

Communication Effectiveness

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“Communication is the problem and the answer” is a line from a popular rock song. This phrase frames the concept very well. Communication is the basis to success or to failure. If I show you a failed organization or relationship, you can usually trace the failure to communication. Equally, find a community or setting that is vibrant growth-oriented, and you will discover a group that communicates well.

This potency so intrigued me that I chose to do my doctoral work in the area of communication effectiveness. Clearly, if we are going to promote change, shift the culture or make something new happen, we must be able to effectively or even “seductively” communicate.

Communication is a process by which people send and receive messages. Communication effectiveness is to do so in such a manner that a close approximation exists between the message sent and the message received. It requires the manipulation of the process to enhance the potential for communication success. Communication seduction is to use methods or methodologies to lure the receiver into wanting to know or understand more about the message sent.

In the process of communication there are two entities, each with unique spheres of experience coming together in some element of commonality. This implies that the communicator has two major frameworks to initiate the communication. The first is the known element of commonality. If two people find themselves in a class together, the first known element is that both individuals have chosen to take the class. The features of this known element are the class name, reputation, instructor and topic matter. All of these things offer initial fodder for communication.

The second framework is that of assumptions people may make of each other. People have spheres of experience that is a compilation of all the things that have happened to them; family history, education, life experiences and the like. These aspects are not fully known, but assumptions can be made. This is done with direct observation and opportunities to check the accuracy of assumptions through initial communication.

By using both of these frameworks, the known commonality and the assumptions of the individuals’ experiences, the communicator will code a message that he or she hopes will be understood and decoded most effectively. At this point the process—the coding—the message gets constructed with words,

gestures and affect and then delivered. The actual decision about which words to use, the specific gestures to apply and the affect to incorporate are made based on the two frameworks. As the message gets sent, it is hoped that it will be decoded and understood and a relay message that builds on the first message will occur.

While this sounds sterile as we discuss it in this context, the process happens so quickly that often we do not think through all the ways we could enhance or “seductively” construct the message so it is likely to be heard and understood. Consequently, the process of communication falls prey to so many distractions and distortions that the net result is that most communication is not effective. In fact, in many situations, it is amazing that things get communicated at all.

Using these frameworks in a thoughtful way will begin to enhance the communication, but research has shown that adding the dimension of “expressive affect” will ratchet up the effectiveness to a seductive level. Since the early 1970s, researchers have manipulated a number of variables to find ways to enhance the communication process. Most of this research was kicked off by a social scientist by the name of John Ware. His work was spurred by a study he conducted in 1975 and was published in both academic as well as popular journals as the “Dr. Fox Effect.”

Fascinated by the notion of communication effectiveness, Ware conducted a study at the University of Illinois. He hired an actor, wrote a nonsense script, invented a bogus Dr. Fox complete with an impressive biography and then invited local social workers, counselors, teachers and psychologists to a contrived lecture. He prepped Dr. Fox, who practiced an expressive presentation, much as an actor might prepare for a play. Then John Ware had Dr. Fox carry out the presentation to this professional audience. Close to one hundred professionals came to the free lecture sponsored by the University of Illinois. Dr. Fox spoke on the topic of “mathematical game theory and behavior” (a bogus topic) for an hour, answered questions and then left the stage to rousing applause. John Ware then did an exit evaluation of the lecture with basic questions about Dr. Fox. He asked if the audience had heard of him, read his books and found his theories useful.

As it turned out, the majority of the members of the audience loved Dr. Fox. Some of them claimed they had heard of him, a few said they had read his books and the majority said that they thought his theories were useful. Yet, for all of this acclaim, the lecture was nonsense! This so amazed John Ware that he coined the term “Dr. Fox Effect” and began the exploration of a body of knowledge now known as “educational seduction.”

For people interested in change, the concept of educational seduction is useful. Cultural shifting is about influence and action. Ware articulated what

many generations had known, that some people could so influence others with seductive communication that they could get those same people to do positive or negative things. Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson and Jimmy Jones, among others, had the seductive ability to influence followers to do cruel and harmful things.

My interest in this concept was for just the opposite. Ware proved and history acknowledged that some people could seduce others to do wrong or negative things, but we also know there have been many people who have used the gift of communication seduction to promote positive and valuable things. I was intrigued about how seductive communication could be used by change agents or gatekeepers to promote new people, ideas or products within the context of the community. Given the goals of the change agent, or the natural influence of the gatekeeper, if this could be coupled with educational seduction theory, amazing things might happen.

To test this approach, I conducted an experiment similar to Ware's, but instead of nonsense content, I inserted viable and useful information. To further test the difference between styles, I manipulated two distinct communication approaches, but kept the content positive and viable. I hired an actor and had him learn the content for a college class lecture. He delivered the lecture to two similar classes, but in two distinct styles-direct and expressive. The direct style was focused, but very businesslike. The actor stayed mostly at the podium and used a serious and direct affect. The expressive style had the actor moving much more and inserting vocal inflection and gestures. My study verified what Ware had initiated. The expressive communication style had a greater impact on the audiences I researched.

So in the notion of change and communication, effectiveness becomes an important and useful concept. The more we can engage the audience we are attempting to influence, the easier the cultural shift.

(This article was pulled from the book: Cultural Shifting, by Al Condeluci, TRN Press, 2002 – 1-800-280-7010 - www.trninc.com)