Does Communication too Require Recycling?

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Abstract : *It is the unending process of communication that keeps the world alive and going. Disruption, rupture or disturbance in this process has far reaching results that adversely affect our routine and work life. This paper adopts a pragmatic approach to study (mis)communication, the factors contributing to it and ways to repair it. The cycle of communication has to run smoothly to enable us to overcome errors and keep the machinery of personal and professional relationships oiled. And the cycle should be recycled to rectify the errors and resume harmony.*

Keywords : *Communication cycle, feedback, miscommunication, misunderstanding, Non-understanding, Recycling, Repair*

Launching

Communication is something that we do day in and day out. It is synonymous with our existence. The chain of communication is what connects us to our inner and outer world. Hence, it is extremely important that we take care of what and how we communicate. But somehow, due to our carelessness or lack of adequate skill, there is so many times more miscommunication than communication and the entire cycle or process is disrupted. This disruption leads to a chain reaction, sending ripples in our work and routine life.

Does Communication Require Recycling too?

> *What men want is not knowledge, but certainty.*
> **Bertrand Russell**

Communication is a word that has become centripetal in today's fast changing, digital world. Every nano second counts and we have to derive maximum benefit out of it. It's now or never and if the door of opportunity is shut, the most probable scenario would be that it would remain shut. For every little opportunity, there are thousands of suitors and once you are out of the queue, you are out. The optimum use of an opportunity could be made only and only by precise, perfect, to the point communication.

The process of communication is described as a cycle. The sender has a message to be conveyed. He encrypts his ideas into words as language is the most widely used medium of communication. The words are conveyed through a channel. This channel would mean face to face communication or telephonic conversation or written communication. The receiver, on receiving the message, decrypts it and catches the underlying ideas or feelings. A feedback or response is generated in the mind of the receiver that he passes on to the sender that again triggers another communication between them. This cycle continues and leads to an exchange of ideas, emotions, knowledge, opinions or beliefs. The sender and receiver keep on interchanging their roles so as to enable a participative, two way communication. Understanding is the factor that plays a key role in this entire cycle and acts as a stimulus for further developments.

Understanding is a thing that most of us take for granted and hence, we expect people to fathom the depths of our minds and hearts by using half-uttered and sometimes even non-uttered statements or questions. Such fragmentary utterances are not understood or partially understood or misunderstood. *The Principle of Parsimony* (Carletta & Mellish, 1996) explains:

> The Principle of Parsimony states that people usually try
> to complete tasks with the least effort that will produce
> a satisfactory solution. In task-oriented dialogue, this
> produces a tension between conveying information

> carefully to the partner and leaving it to be inferred,
> risking a misunderstanding and the need for recovery.
> (p. 71)

The distinction between misunderstanding and non-understanding has been a discussed phenomenon (e.g., Hirst et al., 1994; Weigard, 1999). In misunderstanding, the listener does understand the speaker but the interpretation is not in sync with the speaker's intentions or ideas; whereas in non-understanding, the listener does not understand the speaker at all or is not sure to choose a particular interpretation. Non-understandings are easy to notice or even rectify but misunderstandings are not easily noticed and hence may lead to more complications. Dascal (1999) notes the different names for misunderstanding such as: *mishear*, *misrecognise*, *misinterpret*, *misinfer*, *misconclude*. One thing here needs to be recognized that rejection is not necessarily non-communication or miscommunication. It may be a result of many factors amounting to the denial.

Communication is the process that brings us closer to people and acquaints us with their knowledge, culture and beliefs, resulting into the formation of a common ground. Clark (1996) defines common ground as follows:

> Two people's common ground is, in effect, the sum of
> their mutual, common, or joint knowledge, beliefs, and
> suppositions. (p.92)

A pre-requisite for the establishment of a common ground is the existence of a mutual understanding between the speaker and the listener. Feedback or response is the key catalyst in this phenomenon. Clark talks about this in the Presentation and the Acceptance Phase. He states:

> Every presentation enacts the collateral question "Do
> you understand what I mean by this?" The very act of
> directing an utterance to a respondent is a signal that
> means "Are you hearing, identifying, and understanding
> this now?" (Clark, 1996, p.243)

An active feedback is the evidence of proper understanding and it also helps in resolving misunderstanding immediately without giving way to adverse developments. Clark & Schaefer have discussed different types of positive evidence. Continued attention, relevant contribution, verbal or non-verbal acknowledgements, and a demonstration and display of understanding are some strong indicators of a proper understanding.

The question then arises that in spite of the fact that we all like sufficient evidence whether our point is driven home or not, why do we avoid enough positive evidence during our communication? This is explained by the Principle of Parsimony, as discussed previously – people strive to be economical and efficient in their language use. Clark (1996) calls this the *principle of least effort*:

> All things being equal, agents try to minimize their
> effort in doing what they intend to do. (p224)

Due to this principle of least effort, the furnishing of evidence gradually diminishes as the conversation moves forward to the point that it eventually fades out. However, a constant need of evidence is, in many situations, neither a compulsion nor a desired case. A teacher communicating a lot of facts or explanations to students need not constantly wait for evidence as it is pointless and time consuming. After sending an e-mail, we do not invariably wait for an acknowledgement whether it has been read or received. In such situations, lack of negative evidence is a positive one.

The situations wherein the misunderstanding remains unrevealed defy any kind of realization or repair. But the fortunate cases wherein we can comprehend and apprehend the loopholes and lacunae are reparable and ought to be fixed. A refashioning, reshaping and recasting of our words would repair the communication and prevent it from going south. Hirst et al. (1994) provide a way of analysing the cause for repair:

> Participants in a conversation rely in part on their
> expectations to determine whether they have understood
> each other. If a participant does not notice anything
> unusual, she may assume that the conversation is

proceeding smoothly. But if she hears something that seems inconsistent with her expectations, she may hypothesize that there has been a misunderstanding, either by herself or the other, and produce a repair – an utterance that attempts to correct the problem. (p.223)

Repair means the removal of misconceptions and planting of the correct inferences. At this point of time, clarifications are in order and must be communicated right away to avoid further misunderstandings. This would lead to the straightening out of errors and moving the communication towards desired results.

In certain situations, the non-understandings or misunderstandings cannot be repaired by the speaker or sender. The receiver may not be able to comprehend the message owing to a lack of linguistic or technical knowledge. In such conditions, the receiver has to discover ways to enhance their perception. The sender can help to a certain extent if help is requested, but not beyond a certain point. Assumptions also hinder proper communication or understanding. We have to learn how to see and interpret things in the right light without bringing in our conjectures and presumptions.

Denouement

Man being a social and ambitious animal aspires to achieve lots through his communication in the general as well as technical field, in formal as well as informal situations. Therefore, it is mandatory for him to master the art of communication and make amends wherever and whenever the communication goes awry; and also to recycle his communication cycle, if the situation demands so.

References

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