COMMUNICATION, MANAGEMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE EXPERT SPECTATOR:

Adapting to co-cultures in the workplace

Donald C. Smith
Department of Communication, University of New Haven, West Haven, CT, USA

Abstract

Management would be an easy task, if communication were a simple process. One critic has observed that "The oddest thing is not that we do not always communicate clearly, but that we are able to communicate at all." This paper examines the complexity of the communication process, sense making among employees of divergent backgrounds, popular communication myths, and the concept of the "Expert Spectator". It outlines factors contributing to the "fight or flight" response common in intercultural communication, and then recommends a constructive strategy for ensuring more positive organizational communication outcomes. Central to the theme of this paper is the notion that by carefully observing the communication environment, managers can better adapt to the challenges they face as they interact with employees whose world views may be substantially different from their own. For this reason, knowledge of management principles is not enough; it is imperative to have a sound understanding of the communication process itself. In this vein, a concurrent aim of this paper is to conduct an initial consideration of communication education in U.S. Business Schools and, in doing so, raise some questions which merit further research.

Communication! Simple, right?

To the uninitiated, those without formal schooling in the field, Communication seems a simple task. Why wouldn't it appear easy? Educated adults have been speaking since childhood and know a good deal about subject, verb, and predicate agreement. They enter the workplace confidant that they understand how to communicate. Yet to those with a more complete understanding of the communication process, the task involves a good deal beyond sentence composition and it is anything but simple.

A poster that graced the walls of many universities in the 1980s used to read: "The oddest thing about communication is not that we do not always communicate clearly, but that we are able to communicate at all." The sentiment rings as true now as it did then. Those who view the activity as simple, conceive of it only in the most superficial of ways. The act of communication, if easy, is easy in the same way as golf. Keep your head down, hit the ball, find it, and hit it again. Decide what to say, find an audience, open your mouth, and "speak"! What could be easier?

In each case, without question, more is required of those who would be successful. Education, training, forethought, strategy, technique, timing, placement, intelligence, and talent, affect both golfers and communicators alike. And those involved in either activity encounter a substantial amount of hazards. Ability might be acquired through trial and error or through formal instruction. Those who learn from experts generally have the greatest chance at success.

The communication education of managers in the U.S.

This paper takes the position that communication is the vehicle through which all management is accomplished and that those managers without sufficient training in the formal discipline of communication are at a serious disadvantage in the workplace. This limitation is complicated whenever intercultural communication elements come into play and such variables are always at work in most modern corporations. What follows is a call for the field of Management to make Communication, particularly the study of intercultural communication, a more prominent part of its curriculum. It is imperative that 21st century managers pay greater heed to the complexities of the human communication process. The question as to whether U.S. educational systems and managers are lacking in this regard is admittedly broad, but worth exploring.

Communication vs. Management

Interpersonal communication, so very important in corporate life, is best defined as the use of symbols to co-create meaning between and among individuals. When successful, this co-creation leads to mutual understanding. If we divide a sender's intention by the receiver's understanding and achieve a 1:1 correspondence, perfection has been achieved. Between 0 and 1, is the relative degree of understanding each of us generates as we try to communicate with one another. Perfection rarely, if ever, occurs (Tubbs, 2000, p. 21).

Management, traditionally defined, refers to people carrying out four basic functions – planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (McNamara, 2003 pp.1-2). This definition, McNamara hopes, will "be shared and contributed to by users and readers across the world," and is similar to those that may be found in the management textbooks currently in use.

Curiously absent from the definition is the word *communication*. Closer examination reveals that the *Free Library* lists seventy-four separate areas related to management, including employee performance, ethics and social responsibility, staffing and supervision. In the electronic menu, "communications" with an "s" appears three times. (Note: the "s" is telling - when this typically occurs, it denotes a focus on the product of communication as opposed to the process).

Communications (Interpersonal), Communications (Writing), Interpersonal Skills, and Organizational Communications are among the available sub-choices on the Free Library menu. Readers can find advice on how to engage in appreciative inquiry, build trust, handle difficult people, and manage conflict. The point here is not that all of the advice is bad, but rather that it most always takes a "how to approach." Theoretical perspective is lacking. There is much talk centered on "what" and considerably less grounded in *why*.

Communication, as a field of study, appears to be similarly treated by the *American Management Association*. It is possible to search both for communication seminars and communication research through the *American Management Association* homepage. Doing so generates ninety seminars of the "how to communicate" variety and provides only four "hits" catalogued as communication research. One seminar "Building Better Work Relationships: New Techniques for Results-Oriented

Communication" promises attendees that they will learn how to say exactly what they mean every time and be able to put themselves in the listeners' shoes. *Exactly*, and *every time.* These are very exciting promises!

It's easy to see how this approach would be appealing to managers, but what specific knowledge base informs the approach is unknown. We do know that it is results-oriented, what we don't know is if it stems from an intelligent framework grounded in sound communication theory. Any human system that promises exact results every time is suspect. It is also worth noting that it is not possible to determine from the web site, who is teaching this seminar. The instructor may or may not be formally schooled in Communication.

MBA programs and their resulting managers would be quick to point out that communication is suggested in the very act of carrying out the managerial tasks in McNamara's list. Herein, however, lies that simplistic understanding previously mentioned.

Communication is not merely implied in these tasks, it is the very lifeblood of the tasks.

As such, communication not only warrants mention in any basic list of management functions; it should appear at the very start. Chester Barnard understood this point very well, noting that the first function of any executive was to create and maintain a system of communication. As president of New Jersey Telephone, he implicitly understood the significance of communication and its relationship to management in the workplace (Barnard, 1938).

Regrettably, like many managers before and after him, Barnard's writing reveals no explicit call to include communication as a formal part of MBA education, though one does wonder if he would object.

To date, many of the traditional management programs in the United States seem not to view Communication (the formal discipline) as among their important studies. Courses in this area are palpably absent and the accrediting agencies, AACSB for example, do little to encourage the inclusion of communication courses in business school curriculum, (that is, at least insofar as the term is defined within the context of this paper and the communication discipline overall). Such absence can only be attributed to a lack of understanding of the formal discipline of communication or the belief that its principles are sufficiently covered in other courses commonly offered by business schools and their programs.

The problem inherent in the absence of communication as a key term in McNamara's list, and in business school curriculum overall, is that the execution of all business activities are predicated upon the successful completion of the communication process. Planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, in any corporate sense, do not exist outside of people. These concepts, and the potential for enactment, reside in the employees who make up organizations throughout the world. Any effort at planning, organizing, leading, and controlling requires the cooperation of others in the workplace. Any organizational outcome is co-created with communication at the

heart of the creative process. A manger failing to understand this fact may have concepts work within their minds, only to fail within the corporate environment.

Managers with a limited view of the communication process can easily fall prey to communication myths and each time one of these myths is embraced, the opportunity for successful communication is hindered. A manager attempting to generate results-oriented communications without understanding that communication is co-generated by both sender and receiver is off to a very bad start. Even if employees of a given company can recite the organization's mission statement, it is no indication that they understand the mission in the same way as their supervisors. In fact, there is no certainty that everyone in management understands the mission in exactly the same way – as noted before, perfection is rare in the communication process.

Myths of Communication

Communication, in order to be successful, must be audience centered. Scholars have known this to be true for hundreds of years. Aristotle made the point in the 5th century and it applies equally well to 21st century organizations. Proper communication strategy in the workplace involves adapting to those in the organizational environment. Strategies, missions, goals, end game contracts, all of these are only relevant insofar as a group of individuals share a mutual understanding of the concepts and can act upon them. What a manager intends with a message is much less important than what people actually end up doing with a message. This point is best illustrated through a discussion of Myths of Communication (Richmond and McCroskey, 2002).

Communication is in words

Meaning resides not in messages but in message *users*. Communication*s* are effective only to the extent that the senders *and* receivers understand them. Mangers could learn a good deal from the typical mistakes that students make in exam books. When students write an essay, often they write it for themselves. I understand what I mean, the student supposes, therefore the reader should as well. A better exam is one that anticipates the reader and asks what that person will do with the communication therein. A better manager is one who asks, "what is each of my employees doing with my message?" That is, what meaning are they assigning to the stimuli that I just issued?

All communication is abstraction, even with the most rudimentary of words at play. Does "apple" refer to a computer, a city, a fruit, or a term of endearment as in, "apple of my eye"? Only those involved in the exchange can say for sure. There is a great range of meaning possible and ultimately understanding depends upon that which is assigned both by the sender and receiver.

Why is the point an important one for managers? Clearly, understanding becomes a greater challenge when we move from simple words like "apple" to more complex notions like "mission," "motivation," "teamwork," "leadership," "supervisor," "subordinate," and "vision".

Meaning assignment in intercultural settings presents more intricacy still. Managers in multinational corporations encounter individuals with world-views substantially different from their own. Consider the following example: "Returning to work after

the death of a parent, one Euro-American employee appreciated and valued all of the co-workers who expressed sympathy and asked questions about the deceased parent. Someone of the Dine (Navajo) background could be extremely uncomfortable with the mention of the person who died and discussions of death, burial, and the life of the deceased. Because of cultural taboos, such conversations might produce great anxiety instead of comfort." (Adler, 2002, pp. 51-52).

Clearly, no one single approach fits all situations in a corporation. Results oriented strategy, of the kind found in management "how to" books and articles, often suggests otherwise. Moreover, not every member of a given group experiences cultural identity in exactly the same way, (Smith 2002). It is therefore ill advised to adopt a strategy that says "I will approach all company members with a Navajo background in the same way no matter who the individual is or what has occurred."

Differences in corporate interpretations, individually and collectively, might revolve around task attractiveness, social style, appearance, punctuality, family obligations, civility, motivation, gender, contractual obligations, hierarchy, and overall conditions of employment. The very language a manager uses has to be carefully considered. "Mission" has a very different meaning in Southeast Asia than it does in the United States.

Even in a dyad, the most basic form of exchange, clear communication can be a challenge. In a corporation, this complexity is compounded a hundred or a thousand fold. The wise manager spends a substantial amount of time determining what people have done with his or her message and not merely considering whether or not they were clear in their own mind. The surest test of ignorance in the workplace is the manager who claims: 'I have no problem communicating. I know what I want to say, I say it clearly and with sufficient volume, and if someone is too stupid to understand what it is I mean then that is their problem.' Such managerial style is a problem for everyone.

Communication is good and more is better

Here we have two more myths. Communication is neither good, nor bad. It is simply a tool. Used well, we create good results, used poorly we compound problems. Today's employees are inundated with messages. They arrive via phone, fax, computer, pager, radio, television, intercom, and the U.S. postal service. Good communication requires some degree of forethought. In an age that requires rapid response, mistakes are possible and frequent. Remedy of these mistakes takes time; time that is already lacking.

Telling is communicating and it will solve all our problems

As many companies downsize and work is redistributed, fewer people become responsible for more tasks. This reorganization creates a situation wherein managers and employees have even less time for proper communication than was available before. Dialogue resulting in mutual understanding and conviction can be time consuming, and time devoted in this regard is often perceived by management as a luxury as opposed to a necessity.

Meetings are held, but often these can become instruments of control. There is the illusion of input. Really, the meetings serve as an opportunity to give directives,

answer questions, and send employees on their way. Communication cannot solve all problems, especially under these circumstances and as employees come to sense that their meetings are not truly an open dialogue, but rather an opportunity to become "informed", they grow quiet. They leave the meetings perhaps knowing what is expected of them, perhaps not.

A manager can be sure that an employee has *been told what to do* but cannot be sure that the employee *understands what to do* or that he or she is motivated to carry out the tasks. Meetings such as these can create a learned helplessness on the part of the work force. Meetings conducted without a proper respect for the communication process do not solve problems. They compound them.

Putting it all together: problems have solutions

The first part of this paper raised questions and concerns regarding how traditional management programs of study may be lacking insofar as educating their students in the complexities of the human communication process. The argument was offered that a manager's approach, by education and training, is most often message centered rather than audience centered. How to: write a good memo, run a good meeting, deal with the difficult client, and resolve a difficult dispute. Underpinning the discussion is the notion that theory without practice is sterile and practice without theory is ignorant. While this paper undoubtedly posed more questions than it answered within the confines of its present scope, the overall issues discussed are compelling and warrant further research.

Part two demonstrated how communication is the vehicle through which all management is carried out and it examined myths that serve as traps laying in wait for managers who are insufficiently educated.

The final part of this paper will explore how a manager with a formal education in Communication can become an *Expert Spectator* and, as such, a professional who is much better prepared for the challenges of the 21st century workplace.

The Expert Spectator

Expert training in a field allows people to see things they would not have noticed otherwise. In the hospital, a trained eye looks at an x-ray and sees much more than would the average citizen. An athlete turned television commentator observes the playing field and is able to discuss not just what has happened but what else might have happened and why. This person knows the players and the possibilities. A chorale director listening attentively to the hundred voices before him can stop and single out the one voice that is off key and make a correction.

In each instance, it is the formal training that allows each of these people to see and hear what others could not.

Would a manager's training allow them to see the results of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling? To an extent, yes. The manager would be able to measure how far along the path to an objective a company and its employees were. The distance from point A to B might be measured, but a substantial amount of information would be lacking as to *why* this distance was or was not covered.

Communication analysis, in the role of the "Expert Spectator", (a term coined by Rosenfield, 1968 and adapted for use in this paper) would allow managers to examine what they have intended in an organization in relation to what an employee has understood. This kind of manager would not only ask, what was I intending with my communication. Instead, trained in the field, they would ask, what is my employee doing with my communication? What meaning have they assigned? What is in the way of their understanding? What motivation do they have? Why? The smart manager knows that by observing his or her employees, and by asking the right questions, these answers can be achieved. Why would any manager not want to do this in the first place?

Fight, flight, and ignorance

Most managers do, in fact, talk to their employees. Whether or not they are communicating effectively is another thing altogether. Potential pitfalls were noted above. A manager, lost in the myths of communication, may actually believe that he or she is reaching the employees. The manager genuinely holds the belief that understanding is occurring. They understand themselves, after all. Without a proper education, such managers may be unaware of the gaps in understanding that can occur in even the simplest forms of communication. The extra effort required is seldom engaged.

One reason a manager may not put the necessary effort into mutual understanding is due to ignorance. The effort is unnecessary since, to the manager's way of thinking, understanding has already been achieved. Yet putting extra effort into the process is almost always necessary, especially in intercultural communication settings.

A basic communication model tells us why. Let's take notions concerning the importance of work. Person A (John) believes work is important to live. Person B (Mary) believes you live to work. John is devoted to his family and personal life; Mary is devoted to her job. Do both have similar understandings and aspirations within the company? Likely not, and as both continue to communicate their differences can become more pronounced. As the difference between the perceptions of John and Mary grows, so does the tension between them and this tension triggers the most basic of responses, an urge to fight or flee.

Fighting for the manager or employee can take many forms although it is not possible to predict in advance how any member of an organization is sure to behave. "Not all companies encourage a style of verbal opposition; each company has its own distinctive culture, developed over time. Different companies tend to encourage, more or less verbal opposition and argument," (Tannen, 1994 p. 59).

Among the fight possibilities are subtle threats, subversion, lack of cooperation, and aggressive public or private argument. A good deal has been written about the mindset of a person under these circumstances. Those ready for a fight may be thinking "Be wary: people are out to get you," "Never admit you're wrong," "don't trust anyone in authority," or "defend yourself!" (Bernstein, 1989 p. 28), and as trust diminishes, so does the opportunity for effective communication.

Alternately, the manager or employee might flee, retreating to their respective offices and trying to put the matter entirely out of mind. As the tension continues to grow,

successful communication wanes and meeting upon meeting does nothing to resolve the situation. Others in the company will witness a war of sorts. John and Mary, each attesting to what is most important in their lives, each wanting to win and each unwilling to give up on a value that they hold so dearly. The resulting power struggle is lose-lose.

Mary may believe she has won should she terminate John, but likely she has not. The new hire may hold similar views as John, while not expressly saying so, and those within the company holding the same mind set as their fallen colleague are now hostile toward the manager who eliminated him. The problem has not abated.

For managers to successfully negotiate their communication environments, they must put their focus not upon messages but upon the message users. Not everyone assigns the same meaning to his or her work or private life. Such is a given, and the point is understood within just a few examples.

One employee works to live, the other lives to work. Cannot both agree that the place of employment provides each what they desire, and that it is in the best interest of both parties to have the company to do well? John and Mary have an alternative to fighting or fleeing - coping (Dodd, 1995). In order to cope, however, they both must understand what is happening between them and must find ways to communicate more effectively.

Communication education and training can lead managers to adopt the role of the expert spectator. The expert spectator knows to think before speaking, but more importantly, *knows what to think about*. This manager is in a better position to assess communication situations and figure out how to respond and knows it is unwise to focus on messages without first considering message users. Proper communication education and analysis can provide managers with perspectives and approaches currently not available to them.

In sum, the kind of background suggested will be helpful to managers engaged in the act of human communication. Particularly when they find themselves in intercultural communication settings where "worlds collide," or better yet, where "world views" do.

References

Adler, R. B (2002). *Communicating at work.* New York: Mc-Graw Hill Higher Education.

Barnard, C. (1938). *The Functions of the executive.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bernstein, A. (1989). *Dinosaur brains.* New York: Ballentine Books.

Dodd, C. (1995). *Dynamics of intercultural communication*. Boston: Mc-Graw Hill.

Richmond, V. (2002). *Organizational communication for survival.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

McNamara, C. (2003). Basic definitions (and misconceptions) about management. *www.mapnp.org/library/*

Rosenfield, L. W. (1968). Anatomy of a critical discourse. *Speech monographs,* 35, 50-69.

Smith, D. C. (2002). Culture and identity: Your right to define? Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association of Puerto Rico Convention, San Juan, December 1999.

Tannen, D. (1994). *Talking 9 to 5.* New York: Quill.

Tubbs, S. L. (2000). *Human communication.* New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

Address for correspondence

Dr Donald C. Smith
Department of Communication
University of New Haven
300 Orange Avenue
West Haven, CT 06516
USA
Speakeasy2000@snet.net