude expressed. Either you respond, "I didn't like it either; I thought it was terrible", or else you tend to reply, "Oh, I thought it was really good". In other words, your primary reaction is to evaluate it from your point of view, your own frame of reference.

This is an example of your spontaneous perceptual evaluative filters, derived from your life experiences and perceptions, in action.

By evaluating in this manner, the listener has only brought his or her spontaneous response derived from his or her frame of reference to bear on the matter. Instead of communication with understanding, the interaction consists of two ideas, two feelings, two judgments missing each other in psychological space and in this situation the psychological distance between the two remains unbridged. In the instance noted above, for example, the evaluative response has failed to inform the listener why the person didn't like the discussion or what the discussion apparently meant from his or her point of view.

Another example of how spontaneous responses or frames of reference and consequent evaluations can influence the ability to receive messages with minimal distortion:

A senior manager, born during the "Roaring Twenties" and raised during the Depression of the '30s, is interacting with a subordinate born during the post World War II baby boom and raised during the affluent '50s. Concerned with security and husbanding resources, the boss says, "We can't afford that new equipment". Through the filters of his life experiences and perspectives, the subordinate's evaluation is "the old tightwad won't listen to reason". Neither party is likely to be able to deal effectively with the other or "hear" the other's analysis of the "facts". The boss, from his point of view, believes the subordinate is a "materialistic spendthrift"; the subordinate believes he or she is dealing with a "tightwad", and each "listens" to the other through their own life experiences, filtered and less-than-insightful evaluations. Lacking understanding of where the other is "coming from", each party to the flawed communication distorts the messages being sent and received, and an effective analysis of the "facts" gets lost in the process.

In order for communication to flow rather than break down, we must be able to understand what the speaker means, and this often means making an attempt to understand his or her meaning and his or her spontaneous responses (life experiences and perspectives) rather than evaluating his or her statements by using our own spontaneous meanings or definitions, derived from our own life experiences and perspectives. Among other things, this implies that listening does not mean waiting alertly for the flaws in the other fellow's arguments so that later you can cut him down. In regard to the tendency to evaluate rather than listen empathetically, Hayakawa (op. cit.) suggests a general rule:

Refrain from agreement or disagreement with a speaker, refrain from praise or censure of his (or her) views, until we are sure that we thoroughly understand what those views are.

Pathways to Better Communication

The point has been made that good listening is reflective, empathetic listening: listening with an awareness that the speaker may be operating with different life experiences and

perspectives leading to a different set of spontaneous responses or frame of reference, and trying to understand those experiences and perspectives and that set of spontaneous responses or frame of reference in order to glean the speaker's meaning. This doesn't imply that we have to agree with a speaker, rather it suggests that we have to see reflectively and empathetically his or her meaning through his or her eyes before we can agree or disagree. Writers on the subject of effective communication have suggested certain procedures for improving understanding:

1. A good listener does not merely remain silent; he or she asks questions. However, these questions must avoid all implications, whether in tone of voice or in wording, of skepticism or challenge or hostility, i.e., we must avoid putting the speaker in the position of defending his or her perspectives. Our questions must clearly be motivated by curiosity about the speaker's views (and perspectives). Such questions, which may be called "questions for clarification", usually take the form, "Would you expand on that point about...?" or "What exactly is your recommendation again?" or "Would you mind restating that argument about...?"
2. Rogers and Hayakawa both suggest the following procedure: before commenting upon a statement, the listener can try to restate to the speaker's satisfaction what the speaker has just said. Hayakawa writes: "Perhaps the most useful kind of question at this stage is something like 'I am going to restate in my words what I think you mean. Then, would you mind telling me if I've understood you correctly?'" or, if talking with someone of more recent vintage, try 'Hey man, let's see if I got that.'

Rogers suggests that as an experiment the reader might do the following: the next time you expect to get into an especially difficult or heated argument with someone, institute this rule for your behavior -- "I can speak for myself only after I have first restated the ideas and feelings of the other speaker accurately and to that person's satisfaction." If this is done sincerely, in a true effort to understand not only what the other person says but what he or she feels and what his or her perspectives are, the usual response to this behavior is that the other person begins to make some effort to understand your point of view. Rogers continues:

Can you imagine what this kind of an approach would mean if it were projected into larger areas? What would happen to a labor/management dispute if it were conducted in such a way that labor, without necessarily agreeing, could accurately state management's point of view in a way that management could accept; and management, without approving labor's stand, could state labor's case in a way that labor agreed was accurate? It would mean that real communication was established, and one could practically guarantee that some reasonable solution would be reached. And in addition, after an agreement was reached, there would be a higher probability that both sides understand to what they have agreed.

These techniques in themselves will not guarantee effective listening, but they should help the listener to avoid some of the terminological tangles resulting from incongruent or conflicting spontaneous responses derived from the unique life experiences and perspectives of the speaker and listener that is at the root of poor communication. Recognizing and respecting the speaker's

frame of reference, Rogers and Roethlisberger point out, can help sidestep the hostilities, resentments and defensiveness that arise through misunderstanding.

Improvement in the quality of listening can go a long way toward avoiding the misunderstandings that often are the basis for ineffective communication. Effective listening is reflective empathetic listening. Before responding to a statement, a listener is advised to be certain he or she has reflectively understood the statement in the speaker's terms. This requires a sensitivity to the speaker's life experiences, perspectives and frame of reference, which may be quite different from the listener's. The listener must be able to see things through the eyes of the speaker before he or she can be sure he or she has understood.

Listening empathetically, however, may not be as easily achieved as it might sound. Writers on the subject have noted that in addition to a willingness and the necessary skills, empathetic listening requires courage. As Rogers writes:

If you really understand another person in this way, if you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him (or her with his or her life experiences and perspectives) without any attempt to make evaluative judgments (based on your own life experiences and perspectives), you run the risk of being changed yourself (you may modify your own frame of reference). You might see it his (or her) way; you might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or your personality (and your perspectives).

Rogers' point above, that good communication can seem too dangerous, suggests the curious turn of thought that misunderstandings and poor communication, in some circumstances, might be functional for preserving intact our intrinsic perspectives and biases. Writers on the subject of communication typically adopt the point of view that poor communication is a problem everyone laments, and that as far as everyone is concerned, we would be better off with communicative clarity. There are some writers, however, notably Charlotte Kursh⁴, who suggest that it is a mistake to view good communication as a panacea. In her article, "The Benefits of Poor Communication", she challenges the assumption that better communication will necessarily reduce strife and conflict. She writes:

A better understanding of the situation might serve only to underline the differences rather than to resolve them. Indeed, many of the techniques thought of as bad communication were apparently developed with the aim of bypassing or avoiding confrontation, and some of them continue to be reasonably successful in this aim.

Kursch's point is that the assumption that the attainment of maximum clarity as measured by some more or less objective standard is always in the interest of at least one of the parties to an interaction, and often of both, may not always be correct. The heated rhetorical clashes, with all their implied misunderstandings of each other's position, between, say, the Arabs and the Israelis, may prove quite functional: the speakers might not be at all interested in understanding each other; rather, suggests Kursh, they have their eyes on "pleasing the crowds" that are their constituents. As a further illustration of this point, Kursh writes:

The fuzziness, the lack of clarity, the meaninglessness of the ordinary political speech can be an important tool in getting a working majority -- and a consensus, however arrived at, may be vital for the well-being or even existence of a nation.

The possibility that poor communication may be functional is raised not with the purpose of advocating it; rather, it is raised to point out the importance of recognizing that the cause of misunderstanding and poor communication may go far beyond the problems of speaking and listening well, to the fundamentally different life experiences and intrinsic values of the individual, group, organization, or nation thus yielding quite different spontaneous responses. In these circumstances, there is not a problem in communications but a fundamental conflict in deep-rooted life experiences, cultures and perspectives. Where good communication and understanding is called for, skillful reflective listening without making evaluative judgments will go a long way toward accomplishing it. "Managers who overcome the language barrier in their own organizations will find their interactions...vastly more productive."⁵

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION⁶

Body Language -- Conflict or Congruence Between Verbal and Physical Signals⁷

If we are even minimally sensitive, most of us have some skill at interpreting the many sets of signals (often called "constellations") we receive from facial expressions, hand movements and other body movements exhibited by other people. What people mean, as contrasted with what they are saying, is often most explicitly revealed through complex sets of body language signals. Obvious examples of these "constellations" that most of us, within our own culture, are able to interpret correctly, are:

--Male-female "magnetism" which results in a complex set of "signals" that may or may not be consistent with the words spoken.

--An authoritarian boss, "taught" to be a participative manager, signals through grimaces, frowns, changes in eye contact, folding arms, or other body language signs whenever a subordinate, whose ideas he or she does not respect, ventures one.

--One person involved in an intense conversation with another notices that the other party signals through loss of eye contact, expressions of annoyance, changes in posture and other signs that the psychological distance, and sometimes even the physical distance, between them has increased.

All of these are examples of complete sets of clues that some of us "read" accurately and others, less sensitive to physical manifestations influencing communication, hardly notice.

Body language talks; sometimes more clearly than the words we say. If you have ever had the experience of trying to communicate with someone who does not speak your language, and when you are forced to get your message across through gestures and facial expressions, you will begin to understand the power of body language. Or, if you have had to rely on only telephone conversations with an important other person and cannot see their expressions (with consequent miscommunication), or in the case of the blind who have to receive all their signals through interpretation of voice inflection, then you will recognize that these are all manifestations of the importance of physical accompaniments to verbal signals.

Body language is one means of communication; one language among others, including the language we speak, and the language of space, time, and things. It is also largely unconscious and spontaneous. We usually don't particularly notice it, in ourselves or others, and therefore we often miss an important element of the total communication process.

These non-verbal messages may either confirm or deny the verbal messages accompanying them (or be neutral or unintended or misinterpreted). As an important part of the total communications package, we need to learn to "read" the complex sets of physical elements in messages sent and to resolve any conflicts we perceive between the physical and verbal signals.

A complication: sets of non-verbal signals vary immensely, not only between individuals but between cultures and in connection with the context of the total communication. Take this ubiquitous symbol in the American society:

A smile. What does it mean when it is:

- a) accompanied by a gun in your ribs and the admonition to "stick 'em up"?
- b) accompanied by the phrase "have a nice day", said routinely by the supermarket checker?
- c) preceded by the message from your boss that you have just goofed badly and need to watch your step?
- d) exhibited by a used car salesman trying to sell you a clunker?

To complicate matters further, what does a smile mean in different cultures, to say nothing of different kinds of smiles: a thin-lipped smile from a Texas rancher; a toothsome smile from a Japanese businessman; an indulgent smile from a Boston Brahmin dowager; a diffident smile from a shy Pakistani woman; an eye-twinkling smile from an Irishman?

These signals are given in interrelated sets or constellations and, in context within our own culture, may be easily "read" by most of us if we pay attention to our spontaneous intuitive responses. Single signs or small sets of other facial and bodily signals are easily misinterpreted, especially if we are unfamiliar with the individual's background and life experiences. Eye contact is an especially difficult aspect of body language to read across different cultures. In her paper, Jane Lyman Holtz⁸ of the Harvard Business School focused on this problem thus:

How we look and how we are looked at has a lot to do with our needs for approval, acceptance, trust and love, -- and we usually react accordingly. Looking is a non-tactile way to "touch" another. Looking away or not looking at all is a clear-cut sign of disinterest -- of distancing oneself from another. Avoiding eye contact is a way of hiding true feelings, especially discomfort or guilt. People who feel insecure about themselves will avoid eye contact in a threatening situation but seek it when the situation is to their advantage. In such a way, characteristics of self-concept can be expressed through body language. The meanings of eye contact and avoidance differ across culture and social class. Albert Schefflen describes the differences he has observed between middle class Americans and working class Blacks and Puerto Ricans, and the misunderstandings that can arise from a lack of awareness or understanding: "In an interaction, Black males do not look at each other's faces as often as white middle class males do. By cultural prohibition, eye-to-eye gazing is considered rude. As a consequence of having used their gaze in this way for a lifetime, Blacks tend to avoid face-to-face gazing when they are talking with whites. Sensitive whites will often respond by dropping their eyes also. Puerto Rican

boys are taught to look down as a gesture of respect. We have seen middle class teachers try to force a lad to look them in the face. In one case, a Puerto Rican boy who was treated in this manner fled from the school in panic."

There are many other sets of clues available to the astute observer; we express feelings with our hands, arms, legs, and total body posture. Once again, it is important to emphasize that these clues can be correctly interpreted only in context and only in constellations or large sets. As Holtz puts it: "No position, expression, or movement can be considered in isolation. Communication is a "multi-channel" system. Body language is but one channel, interdependent with our use of time, space, things, and verbal language."

For the manager concerned about more accurate communication and consequent better judgments and decisions, awareness of and increasing skill in interpreting body language appears to be an appropriate and useful adjunct to the tool kit.

COMMUNICATING WITH TIME, SPACE AND THINGS

How Different Cultures Use Time, Space and Things Differently

In the early '60's, applied anthropologist Edward Hall⁹ published a classic book entitled "The Silent Language", followed five years later by another, "The Hidden Dimension". In these books (highly recommended reading for managers), Hall demonstrated graphically how people inhabiting different cultures use time, space and things to communicate messages and how people in those cultures, lacking knowledge of the differences, often miscommunicate. Dealing particularly with the American society, he demonstrated the many ways we send messages non-verbally, and in subsequent years a number of authors have extended his insights and applied them to management. There are two important lessons we can learn from Hall and others who have built on his ideas:

1. People around the world view time very differently than we do; they are equally or even more sensitive to spatial discriminations, and things carry many different messages to people in other parts of the world than they do for us.
2. Different parts of many countries, such as the United States, and different people in the same country often view time, space, and things differently. Managers from Texas have almost as much of a problem communicating with Bostonians as with Brazilians. A British multinational manager may have more difficulty communicating with a British "punk rocker" than with another manager in his own company from another country.

The Many Dimensions of Time

Professor Anthony G. Athos¹⁰ has noted that we have many ways of talking about time: "We have time, keep time, buy time and save time; we mark time, spend it, sell it and waste it; we kill time, pass time, take time and make time." In the world of business and industry, we are concerned with overtime and flextime. We speak of "bankers hours" and consider the implications of the four-day work week. We worry about workaholic managers who spend too much time on the job and about malingering workers who spend too little.

In many parts of the United States, and particularly in connection with work, junior managers are very concerned about being "on time". And how we handle on-time-ness communicates a good deal about relative status. An executive who has summoned subordinates

to a meeting expects them to be on time for the meeting, but is not over-concerned about keeping them waiting if he or she is busy. The subordinates, on the other hand, will often arrive ahead of the time set even if it means they will cool their heels in the boss's waiting room until he or she is ready for them.

Managers of equal status sometimes will use time in somewhat subtle ways to communicate relative status. One manager calls another and asks him or her to be in his office at 10:00 am for a conference. Whether or not he or she has a legitimate reason, the second manager, without explanation or apology, shows up ten minutes late. Nothing has been said, but a message has been given and received.

The amount of time we are willing to give another person also communicates a message, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Consider the manager who interacts frequently with subordinates in their offices in a friendly or supportive way, contrasted with the manager who rarely leaves his office and only calls people in to critique their work. Or a boss who spends many hours coaching a subordinate, but gives little time to anyone else in the office. A signal has been given: with positive connotations to the recipient of the manager's time and a negative message to everyone else.

The way different cultures and sub-cultures deal with time is often affected by elements peculiar to the culture. In Spain and Latin America, most work stops for at least two hours in the heat of the afternoon while people enjoy siesta. To make up for the hiatus, work continues until late in the evening and the dinner hour is advanced to 10:00 pm.

When visitors from other cultures where a much more relaxed attitude toward timeliness prevails come to the United States, their U.S. hosts may escort them on tightly scheduled visits that fit the hosts' concept of maximizing the effective use of time. The visitors often find it difficult to understand why it is necessary to be on time for appointments and find themselves exhausted at the end of a day of rigidly scheduled visits.

Lack of sensitivity to other people's ways of viewing time can trap us into inappropriate behavior toward them. Professor Athos (op. cit.) recounts an interesting example of this:

Using time to manipulate or control others is common, even if we who do so are unaware of it. I once hired a Mexican-American gardener on a monthly contract to care for my yard. When we were discussing the arrangements, I felt somewhat uncertain that he would do all I wanted done or do it to my satisfaction. My feelings of mistrust were expressed by focusing on time. I wanted to know precisely what day of the week he would come and how many hours he would stay. He seemed to understand and said, "Thursdays. Four hours."

Well, he actually did come on Thursdays once in a while but he also came on every other day of the week except Sunday and Monday. He never to my knowledge stayed four hours even when I happened to be home. I was sure I was being "taken" until it occurred to me that the yard had never looked so good and that everything really needing to be done was done.

The gardener apparently thought in terms of planting and cutting and fertilizing cycles. He felt his duty was to the yard, not to me. He sent me bills about every three or four months and then he often had to ask me what I owed him. He trusted me completely

to pay him what he deserved. He worked in terms of seasons of the year, and I was trying to pin him down to an hourly basis. My attempt to replace my mistrust with the brittle satisfactions of controlling another person, in time, would eventually have led him to quit or me to fire him. I was lucky to see what was going on and I left him alone. We got along fine.

Clearly the ways we handle time communicates many different messages about how we feel; not infrequently unconscious and unintended messages that account for many of the problems in communication between people.

The Hidden Language of Space

We communicate a good deal about ourselves and how we feel about others by how we use space. The best example of this, apparent to all who work in organizations, involves the strong values connected with the size and locations of offices. Although there are sometimes ambiguities caused by purposeful or accidental flouting of the basic values, almost anyone can walk into many plants or offices for the first time and accurately estimate the relative status of those working there by observing the circumstances of their workplace.

Borrowing heavily from Edward Hall's work, Athos has identified five basic values that most of us assume when concerned about work space:

1. More is Better Than Less - Many a battle has been fought by executives over the size of their offices. While the acute concern felt by most people about office size has its amusing aspects, most organizations have found it expedient to be very exacting about office space that accurately reflects the rank of the person occupying it.
2. Private is Better Than Public - Secretaries work in open spaces, junior managers often in cubicles enclosed only by room dividers or in offices with several other inhabitants, while senior managers have private offices where doors can be closed.
3. Higher is Better Than Lower - Senior executives usually have their offices in upper floors of office buildings. At the U.S. Department of State in Washington, when people speak about the "seventh floor", they are referring to the offices of the Secretary and Undersecretary. In other organizations, "Let's go upstairs with this" means "Let's go see the boss". Being "kicked upstairs" means an ineffective manager is being given the boot from a sensitive operating position to the implied (but false) status of an empty office in the executive suite.
4. Near is Better Than Far - At a large government laboratory, the executive offices are referred to as "Mahogany Row". The Director's suite of offices is at one end of Mahogany Row, the Associate Director's office is next in line and the rank of other executives is directly related to how near their offices are to the Director's.
5. In is Better Than Out - We speak of the "in group". An executive's office may be located, for business reasons, far from the seat of power; even, in large organizations, in another city. However, when he or she visits headquarters, if he or she sits near the boss at the conference table, that executive is "in".

While much of the above noted uses of space and the values connected with them are similar to those of other cultures, the needs, values and customs connected with interpersonal

space vary considerably from one culture to another. Hall has identified the often fascinating cross-cultural differences, and indeed the differences between people from the same cultures, in regard to their feelings about and behavior regarding what he calls their "bubble of personal space". Degrees of tolerance for closeness to others varies tremendously between individuals, sometimes related to race or ethnic factors, sometimes to status or social position and sometimes to both.

The phrase "keep your distance" is germane to this phenomenon. While Latin or Arab males frequently embrace or talk nose-to-nose, British and Nordic males prefer to converse, even intimately, at a "respectable" distance. When those of one persuasion intrude on the "territory" of those who feel differently, sometimes amusing and sometimes tragic or dysfunctional results can be observed. In the United States, an insecure manager usually prefers to keep a desk or equivalent space between himself and a subordinate, while perfectly comfortable with closer contact with peers.

So, communication can be facilitated or can break down as a consequence of sensitivity to the "proper" uses of space and time.

Things Signal Status

People of high status sometimes try to lessen the manifestations of their higher levels in their society by down-playing the importance of things; people of lower status rarely do so. In most cultures, the possession of (more, bigger, expensive, unique, beautiful) things connotes status, wealth, education, and taste; all in contrast to (less, smaller, cheaper, common, ugly) things possessed by those less fortunate. Some relish and even flaunt the former; others feel guilty about or wish to hide their good fortune.

Those who possess less sometimes want to signal more than they have to the world, for example, the economically deprived individual who drives a Cadillac. Or, we see the opposite, for example, the wealthy individual who prefers a modest home and a "compact" car.

In summation, like time and space, things emit signals that are part and parcel of the complex communication process. Managers who wish to communicate effectively need to pay as much attention to these signals as to those received from effective listening to verbal messages and knowledgeable observation of sets of clues from body language. Managers who operate in sub-cultures of the United States and in cultures other than our own need to recognize the difficulties in expression verbally, physically and with regard to time, space, and things. People everywhere are extraordinarily sensitive to the values embodied in their cultures. An effective manager takes all the facets of communication into account when interacting with individuals and groups and when making important decisions.

Questions for Reflection and/or Discussion

1. What can managers do to improve their listening skills?
2. What can managers do to improve their ability to send and receive non-verbal signals?
3. What can managers do to improve their sensitivity to the way others perceive time, space and things?
4. What can managers do to improve their communications skills?

FOOTNOTES

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