Strategic flexibility in interpersonal relationships.

REFLECTIVE PAPER

How many times have you heard someone say something like this: " he just doesn't understand me" or " there has been a breakdown in communications between us"? Lack of good communication between people is a constant problem. As the author, Richard, points out in the first chapter, " The Communication Process", communication skills are crucial to both getting the best out of people and extricating oneself from difficult situations. Nowhere is this more evident than in the personal relationships we form with family and friends.

The author introduces the idea of " Strategic Flexibility" (SF), which means that a person uses every communication tool he has in order to effectively get his point across in a given situation. SF is not limited to words but expands into a whole " communication repertoire" that can include gestures, expressions, body language and tone of voice. SF is characteristic of people who are successful not only in their professions but in their personal relationships as well. The author's description of SF has six steps: anticipate circumstances; assess the factors and conditions you find yourself in; evaluate the current situation in relation to your own abilities; select the most relevant communication skills you possess; apply the first 4 steps carefully; and reassess your communication after receiving feedback. Finally, creativity is also key to communicating effectively as it allows the speaker flexibility and adaptability.

In applying this model to my own life, I began to consider some of my friendships and how they have either been strengthened or weakened because of a certain style of communication between us. Some years ago I

had a friend I became quite close with very quickly called Julia. She was exuberant, funny and full of drama. We not only worked together but also went to bars together, out dancing, to comedy clubs and generally palled around. Hanging out with her was full of extreme ups and downs.

At one point, Julia was having a great deal of trouble getting what she needed from her immediate supervisor, Rob. Rob and I were also friends. Julia's frustration with Rob and Rob's frustration with Julia was beginning to affect everyone else who worked with them. I offered to speak to Rob alone on Julia's behalf, thinking that hearing some of her complaints and concerns from a third party might make Rob more receptive – after all, he and I got along smoothly. I took Rob out for a drink and noticed immediately how uncomfortable he was. His body language said it all – he found it hard to make eye contact, was hunched over in a corner of the table and smiled nervously from time to time. He really did not want to hear any of what I had to say.

I had an idea in my head of the role I wanted to play with Rob. I planned to be firm and reasonable and to avoid raising my voice or showing anything but understanding that the dynamic between him and Julia was problematic. But I thought that I could help fix it if only I could get Rob to agree to have more regular and business-like meeting with Julia where they could discuss their issues and, with luck, sort them out effectively. But what wound up happening is that although I kept my voice even, all I did was put Rob on the defensive. I never really asked him for his side of the story and just assumed that everything Julia told me was the way things really were. I had arrived with this assumption because I knew others had occasionally found Rob

difficult to communicate with. He could be a bit dry and sarcastic. But he was also very driven and good at his job, which was quite demanding in a number of ways. It did not occur to me to ask him how the pressures of his job and his frustrations with Julia's work style might be affecting the outcome of the department he headed.

Needless to say, nothing came out of this meeting with Rob. As I spent more time around Julia, it became obvious to me that her way of dealing with problems was to give way to emotional outbursts rather than find a clam and thought-out way of telling people – including Rob and, by then me – what was troubling her. I myself made the mistake of confiding in Julia at a time when I was feeling very vulnerable and she wound up throwing back what I had told her in my face. I started to learn at that moment that being more careful about how and with whom I communicated with would have a direct effect on my happiness in both my work and personal life. The way to communicate with someone who tends towards being emotional is not to meet it with the same level of emotion but rather to step back and try to diffuse the situation by giving the person a chance to vent and then thinking before responding. This way, there is a better chance that ideas can flow peacefully between the parties.

I am also much more receptive to body language now. If I was trying to speak to someone who was hunched over and not meeting my eyes, I would know immediately that the style of communication I was using was making the other person uncomfortable. Using the SF tools, I would try to be more mindful of the sender-receiver mode the author writes about. I did not receive messages properly or chose to ignore them, acting only as a sender.

This one-sided communication style was probably the reason my attempt at peacemaker failed. My nonverbal communication was equally lacking. I could have made Rob more at ease by leaning back in my seat instead of leaning forward as if ready to attack. I could also have given him a reassuring tap on the arm or shoulder to indicate friendship and empathy. I did not listen to the indirect feedback Rob was giving me. I did not respond to his obvious discomfort nor did I really give him a fair hearing. I think choosing a bar was not a bad idea as it was a neutral zone for both of us, but selecting a quieter bar than the one we went to also would have been a better choice, as it is hard to stay focused when people are playing pinball next to you!

By ignoring Rob's side of the situation and not doing much to make him feel he was not under attack, I also did not apply the ethical standards the author outlines, such as treating opposing views with respect. I do make a concerted effort to apply many of the standards of ethical communication in my relationships now.

2. Perception

Self-perception, as well as perceiving the needs of others, plays a vital role in effective communication, an idea that is discussed at length in the second chapter, " Self, Perception and Communication." The relationship between self-image and perception of both self and of others is immensely complicated. Low self-esteem can feed into other people's perceptions of a person through signals in their body language, tone of voice and facial expressions. These in turn, can reinforce negative self-image when other people respond to the negative signals they are receiving and send them back again to the initial communicant.

Stepping outside one's comfort zone by engaging in " risk-taking" can create a fundamental threat to self-identity. As the author points out, " to take that action, or have that experience, would so violate who you are that, should you do it, you would no longer be the same person. You would be forced to see yourself as someone different." Yet this very act of questioning identity can be enormously empowering.

I grew up a fairly withdrawn child. I did not relate well to my peer group and was always more comfortable around adults or animals. I was afraid of judgment, or being teased. My grandmother had me outfitted at an expensive department store twice a year, which just created a further separation between my peers, whose parents tended to shop at Sears and local shops on an as-needed basis and me. My clothing communicated that I thought I was better than everyone else – even though that image could not have been further from the truth.

The author points out that " Social comparisons are pivotal to self-evaluations. They depend less on objective circumstances than on how you judge yourself in relation to others on particular attributes." This was certainly true of my school days. Because of my distance from and fear of my classmates, I retreated into the library during most recess periods. My bookish behavior again reinforced that I was different. The fact that I did not voluntarily engage with my classmates on the playground – even though a big part of me wanted to – made me even more of a target for teasing. In short, every method of communication I was using, from my clothing, haircut, behavior and choice of pastimes – communicated that I was a snob, even though my self-esteem was shaky and all I really wanted was to fit in.

As I grew up and realized the value of a certain level of conformity, my fortunes shifted. I started to dress in the same brand jeans as the cool girls, wore the same style of shoes and makeup and made sure my hair was cut in one of the latest fashion trends. These changes told my peers that I was becoming like them. They started to treat me as a friend. Even so, I always felt a need to stand apart from the pack, to be noticed. The solution turned out to be through acting. I took up theater classes, dance and singing and performed in school plays. By pretending to be someone else on stage, I could feed that need for to be someone different while still being one of the gang. I could take risks as another persona that I could not take in my real life.

After many years, I am still learning how to read people better instead of assuming they think the worst of me automatically. I have found that it is important to try to read people, to try to understand their own self-perceptions and the way they view their environment. These observations act as the feedback mentioned in the SF description. In this way, I can better react to what people are actually saying to me (rather than acting out of irrational fears) and adjust my own body language, word choice, even my dress in order to establish a rapport. This becomes very important in interviews and work situations.

I have had jobs where my employer was excellent at communication and somewhere the communication was lacking. In the case of the former, I once worked for a professor who was very good at giving me work that matched my level of competence but that also helped stretch my skills set. When he gave criticism, it was also in a gentle tone of voice. He used words that were

not judgmental but instead focused on showing me how I could improve my work with a few adjustments or a change of direction. An important quality Jeff had was that he was also always willing to listen to my ideas, help me develop them and would give me credit for work that was uniquely mine. Jeff was a great example of someone who had the SF concepts down pat and used them every day in his dealings with staff.

Jeff's method of communication was a pivotal experience in my work life. It helped build my sense of ability and encouraged me to think for myself. Because Jeff was such a supportive boss, I also worked harder to please him and took greater pride in producing quality work. I began to learn how to argue a point effectively, and without becoming emotional. I did this by consciously separating my ideas for the project at hand from things I had been told as a child. I forced myself to listen to criticism because it was given in a gentle and well-intentioned way. Jeff's style was one of the stepping-stones in transforming not only my perceptions about my own abilities but my ability to learn and grow in a job.

3. Listening

Listening is also a skill upon which I have improved, even though this has required a good deal of effort. True listening means often having to force yourself not to react, at least not immediately. Listening requires more than simply hearing what another person is saying. It involves paying attention to the use of words, body language and expressions, and also trying to put yourself in the shoes of the person speaking. The more you make an effort to understand the perspective from which they are communicating, the more I feel you are truly listening.

I have found this to be especially true with family. Often, there is a lot of emotional baggage we carry around from the things our parents and siblings said to us when we were very young, a point the author makes repeatedly. The author likens our self-perception to a map: " What this means for you is simply that your perception of reality is not reality itself, but it is your own version of it—your " maps." But these maps are not necessarily complete pictures of who we are, or of who we are capable of becoming, just like a road map does not necessarily show every tree, brook and signpost on a route. You can always use a different map or a different route to get to the same, or even a different, place. Again, the idea of flexibility in the SF concepts applies, since taking a different road can make for a pleasanter journey.

This also means, however, that no two people are working from exactly the same map. Listening is therefore crucial to being able to find your way along another person's route. Keeping in mind that the way one sees the world or a particular problem may not be the same as the person you are conversing with. Preconceived notions – or " perceptual filters", as the author refers to them, can keep people from actually listening to each other. It is therefore important to try to keep both the mind as well as the ears open in order to foster communication. Conversely, shared experiences, where they arise, can also cement relationships. My siblings and I share many of the same experiences but have very different perspectives about them. I have learned a good deal about who they are as people by listening to them expand their views, and it has also influenced how I now see myself in relationship to them and our parents. Only by taking the time to listen can you find those

synergies with other people and develop healthy and productive

communication.