

TOWARD A NEW REPERTOIRE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR LEADERS AND MANAGERS

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Managers and leaders know the importance of their communication skills. However, many of us have a feeling that there is a mismatch between the requirements of flatter, more interdependent organizations in a rapidly changing globalized world and the repertoire of skills featured in many professional trainings and manuals. Noting this mismatch, communication theorists are in the process of constructing a new Body of Knowledge about communication that points to a different specification of the skills needed by managers and leaders. This article contrasts this still-emerging concept of communication with the more common approach, and describes some of the skills consistent with it. Experienced practitioners will recognize the skills named in this paper as consistent with higher levels of organizational maturity and professional accomplishment.

THE CURRENT VIEW: COMMUNICATION AS TRANSMISSION OF INFORMATION

This view of communication describes a linear process from a source to a receiver. "Communication is a transmitting and a receiving process that depends for effectiveness upon the receiver's perceptions."¹

This way of thinking is grounded in the intellectual framework of the 18th century Enlightenment that developed a revolutionary new way of thinking about human beings in relation to themselves and to the world around them.² However, many people feel that the "enlightenment project" has past³ and that new ways of thinking about these relationships are needed.⁴

For example, John Locke thought that we could and should develop "clear and distinct" ideas about substantial objects. In this view, communication does not have substance; rather, it is a means of transmitting "clear and distinct" ideas from one mind to another.⁵ After a few centuries of reflection, however, at least three problems with this idea have become apparent.

- Our ideas are often not clear and distinct and none the worse for it; the opposite of "clarity" can be "richness" or "complexity." Questions are sometimes more

¹ Russell T. Westcott, Ed. (2006). *The certified manager of quality/organizational excellence handbook, 3rd edition*. Milwaukee, WI: ASQ Quality Press, p. 214.

² Robyn Penman (2000). *Reconstructing communicating: Looking toward a future*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

³ Stephen Toulmin (1992). *Cosmopolis: The hidden agenda of modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Richard Bernstein (1992). *The new constellation: Ethical/political horizons of modernity/postmodernity*. Boston: MIT Press.

⁵ Locke's *Essay concerning human understanding*, originally published in 1690, is available online at http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke1/Essay_contents.html.

powerful than descriptions and the ability to improvise more important than knowledge.⁶

- The world is far more fluid and complex than the Enlightenment thinkers supposed. Particularly in organizations, things like “narratives,” conversations, and “relationships” are vitally important.⁷
- Transmitting information is only one of many things that we do in communication, so it is important to know more about it than only how to avoid distortions and misunderstandings. Because communication is performative, we need to pay attention to its positive functions as well as to ways of avoiding the influence of “filters intended to help clarify the meaning of the message” that “can, and too often do, muddle the message instead”⁸ and on the “obstacles” that “complicate and hinder effective communication within a global enterprise.”⁹

THE EMERGING VIEW: COMMUNICATION AS “PERFORMATIVE”

The emerging view of communication sees it as *doing* something rather than just describing states of mind or states of affairs; as *making* the social world in which it occurs rather than just talking about it. This view doesn’t contradict the good advice about, e.g., listening and feedback in the *Handbook*,¹⁰ but enlarges the perspective so that other communication skills are brought into prominence.

In what follows, prepositions are important: take note of *at*, *through*, *about*, and *as*. Managers and leaders working with this concept look *at* communication processes fully as much as *through* them to what they are *about*. That is, fights, debates, deliberations, dialogues and other forms of communication are themselves seen as substantial, quite independently of the topics about which people are fighting, debating, etc. These forms of communication are the “construction zones” in which organizations are made.

Next, as shown in Figure 1, they see communication *as* a two-sided process of coordinating actions with each other and as making/managing meanings. Both sides of the process are always present, and there is an unavoidable tension between them. We always try to live out our preferred stories in interactions with other people (that’s the task of coordinating) and we develop coherent stories about the interactions we have with others (making and managing meanings).

In contrast with the “transmission model,” this concept does away with the separation of message sources and receivers; both are fully involved in making whatever develops. It also replaces linearity with reflexivity: people are affected by, as well as producers of messages. That is, the social worlds made by the way leaders communicate include those leaders themselves.

⁶ Barrett, F. J. (1998). Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations: Implications for organizational learning." *Organization Science*, 9 (5, September-October): 605 - 622.

⁷ Stacey, R. D. (2001). *Complex responsive processes in organizations*. New York: Routledge.

⁸ Westcott, p. 214.

⁹ Westcott, p. 225.

¹⁰ Westcott.

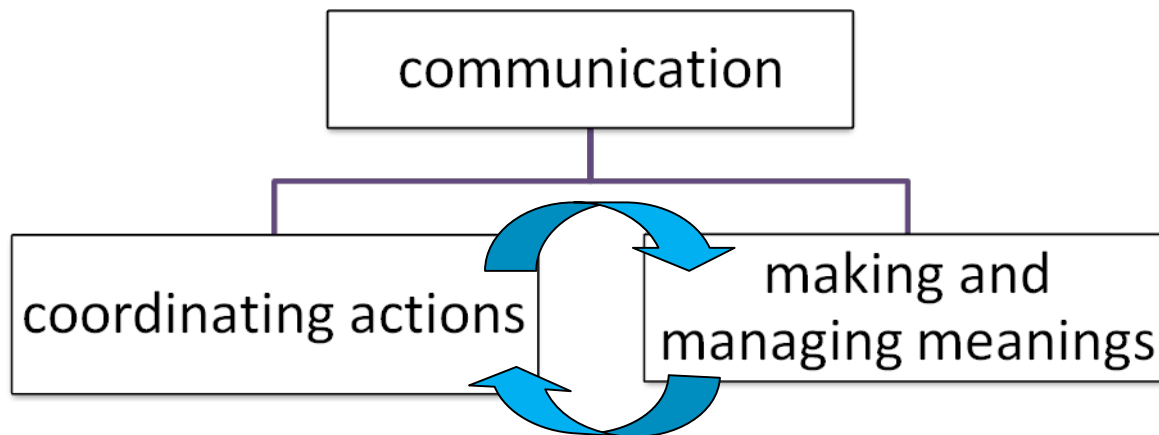


Figure 1: the two-sided process of communication

THE ROLES OF MANAGERS AND LEADERS

The “transmission model” of communication suggests that we look *through* communication and see the leader’s role in terms of what he or she talks about. This perspective leads to definitions like: “Leaders provide vision, direction, and focus for people to achieve a common purpose. They act as champions and advocates for achieving goals and continual improvement.”¹¹

In contrast, the emerging view leads to a perspective of organizations as comprised of patterns of conversations and the leader’s role as promoting certain forms of communication and inhibiting others.¹² This approach is more consistent with a participatory model of organizational function in which the role of the leader is to assume responsibility as the custodian of communication processes in which people collectively generate and pursue their goals.¹³

NEW REPERTOIRE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The emerging concept points to less familiar and more sophisticated communication skills involved in initiating, sustaining, and – when necessary – transforming the patterns of communication within an organization and between the organization and the social systems of which it is a part. Some of the component skills include:

THE COORDINATED ENACTMENT OF DESIRED SPEECH ACTS

Speech acts are the things we do when we communicate; they include threats, promises, insults, questions, answers, compliments, etc. But speech acts are not

¹¹ Carol Kurtz (2007). An in-depth look at leadership in the CMQ/OE body of knowledge. *The Quality Management Forum*, 33 (Summer, No. 3), p. 16.

¹² Ford, J and L. Ford (1995). “The Role of Conversations in Producing Intentional Change in Organizations.” *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 20, no 3, July 1995, pp 541 – 570.

¹³ W. Barnett Pearce and Hilda Carpenter (2007). Creating Stewards of Communication Patterns. *OD Practitioner*, 39: 22-26.

accomplished in a single message and they often are quite different from the leader's intentions. Think of speech acts as a double interact performed in three coordinated "turns" as shown in Figure 2. Whatever the leader does should be seen as the "second" turn that is done in the context of whatever someone else has done "first" and as being moved to completion by what other people do "next."¹⁴

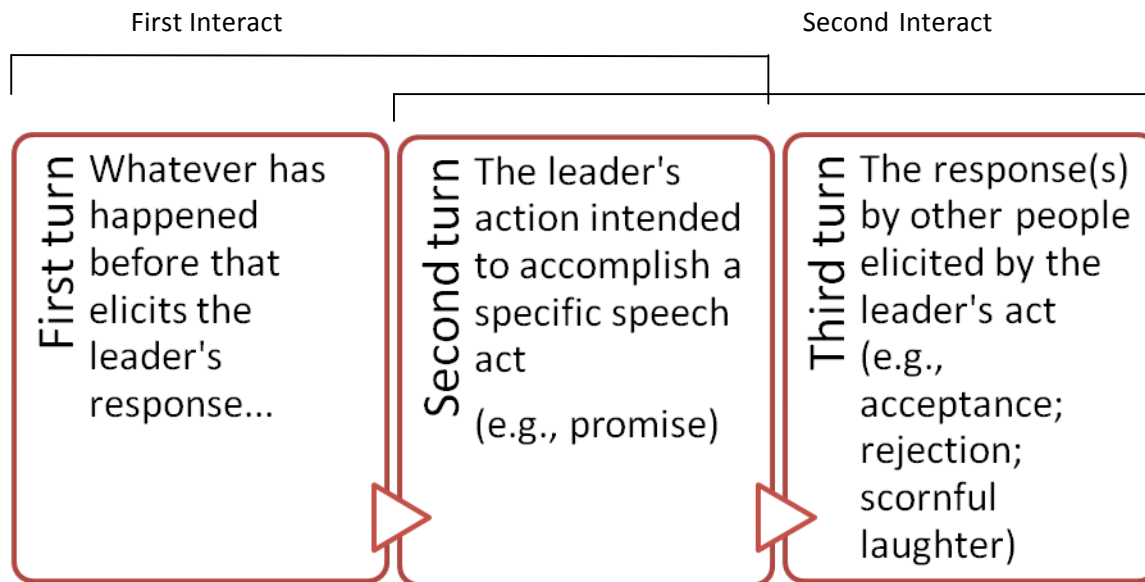


Figure 2: The double-interact model of speech acts

In the figure, the leader intended to perform the speech act "promise." But what actually occurs is not as strongly related to the leader's intention as it is to the placement of this act between things that other people have already done (the first turn) and what they do following (the third turn). The conceptual shift of seeing one's own actions as "second turns" enables more sophisticated communication skills

Because speech acts are coordinated, leaders need an enhanced ability to listen to the organization as a whole in addition to specific messages. This communication skill involves developing sensitivity to and a vocabulary for describing patterns of communication, relationships among these patterns, and stories "about us," "about them," and "about what we are doing together" that make these networks of communication patterns more or less coherent. These stories comprise the contexts into which leaders act (in "second turns" of speech acts) and determine whether the speech act that they accomplish is that which they intended.

Leaders get into trouble when they confuse their intended meanings (for "second turns") with the three-or-more-turns speech acts that are co-constructed in interaction with other people. By seeing communication as contingent and fluid, they gain a better appreciation of the power of softer forms of communication. For example, they are ready to

¹⁴ For a fuller description of "speech acts" and their implications for management, see Pearce, W. B. (2007). *Making social worlds: A communication perspective*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, chapter 5.

learn how to speak “invitationally” rather than “persuasively.” Persuasive speaking pummels the listener into compliance; invitational speaking creates a relationship of collaboration and cooperation.¹⁵ They become aware of the importance of dialogic communication in which people are able to remain in the tension between standing their own ground while being profoundly open to others.¹⁶

ABILITY TO DISCERN AND ACT WISELY INTO BIFURCATION POINTS

In any sequence of coordinated action, there are moments when what a leader does significantly alters what happens next, and next, and so on. And since communication makes the social worlds in which we live, the leader’s ability to detect these bifurcation points and act into them wisely changes the world.

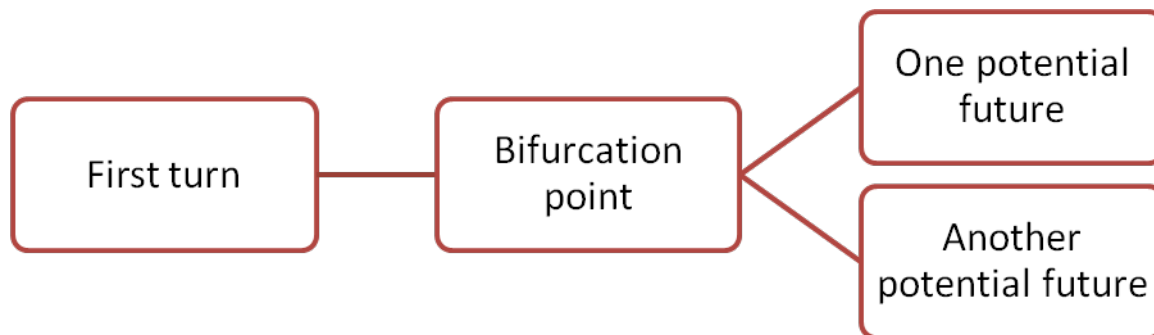


Figure 3. A bifurcation point

Some “turns” in coordinated actions are pivotal points on which the future depends. Sophisticated leaders discern such moments and act wisely in them, preventing undesired futures and increasing the probability of preferred futures

In one sense, every moment is a bifurcation point, but some moments are more pivotal than others. We have all seen leaders who miss such moments because they seem to have an insufficiently developed sensitivity to them. The good news is that what Barge and Little call “dialogic wisdom” can be achieved by awareness and reflection.¹⁷

There is both an inner and outer aspect of this ability “to take into account the complexity of the situation when considering how to position oneself between single and multiple voices in the ongoing dynamic of organizational life.”¹⁸ The “outer” aspect has to do with concepts and tools for describing the stories and patterns of coordinated action in the organization. That is, to judge how specific actions that the leader might take will “fit into” what else is going on and what responses it will elicit. Scholars and practitioners are developing powerful concepts and heuristics to develop this skill.

¹⁵ Sonja K. Foss & Karen A. Foss (2003). *Inviting transformation: Presentational speaking for a changing world*. Second edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

¹⁶ Powley, E. H., Fry, R. E., Barrett, F. J., & Bright, D. S. (2004). Dialogic democracy meets command and control: Transformation through the Appreciative Inquiry Summit. *Academy of Management Executive*, 18: 67-80.

¹⁷ Barge, J. K. & Little, M. (2002). Dialogic wisdom, communicative practice, and organizational life. *Communication Theory*, 12: 375-397.

¹⁸ Barge & Little, p. 386.

The “inner” aspect of this communication skill has to do with the personal and social development of the leader. If the leader “maps” a complex organization onto a simple cognitive frame – for example, one that sees simple effects from single causes – this leader will live in constant surprise about what is happening in the organization; or if the leader perceives the social world using fixed categories rather than being able to perceive the flux and flow of organizational life, this leader will be constantly playing “catch-up” as events outstrip his or her plans and perceptions. Fortunately, there is an emerging body of knowledge about human and organization development¹⁹ that can act as scaffolds for the leader’s continued development.²⁰

ABILITY TO DO EPISODE-WORK

Episodes are sequences of speech acts, punctuated as having a beginning and an ending, and made coherent by a story about what’s happening. This general description points to the common features in board meetings and union meetings as well as in off-site retreats and in casual office conversations. Episode-work is all the things we do to initiate, define, re-define, sustain, and on occasion, transform episodes.²¹

The definition of episodes suggests three fertile areas for leaders’ episode-work. If they are mindful of episodes, leaders can make intentional choices about how to structure the sequence of speech acts in an episode. The design of meetings is perhaps the most obvious opportunity for episode-work. It makes a significant difference, for example, whether the leader’s “process improvement initiative” is presented as the “first turn” in an episode or is presented in response to the invitation of the group following their exploration of the situation confronting the company and deliberation about available options for moving forward.²²

Punctuating the beginning and ending of an episode is a second area of opportunity for leaders. In many organizations, recurring unwanted patterns of coordinated activities are well-known to everyone: for example, complaining employees and a secretive supervisor. Both sides would describe the pattern exactly the same except for the punctuation: employees would explain that they complain because the supervisor is secretive, while the supervisor explains that he or she is secretive because every time he or she tells them things, the employees complain. As this example shows, punctuation is important; it prefigures and legitimates certain stories of responsibility, agency, and victimage.

The third area of opportunity for episode-work is the stories that make the sequence of speech acts coherent. There will be such stories: human beings are inveterate storytellers and cannot tolerate the absence of coherence. At times, the meaning of the organization itself as well as specific episodes may be fluid because there are multiple stories circulating that may give quite different patterns of coherence. Unsanctioned episode-work that fills an unmet need for news is often called “rumor.” At other times, a

¹⁹ See Pearce, chapters 6-8.

²⁰ Shotter, J. (2005). Peripheral vision: ‘Inside the moment of managing’: Wittgenstein and the everyday dynamics of our expressive-responsive activities. *Organization Studies*. 26: 143-164.

²¹ The term parallels Freud’s “joke-work,” the things we do to signal that what we are saying is to be taken as humor. See Freud, S. (1963). *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. N. Y.: W. W. Norton, p. 194. James Strachey, translator.

²² When presented as a “first turn,” such initiatives often elicit resistance. The intended “question-and-answer” becomes an episode of “attack-and-defend” and initiates a pattern of communication which can subvert the initiative itself.

robust, consensual story about the organization dominates any alternative. The leader's ability to do episode-work by proposing, supporting, or challenging these stories fluctuates as the organization moves among these conditions.

THE NEW REPERTOIRE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Speech-acts; bifurcation points; episode-work: these are hardly the terms one might expect to find in a discussion of communication skills. However, the more familiar canon of skills is dependent upon a philosophical position and an assumption about the nature of organizations that many of us find outmoded. There is now a substantial body of knowledge about these communication skills, even though they have not – yet – become the dominant story in many organizations. To be fair: this emerging view has not coalesced as clearly as the one that it replaces. The theory of the “coordinated management of meaning” (CMM) is one version of this new approach.²³ The skills briefly introduced in this essay are grounded in an emerging concept of communication as the process by which we make, not just talk about, the events and objects in our social worlds. The acquisition of these skills requires more than simply adopting new techniques; they are sustained by a certain level of sophistication in the leader him or herself.

²³ W. Barnett Pearce (2007). *Making social worlds: A communication perspective*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.