Effective Communication Defined

To say we communicated does not imply an outcome. Communication is a process involving the exchange of messages and the creation of meaning (Barnlund, 1962). No two people ever attach the same meaning to a message. Whether or not a specific instance of communication is effective or not depends on the degree to which the participants attach similar meanings to the messages exchanged. Stated differently, **communication is effective to the extent that we are able to minimize misunderstandings.** "To say that meaning in communication is never totally the same for all communicators is not to say that communication is impossible or even difficult—only that it is imperfect" (Fisher, 1978, p. 257).

When we communicate, we attach meaning to (or interpret) messages we construct and transmit to strangers. We also attach meaning to (or interpret) messages we receive from strangers. We are not always aware of this process, but we do it nevertheless. To say that two people communicated effectively requires that the two attach relatively similar meanings to the messages sent and received (e.g., they interpret the messages similarly). This can be viewed as basic communication fidelity—"the degree of congruence between the cognitions [or thoughts] of two or more individuals following a communication event" (Powers & Lowrey, 1984, p. 58).

Why Misinterpretations Occur

Communication is effective to the extent that the person interpreting the message attaches a meaning to the message similar to what was intended by the person transmitting it. This, however, is not what happens most of the time. The vast majority of the time we interpret strangers' messages using our own frames of reference. There are problems that emerge when we interpret strangers' behavior based on our own frames of reference:

When we are communicating with strangers and base our interpretations on our symbolic systems, ineffective communication often occurs.

The misunderstandings that occur when we communicate with strangers may be due to many different sources, including, but not limited to: (1) the messages may be transmitted in a way that they cannot be understood by others (e.g., pronunciation or accents may hinder understanding), (2) the communication rules of the cultures from which the communicators come may differ and influence how messages are interpreted (e.g., one person is being indirect and the other person is interpreting the messages using direct rules for communication), (3) one of the communicators may not be able to speak the other's language adequately (e.g., one person is just learning the other's language and is not fluent), (4) one person may not understand how to accomplish a certain task or interpret a specific utterance within a social context (e.g., a person who does not speak English well may try to complain to an English speaker and actually apologize), (5) one person may make errors in attributions because of his or her group identity and/or intergroup expectations (e.g., a U.S. American expects a Japanese to be indirect and does not recognize a direct answer to a question when it is given), and (6) the communicators may not be familiar with the topic being discussed.[21]

It is important to recognize that the misunderstandings that we have with strangers are the result of our interpretations of their behavior, not their behavior per se.[23] I may say, for example, "You make me angry." This is not an accurate statement. While it is true I would not have experienced anger if you had not behaved in a certain way, my anger is based on how I interpreted your behavior, not your actual behavior.

To decrease the chance of misinterpretations of strangers' messages based on our unconscious interpretations, we must be aware of our normal tendencies. There are five principles that are useful in understanding how misinterpretations occur:

1. We can never know the state of mind—the attitudes, thoughts, and feelings—of other people.
2. We depend on signals, which are frequently ambiguous, to inform us about the attitudes and wishes of other people.
3. We use our own coding system, which may be defective, to decipher these signals.
4. Depending on our own state of mind at a particular time, we may be biased in our method of interpreting other people's behavior, that is, how we decode.
5. The degree to which we believe that we are correct in divining another person's motives and attitudes is not related to the actual accuracy of our belief. (Beck, 1988, p. 18)

Understanding these principles can help us improve the quality of our communication with strangers. Using the principles, however, requires that we be mindful.

Mindfulness

We must become aware of our communication behavior in order to correct our tendency to misinterpret strangers' behavior and to communicate effectively. Social psychologists refer to this as becoming mindful of our behavior.[24] There are three qualities of *mindfulness:* "(1) creation of new categories; (2) openness to new information; and (3) awareness of more

than one perspective" (Langer, 1989, p. 62). One condition that contributes to being mindless is the *use of broad categories.* Categorization often is based on physical (e.g., gender, race, etc.) or cultural (e.g., ethnic background) characteristics, but we also can categorize strangers in terms of their attitudes (e.g., liberal-conservative) or approaches to life (e.g., Christian or Buddhist).

Mindfulness involves being *open to new information* (Langer, 1989). When we behave on automatic pilot in a particular situation, we tend to see the same thing occurring in the situation as we saw the previous time we were in the same situation. If we are consciously open to new information, we see the subtle differences in our own and strangers' behavior that may take place. The more we think about how to behave in situations, the more appropriate and effective our behavior tends to be (Cegala & Waldron, 1992).

Being open to new information involves focusing on the process of communication that is taking place, not the outcome of our interactions with strangers:

> An outcome orientation in social situations can induce mindlessness. If we think we know how to handle a situation, we don't feel a need to pay attention. If we respond to the situation as very familiar (as a result, for example, of overlearning), we notice only minimal cues necessary to carry out the proper scenarios. If, on the other hand, the situation is strange, we might be so preoccupied with the thought of failure ("what if I make a fool of myself?") that we miss nuances of our own and others' behavior. In this sense, we are mindless with respect to the immediate situation, although we may be thinking quite actively about outcome related issues. (Langer, 1989, p. 34)

Focusing on the process (e.g., how we do something) allows us to be mindful of our behavior and pay attention to the situations in which we find ourselves. **It is only when we are mindful of the process of our communication that we can determine how our interpretations of messages differ from strangers' interpretations of those messages.**

When we are mindful, we want to negotiate meanings with strangers. That is, we need to try mindfully to understand strangers' meanings and ensure that they understand ours. The collaborative model of language usage suggests that meanings emerge in our interactions with others (Clark, 1996). We try to make sure that we share similar meanings for each utterance with others before proceeding. When we perceive a problem in our conversations that we think may lead to misunderstandings, we try to repair the problem (Clark, 1996). We use various conversational mechanisms (e.g., repetition) to ensure that meanings are negotiated (e.g., that they establish a common ground). Negotiating meanings with others involves creating and reflecting our identities in the situation in which we are communicating (Tracey, 2002).

When we are communicating with strangers, we tend to interpret their messages using our own frames of reference when we are not mindful. This frequently leads to miscommunication. When we are mindful, we can take strangers' perspectives into consideration (e.g., trying to understand strangers' meanings for their messages rather than using our frames of reference to interpret strangers' messages). This inevitably increases the effectiveness of our communication with strangers.

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