Communication: Why Conversations Go Sideways and What We Can Do About It

Undergraduate Education Workshop
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UCD Conference Center Room A
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Guiding Questions

• What is communication?

• Why does human communication go sideways?

• What can we do to improve communication?

• Where can I go for more information?
Group Expectations

Goal: Atmosphere for learning
• Treat each other with respect
• Use first names
• Cell phones turned off or to vibrate
• Take care of yourself
• Participate fully
• Have fun
• Personal experiences shared in here stay in here
Agenda

• Introductions and Agenda Review
• Communication Process
• Why Communication Goes Sideways
• Break
• What We Can Do to Help Communication
• Deep Listening Exercise
• Resources and Questions
• Closure
The Communication Process
How Can The Communication Process Go Wrong?

Noise = Interruptions in the flow of information

Examples
- Environmental – construction next door
- Semantic – meanings of a word such as “weed”
- Cultural – “correct” pauses between words
How Can The Communication Process Go Wrong?

Culture
Experiences
Style
Lack of Cues
Environment
Relationship
What Else?

Culture
Experiences
Style
Lack of Cues
Environment
Relationship
What Else?
Why Communication Goes Sideways
Answer 1
Our brains attend to limited information

Awareness Test

http://www.awarenesstest.co.uk/video/basketball-awareness-test/
Why Communication Goes Sideways
Answer 2
Our brains fill in information gaps

Kanizsa Triangle
Why Communication Goes Sideways
Answer 3
Malleable Memory

“The biggest lie of human memory is that it feels true. Although our recollections seem like literal snapshots of the past, they’re actually deeply flawed reconstructions, a set of stories constantly undergoing rewrites.”

Where were you on 9/11/2001? What airlines were involved?*  How did you feel?

- Survey A: Details within 1 week

- Survey B: Details 1 year later – 37% of the details changed

- Survey C: Details 35 months later – little change from Survey B (5-10%) except for how the person felt at the time (significant additional unreliability)

- In each survey, participant confidence in answers was high

*American and United

Why Communication Goes Sideways
Answer 4
Emotion and The Wiring of Our Brains
Emotion is Much More Powerful Than Reason
Emotion Trumps Reason
When you want to take yourselves out of a limbic reaction,

Ask A Question
We assume incorrectly that we know the intentions of others – and the impact of our actions on others.
## Intention, Event, Impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intent</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Person B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intent and Impact

Each individual has experience with only $\frac{1}{2}$ of this circle, but we act as if we know the entire circle.
Remember, we cannot assume we know the intentions of another – or the impact of our actions on another.
Communication is primed to be difficult when one or more people have identity at stake.

- Status
- Competence
- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Fairness
Ed Muzio discusses Chris Argyris’ Ladder of Inference and the way it leads to and reinforces mistaken assumptions and beliefs. [Link to video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9nFhs5W8o8)

BREAK
What Can We Do To Improve Communication?

The Good News! These tools are generally applicable to all communication snafus.
Enhancing Communication Success

• Look in the mirror or, reflect, reflect, reflect.

• My narrative
• My contributions
• My incomplete understanding
• What I want to accomplish
• My emotions and identity
• My biases*

*https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html
Deep Listening
How To . . .

• Stop talking.
• Attend to what the person is saying and trying to say.
• Notice body language, volume, tone.
• Put the speaker at ease (use eye contact but don’t stare).
• Be patient.
• Clarify and summarize.
• Empathize and validate (you don’t need to agree.)
• Suspend judgment.
Deep Listening: Verbal

• **Question** - ask open ended or clarifying questions.

• **Respond** - affirm verbally (“tell me more”) or non-verbally (eye contact)

• **Reflect** - Verbally reflect back any emotion the speaker mentions, or ask about feelings.

• **Summarize** what the person has just told you. Check in to see if you have heard it correctly.

• **Thanks!** (“I’m glad you told me this.”)

(Copyright 2005, Interfaith Center for Peace)
Deep Listening: Non-Verbal

- **S**quare
- **O**pen
- **L**eaning Forward
- **E**ye Contact*
- **R**elaxed

(“SOLER” Copyright 1995, The Winning Against Violent Environments Conflict Resolution Program, Cleveland Public Schools, OH, All Rights Reserved)
Why Does Deep Listening Work?

- Slows down the communication process
- Checks for meaning
- Quiets the limbic system of the brain
Practicing Deep Listening: Hot Buttons

• Get a partner
• Think of a “hot button” issue on which you take a clear side. This issue should have something to do with social identity
  • E.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. rather than people driving slowly in the fast lane.
• Briefly share your issue with your partner
• Actively listen while your partner argues against your side for 2 minutes.
• Switch.

Source: Sustained Dialogue Institute Moderator Training
So when you are listening to somebody completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it.

- Jiddu Krishnamurti, philosopher
Inquiring and Sharing
How To . . .

• Inquire from a place of curiosity, not judgment.
• Ask for and share about context and life experiences that have shaped hopes, concerns, values, and views.
• Note uncertainties, gray areas, and complexities for self and others.
• Ask and explain about meanings of words, especially if they are charged.
3 Inquiries to Open a Conversation

• How has this situation had an impact on you and your life?
• What is at the heart of the matter for you?
• Within your thinking about the issue, do you have some gray areas or uncertainties? Are there times when some of your values related to this issue bump up against other values you hold?

Blog “3 Questions to Open a Constructive Conversation,” Maggie Herzig, January 20, 2015; Public Conversations Project
So, what else can we do to enhance the success of a crucial conversation?
Enhancing Conversation Success

• Seek to understand, then to be understood. Approach with curiosity.
• Establish mutual purpose and mutual respect explicitly at start and as needed throughout.
• Share your observations and conclusions tentatively. Allow for face-saving.
• Confirm agreements (who does what by when). If the agreement covers a period of time, include an opportunity to check in about any changes.
• Take a break.
• Slow down.
Resources

• Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking; Malcolm Gladwell; Little, Brown and Company, 2005

• Crucial Conversations: Tools For Talking When the Stakes Are High; Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler; McGraw-Hill, 2012

• Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together; William Isaacs; Doubleday, 1999

• Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most; Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen; Penguin Books, 1999

• Predictably Irrational; Dan Ariely; Harper-Collins, 2009

• “Tell Me More: On the Fine Art of Listening” from Strength to Your Sword Arm: Selected Writings; Brenda Ueland; Holy Cow! Press, 1996.

• Thinking, Fast and Slow; Daniel Kahneman; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011
Thank you!

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We look forward to dialogue with you in the future!