

Communication Competency as a Cooperative Concept

John King D'Amato

Abstract

This article examines the difficulties facing any two people in an interpersonal verbal communication situation - often referred to in our classrooms (too simply,) as "a conversation" Using existing research from communication scientists, it will hopefully demonstrate the complexities inherent in any "conversation", and the challenges faced by anyone wishing to become a more competent communicator. The difficulties facing a Westerner communicating with a Westerner are detailed, but it is hoped that further research may be encouraged to examine the complexities that Eastern cultural differences (or similarities) and an ESL setting add to the already inherent challenges of communication competency.

Introduction

Though communication scientists Mark Knapp and Anita Evangelistic argue persuasively about the difficulty of defining the always successful interpersonal communicator (1992), individuals interested in simply becoming more competent communicators should focus on more general interpersonal communication skills, knowledge and attitudes. Rather than an endless list of specific communication rules for every situation, a discussion of interpersonal "do's" and "don'ts" might be more useful. As a mnemonic device, these interpersonal communication approaches are presented in the form of well-known adages.

You Can't Tell a Book By It's Cover

The first hurdle that must be overcome in becoming a more competent communicator is recognizing that things aren't always as they seem. Individuals define and continually redefine an interpersonal communication situation (the basis of and context of a conversation) because, as with all people, their needs and their relationships are constantly changing (Littlejohn, 1989). Both individuals in an encounter may strive to reach a combination of their own and the other's identity and relational goals. Since the needs and goals of both individuals may change from moment to moment, the fluidity of any situation makes it nearly impossible for anyone using a meta-perspective to consistently

ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์, อาจารย์ประจำคณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศรีปทุม

divine and
from verbal
& Vangel

T
meta-pers

They bring
needs, bu

and cog
experienc

cultural a
gathered

from othe
the expect

events an
1990).
individua

of others,
not alway

I
begin not
process d

They can
character

baldness,
or into a
Walther,
on limit

individua
that a rel
(Knapp a
interspers

divine another's ever-shifting motivations simply from verbal and nonverbal communication (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1992)

The problem with individuals using a meta-perspective is that they are only human. They bring to any encounter not only their own needs, but values, attitudes and beliefs, feeling and cognitive "baggage" based on past experiences with others and their knowledge of cultural and societal norms. This information, gathered from personal experience, the media, or from others, colors the perceptions and shapes the expectancies individuals have about objects, events and relationships (Burgeon and Walther, 1990). Though this information provides individuals with a basis to predict the behavior of others, the interpretation of the information is not always accurate.

First impressions of others, for instance, begin normally with stereotyping, a structuring process designed to quickly size-up new people. They can be grouped according to physical characteristics such as sex, race, height, or baldness, by occupation, social group, religion, or into any number of categories (Burgeon & Walther, 1990). 133). Early impressions, based on limited observation, may be enough for some individuals to filter-out others, with a decision that a relationship is not desirable (Duck, 1982) (Knapp and Evangelistic, 1992).

Ervin Goffman, who examined human interpersonal communication utilizing theatrical

metaphors, paraphrasing Shakespeare's "all the world's a stage", and looking at everyone as actors "performing" in a multitude of "roles" requiring a variety of "faces". Goffman's work (1959), describing the projection of identities through consciously designed and often deceptive fronts, ought to serve as a warning to individuals interested in becoming more competent communicators not to take others at face value, nor to prejudge too quickly. Effective communicators understand that both individuals in dyad will stereotype at first, and that unless more information supporting that information is gained, their perceptions and expectations may be incorrect.

Best Laid Plans...

The second obstacle for competent communicators is in understanding that even when they seem to be doing everything right, the communication process may still break down. Selective attention, perception and retention are like the "gremlins" of interpersonal communication. Individuals on the receiving end of seemingly precise, well-formed and unambiguous messages may miss parts of the messages entirely, misunderstand or misinterpret what was said, or they may forget key points ten minutes later (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992). Because individuals tend to attribute reasons for verbal and nonverbal behavior based on communication and observations of others, the

opportunity for misperception and incorrect attribution of motives is always present at any stage of a relationship (Weber and Evangelistic, 1991). The communication research of Burgeon et al. (1989) indicates that the discrepancy between expectations of behavior and perceptions of actual behavior may lead to dissatisfaction within a relationship. Nonverbal expectancies, often based on societal norms rather than on mutually negotiated rules of behavior, are designed to help predict the behavior of others, but violations can often project violators as immoral or bad persons (Burgeon and Walther, 1990).

Despite all of the precautions taken to protect performances, by sealing off "backstage areas" or ensuring that all elements of a front are consistent, individuals can still make inadvertent slips in their performances (Goffman, 1959). No matter how well guarded individuals keep their "backstage areas" or how carefully they construct messages, there are still incidents that cause embarrassment to either or both parties. At these embarrassing points, communication within the dyad momentarily breaks down, and homeostasis is often sought by both individuals (Sharkey & Stafford, 1990).

Competent communicators understand that miscommunication and performance mistakes are actually part of the communication process. Individuals who understand the inherent difficulties in communicating through an imprecise language to people who view messages

through the distorting prisms of perceptions and expectations, continually repeat, clarify, and explain their messages. They also understand that just as nonverbal and verbal communication behaviors can get them into trouble, other communication practices and strategies can sometimes get them out of trouble.

A Stitch In Time Saves Nine

Rather than allowing a situation to get out of hand and communications to become interrupted, competent interpersonal communicators employ a variety of strategies to get derailed communication back on track. They anticipate expectancy violations by themselves and others. They know that all individuals have "negative face wants" which seek to protect a projected identity from embarrassment, and "positive face wants" which desire to have the identity approved by others (Leachy & Applegate, 1991). They are concerned with not only their own identity and relational goals, but those of others, as well. They know how to gain compliance (Miller & Parks, 1982). for instance. while giving enough of a semblance of autonomy to another to allow "face redress". Or, compliance is gained in conjunction with a politeness strategy that may lessen the perceived threat to another's identity (Miller & Parks, 1982). They understand that face saving after an embarrassing situation is a cooperative act that is performed to regain the flow of the interaction (Sharkey & Stafford, 1990).

Competent communicators practice appropriate strategies that help others in their embarrassing situations. This is due to flawed communication practices. Individuals have an identity that there is a need to be discouraged and "self" presented to interpersonal communication. Competent repair process management is a process.

It Takes Two

Competent communicators that effective interpersonal communication is active, dynamic, and activity that takes place. They understand their long-range goals must make an effort to identity and relational. They must be flexible taking a meta-level to see the situation (Knapp and Var

They understand "Theory" that plan and costs, but c

Competent communicators know and practice appropriate responses to embarrassment that help other individuals rather than exacerbate their embarrassment. When the embarrassment is due to flawed performances, competent communicators know that both parties normally have an identity stake in any interaction, and that there is a natural tendency, or "tact" which discourages undue prying or disbelieving the "self" presented to them (Goffman, 1959). In every interpersonal communication situation gone awry, competent communicators are part of the repair process. They realize that identity management is a negotiated and partnership process.

It Takes Two To Tango

Competent communicators understand that effective interpersonal communication is an active, dynamic, spontaneous and symbolic-laden activity that takes two people working together. They understand that in order to achieve any of their long-range identity and relational goals, they must make an effort to help others achieve their identity and relational goals (Burgeon et al., 1989). They must be flexible, adaptable and Capable of taking a meta-perspective that allows them to see the situation through the eyes of others (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992).

They understand the "Social Exchange Theory" that places emphasis not only on rewards and costs, but on perceptions and expectations.

They realize that as a relationship progresses, the levels of satisfaction felt by both members is rarely the same (Miller and Parks, 1982). They can monitor their own and others' behaviors to decrease discrepancies between expectation and actual behavior to increase levels of satisfaction.

In order do this effectively, they must possess the listening skills necessary to not only hear what the others are saying, but also to hear what others are not saying, yet feeling. Communicating empathy for the feelings of others, conveys respect for the worth of others, supports their identity and relational goals and reduces defensiveness (Gibbs, 1961). They can demonstrate this empathy and communicate more effectively if they possess the role-shifting skills that allow them to perceive and adopt other's communication styles. By not being locked into one style, effective communicators can use intuiting, thinking, sensing or feeling approaches that adapt to others' needs (Gibbs, 1961; Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992).

In reacting to others' needs, effective communicators must possess the flexibility and skills to design messages according to the situation and goals of each individual. At times, these messages will be expressive, relying primarily on emotional appeals. At other times, the messages might be conventional, adhering to existing norms of behavior. Occasionally, the messages will reflect a rhetorical approach, involving negotiation and agreement by others

to reach a conclusion. The flexibility described slightly differently as style flexing in a "Model of Four Communication Styles", includes the knowledge and skill to be analytical, amiable, expressive or a driver as the situation warrants (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992).

Summary

Finally, effective interpersonal communicators understand that competency is more a mastery of skills and knowledge. They

realize that it takes the willingness of two people to make the communication process or a relationship work. Success in either area takes both individuals working together, sharing information, negotiating the rules of communication behavior, and operating as a team. With a cooperative effort both individuals can achieve their identity and relational goals. If those goals are achieved, any communicator can claim competency.

References

- Burgeon, J. K., Kelley, D.L., Newton, D.A. & Keeley-Dyreson, M.P. (1989). The nature of arousal and nonverbal indices. **Human Communication Research**, 16, 217 - 255.
- Burgeon, J., & Walther, J.B. (1990). Nonverbal expectancies and evaluative consequences of violations. **Human Communication Research**, 16, 217-54.
- Duck, S.W. (1982). **Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Relationships**, London: Academic Press.
- Duck, S. (1985). Social and personal relationships. In M.L. Knapp and G.R. Miller (Eds. **Handbook of Interpersonal Communication**, pp. 665-686) Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Gibb, J. (1961). Defensive communication. *Journal of Communication*, 11.
- Goffman, E. (1959). **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**. New York: Anchor.
- Knapp, M., & Vangelisti, A. (1992). **Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships** (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Leichty, G., & Applegate, J. (1991). Social cognitive and situational influences on the use of face-saving persuasive strategies. **Human Communication Research**, 17, 451-458.
- Littlejohn, S.W. (1989). **Theories of Human Communication** (3rd ed.). Belmont, Ca: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Miller, G. R., & Parks, M.R. (1982). Communication in dissolving relationships. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), **Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Relationships** (pp. 127-154). London: Academic Press.

Schram, W. (1977).
Communica
University of
Sharkey and Stafford
Communica
Weber, D.J., & Vang
in conversa

- Schram, W. (1977). The mature of communication between humans. **The Process of Effects of Mass Communication**. Eds. Wibur Schram and Donald F. Roberts. Revised ed. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Sharkey and Stafford, (1990). Turn taking raking resources employed by congenitally blind conversers, **Communication Studies**, 41(2).
- Weber, D.J., & Vangelisti, A.L. (1991). "Because I love you..." The tactical us of attributional expressions in conversation. **Human Communication Research**, 17, (606-624).