

COMMUNICATION: THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE

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Among the few universals that apply to man is this: That all men—no matter of what time or place, of what talent or temperament, of what race or rank—are continually engaged in making sense out of the world about them. Man, according to Nicholas Hobbs, "has to build defenses against the absurd in the human condition and at the same time find a scheme that will make possible reasonably accurate predictions of his own behavior and of the behavior of his wife, his boss, his professor, his physician, his neighbor, and of the policeman on the corner."² Although men may tolerate doubt, few can tolerate meaninglessness.

To survive psychologically, man must conceive a world that is fairly stable, relatively free of ambiguity, and reasonably predictable.

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able. Some structure must be placed on the flow of impressions; events must be viewed from some perspective. Incoming sensations will be categorized, organized around some theme. Some facts will be noted and others neglected; some features will be emphasized and others minimized; certain relationships will appear reasonable, others unlikely or impossible. Meaning does not arise until experience is placed in some context.

Man is not a passive receptor, but an active agent in giving sense to sensation. The significance that any situation acquires is as much a result of what the perceiver brings to it as it is of the raw materials he finds there. Terms such as "personal constructs," "social schema," or "perceptual sets" have been used to identify the cognitive processes by which men render experience intelligible. As George Kelly notes, "Man looks at this world through transparent patterns or templates which he created and then attempted to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. The fit is not always good. But without such patterns the world appears to be such an undifferentiated homogeneity that man is unable to make any sense out of it. Even a poor fit is more helpful to him than nothing at all."²

As the infant matures into adulthood he gradually acquires a picture of the world he inhabits and his place within it. Pervasive orientations—of trust or suspicion, of affection or hostility—are learned early, often at considerable pain, and through communication with significant other people. Every success or failure contributes in some way to his accumulating assumptions about the world and how it operates. Such cognitive predispositions are learned unconsciously, and most people are only vaguely aware of their profound effects. Yet they are, in the view of Roger Harrison, "the most important survival equipment we have."³ Thus it is not events themselves, but how men construe events, that determines what they will see, how they will feel, what they will think, and how they will respond.

Such perceptual biases, taken together, constitute what has been called the assumptive world of the individual. The world men get inside their heads is the only world they know. It is this symbolic world, not the real world, that they talk about, fight about, argue about, laugh about. It is this world that drives them to cooperate or compete, to love or hate. Unless this symbolic world is kept open and responsive to continuing experience, men are forced to live out their lives imprisoned within the constructs of their own invention.

The worlds men create for themselves are distinctive worlds, not the same world. Out of similar raw materials each fabricates

meanings according to the dictates of his own perceptual priorities. It is not surprising that nurtured in different families, enforced by different sources, frightened by different dreams, inspired by different teachers, rewarded for different virtues, men should view the world so differently. The way men project private significance into the world can be readily illustrated. Here is a group of people asked to respond to an ordinary photograph showing adults of various ages, standing together, and looking up at a distant object. The experimenter asks, "What do you see?" "What does it mean?" Some of the viewers comment on the mood of the figures, reporting "grief," "hope," "inspiration," or "despair." Others notice the identity of the persons, describing them as "peasants," "members of a minority," "Mexicans," or "Russians." Still others see the "ages of man," a "worshipping family," or "three generations." Even at the objective level there is disagreement, some report three persons, some four, some five. When shown before lunch "hunger" is one of the first interpretations; after lunch this meaning is never assigned. A similar process of projection would seem to fit the varying reactions people have to a peace demonstration, Charles de Gaulle, a labor contract, the Hippies, or the Pill.

Two behavioral scientists, Hastorf and Cantril, studied the conflicting reactions of Princeton and Dartmouth students to a hotly contested game between their football teams. The students seemed not to have attended the same game, their perceptions were subservient to their personal loyalties. The investigators conclude: "It is inaccurate and misleading to say that different people have different attitudes toward the same 'thing.' For the 'thing' is not the same for different people whether the 'thing' is a football game or a presidential candidate, Communism, or spinach. . . . We behave according to what we bring to the occasion, and what each of us brings to the occasion is more or less unique. And except for these significances which we bring to the occasion, the happenings around us would be meaningless occurrences, would be inconsequential."⁴

While we are continually engaged in an effort after meaning, every perception is necessarily a private and incomplete one. No one ever sees all for each abstract in accordance with his past experience and emerging needs. Where men construe events similarly, they can expect to understand and agree readily; where they construe events differently, agreement is more difficult. In exploring the impact of cognitive styles upon communication, Triandis found that pairs of subjects who categorized objects similarly communicated more effectively than those who categorized them differently.⁵

Paradoxically, it is these differences in perception that make

communication inevitable. If men saw the same facts in the same way, there would be no reason to talk at all. Certain rituals of recognition or flattery might interrupt the silence, but there would be no experiences to share, no occasion for serious talk. There would be no experiences to share, no conflicts to negotiate. A simple experiment will demonstrate this idea. At the next conversational opportunity, agree completely, both in fact and feeling, with the person who has just expressed an opinion. (This is more difficult than many people imagine). In a matter of seconds following this restatement, the conversation will grind to a halt, or someone will change the subject. The reason is clear: Where men see and feel alike, there is nothing to share. Talk is primarily a means of confronting and exploring differences. Conversation moves from disagreement to disagreement, interrupted only occasionally to note areas of momentary concurrence.

It is not only inevitable that men communicate, but fortunate that they do so. The exposure to differences through communication, painful as it sometimes is, provides the only opportunity to test our private perceptions, to construct a total picture out of our separate visions, and to find new ways of negotiating unresolved problems.

Research on decision-making illustrates how important communication is in improving human performance. Subjects in one of these studies solved a set of problems working alone, then through majority vote, and finally by discussing them in small groups.⁶ The problems resembled those in everyday life; that is, they were difficult, emotionally involving, and presented a range of possible solutions. The results indicated that voting did not improve the quality of solutions reached by solitary effort, but group decisions were clearly superior to individual decisions. In some instances, groups of the least competent subjects were, through discussion, able to surpass the decisions made by the most talented person working alone. Subsequent research using executives in labor, government, education, and business confirmed these findings. Even groups composed of persons who were unable to solve any of the problems by themselves, made better group decisions than the most effective person working alone. That is, administrators with no ability to solve the test problems by themselves, showed superior judgment when allowed to confer. Maximizing communicative opportunity produced superior judgments.

How can we account for these results? Careful study of the recorded conversations revealed a number of contributing factors: Groups had a wider range of information so that each person benefited from the knowledge of others. Every person had his own

view of the problem, and sharing these perspectives enlarged the number of possible approaches. More solutions were proposed in the groups, supplying more alternatives from which to choose. The different biases of participants prevented any subject from suffering the consequences of his own prejudices. Finally, sharing opinions led to more critical examination of proposals. Where persons worked alone they could remain blind to their own errors, but groups quickly identified mistakes that would lead to wrong decisions.

After finishing the analysis, one further question arose: Why were the groups not infallible? Although this smacked of asking why men are not perfect, the question led to new findings. Two conditions accounted for most of the group errors. In some cases the groups lacked conflict, and, assuming that unanimity proved they were correct, did not discuss the problem. In others, despite the occurrence of conflict, the subjects lacked the patience or skill to resolve it, and compromised to avoid interpersonal antagonism. The absence of conflict or the inability to explore it prevented communication and thereby diminished the quality of decisions. In the vocabulary of science, communication among mature persons may be a necessary if not a sufficient condition for personal growth and social progress.

What, then, prevents men from transforming their differences into agreements? Why are facts so often distorted and disputed? What inhibits the flow of new ideas? What produces friction? Why is there so often an undercurrent of resistance when men talk? It is, I believe, because communication nearly always implies change. Aside from common social rituals, men nearly always talk in a context of change. What prompts communication is the desire for someone else to see our facts, appreciate our values, share our feelings, accept our decisions. Communication is initiated, consciously or unconsciously, to change the other person. If difference is the raw material of conversation, influence is its intent.

For most people, change is threatening. It is the old and familiar that is trusted; the novel and unknown that arouses alarm. "No one," John Dewey once wrote, "discovers a new world without forsaking an old one." To change is to give up cherished values, to be left defenseless and forced to assume responsibility for a new organization of experience. The degree to which fear is aroused is usually proportional to the extent to which core values are placed in question. In some cases the fears may be quite specific, and can be articulated. More commonly, the threatened person is unable to identify the reason for his anxiety. Ordinarily threat arises from the source, the content, or the manner of communicating.

The mere presence of some people produces tension. Persons who are superior in age, power, wealth, appearance, esteem may create apprehension. Secretaries and lath operators, medical interns and practice teachers are often incapable of accurate work while supervisors are observing their performance. There is evidence that people who control the destiny of others, such as parents, teachers, supervisors, provoke ego defensive reactions, quite apart from what they may say. The same seems to be the case for those who interrupt or reverse the direction of self-growth.⁸ Threatening people, Landfield found, are those who perceive us as we once were, or now are and no longer wish to be.⁹ Even status signs—the policeman's uniform, the judge's gavel, the executive's desk, the physician's stethoscope, the psychologist's tests—can arouse fear before or during interpersonal encounters. The presence of threat, of course, affects the depth and accuracy of communication. A number of studies demonstrate that where superiors are feared, information is withheld or distorted.¹⁰ Thus where human institutions proliferate status differences or personal habits aggravate them, communication may be more difficult because of the repressive context in which it occurs.

The substance of communication, that is, the subject being discussed, may also trigger defenses. A new fact tests an old fact; a new attitude challenges an existing one. New proposals may provoke fear of an unknown future, fear of possible failure, fear of loss of power or prestige. No matter how frustrating the present, its dangers are palatable and familiar. Time has permitted some adjustment to them. But to turn in new directions is to face a host of uncertainties. Even consideration of a new program implies an attack on those who created or support an existing program. "We tend to maintain our cognitive structures in relatively stable form," writes Joseph Precker, "and select and interact with those who do not attack these structures." When encounters were unavoidable he found they aroused defensiveness or rejection of the attacker.¹¹ Any new or unassimilated thought challenges the assumptions on which behavior is based, and no one is so secure that he cannot be aroused at the thought of revising favored values. Thus, even where people are not initially hostile and try to avoid unnecessary friction, the topic, because of its emotional significance, may trigger resistance.

Beyond the source and content lies the manner in which men talk. One cannot separate who is speaking and what is talked about from the way differences are expressed. Matter and manner interact to produce meaning. Although all men have their own rhetoric, preferring some interpersonal strategies to others, a number of

techniques that complicate communication can be identified.¹² Since interpersonal attitudes are conveyed both by verbal and nonverbal codes, any discrepancy in these codes may be regarded as a warning signal. Warm words are spoken in a cold voice. Frank statements are offset by calculating glances. Expressions of respect are contradicted with every interruption. Against the deceit that is evident in a confusion of codes, men become apprehensive and guarded in their own messages.

An attitude of infallibility discourages communication. The dogmatic assertion of difference leaves no opportunity for influence to move in both directions. Where men claim, "There is only one conclusion," "It all boils down to," "The only course of action is," there will be negligible exploration of differences. The person who is impervious to the words of others while demanding sympathetic consideration of his own denies his associates any significant role in communication. They are forced to disregard their experience, deny their feelings, censor their thoughts. Since unquestioned statements are untested statements, the dogmatic person appears to be more interested in triumph than in truth.

Messages that convey a manipulative purpose also subvert communication. A calculated use of argument, a carefully phrased idea, a solicitous manner, a restrained reaction, all indicate that someone is being maneuvered into a predetermined position. Sooner or later the manipulated recognizes his manipulator. He begins to feel regarded as an object, not as a person. He becomes suspicious, emotionally tense, and verbally devious himself. That the manipulator is sometimes unaware of his own desires to control others, does not reduce the threat he poses for them.

Information normally flows between communicants in both directions: The man who speaks also listens. But often, through deliberate design or personal preference, interaction is blocked so that one person sends all the messages, the other only receives them. The captain commands, the soldier obeys; the teacher lectures, the student takes notes. A letter from a friend who is an educational consultant in India illustrates how far it is possible to carry this kind of communicative irresponsibility. His daughter, raised in one of the great cattle provinces of Western Canada, is attending school in India.

Thora came home the other day doggedly repeating to herself, "A cow is a big animal with four legs and two horns. It is the most useful of all animals. The feet of the cow are called hoofs." I asked what she was doing, repeating this over and over again, and she replied that this was nature study and she had to memorize the cow. The teacher will not tolerate improvised replies, but the

students must jump up smartly beside their desks and repeat exactly what was copied from the blackboard the day before. It sounds fantastic, but the end of the system is to stifle initiative, destroy creativity and engender a violent dislike for learning.¹³

One-way communication implies, of course, that meanings in the nervous system of one person can be deposited in the nervous system of another. Unfortunately communication is not this simple. Men differ not only in experience, but in their habits of speech as well. The only way to arrive at common meanings is through mutual accommodation. Each must share some responsibility for calibrating his words and intentions with the other.

Limiting communication to the sending of messages impoverishes the process and renders at least one participant impotent. Studies by Leavitt and Mueller illustrate some of the difficulties that attend one-way communication.¹⁴ Persons attempting to give even the simplest instructions found their orders were inaccurately executed, that errors of interpretation could not be corrected, and that this condition produced extremely low morale. It is not difficult to estimate the cause of the low morale: For someone to receive confusing or complicated information and to be unable to clarify it, especially when it affects his performance or status, can be unnerving. Since all messages are ambiguous in some respect, cutting off efforts to confirm their meaning leaves the receiver without protection in a potentially punishing situation.

A threatening atmosphere is probable, also, in encounters in which one of the communicants maintains considerable emotional distance. The person who is coldly objective or who refuses to disclose his own feelings is likely to be viewed with suspicion. To be treated as a set of facts or as a problem to be solved, rather than as a human being, seldom contributes to interpersonal rapport. Such emotional distancing creates, to use a phrase of Martin Buber's, an I-It rather than I-Thou relation. One is not likely to approach or expose himself to an unresponsive facade. It is safer to remain on guard in the company of those who are themselves guarded. Any verbal indiscretion or spontaneous revelation may give an advantage or be used against one. As interaction continues, participants draw farther and farther apart from any real confrontation with their differences.

The most familiar form of threat is found in a highly evaluative communication context. There is continual appraisal. Remarks are judged rather than understood. Conversation becomes cross-examination. Criticism may be given directly through attack, or indirectly through sarcasm or innuendo. (The latter, because of its ambiguity, is far harder to handle.) Compliments seem only slightly

less corrupting than insults, for in one case the receiver modifies his behavior to gain further rewards and in the other to avoid further punishments. In either case he is encouraged to distort his judgment. It becomes hazardous to be honest, to be open, to be original. Ideas are suppressed and remarks tailored to fit the expectations of others. The result is to diminish honest contribution to the conversation, and to isolate men from their own experience.

A more subtle form of threat occurs when conversation is converted into a struggle over identity. At one level, talk flows around a common interest or problem; at another, communication becomes a competition for status. Participants present their credentials and challenge those of others. In organizational life these claims relate to the respective power, intelligence, skill, or rank of the communicants. But even in ordinary encounters, men verbally compete to determine who is in better physical condition, who has the more talented children, who can consume more alcohol, or who is more attractive to the opposite sex. Communication becomes an occasion for asserting and validating personal identity rather than for testing what we know. Status-reminding phrases, such as "I've devoted years to this matter," "I've had much more experience," or "You wouldn't be able to appreciate," are likely to invite reaction in kind. "Once the proving syndrome is present," according to Paul Goodman, "the boys are quite out of touch with the simplest realities."¹⁵ People who constantly remind us of who they are and of who we are—especially when who they are is superior, and who we are is inferior—threaten the concept we have of ourselves. When identity is challenged, few have enough insight or strength to resist. What might have become a productive conversation turns into an interaction of roles and of facades. Even the expression of affection can turn into a competitive affair:

"I love you," she said.

"I adore you," he said.

"Love you more," she said.

"More than what?" he said.

"Than you love me," she said.

"Impossible," he said.

"Don't argue," she said.

"I was only . . ." he said.

"Shut up," she said.¹⁶

In short, the prospect of communication may threaten people for a number of reasons: Because such interactions occur with persons endowed with considerable power and status; because the underlying purpose is to change perceptions that have personal

significance; because the communicative approach prevents a full and sympathetic exploration of differences. Any of these factors alone can produce an undercurrent of tension in human affairs; but in many instances all three combine to arouse deeper anxiety.

Through all there runs a common theme. Though manifested differently, there is always a challenge to the personal integrity and self-respect of the person in communication. To talk to some people is dangerous because they control what it is possible for us to be and do. To talk about some topics is hazardous for it exposes one to differences in attitude and feeling. To talk in some ways is disturbing for one must guard continually against being exposed and attacked. But it is at the intersection of all three that men are most vulnerable: Where a sensitive topic must be discussed with a powerful person in an emotionally charged atmosphere.

During a lifetime of painful encounters people acquire an extensive repertoire of defensive strategies.¹⁷ At low levels of stress men tend to remain open to new facts; flexible in interpretation, creative in response. As the perceived threat increases, they narrow their vision, resist certain kinds of information, distort details to fit their own biases, even manufacture evidence to bolster their preconceptions. The old, whether appropriate or not, is favored over the new. Anxiety is aroused when a person, in encounters with others, confronts perceptions that are beyond his capacity to assimilate. As Gregory Bateson has suggested, "This is a terrifying moment . . . you've been climbing up a ladder, you know it was an unsound ladder and now you're asked to step off it and you don't really know there's going to be another ladder—even if the ladder you were on was a rather unsound one. This is terror."¹⁸ Defenses protect the individual against facts that might otherwise undermine the system of assumptions that give stability and significance to his experience.

Not all defending behavior, of course, is defensive. Most men hold tentative conclusions about many issues. We believe that certain ways of looking at the world and at ourselves have some credibility. At any time we may voice these opinions. If, when confronted with opinions that differ from our own, we can explore these differences quietly, comfortably, thoroughly, and with the aim of testing the validity of our own beliefs, then we are only defending an opinion to reach more reliable conclusions. However, if when confronted with disagreement, we find it difficult to examine that thought or feeling, find the opposing view arousing us emotionally, find our hearts racing and our minds frantically seizing upon arguments, find we cannot reply calmly and without antagonism, the reaction is probably defensive. Words are being

used to protect rather than to test private judgment.

Some defensive techniques are conscious; most of them are unconscious. Each person has his own hierarchy of tactics to which he retreats when faced with inadmissible perceptions. These defenses, provoked in a context of change, constitute the major barriers to communication among men. When attacked, as Paul Tournier notes, "Each of us does his best to hide behind a shield."

For one it is a mysterious silence which constitutes an impenetrable retreat. For another it is facile chit-chat so that we never seem to get near him. Or else, it is erudition, quotations, abstractions, theories, academic argument, technical jargon; or ready-made answers, trivialities, or sententious and patronizing advice. One hides behind his timidity, so that we cannot find anything to say to him; another behind a fine self-assurance which renders him less vulnerable. At one moment we have recourse to our intelligence, to help us to juggle with words. Later on we pretend to be stupid so that we cannot reply. . . . It is possible to hide behind one's advanced years, or behind one's university degree, one's political office, or the necessity of nursing one's reputation. A woman can hide behind her startling beauty, or behind her husband's notoriety; just as, indeed, a husband can hide behind his wife.¹⁹

One of the principal forms of defense is to avoid communicative contact altogether. It is unlikely that anyone reading these words has not, on some occasion, deliberately avoided certain persons. It may have been a teacher, a parent, a supervisor, or, depending on circumstances, anyone with the ability to contradict, to embarrass, to attack us. Selective communication—Whites talking with Whites, Republicans with Republicans, Generation with Generation, Physicians with Physicians—greatly reduces the prospect of having to cope with discrepant or damaging points of view.

Even when contact cannot be avoided, it is possible to resist exposure by remaining silent. If a person does not speak he cannot expose himself or his judgments to public scrutiny. By retreating into his own private world he can remain untouched by the worlds of others. Theodore Newcomb has identified the process of communicative avoidance, whether of persons or topics, as tautistic hostility.²⁰ Confrontation is avoided to protect prevailing attitudes. In talking together people run the risk of understanding one another, hence of having to alter existing prejudices. Fraternizing with the enemy or socializing with competitors is traditionally avoided lest one become incapable of manipulating and mistreating them on other occasions.

A kind of psyche with denial is also possible. In this case the

person never really presents himself as he is. According to Ronald Laing, "He never quite says what he means or means what he says. The part he plays is always not quite himself."²¹ Where this withdrawal occurs, there is often an undercurrent of nonverbal signs that express defensive feelings. Recent research shows that people who wish to avoid communication choose to sit at a greater distance from others than those who wish to interact.²² Tension-reducing body movements and gestures which serve no instrumental purpose increase.²³ Any act, from smoking a cigarette to doodling on a note pad, may reflect developing resistance. Research on mutual glances shows that eye contact is reduced when persons are in competitive, embarrassing, or critical encounters with others.²⁴ Thus many nonverbal indicators may convey the defensive attitudes of another person.

Just short of the verbal forms of resistance lies the noncommittal reply. Such phrases as "Uh-huh," "I guess so," "Maybe," and "Oh yeah" fill the void left by a preceding question, but reveal little of the thought or feeling of the respondent. They provide an escape route, for at the moment of utterance they convey only an ambiguous neutrality; later, according to the shifting intent of the speaker, they may be given a variety of meanings.

Yet men also talk to protect themselves from confronting differences. Words become a substitute for, rather than a means to, understanding. People spin verbal cocoons around themselves that disquieting ideas cannot penetrate. One person describes it this way: "If, for example, I can talk at such an abstract level that few can determine what I am saying, then I must have high intelligence. This is especially true if no one can understand me. The reason I could not communicate was that I did not want to."²⁵ Men often talk compulsively, and through long and frequent repetitions leave others no chance to reflect on what was said, to explore their own reactions, or to answer objections. Opponents are overwhelmed and defeated in a rush of words. Sometimes this takes the form of counter-attacks, with the defensive person placing the burden of proof upon the opposition. By turning attention to others and exposing their weakness he hopes to hide his own vulnerability.

Conversational detours around painful topics are not uncommon. This may be done consciously, as in the case of the hostess who steers talk away from religious or political topics. More commonly it is done unconsciously by people who are unaware of the threat they seek to avoid. The essential point of a remark is disregarded, and some tangential or entirely new thought is introduced. Parents who fear discussing sex with their

children, or supervisors who prefer not to know about critical failures of their subordinates, often rely upon topical control to neutralize communication. Each time a threatening or sensitive comment is made talk is turned abruptly in a new direction. Men have become so skillful at defensively diverting conversation into painless channels that some are able to avoid meaningful interaction on nearly every vital issue that touches their lives.

Men also hide from each other through communicating by formula. Talk is prompted not by inner necessity, but by social convention. Everyone is familiar with the meaningless phrases used in social greetings. But this same verbal game may be extended to cover more serious encounters. Phrases are uttered and repeated, but when examined turn out to be empty. Flattery substitutes for frankness. There is much moralizing and sloganizing. Instead of examining differences, communicants obscure them in large abstractions that permit a multitude of interpretations. A kind of double-talk preserves the illusion of confrontation while preventing it from ever occurring. There is often an interaction of roles rather than of persons. When people speak as parents, professors, as physicians, or as political candidates, listeners are likely to discount or mistrust much of what is said. Their remarks are seen as a consequence of their position, not of their personal experience. Of all the defenses, this currently seems most disruptive of efforts to reach across races and generations.

There is also the use of indirection. Instead of speaking frankly, men speak in double meanings. At the explicit level, one idea is transmitted; at the implicit level another idea, often the opposite. The most familiar forms include kidding and sarcasm. Humor, despite its high reputation as a form of recreational communication, often serves defensive and destructive ends. Verbal indirection is almost an unassailable stratagem, for anyone who takes the implied meaning seriously may be accused of projecting false interpretations of it. With a few oblique comments, efforts to openly explore differences may be totally blocked.

Defensive behavior is characteristic of some men all of the time. Everyone must build the house of his own consciousness to interpret events around him. It is this "personal cosmology" that stands between us and the unknown and unacceptable. With such a guidance system events become recognizable and comprehensible. Those who perceive reality in different terms—as everyone does—alarm us because they shake the stability of our system. Defenses, note Kahn and Cannell, "are designed in large part to help us to protect ourselves against making some undesirable revelation or against putting ourselves in an unfavorable light. They are man's

methods of defending himself against the possibility of being made to look ridiculous or inadequate. And in most cases we are not content merely to avoid looking inadequate, we also want to appear intelligent, thoughtful, or in possession of whatever other virtues are relevant to the situation from our point of view."²⁶ Confronted with difference, men may deny it, obscure it, confuse it, or evade it in order to protect their own assumptive world against the meanings of others.

Unfortunately, to the extent that men insulate themselves from the worlds that others know, they are imprisoned within their own defenses. They become blind to the limits of their own knowledge, and incapable of incorporating new experience. They are forced to repeat the same old ways of thinking because they result from the same old ways of seeing. Interaction loses the significance it might have. "This shutup self, being isolated," writes Ronald Laing, "is unable to be enriched by outer experience, and so the whole inner world comes to be more and more impoverished, until the individual may come to feel he is merely a vacuum."²⁷ Without access to the experience and perceptions of others, the individual deprives himself of the raw material of growth. Defenses corrupt the only process by which we might extend and deepen our experience. Until we can hear what others say, we cannot grow wiser ourselves.

To appreciate the full significance of incomplete communication in organizational life, another factor must be added. It is this: The higher men rise, the fewer the problems with which they have direct contact, and the more they must rely on the words of others. Unfortunately, as men assume greater power their higher status increases the difficulty in obtaining reliable accounts from others, and increases their own capacity to shield themselves from unpleasant information. Given a superior who prefers reassurance and a subordinate who fears to speak out, there is every reason to expect censored and distorted reports. Yet is it imperative that those in high places cope with realities rather than defensive fantasies?

What, then, can be done to create conditions in which men are not afraid to communicate? How can the destructive cycle of threat and defense be broken? Are there conditions that encourage men to respond to each other more creatively, so that differences can widen and deepen human experience? Can self-protective encounters be converted into self-enriching ones?

To reduce defenses, threat must be reduced. Such threats, as suggested earlier, spring from the source, the content, or the manner of communicating. Where it is the person who threatens, it

is usually because differences in status exist, are introduced, or accentuated. For this reason groups and organizations ought regularly to review their internal structure to see if differences in authority are essential to or destructive of effective performance. Differences in rank are often multiplied or emphasized without regard for their inhibiting and distorting effects on the flow of information and ideas. Studies of organizational behavior suggest that those marked by severe competition for status often have serious problems of communication.²⁸ Status barriers, however, may dissolve in the face of facilitating interpersonal attitudes.

Where the threat arises from different perceptions of problems and policies there are ways of rendering these differences less disruptive. Proposals can be made as specific as possible to counteract fears of an uncertain future; they can be introduced gradually to reduce the amount of risk involved; they can be initiated experimentally so that failure can be remedied; they can include guarantees against the loss of personal prestige and power. Every new idea, since it is an implicit criticism of an old idea, may disturb those responsible for the prevailing view; but it is possible to innovate without attacking unnecessarily those associated with former policies.

Neither the source nor the subject, however, is as critical as the climate in which interaction occurs. Communication as a physical fact produces no magic: Words can lead toward destructive or productive outcomes depending on the attitudes that surround them. Where the object is to secure as complete, as frank, as creative an interaction of experience as possible, the following attitudes would seem to promote communication in a context of change.

Human understanding is facilitated where there is a willingness to become involved with the other person. It means to treat him as a person, not as an object; to see him as a man, not as a number, a vote, or a factor in production. It is to regard him as a value in himself, rather than a means to some other value. It is to prize his experience and his needs. Most of all, it is to consider and explore his feelings. In practical terms it means one is willing to take time, to avoid interruptions, to be communicatively accessible. Dozens of superficial and fragmentary conversations do not encourage a meeting of minds. There must be as much respect for his experience as we expect for our own. Since it is the loss of self-esteem that men fear most, such respect can do much to reduce the motivation for defensive interaction.

Communication is facilitated when there is a frank and full exposure of self. It is when men interact in role, speaking as they

feel, that communication is often corrupted. In the words of Sidney Jourard, "We say that we feel things we do not feel. We say that we did things we did not do. We say that we believe things we do not believe."²⁹ We present, in short, persons that we are not. As one person retreats behind his false self—performing his lines, weighing his words, calculating his movements—the danger signs are recognized. Rarely does the other person fail to detect them. In an atmosphere of deceit, his suspicion is aroused and defenses go up. He begins to edit his thoughts, censor his feelings, manipulate his responses, and assume the rituals and mask of his office. Not only does communication stop, but mistrust lingers on to corrupt future encounters. Afterwards each says to himself, "I don't believe him," "I don't trust him," "I will avoid him in the future."

This pattern accounts for much of the communicative isolation of parent and child, teacher and student, Black and White. It may also be the reason why interaction is so often accompanied by an undercurrent of strain, for it takes considerable energy to sustain both a false and a real self.

In contrast, defenses tend to disintegrate in an atmosphere of honesty. There are no inconsistent messages. What is said is what is known, what is felt, what is thought. Pretenses are dropped and contrivance ceases. Instead the effort is to express, as spontaneously and accurately as possible, the flow of thought and feeling. In the absence of deceit, there is less reason to distort or deny in reply. A genuine interaction of experience can occur. Much of the tension goes out of personal relationships. Communication becomes something to seek rather than something to avoid. Through talk it becomes possible to learn more about ourselves and more about the issues we face as men.

The willingness to be transparent leads to a further condition that promotes healthy interaction. In social encounters men see their purposes in many ways: Some as manipulative, some as dominating, some as competitive, some as impressive, some as protective. People seldom talk for more than a few moments without exposing their underlying communicative strategy. Most of our defenses are designed to prevent damage to the symbolic self that occurs in the face of these depreciating motives. But an attitude of mutuality can also be heard, and heard loud and clear. This attitude is manifest in many ways: Whenever there is patience rather than impatience, whenever there is a tentative rather than dogmatic assertion of opinion, whenever there is curiosity rather than indifference for alternative views, whenever there is a creative rather than inflexible approach to arguments. Where there is a feeling of mutual involvement among communicative equals,

defenses are unlikely to interfere with the pursuit of new meanings.

Understanding is also promoted when people assume their full communicative responsibilities. Now what does that mean? Simply that one will listen as well as speak, that he will try to understand as well as try to be understood. There is little doubt among specialists that listening is by far the harder communicative task. Then why is it so often assigned to the younger, the weaker, the less competent? Usually it is the student who must understand the teacher, the employee who must understand the supervisor, the patient who must understand the doctor, the young who must understand the old. In response to an essay "On Being an American Parent," one college student wrote the following lines as part of a "Letter to the Editor."

Your paragraph under "Listen" very well sums up what I'm trying to say. I could never tell my parents anything, it was always "I'm too busy . . . too tired . . . that's not important . . . that's stupid . . . can't you think of better things. . . ." As a result, I stopped telling my parents anything. All communication ceased.

I have only one important plea to parents . . . Listen, listen, and listen again. Please, I know the consequences and I'm in hell.³⁰

In instance after instance the heavier communicative burden is forced upon the weaker, and the easier load is assumed by the stronger. It is not surprising that such exploitation should occasionally arouse defensive reactions.

Research in the behavioral sciences gives consistent support to the principle that two-way, as compared with one-way, communication produces more accurate understandings, stimulates a greater flow of ideas, corrects misunderstandings more efficiently, and yields a higher level of morale. Why, then, do men so often block feedback? Partly out of habit. In many interpersonal encounters listening means no more than a passive monitoring of the conversation, a time in which men prepare their next remarks. Partly we prevent feedback because of fear. It is upsetting to find how confusing our instructions have been, how inconsistent our words and deeds, how irritating our actions sometimes are. Where receivers have been given a chance to talk back after long periods of following orders, they usually respond at first with hostility. Yet the easing of communicative restrictions, in most instances, quickly restores a constructive and cooperative relationship.

On the national scene these days we hear much about the need for more dialogue. Many are skeptical of this demand. Has there not always been the right of free speech, free access to the platform for every advocate? True, but freedom to speak is not freedom to influence. For genuine dialogue there must be someone to

talk, but also someone to listen. To speak is an empty freedom—as racial clashes and political demonstrations should remind us—unless there is someone willing to hear. And to reply in ways that prove that what was said has made a difference.

Within the intimacy of the therapeutic relationship—where communicative principles are tested at every moment—this premise seems equally valid. Again, it is not the talking that appears to accomplish the cure but association with someone capable of hearing. To be with someone who is truly willing to listen, who concentrates sensitively on all that is said, is no longer to need defenses. Such listening, of course, involves the risk of change. No one can leave the safety and comfort of his own assumptive world and enter that of another without running the risk of having his own commitments questioned. Not only questioned, but perhaps altered. To communicate fully with another human being, since it entails the risk of being changed oneself, is to perform what may be the most courageous of all human acts.

Communication is facilitated when there is a capacity to create a non-evaluative atmosphere. Defenses are provoked not so much by the expectation of difference, as by the expectation of criticism. "The major barrier to interpersonal communication," Carl Rogers has suggested, "is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve, or disapprove the statement of the other person or group." Under the surface of many, if not most, conversations there runs an undercurrent of censure. If we differ, one of us, usually the other fellow, must be wrong, must be stupid, must be incompetent, must be malicious. In so polarized a setting, where conversation becomes cross-examination, it is not surprising that men speak cautiously, incompletely, ambiguously; it is not surprising that with such critical preoccupations they listen suspiciously, partially, vaguely, to what is actually said. "The stronger our feelings," continues Rogers, "the more likely it is there will be no mutual element in the communication. There will be just two ideas, two feelings, two judgments, missing each other in psychological space."³¹ When people recognize that they will not be forced beyond their own limits, when they see that their meanings will be respected and understood, when they feel that others will help in exploring difficult or dangerous experiences, they can begin to drop their defenses.

As the atmosphere becomes less evaluative, men are more likely to express and examine a wider range of differences without distortion. Where the intent is to comprehend rather than to attack, communication becomes a source of benefit rather than to harm. In a permissive climate people feel comfortable, feel

respected, feel secure enough to talk openly. "Conveying assurance of understanding," writes Anatol Rapoport, "is the first step in the removal of threat."³² Research done on the attributes of helpful people indicates that they are easy to talk with, maximize areas open to discussion, minimize embarrassment, and seldom disapprove.³³

In such trusting relationships men can develop empathy. They can participate in each other's experience, sharing the assumptions, and the meanings that events hold for them. This is not to insist that evaluation always be avoided, for decisions must be made about facts, theories, policies, even people. It is only to argue that mutual understanding should precede mutual evaluation. Problems cannot be solved until they are understood, and highly critical attitudes inhibit the communication of problems.

It appears that whether communication promotes understanding and affection, or blocks understanding and builds defenses, depends more on the assumptions than on the techniques of the communicator.³⁴ Or, rather, it is to say that technique cannot be divorced from assumption: As men assume, so will they communicate. Where men presume their knowledge to be complete or infallible, there is no communication or only a manipulative concern for others. Where men presume—as we know to be the case—that their knowledge is fragmentary and uncertain, genuine communication can occur. To recognize the limits of one's own facts and feelings is to become curious about the facts and feelings of others. At such moments men are likely to be open, honest, trusting, empathic, not because of some altruistic motive, but because it is the only way to correct and to extend their own perceptions of the world. Each stands to gain: The speaker because he can test what he believes and because it is rewarding to be understood; the listener because he can broaden his experience and because it is stimulating to understand.

Every significant human crisis begins or ends in a communicative encounter of one kind or another. It is here that differences are voiced. It is here that differences threaten. It is here that words may be heard. It is here that understanding may be reached, that men may cross the distance that divides them. "In my civilization," wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, "he who is different from me does not impoverish me—he enriches me."³⁵

Notes

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