

Indirect and Direct Communication

Many people fear taking risks in interpersonal relationships, yet since they need to feel that they are articulate and adept at "communication," they often engage in what we can call "pseudo communication." In reality, they try to direct the risk of interpersonal communication away from themselves. They are afraid to present their own opinions, ideas, feelings, desires.

Individuals who fear taking risks may want to manipulate others into fulfilling their own desires or expectations. Thus they would be saved from being rejected or from exposing their vulnerability to others. Their motive may also be to control others without apparently assuming authority. Several common varieties of indirect, pseudo communication, with some alternatives to these misdirected patterns of communication, are discussed below.

Nonpersonal Communication

One way that people engage in non-revealing, indirect discourse is by speaking as if they represented other people, in an attempt to get illegitimate support for their points of view. For example, when Perry Paraphraser prefaces his remarks by saying, "I agree with Fred when he says..," or "I think I speak for the group when I say..." he is not communicating openly or directly. He is simply attempting to borrow legitimacy.

Pseudo Questions

Perhaps the most frequently misused communication pattern is the question. In fact, most questions are pseudo questions. People who ask questions are generally not seeking information or an answer to a "question." Rather, they are offering an opinion - a statement. But because they do not want to risk having their idea rejected, they frame it as a question, hoping to force the other person to agree with them.

With few exceptions, we could eliminate all questions from our communications with others. Since most questions are indirect forms of communication, they could be recast as statements, or direct communications. By replacing pseudo questions with genuine statements, we would come much closer to actual communication with each other. Before we can achieve the aim of direct communication, however, we must be able to identify the varieties of pseudo questions that people tend to use. There are eight basic types of pseudo questions.

Co-Optive Question

This pseudo question attempts to narrow or limit the possible responses of the other person. "Don't you think that... is a classic example of this type. Or, "Isn't it true that...? "Wouldn't you rather...; "Don't you want to...? "You wouldn't want that, would you?" The questioner is attempting to elicit the response she wants by building certain restrictions into her question.

Punitive Question

When Stan Slapya uses a punitive question, he really wants to expose the other individual without appearing to do so directly. For example, Betty Brainy may be proposing a new theoretical model in training and Stan, knowing that the theory has not been properly researched, may ask her what the experimental evidence indicates. Stan's purpose is not to obtain information but to embarrass Betty by putting her on the spot.

Hypothetical Question

In asking a hypothetical question, Terry Timid resorts to a pseudo question. "If you were in charge of the meeting, wouldn't you handle it differently?" She does not actually want to know how the individual would handle it. She may wish to criticize the meeting, or she may be indirectly probing for an answer to a question she is afraid or reluctant to ask. Hypothetical questions typically begin with "If," "What if," or "How about."

Imperative Question

Another type of pseudo question is the one that actually makes a demand. A question such as "Have you done anything about...?" or "When are you going to...?" is not asking for information. Rather it implies a command: "Do what you said you were going to do and do it soon." The questioner wants to impress the other person with the urgency or importance of the request (command).

Screened Question

The screened question is a very common variety of pseudo question. Vanessa Vague, afraid of simply stating her own choice or preference, asks Perry Pleaser what he likes or what he wants to do, hoping the

choice will be what the questioner herself secretly wants.

For example, Vanessa and Perry decide to go out to dinner together. Vanessa, afraid to take the risk of making a suggestion that she is not sure will be accepted, resorts to a screened question: "What kind of food do you prefer?" Secretly she hopes Perry will name his own favorite food, say Chinese. Or she frames her question another way: "Would you like to have Chinese food?" Both questions screen an actual statement or choice, which Vanessa fears to make: "I would like to have Chinese food."

One result of the screened question is that Vanessa may get information she is not seeking. If Perry misinterprets the question about what kind of food he prefers, for example, he may tell Vanessa about exotic varieties of food he has experienced in his travels-not what Vanessa wanted to know at all.

On the other hand, the screened question may sorely frustrate Perry. He is not sure how he should answer in order to give the "correct" response, and he feels under pressure to "guess" what Vanessa really wants him to say.

Vanessa also may find the results of a screened question frustrating. If Perry takes her at her word, she may find herself trapped into a choice (Italian food, for example) that she does not like but cannot escape because she did not have the courage to state her own desires clearly from the beginning. Worse, both individuals may be unable to "risk" a suggestion and end up eating Greek food, which neither likes.

In marriage, the screened question may be used by one partner to punish or control the other. One individual may seem generously to offer the other "first choice" while he/she actually poses the question in such a way that he/she can reject the partner's suggestions and then offer, as a compromise, his/her own choice, which he/she wanted all along. Thus he/she gets what he/she wants by manipulating the partner into the position of offering all the "wrong" choices.

Set-Up Question

This pseudo question maneuvers the other person into a vulnerable position, ready for the ax to fall. One example of the set-up question is "Is it fair to say that you..." If the person being questioned agrees that it

is fair, the questioner has her "set-up" for the kill. Another way set-up questions are introduced is by the phrase "Would you agree that..." The questioner is "leading the witness" in much the same way a skillful lawyer sets up a line of response in court.

Rhetorical Question

One of the simplest types of the pseudo question is the rhetorical question, which comes in many forms. The speaker may make a statement and immediately follow it with a positive phrase that assumes approval in advance: "Right?" or "O.K.?" or "You see?" or "You know." He is not asking the other person to respond; indeed he wishes to forestall a response because he fears it may not be favorable. Often, an insecure person may acquire the habit of ending almost all his statements with "Right?" as an attempted guarantee of agreement.

Or the questioner may precede her statements or requests with such negative phrases as "Don't you think..."; "Isn't it true that...?"; "Wouldn't you like..." In either case, the individual who fears risking her own opinion is trying to eliminate all alternatives by framing her "question" so that it elicits the response she wants.

A supervisor may say to a staff member, "Don't you think it would be a good idea to finish the report tonight and have it out of the way?" She phrases his question so as to make it appear that the decision to work late was a joint one. The staff member may not approve of the suggestion, but he has little or no alternative but to agree.

"Got'cha" Question

Related to the set-up question, a "got'cha" question might run something like this: "Weren't you the one who...?" "Didn't you say that..." "Didn't I see you..." The questioner's joy in trapping the other person is fairly palpable. He does not want an "answer" to his "question" he wants to dig a pit for the respondent to fall into.

Clichés

When people use clichés they really don't want to communicate with another person - or they want to feel they are "communicating" without sharing anything of significance. Thus they resort to routinized, pat, standardized, stylized ways of

responding to each other.

Examples of clichés abound. "You could hear a pin drop." "If you've seen one, you've seen them all." "He hit the nail on the head." "He took the bull by the horns." "He has us over a barrel." "We got our bid in just under the wire." "It's an open-and-shut case." "He left no stone unturned in his search." "Better late than never." "The early bird gets the worm." "He can't see the forest for the trees." "I've been racking my brains over the problem." "His kind of person is few and far between." "He is always up at the crack of dawn." "Let's get it over and done with." "His mind is as sharp as a tack." "Better safe than sorry." "She's as cute as a button."

No one can avoid using clichés occasionally. But the frequent use of tired, worn-out phrases diminishes the effectiveness of communication.

Effects of Indirect Communication

If clichés and pseudo questions are forms of indirect (and, therefore, ineffective) communication, it is important to know some of the effects that such indirect communication has on dealings between people. We can note five major effects generated by indirect communication.

Guesswork

Indirect communication encourages each individual to make guesses about the other. Without direct, open patterns of communication, people cannot get to know each other successfully; what they do not know, they will make guesses about. Such "guessing games" further inhibit or obstruct true communication.

Inaccuracy

If one person is forced to guess about another, she may often be wrong. Yet she communicates with that person on the basis of her assumptions, the accuracy of which she is unable to check. Obviously, communication based on inaccurate assumptions is not clear or direct.

Inference of Motives

Indirect communication also increases the probability that people will be forced to infer the motives of each other. They will try to "psych" each other: Why is he doing that? What is her intention behind that? By communicating through Clichés and pseudo questions, we hide our

true motivations.

Game-Playing Behavior

Further, indirect communication encourages people to "play games" with each other: to deceive, to be dishonest, not to be open or straightforward. Clearly, such behavior is contrary to the goals of good interpersonal relations. When the questioner is playing a "got'cha" game, for example, his behavior may be contagious.

Defensiveness

One of the surest effects of indirect communication is defensiveness. Since there is an implied threat behind a great deal of indirect communication, individuals tend to become wary when faced with it. Their need to defend themselves only widens the gap of effective communication even further.

Direct (Effective) Communication

In contrast to indirect (ineffective) communication, direct (effective) communication is marked by the capacity for taking certain risks in order to understand and be understood. It is two-way communication, with ideas, opinions, values, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings flowing freely from one individual to another.

It is marked by active listening, by people taking responsibility for what they hear-accepting, clarifying, and checking the meaning, content, and intent of what the other person says.

It utilizes effective feedback. Not only does each person listen actively, she also responds to the other individual by telling that person what she thinks she is hearing. The process of feedback tests whether what was heard is what was intended.

It is not stressful. Communication is not effective if people are concerned that they are not communicating; when this happens, it is a key that the communication is not functioning properly.

It is clear and unencumbered by mixed or contradictory messages (verbal, nonverbal, or symbolic) that serve to confuse the content of the communication. In other words, it is direct. Any communication always carries two kinds of meanings: the content message and the relationship message. We not only hear what other people say to us, we also hear implications about our mutual relationship. If we are

so preoccupied with detecting cues about the latter, we may distort the content message severely or lose it altogether. When communication is effective, both messages are clearly discernible; one does not confuse or distract the other.

Approaches

Confrontation is one of five major approaches that can foster direct communication. Each person can learn to confront the other in a declarative rather than an interrogative manner. We can attempt to eliminate almost all our pseudo questions by formulating them into direct statements.

Active listening can be encouraged. This is a powerful antidote to indirect communication. We can learn to paraphrase, empathize, reflect feelings, test the accuracy of our inferences, and check our assumptions in order to produce clearer, more straightforward communication with others.

Owning is a third means of fostering direct communication. If individuals can learn to accept their legitimate feelings, data, attitudes, behavior, responsibility, etc., then they can learn to reveal themselves more directly to other people. Owning what we are, what we are feeling, and what belongs to us is a first step toward communicating more effectively.

Locating a fourth approach toward direct communication, is a way of finding the context of a question. Some questions we cannot answer because we do not know their "environment," so to speak. We need to learn to locate these questions before we can respond to them. Questions are usually more effective if they are preceded by an explanation of where they are "coming from."

Sharing is the final, and perhaps most important, point directing us toward effective communication. All communication is a sharing process; in attempting to communicate with others, we are sharing our views, beliefs, thoughts, values, observations, intentions, doubts, wants, interests, assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses.

For any of these approaches to be useful, we must, as we indicated earlier, be ready to take risks and to work toward a genuine sharing of a common meaning with the other person. If we are not prepared to risk, we will not attain successful, effective, direct communication.