

Consciousness, Courage and Communications (Part I)

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“The shortest distance between two people is a straight truth.”



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Communications Problems

About once a week a brochure proclaiming the advantages of one or another communications workshop comes across my desk. Bookstores are full of self-help books on improving communications between co-workers, couples, and parents and their children. Communications problems result in misunderstanding, missed opportunities and often conflict. One study showed that people spend as much as “...25 to 65 percent of their day embroiled in conflict with others,” costing businesses millions of dollars in lost productivity.¹ Organizational consultants will tell you that roughly 100 percent of work groups want to improve their communications. Interpersonal communication seems to be the bane of human existence.

But imagine where we would be without it. Human evolution took a giant step forward with the advent of language. When early bands of hunter-gathers first began to agree on the meaning of certain sounds such as “good” and “bad,” or “eat” and “no-eat” it must have saved countless nights of churning stomachs from eating deadly nightshade instead of wild asparagus. Communicating is so essential to the human experience that we continue to evolve and elevate the use of language into an art form. There is nothing so fundamental to human interactions as interpersonal communications. There are specific communication patterns to inform, inquire, convince, debate, and inspire. We recognize differences in communication styles between cultures, races, sexes, age groups, and even different regions within the same country. Differences in tone and inflection can completely change the meaning of words and phrases (try putting a different emphasis on each word of this sentence: “I didn’t say I didn’t like her.”). We speak of “body language,” including posture, facial expression, and eye contact that often communicates more accurately than our verbal language. In *Blink* Malcolm Gladwell maintains our unconscious mind registers all this in fractions of seconds.² It appears we cannot not communicate.

It turns out this seemingly simple interaction between a “sender” and a “receiver” of information is a complex and multifaceted event, and if it is to be accomplished with accuracy, sensitivity and effectiveness, it requires more than a mere understanding of language. This is especially true when confronting difficult issues with co-workers, spouses or friends. When it matters most, communications requires a high degree of consciousness and courage.



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Sending Messages

When “sending” messages, experts tell us to be clear, concise and direct, and describe behaviors or events objectively rather than attribute motives to the actions of others or make judgments about their character. “You do not keep us informed” generally works better than “You do not care about us;” or “You are secretive.”

The problem is those pesky human emotions that creep in and affect our behavior. Whether we are aware of it or not the messages we send are made up of both content (our words) and feelings (metaphorically referred to as the “music” – our tone, volume and inflection). Feelings are also communicated by our body language. If I say “I am really happy to have you in my department,” but my arms are folded tightly across my chest and I have a scowl on my face, you may not believe me, because my body language is incongruent with my message.

Invariably those on the receiving end, the listeners, will have feelings as well in response to our message. When we anticipate that their reaction will be negative, e.g., have emotions we do not want to deal with (anger, disappointment, rejection), we may try to control their reaction under the guise of tact, diplomacy, or “political correctness.” Have you ever watched someone cautiously trying to give the boss bad news about his or her pet project, or try to get them to reverse a really dumb decision? One office I know of regularly returns correspondence containing bad (unwanted) news to be “sanitized” before sending it higher up the chain of command to decision makers.

The strategy is understandable—some people, and organizations, still “shoot the messenger.” But you can see the problem. Tact and diplomacy are fine, but unfortunately our attempts to be tactful often end in a garbled message. This is particularly true when you want to influence some aspect of someone’s behavior and you think they may not take it well. I agonized for weeks over performance reviews wondering how to give co-workers constructive criticism without hurting their feelings or decreasing their motivation. The result was a rambling confusing process that left people uncertain at best, and at worst, mistaking my criticism as an endorsement. Psychologist and organizational consultant Will Schutz estimated that 80 percent of all problems in organizations resulted from people not being open and telling each other the truth directly.³ What we need is a way to say what we want to say accurately and effectively and without getting “shot” in the process. Schutz developed a model for working through such difficult conversations called the Levels of Openness,⁴ but it requires an awareness of our feelings about what is going on (consciousness) and a willingness to express those feelings directly (courage).

Levels of Openness

Level -1: Self-Deception: A former head of my office often referred to his “participative” management style, yet he was prone to making snap decisions without checking with anyone. He was not intentionally misleading us, he was simply not conscious of his pattern of behavior. As in the example of incongruent body language, it was like watching a movie where the audio and video are out of sync.



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This level is an **unaware** state, as in I want so badly to be participative I am blind to the fact that I am really an autocrat, but I can also be unaware of my feelings about other people and events. Sometimes it takes a while to become aware of how you feel about what happened at a meeting, or what was said in the hallway afterwards. Later on you may become frustrated or angry, but until you become aware of how you feel, obviously you cannot tell others. If it involves a potentially painful matter, you may unconsciously prolong this stage by not allowing yourself to think about it, by blocking your feelings, or by trying to convince yourself you are not really upset.

Levels of Openness⁴

Level	Looks Like	Example
-1	Self-Deception	Unaware
0	Withholding	Won't say
1	"You are..."	"a jerk"
2	"Toward you I feel..."	"angry"
3	"Because you..."	"are frequently late"
4	"I think you feel I am..."	"insignificant"
5	"I fear I am..."	"insignificant"

Level 0: Withholding: Withholding is the level where you become aware of how you feel but you are unwilling to express it, at least directly to the person involved. You may tell everyone in your department how upset you are with Ron, yet withhold your feelings from him. You may also rationalize perfectly logical reasons why it is really best to withhold: "He would not change anyway..." "It would only make things worse..." "Perhaps I am being too sensitive..." "We would get into an angry argument..." "After all it is a small matter." While you would never be found guilty of lying in a court of law, from the point of view of effective communication, withholding can be extremely damaging. Unexpressed feelings do not go away, they merely go underground where they fester and can result in sulking or resentment. Eventually they resurface in the form of maliciousness or unconscious sabotage. Even when you withhold the content of your message the feelings often come through in your tone and body language. "You cannot not communicate."

Level 1: "You are...": Level 1 openness is the realm of judgments, accusations, and name calling, and can be recognized in statements beginning with "You are...," as in "You are insensitive, unfair, stubborn, or selfish." Although this is more openness than withholding, the accuracy of such statements is highly debatable, and probably better



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described as indiscriminate opinion giving. You could make the argument that in one way it is preferable to withholding, because at least at Level 1 people become aware that a problem exists. Still, I do not recommend this as a starting point for conversations, especially if you are trying to actually resolve conflicts.

Another form of Level 1 openness is seen on television in nightly political segments, where pundits begin their rebuttal statements with *"The truth of the matter is..."* It is just a different way of disguising opinion as truth.

Level 2: "Toward you I feel...": Here is a significantly deeper level of openness. A person who makes this statement is revealing something about themselves rather than making judgments about the character of another. *"I feel angry, embarrassed, disappointed, unwanted, insignificant, rejected..."* When you describe your feelings, the listener is less apt to be defensive and more likely to hear you out. It invites dialogue and increases understanding.

Unfortunately many of us, especially us men, have difficulty discussing our feelings. It is contrary to the macho male role models we grew up with (in Texas, John Wayne was the archetype). An old cowboy once suggested to me that the reason country music is so full of pain and heartache is because that is the only acceptable forum in which men can express those feelings. I have come to believe it actually requires greater courage to expose our feelings and become vulnerable than to remain stoic pretending to be unaffected. Hanging on to outdated role models limits our effectiveness on the job, creates barriers in our relationships, and increases stress, isolation and loneliness.

Level 3: "Because you...": At Level 3 you describe the circumstances, events or behaviors that give rise to the feelings revealed at Level 2. Being specific about observable behavior is more effective than vague generalities. *"I felt insignificant when you did not check with me before making that decision"* seems to work better than *"I am angry with you because you acted like an inconsiderate jerk."*

Level 4: "I think you feel...": Level 4 is one of the most effective ways of communicating through conflicted situations, and one that is not widely recognized or used. It identifies the *meaning* we attribute to the words and actions of others in a very personal way. Everything that happens in our lives has meaning for us. Deepak Chopra has said that humans are "meaning seeking beings." It is part of the human condition that for every statement, action, raised eyebrow, sigh or smile, we assign some meaning to it. That meaning is whatever we choose it to be, and is therefore different for every person and situation. If a co-worker walks through the office without smiling or speaking you can choose to believe she is unfriendly or angry, having trouble at home, or simply busy and preoccupied. The point is not so much which meaning is accurate, but that our feelings and actions toward others are quite different depending on the story we make up about them. We almost never discuss these stories or assumptions directly with each other for fear of looking foolish or feeling vulnerable. Yet it is a powerful way to increase understanding and resolve conflict. *"When you did not check with me before making that decision I assumed it meant you do not believe I am very important in the office and you need not consider how I am impacted by it."* This level of openness allows true dialogue to occur and creates an opportunity to not only clear up the current misunderstanding, but build a stronger relationship for the future.



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Level 5: “I fear I am...”: This is the deepest level of openness and requires a great deal of self-awareness to achieve. It is about our own self-doubts that we generally try to hide from others, sometimes with such efficiency we wind up hiding them from ourselves as well. Then it becomes a part of our unconscious, continuing to affect our reactions and behavior, even though we may no longer understand why we react or behave as we do. If you are concerned that you are not very important, for example, you may become overly sensitive about being ignored, even over matters that do not affect you directly. In that way, it is often the case that the fear I have about myself is related, if not identical to, the story I make up about how you feel about me.

Revealing your fears about yourself exposes the most vulnerable areas of your self-esteem, and requires great courage indeed. Admittedly few people reach this level of openness in conversations, but when they do, the results are often astonishing. Though we may think disclosing our fears makes us an easy target to be taken advantage of, experience shows that it is more often met with understanding and support. *“My fear about myself is that I am really **not** very important in the office. Sometimes I feel like you would not notice whether I even came to work or not. I want to be more involved but I am not sure if my involvement matters to you.”*

As in Level 4, communicating at this level creates a real opportunity for understanding, but at an even deeper level—the level of the self-esteem. It turns out revealing our fears does not make it easy for others to take advantage of us; people can play on our fears only when we are unconscious of them or try to keep them hidden.

As you begin to communicate at deeper levels of openness, more useful information becomes available, and in ways that makes it easier for the listener to both hear your meaning and understand your feelings. Deep open communication allows our work and personal relationships to become richer and more rewarding.

1. Resolving Workplace Conflicts Saves Both Time and Money. *The Business Journal*. Phoenix, AZ: December 31, 1990.
2. Gladwell, M. *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2005.
3. Schutz, W. *The Truth Option: A Practical Technology for Human Affairs*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1984.
4. Schutz, W. *The Human Element: Productivity, Self-Esteem and the Bottom Line*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

