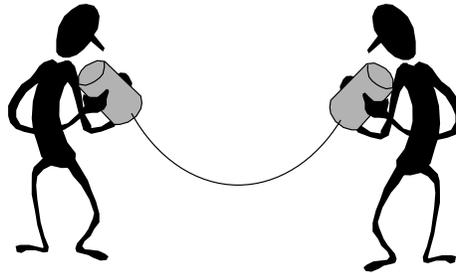


There's No Such Thing As Communications... ...only Mis-Communications

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Bill Deterline's speech at the 2000 ISPI Conference in Cincinnati reminded me of an old unpublished article of mine from the mid 90's. Here it is...

Communications. Is there such a thing? Do we ever really communicate? Or do we simply mis-communicate with greater or lesser amounts of error?



I know I'm playing with the semantics of it all, but as a colleague quotes a friend, "it's not just semantics, it's always semantics!" The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines communications as: "The exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signals, writing, or behavior."

Communication/communicating connotes that the message intended was the message received. But how often does that happen with zero defects?

If we started with the premise that there is really no such thing as communications, that we never can achieve zero defects in our communications, we will then be on the road to better communications. Nirvanic communications.

Just as zero defects for widgets are statistically impossible in a world full of variation, so too with communications. I know it's impossible, because no matter how hard I've really tried, I know I've not achieved perfect "nirvanic communications." I can almost always tell by what happened afterwards. And it's frustrating to be so incompetent at this, as I'm sure you well know.

We try, and sometimes we get darn close to really communicating. Sometimes the variance between what we said, and what was heard, doesn't hurt us...and since it doesn't really clobber us, we never even know that our communications didn't come across exactly as we had intended. Just as with product and process variation,

sometimes the product can withstand certain amounts of process variation with little or no negative consequences.

But that does not mean that we have achieved real communications. It simply means that the product (the interpretation of our intended message) was robust to that amount of process variation (the act of attempting to communicate). That time. But unfortunately, it does not happen so robustly each time. We aren't always so lucky. Which is the danger of believing in communications as a reality.

We are so often lulled into this misperception by the success of most of our recent attempts that we don't always act in accordance with the sad truth. We don't stick around long enough to measure our results and continuously improve the process to reduce the defect rate to a tolerable level—a level that meets the robustness requirements of the situation. And, as with many improvement possibilities, there is not always a sufficient return on our investment to do so. So we tend to walk on too soon.

Not that that's always inappropriate. Hopefully we know it is safe to walk on because we have done a little risk analysis. We know when and where it's just too risky to walk on prior to checking our own communications work. You know, making sure we did it right (enough) the first time! But too often we don't assess the risks and self-check our work. We all too often end up doing communications rework because the level of variation of our process exceeds the robustness limits and hurts our final product. And we almost never find out in a timely manner.

Now the reasons for all these mis-communications are quite complex. I won't pretend to understand nor attempt to convey all of the sources for these variations. We mis-communicate because we humans are not perfectly the same. We each have our own internal variation. We have different meanings for the same terms. We *connote* differently. It's because we have a diversity of experiences, values, beliefs, prejudices, visions, and goals. We have different feelings on different days. Some days we're sharp, other days somewhat duller. Some days we're hurried, some days more deliberate. And on and on. Each potential human variation is a potential cause for the variation in our attempts for perfect communications.



Some of these sources are rooted in the sender and some are rooted in the receiver. Most are rooted in both.

But it is the sender who deemed it worthy enough to attempt communications, so the burden for ensuring that the process variation did not exceed the tolerable limits or robustness, and did not negatively impact the product, should be the sender's.

But smart receivers know that they often get the blame for the miscue. It behooves both sender and receiver to collaborate to get this job done right.

How do we attempt to do this communications thing in a more quality-oriented manner? How can we get closer to doing it righter (within tolerances) the first time? Simply by self-checking our work each time we do it. A technique I learned a long time ago has had such an impact on my own mis-communication style and level of performance that I must share it with you, along with the source.

My friends at Huthwaite, Inc., in Virginia, have a communication model I first was exposed to in the early 1980's in both their sales training and negotiations training. I became enamored with it and began using it to self-check my own work almost immediately.

The Huthwaite communications model is a behavioral model for verbal communications. My simplified version of it includes four groupings of communication behaviors, theirs had between 10 and 13 depending on the application. (I know it should read mis-communication behaviors, but I'm betting that you've got the point by now and so the end product should be robust to my process variation, right?!)

These four behaviors are

- GI: Giving Information
- SI: Seeking Information
- S: Summarizing
- TU: Testing Understanding

Quite simply, **Giving Information** (GI) is telling somebody something. **Seeking Information** (SI) is asking a question. **Summarizing** (S) is restating the message (the given information) usually in an abbreviated manner. But it is the last behavior that is the powerful self-check technique.

Testing Understanding (TU) is repeating the message through paraphrasing or asking a clarifying question (a unique SI) with the deliberate intent to check out whether the error rate in the attempted communications that has occurred is within robustness toleration.

Usually the sender sends one GI after another GI. The receiver does some SI and GI (the give and take of communications). Somewhere along the dialogue somebody better do a little TU.

To Test Understanding (TU) you as a receiver ask a specific question to test/self-check your understanding of something specific that the sender sent (a GI); something along the lines of:

- Did you say the *contract is worth \$4 million*?
- So you think we can *land that account*?
- So you think *I don't listen and really hear you*?
- Are you beginning to *understand this technique yet*?

Either the sender or the receiver can and should do the TU. If it's critical from a risk standpoint, you should do a TU followed up by an S just to be darn sure that the mis-communication is minimal, within tolerances.

The Huthwaite model is simple, but powerful. And if it lessens mis-communications, it is most definitely an improvement tool/technique. And then there is the enhancement to this technique, which is to forecast your intent at the front of your message. An example:

- Let me test my understanding here; did you say *there is an enhancement to the technique*?

You bet! Announcing the receiver's intention allows the sender to mentally prepare for the incoming volley. It's not just more SI, it's a TU!

This technique and its enhancement will help you lower your mis-communications significantly.. First you must be aware that mis-communication is the rule, not the rarity. And second, you must self-check your own communications work products.

So now do you understand that communications is as impossible as zero defects and that you can practice certain techniques to reduce variation? Good. Just testing.