The 1996 International Conference on Work Teams

Dallas, Texas, September 18-20

PROCEEDINGS

A conference jointly sponsored by

Center for the Study of Work Teams
and
S.C. Johnson Wax

Edited by
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Transforming Breakdowns to Breakthroughs in Work Teams

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Abstract

This paper introduces a communication model that helps people develop the tools needed to move from relationships of submission-dominance that characterize hierarchical systems to relationships of equal value that create more effective work teams. This is accomplished with specific steps: bringing communication styles (placating, blaming or being sarcastic, being passive-aggressive, being irrelevant, discounting the human element) to conscious awareness in ways that intensify and make overt and concrete the internal experience of these communications; discovering one's rules that lead to such communications ("I must never cause conflict," "I must always be right," "I must always win," "I must always be the life of the party," "I must always be perfect") and transforming them into useful guidelines that lead to productive communications and effective work teams; embedding different communications into "movies" that illustrate difficult situations from one's own experiences and allow effective skills practice. The model addresses all communication components necessary to create effective work teams: communication within (to one's internal resources and deepest wishes), communication between (two people), and communication among (team).

When Morihei Uyeshiba, the founder of aikido, was asked if he ever lost his balance, he replied, "Yes, all the time, but I regain it so fast that you do not see me lose it."*

Have you ever been in a situation in which you said what you thought someone wanted to hear rather than what you believed, or even knew to be true? Have you ever wanted to say "no" and you said "yes" instead? Have you ever had a concern and talked about everything except what was troubling you? These communication problems are universal and transcend culture, gender and age. They plague personal as well as professional relationships. Communication breakdowns occur regularly between two people and are even more likely in larger systems such as families or work teams.

This paper introduces concepts of a communication model that helps people develop the tools needed to move from relationships of submission-dominance that characterize hierarchical systems to relationships of equal value. Successful work teams recognize the importance of team members having equal value to the team although performing different functions. However, at times, teams are hindered by communication styles that emerge within the context of one person having greater power than another. While some decisions in organizations necessarily have to be made individually, people with greater power sometimes lose the ability to listen effectively, and make decisions without sufficient input. On the other hand, subordinates, fearing possible repercussions, can sometimes stop giving honest input. In the context of submission-dominance, five basic communication styles can be identified: placating (people-pleasing), blaming or being sarcastic, being passive-aggressive, being super-reasonable (dealing only with facts), and being irrelevant (not dealing with issues) (Englander-Golden & Golden, 1992; Englander-Golden & Satir, 1991; Satir, 1988). These communication styles are often out of conscious awareness of the people who use them and surface most obviously during times of stress. They are the product of powerful rules that become engaged when people interact under stress. Some examples of rules that lead to different non-productive com-

munications are: "I must always agree," or "I must always be right," or "I must never be vulnerable."

Say It Straight (SIS) is a model to increase productive communications and facilitate greater cooperation in systems. This is accomplished with specific steps: bringing communication styles to conscious awareness by placing one's body into physical postures that intensify and make overt and concrete the internal experience of these communications (Englander-Golden & Satir, 1991; Satir, 1988); becoming aware of one's communication styles (and combinations of styles) and those of others; discovering one's rules that lead to such communications and transforming them into useful guidelines that lead to straightforward communications; embedding different communications into "movies" that illustrate difficult situations from one's own experiences. In this way, people become aware of their internal resources and deepest wishes, and acquire the skills to express themselves in ways that honor themselves (I), respect others (You) and deal effectively with the relevant issues (It). The I, You and It represent the three components of a two-person interaction.

Research conducted with thousands of people indicates that the reasons for communication difficulties are fear of being rejected or not liked, fear of hurting someone's feelings, fear of being embarrassed, fear of being blamed, fear of being thought of as incompetent or weak (Englander-Golden & Golden, 1996). These fears become engaged in the best of relationships, families or highly functional work teams. We believe that they are part of growing up human. We were all born little and learned important lessons before we knew how to speak: how to be seen, to be heard, to be loved, to be valued, to express our love, to be a person of significance. Because at that time we could not ask clearly for what we needed, we have had many experiences of being misunderstood, and perhaps of feeling manipulated. For instance, we may have cried because we had a gas bubble and someone thought we were hungry and fed us, increasing our discomfort even more. We could not have known that people simply did not understand what we were asking for, even when they meant well. These misunderstandings created many opportunities for us to make disempowering assumptions about ourselves: "I cannot get my needs met because I am not a person of value." The disempowering assumptions were magnified by the sheer physical inequality between ourselves and our caregivers and have led us to take roles of submission or dominance into our relationships long after we have acquired the language and physical ability to take care of ourselves.

That disempowering assumptions are often carried into adulthood is evident in how we communicate with others and how we understand their communication with us. For instance, we might make the assumption that we are not competent because we cannot anticipate what management expects of us. Conversely, we might expect others to "read our minds" and anticipate what we want or need. This anticipation could take the form of an unexpressed desire for management to always appreciate and reward our contributions. Our unwillingness to state clearly what we want or need is probably rooted in the belief, "If I matter to that person, he or she would know what I want, need or deserve." In addition, we may feel that if we have to ask for something, be it recognition at work or flowers on our anniversary, even if we get it, it somehow "doesn't count" because we had to ask for it.

Communication Styles Characteristic of Hierarchical Systems

Communication styles are both verbal and non-verbal. Much of the message is transmitted through various components such as body language, voice tone and volume, tempo, and facial expressions. Often there is a discrepancy between these components. For example, has anyone ever asked you, "What is the matter" and you answered, "Nothing," while your body was giving a different message? It's likely that neither you, nor the person asking believed your answer. The clarity of communication (both the message sent and the message received) depends on how well all the components that carry the message agree. Therefore, it is important for good communicators to recognize what they and others are doing with respect to all of the components of a communication.

Placating. This communication style is characterized by valuing others (their needs, experiences, thoughts, feelings, etc.) over ourselves. The language of placating frequently includes the word "yes." It conveys a sense that what others want and when they want it is more important than our own personal needs or agenda. Placating involves an implicit fear of telling others "no." When we placate, we discount ourselves (I) while acknowledging the value of others (You) and the subject of the interaction (It).

At first, the ability to placate appears to be effective in a work team environment. However, when we placate, we continue to accept task assignments even when we are unable to fulfill them. We also may not share information with other team members simply because we believe it is not of value. Furthermore, we may not take action even when we believe it necessary, if that action causes conflict with others.

It is important to realize that when we know how to placate we also possess important positive qualities. We know how to compromise, apologize, forgive, and promote harmony among team members. The challenge is to consciously utilize the positive possibilities by also valuing ourselves.

Blaming. This communication style is characterized by valuing ourselves (our needs, experiences, thoughts, feelings, etc.) at the expense of others. The language of blaming is negative, accusing, shaming and demeaning. Statements such as "You never..." or "You always..." or "Why did you do it that way..." illustrate the language of blaming. Blaming language will sometimes start with "no" even when the intention is agreement. In an interaction, when we blame, we count ourselves (I) and the subject of the interaction (It), but we discount others (You).

Blaming is obviously disruptive in a work team environment and erodes the climate of safety and trust necessary for productive interaction. It encourages non-productive, self-protective measures among team members. When we blame, we focus our energy on the problem rather than on possible solutions and miss the opportunity to learn from mistakes. In addition, we make it difficult for people to give us potentially important information and feedback.

This communication style also has important positive possibilities. When we have the ability to blame, we also have the ability to lead, make decisions, and get things done. The challenge is to recognize and utilize the positive possibilities by also valuing others.

Passive-Aggressive. This communication style is characterized by an external show of agreement which masks resentment and hostility. Passive-aggressive language is a combination of placating and blaming. We say "yes" while silently adding, "You'll pay for making me do this." The hidden resentment is usually expressed in some non-verbal way (i.e., voice tone, facial expression, or body language). Since the hostility is not overtly stated, we can always claim that our intentions were misunderstood. When we are passive-aggressive, we alternately discount ourselves (I) and others (You). We strike out at others when we deem it is "safe."

Passive-aggressive communication sows distrust among work team members by introducing an element of surprise. This type of communication sabotages team effort and goals. When we are passive-aggressive, we could become a team "spy" by appearing to agree even as we make negative reports to outside parties.

Like the other styles of communicating, passive-aggressive also has positive elements. Being passive-aggressive may be the first step in standing up for ourselves. The challenge is to value ourselves and others so that we can take action in our own behalf.

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Super-Reasonable. This communication style is characterized by an intense focus exclusively on facts without any consideration of the human element. The language of the "Mr. Spock" approach is impersonal, and relies on statistics, logic, and outside authority. When we are super-reasonable, we have the need to always appear to be in control. In an interaction, we disregard our feelings (part of the "I") and the feelings of others (part of the "You") while concentrating only on the factual aspects of the interaction (It).

Super-reasonable communication may appear as a positive ingredient in a work team because it directs attention to the task at hand. However, lack of concern for the human dimension can quickly undermine team morale. Lack of regard for the personal needs of team members (vacation, childcare, family illness) results in diminished loyalty for the team and/or the organization. It also can curtail the participation of highly skilled personnel by demanding conformity to business goals in conflict with important personal values.

The ability to be super-reasonable also has positive elements. It enables us to solve problems efficiently by clear thinking and logical analysis. It also allows us to function with precision under stress, at least for a time. The challenge is to value the human elements in ourselves and others while retaining our ability to stay on task.

Irrelevant. This communication style is characterized by a lack of focus, disruption, frequent change of topic, and humor at inappropriate moments. The language of irrelevance is constantly changing. It reflects a refusal to stay focused on a task or subject. When we are irrelevant, we would rather appear stupid, foolish or clumsy than take the risk of engaging in a stressful interaction. When we are irrelevant, we discount ourselves (I), others (You) as well as the subject of the interaction (It).

Irrelevant communication in a work team is dis-

tracting, irritating and interferes at every level of team function. When we are irrelevant, we become the weakest link in the work team.

This communication process also has positive elements. When used appropriately, it is our sense of humor, our spontaneity, and can be our creativity, our ability to examine a problem from a completely new perspective. It is our ability to take a needed "time out" or appropriately "lighten" a heavy situation. The challenge is to consistently value ourselves, others and the issues that bring us together.

Communications That Characterize Relationships of Equal Value

Say It Straight. This communication style is characterized by congruence among all components of the interaction. What we say and how we say it, matches what we think and feel. The language of saying it straight is characterized by using the first person in our conversation. We take ownership and responsibility by expressing ourselves with "I" statements such as: "I think...", "I believe...", "This is my suggestion...", "I feel...", "I would like...", etc.

When we say it straight, we can please someone or apologize without placating, criticize without blaming, and give information without sounding stuffy. We can state our decisions without excuses and without putting others down. We can call a "time out" without being inappropriate. We value ourselves (I), we value others (You) and we value the subject of the interaction (It). Saying it straight is the only communication that consistently leads to a feeling of respect for oneself and others and empowers every team member to be a leader (Englander-Golden et al., 1996).

Discovering Rules and Transforming Them Into Useful Guidelines

The communications we use under stress come from the rigid meanings we gave to guidelines or from explicitly stated rules for behavior we learned and adopted in our families of origin to "function

safely" in our world (Englander-Golden & Satir, 1991; Satir, 1988). In many instances, these rules have served us well. Today, we may pass on "nuggets of gold" gleaned from our own difficult life experiences as guidelines for successful living that may be construed by others as inflexible rules which require strict adherence to avoid catastrophic consequences. When we attempt to rigidly adhere to rules, they can become a tremendous source of stress.

The language of rules uses words such as must, should, ought, always, never. Our rules can lead us to use the non-productive communication styles discussed above, because what we say and how we say it is filtered by them, even when the process is outside our awareness. Rules form the basis of expectations we have of ourselves and others, and operate as hidden agendas. Following are some examples of rules that lead us to non-productive communications:

> "I must always agree," or "I must never cause conflict."
>
> "I must always put the needs of others ahead of my own."
>
> "I must always have everyone's approval."
>
> "I must never disagree with someone in authority." "I must never ask questions."
>
> "I must never be wrong," or "I must always be right."
>
> "I must always win," or "I must never lose."
>
> "I must never express my feelings."
>
> "I must never be vulnerable."
>
> "I must always be perfect," or "I must never make a mistake."
>
> "I must always be (or appear to be) in control."
>
> "I must always be the life of the party," or "I must never take anything seriously."
>
> "I must never focus on anything too long."

It is quite common to have conflicting rules such as: *Always be honest and Don't air your dirty linen in public*. This combination can be found in family and professional systems.

Rules can be identified and transformed so that their "nuggets of gold" can become useful guidelines for living. This process starts with an awareness of our inner experience (breathing, body sensations, feelings) of a rule. For instance, how

we experience a rule such as, "I must always be in control." It ends with the discovery of the conditions under which we can be in control appropriately in different situations. In the above example, the rule is finally transformed into, "I can be in control when..." It is up to each person to find at least three ways to be appropriately in charge and to become aware of the internal experience as they let go of the rule that they must always be in control of people, places and things.

Making Movies

The communications styles can be explored by embedding them in "movies," in which team members play parts that portray difficult situations from their own experiences (Englander-Golden & Golden, 1996). The "movies" are videotaped and reviewed so that team members can observe their non-verbal as well as verbal behavior. Playing a "part" in a movie, rather than playing themselves, provides team members with the safety to explore new behaviors and feelings. Cognitive learning is reinforced through action and the processing and sharing of feelings. People discover that when they give voice to their deepest wishes, the fears that lead them to non-productive communications are largely unfounded; they feel good about themselves, have high self-esteem and usually gain other people's respect; by being in charge of themselves, they retain their self-esteem regardless of the outcome of the interaction. In movies that are set up to explore rejection, people discover that they can feel sad about being rejected, while at the same time feel good about honestly expressing their own wishes or ideas. By exploring the different communication styles embedded in the movies, people become aware of specific ways they are vulnerable to non-productive communications. They become aware of the effects these communications have on themselves and others, the price they pay in terms of loss of personal power, loss of integrity, loss of partnership, loss of closeness with other human beings. They discover their ability to be effective communicators and the effect it has on their work team. They have the opportunity to practice effective communication. Further, by being both senders and receivers of the different communications, they experience actions, thoughts and feelings from different vantage points. They

increase their ability to understand another person's perspective and feelings.

Conclusions

The communication concepts summarized here can be used to optimize working relationships. The *Say It Straight* model addresses communication within (to one's internal resources and deepest wishes), communication between (two people), and communication among (team). It gives team members the opportunity to develop the tools needed to move from relationships of submission-dominance to relationships of equal value. In this way, all work team members can become leaders and the team can function effectively and in harmony. The process of sharing and receiving feedback, gives people the opportunity to discover the universal nature of the issues being explored. They know that they are not alone! Their concerns are shared by others. This decreases the need for pretense and increases their sense of community. These are important components of effective work teams.

Knowing how to communicate in a straightforward way, does not mean that we will never fall into non-productive communications. Rather, when we know how to say it straight, like the aikido master, we will more readily know how to regain our balance and transform our breakdowns into breakthroughs.

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