NOTES ON COMMUNICATION

A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT THE WAY WE INTERACT WITH THE PEOPLE WE MEET

Dr Gordon Coates

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ABOUT THESE NOTES

Why bother to read a book about something so obvious and routine as communication? Perhaps because, obvious or not, communication is one of the most important things we ever do. It is the interpersonal equivalent of breathing. Just as the physical life of any individual depends on breathing, the interactive life of any number of people, from a couple to a country, depends on communication.

Another way in which communication is like breathing is that we often take it for granted. Indeed, we ignore some aspects almost completely. In the case of breathing, that only matters in special circumstances. Most of the time, we breathe fairly well without thinking about it. However, when it comes to communication, it is best not to leave too much to chance.

To ignore some aspects of communication is to wear interpersonal blinkers. Blinkers allow you to see ahead, but there is a very real risk of bumping into – or even falling off – unnoticed things which are right beside you. Especially (though by no means only) if you work with people, such haphazard interpersonal navigation is simply not good enough.

No prior knowledge about communication is assumed in this little book, and the emphasis is on the practical things which I have found most helpful during my medical career. As a result, many aspects of communication are not addressed at all. Those that are included are discussed from a personal perspective, but I have not proposed any entirely new theories or methods.

Despite their brevity, I think these notes provide a basic understanding of the principles and practices which enable good communication. I therefore hope that readers will find them not only interesting, but also of practical value.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Coates was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1946, and studied medicine at the University of Melbourne and the Royal Melbourne Hospital. He entered General (Child & Family) Practice in 1971, working in various parts of Australia and England before settling in Sydney, Australia in 1977.

His interests in western psychology and eastern philosophy brought him into contact with psychiatrist and thanatologist Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1979, and he subsequently spent a year studying at her training centre in California.

Returning to Sydney in 1981, he spent the next twelve years working in the field of palliative medicine. During those years, he directed new departments of palliative care in two Sydney teaching hospitals, attended a number of hospices, ran a community palliative care service and was a founding vice-president of the Palliative Care Association of NSW. His ideas about interpersonal communication, while certainly not new, have been considerably influenced by his work with dying patients and their loved ones, and also by his later work in geriatric community care in inner suburban Sydney.

At the beginning of 2007, Dr Coates decided to close his medical practice in order to devote the majority of his time to writing. These notes about communication are the second result of that decision, the first being the book "Wanterfall".[1] Various other topics are currently in draft form, and will be made available via wanterfall.com as they are completed.

These publications, incidentally, are quite deliberately written in Australian English (no, that is not an oxymoron). This may explain the occasional linguistic surprise, as you read them.

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[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am greatly indebted to my honorary editor, my wife Suzanne Norris, both for rescuing me from the worst examples of my habitual assault upon the English language and for providing a critical appraisal of the text. Various errors may well have survived. If so, they simply reflect my recidivist tendencies. Therefore, if you cannot understand a passage in the text, blame me; but if you can understand it, thank Suzanne – as I have been doing, with good reason, for nearly thirty years.

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FOREWORD

This book describes some of the ways people communicate with each other, but it neither aims nor claims to cover more than a fraction of the whole field of communication. Indeed, communication is such a very large topic, and this is such a very small book, that the ideas which I have included really only provide a brief introduction to a few of its many aspects.

Nevertheless, I have found all the ideas discussed in these pages both interesting and helpful, which is why they are included. I hope they will at least be of some use to some readers. I also hope that they will encourage curiosity about the wider field of communication – a field which is oceanic, incompletely understood and constantly evolving.

In case it is not already obvious from the above, this little book is *not* written for experts. For those who are interested but not expert, I hope it will be very rewarding. Even for those who are expert but still interested, a quick browse may be worthwhile. However, if you are an expert and you are not interested in reviewing what you already know, then you have wasted quite enough time already – these notes are not for you.

Incidentally, because of the significance of emotions to many aspects of communication, this book contains a number of references to my earlier book, "Wanterfall", which outlined my ideas about the understanding and resolution of human emotions. Although it may seem a little repetitive, I have given a reference in a footnote on each occasion, in the interests of easy access, rather than putting it at the end of the book.

DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNICATION

There are various definitions of communication, and in a moment I will give you three of them. They are not all the same, but they mostly only differ in fairly minor ways. The word itself is derived from the Latin verb *communicare*, which means "to *share*" or "to *make common*". That derivation provides one half of the English meaning of communication.

The other half of the meaning of communication has to do with *information* and *meaning*. These are related, but not identical, concepts. However, in simple definitions like the three shown below, information is far more likely to be mentioned, than meaning. Why is that?

It is difficult to do justice to the interaction between information and meaning in a brief definition, or indeed, in any brief fashion. This matter will be addressed in various chapters and appendices. For now, though, I will simply say that, while information always means something, it rarely, if ever, means exactly the same thing to different people.

THREE SIMPLE DEFINITIONS

- Communication is the sharing of information
- Communication is the giving and receiving of messages
- Communication is the transfer of information from one or more people to one or more other people

The first of these three definitions is the simplest, and also the broadest. Because of those qualities, it is also a little nonspecific. The second definition reminds us that information, here called a message, must be received, as well as sent, to complete the process. For example, a message launched in a bottle might achieve communication, but it also might not.

None of the above definitions requires information to flow in more than one direction (though the first two do rather imply this). Two-way communication is certainly more common, and is often preferable, but a one-way delivery of information, such as advice or instructions, still constitutes communication.

The last definition above only applies to communication between *people*. Animals, plants and machines are also capable of various sorts of communication, but they are not included in this definition. (They are not included in this book, either – though machines do get a brief mention in Appendix 4.)

This last definition is perfectly satisfactory for our purposes, though, as this is a book about communication between people. That implies at least two people – one at each "end" of the process. It can, of course, involve many more than two people.

ONE SIMPLE PROCESS?

How does communication actually occur? If it can be simply defined, as we have seen above, can it be just as simply achieved? It seems to me that the process by which communication occurs is very simple in concept, but can become extremely complex if it is inspected closely.

The simple version goes something like this. The sender, who has a message, somehow puts it in a form which can be sent, and somehow sends it in the direction of the receiver. The receiver then somehow receives it, somehow gets it into their brain, and somehow attributes meaning to it. This version includes a great deal of "somehow", but no "how" at all!

The complex version of the communication process is either utterly fascinating, or incredibly boring, depending on your point of view. Many thousands of pages have been written about it, and agreement between the authors of those pages is

far from complete. I have included a little bit about the details of the process in Appendix 1, for any interested readers.

However, not everything about the process involved in sending and receiving messages has been banished to Appendix 1. Some of its practical aspects will be discussed in the next chapter. Before that, though, I will make a first tentative step towards redeeming my promise to say more about the related concepts of *information* and *meaning*.

INFORMATION AND MEANING

Whether writing about communication, or simply chatting over lunch, the word *meaning* is quite often encountered. Because it is a common word that we all use frequently, it is easy to forget something very important about it. While always present within an individual mind, *meaning is never fully transferable*. I am commenting on this complex matter early in the book, because everything said later, in every chapter, is subject to this limitation – a limitation inherent in all communication.

The meaning attributed to any message by the receiver can never be exactly the same as the meaning intended by the sender, because they are different people, with different sense organs and different cognitive function. There are also many other factors which influence the degree to which the receiver's meaning differs from the sender's meaning.

In the case of a word or phrase, the surrounding words or phrases usually provide useful clues. Language features (such as formal, informal and idiomatic language) and sentence structure (sometimes called syntactical grammar) also provide extra information. In the case of speech, factors such as timing, stress and intonation are very significant.

The overall structure and organisation of the communication (sometimes called textual grammar) must also be considered,

as should the individual characteristics of the sender and the receiver. Any concurrent messages, especially non-verbal ones, will also exert an influence, as will other factors such as the pre-existing knowledge of each communicator and the relationship between the communicators.

The method by which a message is delivered, and the form in which it arrives, will inevitably have an impact on the receiver. The purpose of the communication and the audience to which it is directed are also very relevant. The overall situation in which the communication occurs, and the local – and more distant – events surrounding it, also play their part.

These various things which influence the meaning attributed to an instance of communication are often referred to as the *context* of that communication. However, context is not always applied in such a broad way. Sometimes it is used to refer to particular aspects of the influences surrounding a message.

Do the preceding paragraphs mean that communication is doomed to constant failure? There is more than one answer to that question. One could argue that the transfer of a representation of some information to the mind of the receiver is all that can be *expected* of the communication process. From that viewpoint, the process might be considered successful, even if the meaning attributed is not the meaning intended.

However, that view of communication will not satisfy everybody. Many will wish to share their intended meanings as closely as possible with their target audiences, no matter how small or large those audiences may be. In order to do that, communication must become an art as well as a science.

There will be examples of ways in which meaning can be influenced in most of the chapters in this book. In addition, in Appendix 1, information and meaning will be addressed at a little more length. This will still not be sufficient to scratch the

metaphorical surfaces of these elusive concepts, but I hope it will at least give an idea of their nature and significance.

SENDING AND RECEIVING MESSAGES

Not much can be said about the sending and receiving of messages without the risk of using words to which various experts have previously assigned one or more completely different meanings. For example, I was thinking of referring to the paths followed by information which is sent or received as "communication channels". However, that term has been used in various other ways, so I will avoid it.

Instead, I will simply say that messages passed between two[1] people need a way to get *out* of one person and a way to get *in* to another person. Therefore, I will talk about "output" and "input". By output, I will mean information going out from a person or persons, so that it is available to one or more other people. By input, I will mean information being received, in a way that ultimately allows it to reach the receiver's brain.

There is one thing I need to clarify about these terms. It is possible to imagine the provision of output as an active process, and the reception of input as a passive process. This idea was once quite common, but it does not take into account the fact that receiving information is also an active process, at least as far as the human brain is concerned.

Perhaps it is easier to see that output is an active process, because (after using the brain quite a lot, hopefully) we use various muscles to create the output. In the case of input, the sensory organs don't show any visible activity (though plenty of physiology and biochemistry is certainly happening). However, the brain really is very active as the input arrives.

[1] I will refer to the minimum number of people (two) in various examples, but in most cases the same example can be applied to a group of people.

Therefore, whether I refer to output or input, I am referring to an active process in each case. Now, how does this process actually work? The short answer is to say that inputs are achieved by means of *sensations*, while outputs are achieved by means of *actions*. However, that answer, like most short answers, will need a little further explanation.

When I say that inputs are achieved by means of sensations, I am not referring to sensational phenomena, such as exciting performances by famous actors. I am referring to signals generated by sensory receptors, which travel along nerve fibres to the brain, where they are then processed.[1] Often, the receptors involved are "organs of special sense", especially the eyes or the ears. However, other sensory nerve endings, mainly those associated with the sense of touch, can also be employed.

When I say that outputs are achieved by means of actions, I am not referring to activity in general, but to particular actions, such as talking, writing or physical gestures, which make information accessible to others. These actions involve representing[2] the information in some form which can be sent to, and accessed by, the receiver. (Incidentally, actions which are *not* intended as a form of communication may also be perceived as messages by those who observe them.)

Although output must obviously occur before input when a message is sent and received, I am going to discuss the inputs first. Why? Because both inputs and outputs are usually named after the type of input involved. That being the case, starting

[1] The combination of sensory input and its mental processing constitutes *perception*, which is discussed briefly in Appendix 1.

[2] Representation of information is a complex matter, the basic principles of which are discussed in Appendix 1. For now, an everyday meaning, "to render or present something in a way which can be accessed", will suffice.

with the outputs would be rather confusing, as their names would make no sense until the inputs had been discussed.

INPUTS

Three of our five senses – sight, hearing and touch – are used as *major inputs*. These are usually referred to as the visual, auditory and tactile[1] inputs respectively. They are sometimes called input channels; however, as previously mentioned, the term "channel" is used in various ways, so I will avoid it.

The importance of the major inputs is often in the order given – first visual, then auditory, then tactile. However, people vary in their ability to use a particular input, as well as in their preferences for different inputs. Also, some people have reduced or absent function affecting one or more senses, which naturally modifies their available options.

Although the three major input methods react to different stimuli, and receive various types of information in their different ways, each of them can also be employed to receive words. Visual reception of written words and auditory reception of spoken words are everyday experiences. Communicating words by touch is perhaps less intuitive, but an efficient method of achieving this has been available, in the form of braille[2], for nearly two hundred years.

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[1] The tactile sense is sometimes subdivided according to the type of sensation, such as light touch, pressure, joint position, temperature, pain of various types, and so on. However, these subdivisions are not usually considered when discussing tactile communication (which, in practice, usually involves light touch or pressure).

[2] A system of writing developed (from a much more complicated existing system) by Louis Braille (1809-1852). It employs patterns created by up to six raised dots, the positions of which are arranged in two columns of three rows each, in order to represent the letters and numerals. *(to next page…)*

The other two known senses play relatively little part in deliberate communication. The sense of smell is only available as an input when proximity allows. In that case, unless nasal congestion or some other pathology has put it out of action, a wide range of odours can be sensed, even when the substance involved is at a very low concentration. In some cases, a single molecule is sufficient for the recognition of an odour.

Strong olfactory stimuli are provided by many types of food and drink, as well as many plants and perfumes, but their meaning is usually nonspecific. Various body odours also constitute powerful non-verbal messages. However, transmission of verbal information via the sense of smell, though theoretically feasible, is not used in practice.

The sense of taste generally requires olfaction as well as tongue contact, as most taste sensation is actually mediated by the sense of smell. However, five tastes, sweet, sour, salty, bitter and savoury, can be sensed by the tongue alone. The provision of food and drink is a form of communication involving taste. However, the use of taste to receive verbal information would be even less practicable than the use of olfaction.

That covers the five known senses, but it is possible that *pheromones* also have a role in communication. Pheromones are volatile secretions, produced by many vertebrates, which influence social or sexual behaviour when their evaporated molecules are sensed by the "vomeronasal organ" of another member of the same species.

(braille, continued) This makes written communication possible when the visual input is unavailable. Extensions of the system can accommodate various complexities such as mathematical and musical notation.

Simply embossing the letters is a slower alternative to braille. It can be very useful when one of the parties involved does not know braille, though.

However, although humans have a (possibly vestigial) vomeronasal organ, its role in human communication awaits clarification. Further research might conceivably uncover an unconscious, but highly significant, communication process, based entirely on the wafting of pheromone molecules through the air circulating between two or more people. Time will tell.

In any event, as far as is known at the time of writing, we mostly use our *visual*, *auditory* and *tactile* senses as inputs. All three can receive information which does not include words. By making use of writing, speech or braille, as appropriate, all three can also be used to receive words.

Importantly, many people seem to use one of the three main inputs more effectively than the other two. The same preference usually influences their use of outputs. I will have more to say about these preferences after looking at the outputs, which are the subject of the next heading.

OUTPUTS

As mentioned earlier, the outputs are named after the inputs used to receive them. The major outputs are thus called visual, auditory and tactile, just like the major inputs. In other words, if a gesture is made, the visual output is said to be employed. If a sound is created, the auditory output is said to be employed. If a part of the sender's body, or an object acting as an extension of the sender's body, makes contact with the receiver's body, the tactile output is said to be employed.

Also as mentioned earlier, outputs are achieved by means of *actions*, which create messages, and sometimes also transmit them over a short distance (as in speaking, for example). These actions are performed by various parts of the body, but *not* by the sense organs which act as inputs. Outputs and inputs involve different parts of the body. That is not to say that there

is no connection between them. Input is almost always used to *monitor* the production of output. One example is listening (input) to the sound of the voice, as well as the words produced, while speaking (output).

The eyes might seem to be an exception to the separation of inputs and outputs. Muscle contractions can change pupil diameter, or move the lids or the eyeballs, to create a visual output – which then becomes the input to the receiver's retina. In a sense, then, eyes can create messages which can be received by eyes. However, the input sense organ (the retina) is quite distinct from the output message creator (the various muscles which control the pupils, lids and eyeballs).

In general terms, visual output might be created directly by gesturing or smiling, less directly by choice of clothing, or indirectly by using a projector. Auditory output might be created directly by clapping or speaking, less directly by playing a musical instrument, or indirectly by playing a recording through loudspeakers.

Tactile output might be created directly by shaking hands, less directly by rocking a cradle, or indirectly by providing comfortable chairs for visitors. In practice, most communicative output can be assigned to one of these three main categories (though olfactory and gustatory outputs are also possible). As mentioned above, the role of pheromones in human communication is uncertain at the time of writing.

PREFERRED INPUTS AND OUTPUTS

Having looked at the *available* inputs and outputs, the question arises whether the particular method in use at a given time has any influence on the quality of communication. I mentioned previously that different people appear to favour different inputs and outputs – but do such preferences matter?

Importantly, a preference for a particular method does not exclude the others. However, it does reduce their use, either for input or output, in comparison to the favoured method. Unless there is a specific disability preventing the use of one or more of the inputs or outputs, they will all be available to some extent. However, the preferred method(s) would probably be used more, and presumably also more effectively.

Although the output method employed can influence the choice of words, any further alteration at the receiving end would reflect sensory or cognitive errors. There would presumably be more risk of such errors if the message arrived via a little-used input. However, in the case of *non-verbal* communication, which is discussed later, understanding appears to be generally better if messages arrive via preferred inputs.

As a great deal of the emotional component of communication seems to be non-verbal, emotional communication is more sensitive to input and output preferences. (Estimates of the proportions of communication which are verbal and non-verbal will be discussed later, under Non-verbal Communication.)

None of this would really matter if we all used all the major inputs and outputs all the time, but that is unusual. It would also not matter if people always used the same inputs and outputs as each other when communicating, but very often, they don't do that, either.

Among other things, this suggests that people who work with people, especially in a therapeutic role, might be wise to pay attention to all their inputs and outputs. This should reduce the amount of information lost in either direction and might also be a way of improving one's own non-verbal communication.

The significance of preferred inputs and outputs has been emphasised by many authors, and is also a central feature of Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) which is an interesting

approach to communication, persuasion and some aspects of hypnotherapy (potentially, though not necessarily, including covert hypnotic suggestion).

NLP has its roots in some observational studies of the interactions between clients and therapists which were made by psychologist Richard Bandler and linguist John Grinder[1] in the early 1970s. A "new code of NLP" was also proposed by John Grinder et al in the early 1980s.

Putting into practice some of the ideas of anthropologist and systems theorist Gregory Bateson, Grinder and Bandler carefully recorded the interactions between three successful therapists (Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir and later Milton H. Erickson) and their clients. Analysis of the resulting audio and video material revealed a number of interesting patterns of behaviour, quite a few of which were related to the input and output preferences of those involved.

When I first studied NLP in 1980, it seemed like a very promising development, likely to have significant implications for counselling and psychotherapy. However, the emphasis since then seems to have been more on marketing books, seminars etc as aids to self development, salesmanship, management training and related things, rather than developing NLP into a form of medical or psychological treatment.

To the best of my knowledge at the time of writing, NLP has not been validated as a form of therapy. However, I have personally found some of the ideas which emerged from the early work of Grinder and Bandler quite useful when communicating with patients and their loved ones.

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[1] Grinder, J. and Bandler, R. 1975a. The Structure of Magic: A Book About Language and Therapy. Science & Behaviour Books, Palo Alto. Also Grinder, J. and Bandler, R. 1975b. The Structure of Magic II: A Book About Communication and Change. Science & Behaviour Books, Palo Alto.

I will look at those ideas in terms of the *style* of communication which often seems to be linked to a preferred method of input and output; or, in some cases, linked to a preference for words and concepts. It is therefore possible to propose *visual, auditory, tactile*[1] and *verbal*[2] communication styles.

If the communication styles of people who are interacting do not match, some information which is intended for transmission might get lost. Equally significantly, some information which was *not* intended for transmission might still be sent and received (which could be embarrassing).

I think it is therefore worth developing an awareness of your own communication style, and also noticing any available clues to the preferred communication style of a person with whom you are interacting. Some useful clues[3] can be gleaned by noting the words people use when giving descriptions.

The most revealing words for this purpose are often, but not exclusively, verbs and adjectives. Apart from these verbal clues, some further hints can be discovered by noticing any actions which accompany speech. Sometimes, those actions may be suggestive of one of the major input/output systems.

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[1] In NLP, the style I call tactile is called "kinaesthetic". The latter word is derived from kinaesthesia, which means sensation from muscles, tendons, and joints in response to body movement or muscle contraction. I don't think that is really the right word for a style which is most closely related to the senses of touch and pressure.

[2] In NLP, the style I call verbal is called "auditory digital". "Auditory" might suggest that the verbal style is restricted to mainly auditory communicators, which I think is an oversimplification. "Digital", as mentioned under Watzlawick's fourth axiom in Appendix 3, is more often applied to fingers, numbers or computers, nowadays, than to discrete symbols.

[3] In NLP, these clues are called "cues", and the input/output methods are called "representational systems".

Some interesting associations have also been noticed between eye movements[1] occurring while processing information, and a person's communication style. When remembering or imagining, the eyes often move sideways or diagonally, in a way which can be related to the person's communication style.

Responses to conflict during an interaction also appear to bear some relationship to preferred communication styles. The famous family therapist Virginia Satir[2] found it helpful to classify clients as *blamers, placaters, computers, distracters* or *levellers* on the basis of their behaviour under stress.[3]

She suggested connections between some of these categories (often referred to as Satir categories) and some communication styles. I will mention some of those connections when discussing the individual styles. As with the other clues, the connection between communication style and response to conflict is suggestive rather than definitive.

Nevertheless, I think these clues can be helpful as part of a broad approach to better communication. On the other hand, if too much notice were taken of them, it could very easily do more harm than good. Anyway, to show how the clues may

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[1] These are actions too, of course, but I have considered them separately because their interpretation relies on derived rules, rather than analogy.

[2] Satir, V. 1972. Peoplemaking. Science and Behavior Books, Palo Alto.

[3] According to Satir, *Blamers* are those who, instead of facing a conflict situation squarely, and considering whether they need to change their own state or actions, simply blame others and do nothing about it. *Placaters* are those who make a similar evasion in the opposite way. They accept the blame and apologise, but still do nothing about it. *Computers* are those who evade responsibility by behaving in an emotionally distant way, sticking to concepts, logic, mathematics and statistics. *Distracters* are those who make a similar evasion by going off at a tangent or creating a diversion. *Levellers* are those who do not evade issues, but instead face them, respond in an open and honest fashion, and seek a solution.

become apparent in everyday situations, I will give examples of each type of clue for each of the four communication styles.

Visual Communication Style

Visual Words

A person with a visual communication style might discuss a situation in terms of how it *looks*. During negotiation or argument, they might try to get you to *see* their point of *view*. To be noticed, they might rely partly on clothes, hairstyle, makeup, accessories and so on, which will *catch the eye* of another person, thus *showing* themselves in a good *light*. When describing experiences, they often mention *colours*, and also use words like *clear*, *vivid*, *bright*, and *dull*.

Visual Actions

Visual communicators are prone to drawing pictures in the air with their hands, and often demonstrate any movement they describe by performing it with their own body. Their facial expressions are usually closely related to the verbal message. Eye contact is frequent, and is again related to the verbal message. They may also show a visible reaction (not always an approving one) to your own appearance, or to the appearance of their surroundings.

Visual Eye Movements

People who favour visual communication often display eye movement upwards and to one side. Sometimes, movement up and to the left[1] reflects recall, while movement up and to the

[1] The terms "left" and "right" refer to the anatomical left and right sides of the person whose eyes are being observed, not to those of the observer.

right reflects imagination, but this is less reliable than the upward component of the movement.

To complicate matters, visual people with extremely accurate recall (sometimes called eidetic or photographic memory) often close their eyes to reduce interference from external sources, while virtually reliving the experience internally. (This can also occur with non-visual eidetic memory, or indeed with memory of any sort, so it is very nonspecific.)

Visual Conflict Responses

Visual communicators often have a strong sense of how things should look – which sometimes extends to how things should be, what is currently wrong and what should be done about it. Many of them proceed to do something to improve the situation, often with considerable speed and efficiency.

However, seeing other people's many shortcomings with such clarity can make it tempting to criticise them, and perhaps also to blame them for what appears to be wrong. The term "visual critic" or "visual blamer" might then be applied. Fortunately for their families, friends and colleagues, only *some* visual communicators earn either or both of those labels!

Auditory Communication Style

Auditory Words

A person with an auditory communication style might approach a decision or problem in terms of how it *sounds* to them or whether it *rings* true. During negotiation or argument, they might want to *tune in* to your ideas and also try to get you to *hear* what they are *saying*. To be noticed, they might employ audible signals such as the tone, pitch and volume of their voice. When describing experiences, they often mention how

things *sounded*, and use words like *quiet*, *loud*, *distorted*, *blaring* and *echo*.

Auditory Actions

Auditory communicators pay attention to the sonic aspects of their environment, avoiding noisy shopping malls and construction sites where possible and reacting strongly to stimuli like the tone, pitch and volume of other people's voices.

They are quite likely to invest in expensive high-fidelity sound equipment, choosing the components, connecting wires and supporting structures[1] by ear rather than specifications, as they often notice many aspects of sound which others ignore.

Auditory Eye Movements

People who favour the auditory input/output method often display a horizontal eye movement to left or right while processing information. As with the visual style, movement to the left more often reflects recall, while movement to the right more often reflects imagination.

Alternatively, as with any communication style, auditory communicators with very accurate recall may close their eyes to reduce interference from external sources, while they are "hearing" the experience in their memory.

Auditory Conflict Responses

Auditory communicators often demonstrate their own feelings by the volume, pitch and timbre of their voice and the speed and rhythm of their speech – a complex musical performance

[1] If you don't think the connecting wires and supporting furniture affect the sound of recorded music, you're probably not an auditory communicator!

which other communicators rarely appreciate fully. The performance may include shouting, in some cases. In addition, many auditory communicators are inclined to cross over to the verbal style under stress – which is presumably why the verbal style is called "auditory digital" by NLP practitioners.

Tactile Communication Style

Tactile Words

A person with a tactile communication style might approach a decision or problem in terms of what sort of *feeling* (or sometimes *gut feeling*) they have about it, and whether they can *grasp* its meaning. During negotiation or argument, they might try to *impress* their ideas, *put* them to you or get them *across* to you.

To be noticed, they might choose to share their *feelings* with others. They may use phrases like *touch base* and *get in touch*. When describing experiences, they often mention how things *feel*, especially as regards *comfort* and *texture*, and they use words like *soft*, *hard*, *smooth* and *rough* in their descriptions, as well as *warm*, *cold*, *friendly* and *unfriendly*.

Interestingly, physical feelings and emotional feelings tend to be combined in this style. Even though it is only physical feelings that are tactile, tactile communicators usually seem to experience emotional feelings fairly strongly as well.

Tactile Actions

Tactile communicators often stand quite close to you. They may also move in a slow and measured way. Any physical contact which is appropriate to the occasion and the culture involved is likely to be frequent and pronounced. Physical contact with pets may be almost continuous! Inanimate objects

also attract direct contact, involving actions such as stroking materials and squeezing cushions.

Tactile Eye Movements

People who favour the tactile input/output method often display eye movement downward and to their right while they process information. Alternatively, as with any style, they may close their eyes while concentrating, or fail to follow any recognisable eye movement pattern at all.

Tactile Conflict Responses

Satir suggested that the placater response to conflict is somewhat more common in tactile communicators, calling a client with both characteristics a "kinaesthetic[1] placater". Placaters, as mentioned earlier, tend to accept the blame and apologise profusely – but still do nothing about the problem.

However, there is another possible tactile response to stress, and that is physical violence – which is quite likely to be directed at the perceived source of the stress. Therefore, it is not wise to assume that a tactile communicator will always be soft and submissive, even if that has been the case so far.

This is not to say that all tactile communicators, or for that matter all submissive people, are likely to become violent at any moment. It is simply an observation that both submissive and aggressive tendencies can exist in tactile communicators – and, indeed, in human beings in general.

[1] As explained in an earlier footnote, I prefer "tactile" to "kinaesthetic".

Verbal Communication Style

Verbal Words

Although "verbal words" may be verging on tautology, there are certainly some words which seem to be favoured by verbal communicators. For example, they might approach a problem in terms of how they *understand* or *conceptualise* it, and what they therefore *think* about it. During negotiation, they may advance *logical arguments* based on *peer reviewed research*. They are also likely to introduce *abstract concepts*.

To be noticed, they might contribute *facts*, *documents*, *publications* or *ideas*. When describing experiences, they may *quote* from an *itinerary*, and note certain *data* they have collected and its *relevance*, perhaps giving the *prices* and *numbers* of various things which are being described.

Their words often do not evoke any sensory images at all, which is a very characteristic feature of the style. Nevertheless, they must employ at least one input and at least one output. Typically, they make greatest use of the auditory, moderate use of the visual and least use of the tactile input/output method. However, the use of reading and writing, i.e. a visual input and output, is predominant in some cases.

Verbal actions

The muscles associated with speech and writing or typing are always well exercised. Verbal communicators also do a lot of their work and their socialising by telephone. Even after all that talking, they still have a tendency to talk to themselves, when recalling events or planning future activities.

They usually learn conceptually, rather than by rote. In other words, they make sure that they understand every step of the subject matter, after which they find its recall quite easy.

Incidentally, education, particularly in western countries, relies very heavily on the verbal style. This encourages increased use of this style, both during *and after* the education process.

Verbal Eye Movements

People who favour a mainly verbal approach to communication often display eye movement downward and to the left while they process information. They may not be seeing, hearing or feeling, but rather conducting a silent internal verbal dialogue.

Alternatively, the words and numbers of an internal dialogue may be represented (internally) as a visual or auditory image, and their eye movements will then reflect that imagery. Even though the internal dialogue is *coded* (verbal, mathematical etc) its elements may be seen or heard "in the mind's eye".

Verbal Conflict Responses

Verbal communicators usually have well-developed linguistic and numeric ability. Under stress, they tend to take refuge in these strengths, which results in verbose, distant, logical and clinical behaviour. They sometimes approach emotions as if they were a purely intellectual phenomenon, something to be measured and controlled but not experienced. Satir referred to people with these features as "verbal computers".

Of course, not all people with highly developed verbal and numeric abilities are lacking in other areas of the mind. Extreme examples of the "verbal computer" are perhaps caricatures of the verbal style. Nevertheless, a tendency in that direction, especially when under stress, can be observed in many verbal communicators.

COMMUNICATION STYLES IN PRACTICE

Everything I have said about the different communication styles might be filed in the "interesting but irrelevant" category – *unless* it has some impact on the real business of communicating with real people during real life.

The first thing to remember, when looking for real world examples of the influence of communication styles, is that the four styles described above simply do not exist. Perhaps I should rephrase that. The four styles described above do not exist *in isolation*. Rather, they are like points on a continuum.

Perhaps the continuum has four rounded peaks representing the four styles, but it is still a continuum. The four rounded peaks can be observed on it, and they have been given names. However, they are not prisons, and a communicator is not condemned to remain on any particular peak forever.

Nevertheless, many people communicate in a way which is at least more suggestive of one of the styles described than any of the others, and this sometimes has significant implications for communication, especially with regard to establishing rapport.

For example, you can hit a brick wall trying to communicate by sight or sound alone with very tactile people. Words may also be insufficient, until rapport has been established. They need to *feel* accepted, comfortable and safe. Even the way you shake hands could make or mar the interview, in some cases.

Imagine for a moment that you are a very tactile person, and I am primarily a verbal communicator. Now, what if I send a very important message in your direction, employing for the purpose some rather complex and meticulously constructed sentences, delivered in an urgent tone of voice?

What if I also, without realising what I am doing, transmit two other messages? Firstly, I display a very awkward, rigid

posture; and secondly, I maintain a prolonged, vice-like grip on your shoulder. (Perhaps I grabbed your shoulder when I first approached you, and forgot to let it go. Unlike you, I would probably not pay much attention to shoulders.)

As your preferred style is the tactile one, you might mainly notice my rigid posture[1] and my vice-like grip. You might miss quite a few of my words, as well as their urgent sonic character. Those things might be swamped by the weird tactile information which has, let us say, grabbed your attention.

Perhaps you would respond with a fending-off gesture, in the hope that the pain in your shoulder might not continue for too much longer. If so, I would be confused by it, if I noticed it at all. I would be waiting for words, and perhaps some sonic evidence that you realise the importance of what I have just told you. However, I might wait in vain.

Our communication would not have been very accurate! You would have learned that I grab people for no good reason, and talk in an incomprehensible way – but you might not have learned anything at all about the urgent matter which was my reason for approaching you. If I was trying to save you from some mortal peril, your situation would now be very grave.

What would I have learned? I would probably have concluded that you are very slow on the uptake, and do not even respond to urgent information which is necessary to your own safety. Not only that, but you are apparently more interested in waving away the bearer of vital news, than speaking appropriately in response. I would think you extremely eccentric!

Of course, many people communicate fairly well regardless of the communication style involved. However, a new client is an

[1] Although another person's posture is noticed visually, a tactile recipient's internal image of posture might well reflect its tactile consequences.

unknown quantity in that regard, so assessment is a good idea. Importantly, when assessing a client's communication style, *the process should be invisible* to the client. Alternatively, it could be explained, so that the client does not feel threatened by it.

As mentioned earlier, one way to avoid problems due to communication style mismatches is for the sender to transmit via all outputs, so that someone with a restricted communication style can still get the message. At the same time, it is a good idea to keep all inputs open (and attended to) so that messages of all sorts will be received.

A potential drawback of transmitting via all outputs, though, is that it makes it possible to transmit incongruent[1] messages. That would not promote good communication! If your words say you want to know more, your tone of voice says you couldn't care less, your face says you strongly disapprove and your body says you want to go home, then going home is probably the best thing you can do.

However, that is not an argument against transmitting via all outputs simultaneously. It is only transmitting incompatible messages (and especially messages you don't want to transmit at all) that needs to be avoided. In many cases, transmission via all outputs is already happening anyway, in which case, remaining unaware of it is a recipe for sending an unknown number of possibly inappropriate messages.

Of course, messages sent via different outputs cannot always be identical, because not all input/output methods can carry all sorts of information. However, they must all be compatible with each other. Congruent output, incidentally, is very

[1] The general meaning of congruence is a correspondence in character, such as the quality of coinciding when superimposed. In the context of communication, congruence means that all messages received from one sender at one time are compatible with each other.

difficult to maintain if you are being dishonest, because subconscious non-verbal clues usually give the game away.

Another thing that can make congruent output difficult is the presence in the sender of unresolved emotional issues. Strong emotions can influence every aspect of non-verbal communication, and also the choice of words. This is especially significant when the sender is not fully aware of the emotions which are simmering away in the background.

Reducing the amount of unresolved emotional distress present in one's own mind is arguably the most important contribution that can ever be made to the quality of one's communication. However, I have written about emotions at considerable length elsewhere[1], so I will not address that topic here.

In summary, attention to communication styles can sometimes improve your communication, but only if the process is so well integrated into your overall approach that it is not apparent to others. If it shows as an obvious part of the process, it is more likely to be detrimental; though this could be ameliorated by a simple explanation of the reasons for what you are doing.

[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

COMMUNICATING USING WORDS

You may wonder why this chapter is not called "Verbal Communication". That would certainly contrast nicely with the next chapter heading, which is Non-verbal Communication. However, many people assume that "verbal communication" refers to *spoken* communication only, thus excluding written communication. That is why, although it is rather clumsy, I use the term "communicating using words" when I am referring to spoken *and/or* written communication.

Communicating using words inevitably means using a *language* – a system which governs the use of agreed sounds or other symbols in order to exchange information. Like the basic communication process itself, language is an enormous topic, about which I will say a little in an appendix (Appendix 2) and almost nothing in the book itself.

I will mention a few very general points about language in this chapter, but *they will all be oversimplifications*. Everything in Appendix 2 is also an oversimplification. Countless thousands of pages have been written about language, by people who know far more about it than I do, but all I intend to do here is to include a few thoughts which I hope may be helpful.

Because this chapter addresses one very important method of attempting to share *meaning*, I will paraphrase the brief remarks I made about information and meaning in the first chapter before continuing. This may seem a little repetitious, but I think it is critical to understanding the present chapter.

Even though it exists within each individual mind, *meaning is never fully transferable*. All communication is subject to this limitation, whether we like it or not. The sender and the receiver have different sense organs and different cognitive function. They are also subject to many other influences which can affect the meaning ultimately assigned to a message.

Factors such as the choice of words, the surrounding words and sentences, various language features, sentence structure, timing, stress, intonation, and the overall structure and organisation of a message, all exert an influence on the meaning ultimately attributed to it. So do the individual characteristics of the sender and the receiver, as well as any other messages they are exchanging at or about the same time.

The pre-existing knowledge of both parties, the relationship between them, the method and form of the delivery of information, the purpose of the communication, the audience for which it is designed and the overall situation in which it occurs, including both local and distant events, also play their part. This chapter, and indeed every chapter, must be read in the light of these unavoidable uncertainties regarding meaning.

UNDERSTANDING

How Words Work

It is a truism, but still worth remembering, that communication via words can only be successful if the sender and receiver have a language in common, and use it. The successful representation and transfer of information will be useless if that representation means nothing to the receiver.

We are so used to using words to communicate, that we usually don't think of the process as being in any way unusual or special. Nevertheless, communicating using words, whether spoken or written, does have some very special advantages.

These advantages all flow from the fact that the information is encoded. Any language, such as the English language I am using now, is a type of *code*. That code has three main elements: *words*, the *rules* which govern the way those words are used, and the *context* in which the words are used.

The context, broadly speaking, consists of the surrounding words, the way the words are delivered, any concurrent messages, and the overall circumstances in which the communication occurs. This in fact adds up to a very large part of language, potentially including all the types of influence on meaning discussed near the end of the first chapter.

Of course, encoding can be a decided *dis*advantage if the code is not known. However, this is not a problem as long as the common language requirement is met. Then, although no language can exactly represent the content of human consciousness, the net benefit of language is considerable.

Firstly, because a word has a definition, its meaning is usually fairly *precise*. Of course, this virtue is somewhat diluted if a word has more than one meaning, or if the definition of its meaning lacks precision. Even then, though, the context is usually sufficient to clarify the intended meaning of a word – though, as previously discussed, the overall meaning is at the mercy of many influences and cannot be exactly controlled.

Another advantage, which flows naturally from the first, is that a relatively few words, each possessed of a significant amount of agreed meaning, can express a total amount of meaning which might take a long time to impart, if there were no defined words to cover the subject matter. We can therefore add *efficiency* to the relative precision already mentioned.

A third advantage of words is the flexibility of management which results from their coded nature. This allows many operations to be performed on collections of words. A few examples are convenient storage, repeated editing and translation into other languages. There is some more about this in Appendix 2 and Appendix 4, but for now we can simply add *convenience* to the *precision* and *efficiency* already noted.

Human languages evolve continuously through the use of spoken words, becoming more useful and usually also more complex. The later addition of *writing* increases their usefulness yet further, and considerably so. Although speaking and writing are both methods of delivering words to a receiver, there are some important differences between them.

Not only is it routine to use slightly different vocabulary and grammar, depending on whether the communication is spoken or written, but the physical representation of words as sounds bears virtually no relationship at all to their physical representation as written or printed text.

The non-verbal messages which accompany words may also seem subtly different, according to whether they are heard or seen. In addition, while the sender is usually not in a position to observe a person who is reading a written message, the sender usually can observe the effect of a spoken message. Such observation can lead to the correction of misunderstandings.

An important practical point, when giving instructions or explanations in the form of spoken words, is that it is best to follow up with the same information clearly set out in written or printed text. While the general meaning may have been understood and remembered, details are frequently missing.

Indeed, the sender may well realise, when preparing the written version, that some important details were omitted altogether when speaking about the matter. In addition, if the receiver was under stress at the time of the conversation, almost everything is likely to be vaguely remembered, or not remembered at all.

Shades of Meaning

When words are used to communicate information, their meaning can be anything from very vague to very precise. In addition, words can be entirely descriptive, entirely abstract, or

anywhere in between. If they are descriptive, they might evoke the imagery of any or all of the main inputs, and sometimes the subsidiary inputs as well. Alternatively, if the meaning is abstract, they will evoke no sensory imagery at all.

To make the meaning more vague, one can choose words with less specific meanings, or arrange words in a way that allows for more than one interpretation, or both. To make the meaning more precise, one must avoid doing either of those things, so that there is as little flexibility as regards meaning, as possible.

Descriptive communication with words provides information which allows the identification of something which is already known to one or more of the five senses. For example, the words "a large green tree stood there, bathed in brilliant sunlight, like a giant sentry guarding the newly ploughed field" are likely to evoke visual memories, making it easy for the receiver to imagine seeing such a sight.

Similarly, the words "the rain drumming loudly on the roof made a deafening roar, echoed by the rattling of the windows and accompanied by the moaning of the wind" are likely to evoke auditory memories, making it easy for the receiver to imagine hearing such a sound.

To evoke tactile memories, words like smooth, prickling, cold and sharp might be effective. To evoke olfactory memories, words like aroma, scent or smell might be employed. Finally, to evoke gustatory memories, words like flavour, tasty and spicy could be pressed into service.

It is also possible, when communicating using words, to include an element of *embedded* meaning. This is achieved by using ordinary words – but not in ordinary ways.[1] It may

[1] The way in which the words are delivered is also significant, but that is a non-verbal addition – here, we are just considering the words.

involve unusual, perhaps surprising, word choices, unusual ways of putting the words together, or various specific poetic devices such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration and onomatopoeia.

Although the methods mentioned in the previous paragraph may be employed with the intention of expressing a particular meaning, it must be remembered that the very fluidity of this art form allows for an extremely wide range of possible interpretations. Therefore, what can be a very powerful form of communication is usually also very imprecise!

The end result of the various ways of influencing meaning described above is that a group of words can provide far more meaning than might be expected from the usual meanings of the individual words. The extra meaning (which may be the main, or perhaps the only meaning) is often said to reside "between the lines". The commonest examples are found in poetry, philosophy and the lyrics of songs.

However, people may also resort to symbolic language during a conversation, either because they are attempting to express the inexpressible, or because they do not want to state the facts baldly. Terminally ill patients often refer to their uncertain future in this way. This can sometimes lead to a more direct discussion of the prognosis, but on other occasions an answer in the same symbolic vein may be more appropriate.

A rather different example of extra meaning embedded within a group of words is *sarcasm*, in which apparently innocent words are intended – and interpreted – as harsh criticism. The principle is the same, in that the words are used as raw materials to build a meaning which goes beyond the literal one.

MISUNDERSTANDING

General Precautions

The possibility of different meanings being attributed to the same words is, of course, not necessarily beneficial, because it may result in *misunderstanding*. Although, as previously discussed, exact transfer of meaning is not feasible, a great deal can be done to minimise misunderstanding. Firstly, it usually helps to employ well-known words, to speak or write them clearly, and to use fairly short sentences of simple structure.

Secondly, it is essential to *know your audience*. Words are used differently, sometimes with different shades of meaning but quite often with completely different meanings, in different age groups, cultures and subcultures. In addition, the context may be different in various ways which are associated with the particular group. Even the grammar will not escape unscathed!

It is also a good idea to review the meanings of statements mentally, while formulating them, and again before sending them. Just by wondering what the words could possibly mean, what images they might evoke and how they might make someone feel, one's choice of words can often be improved.

Language Barrier

The general precautions mentioned above, together with some specific ones, become particularly important in the presence of a language barrier. In this situation, many nuances of meaning may be misinterpreted, and some essential content may be lost altogether. In addition, as I will discuss later, gestures may have quite different meanings in different cultures.

In any conversation with a person who is using a second or other language, it is more important than ever to use the simple words, short sentences and clear enunciation mentioned above

under General Precautions. In addition, the speed of delivery must be adjusted to the needs of the particular recipient.

It is also important to check at frequent intervals, to see whether the intended messages (and no major misunderstandings!) are getting through. This can best be judged by a mixture of careful observation of the receiver's non-verbal output, for clues suggestive of uncertainty; and direct questioning, to evaluate comprehension of the matters which have been discussed.

Frequent eye contact may be one useful part of the assessment of comprehension, but it is sometimes perceived as intrusive or vaguely disturbing by the other person. (In a teaching situation, a similar caution applies to watching a speaker's lips, which can help to determine the cause of pronunciation errors, but can also make the watched person feel uncomfortable, unless the reason for it is explained).

If a particular word is critical to the understanding of the subject matter, it is a good idea to ask specifically whether its meaning is known. People often feign comprehension in order to be polite, to avoid being a nuisance, or simply because they think they will be able to guess the overall meaning soon.

Students of a second or other language often carry around a small translation dictionary, either electronic or printed (the latter usually being preferable, at the time of writing). However, the meaning found in a dictionary should always be considered provisional, especially if the person seems surprised by it, as some words have very different alternative meanings.

Drawing pictures or diagrams to represent important elements of a sentence can be a very useful device. Asking a person to interrupt you whenever they don't understand is probably also worth a try, but the politeness and guesswork mentioned above often prevent this plan from working. Asking specific

questions, which can only be answered correctly if the sentence has been understood, gives much better results.

That is all I will say about words under this heading. As mentioned above, there is a little more in Appendix 2. There will also be some references to the use of words in the chapters which follow. However, most of the finer points belong to disciplines like English Expression, English Literature and Poetry – and those disciplines are entirely outside my scope.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In a very general sense, non-verbal communication simply includes all communication which is not achieved purely through the use of words or other symbols which perform the same task as words. However, as discussed below under Non-verbal Terms, that distinction is not always clear cut.

Regardless of the occasional demarcation disputes, non-verbal communication occurs within the same basic framework (i.e. output, transmission and input, to condense thousands of pages into three words) as does communication which is dependent on discrete symbols such as words. As I mentioned earlier, that process is very briefly discussed in Appendix 1. Incidentally, I am still avoiding the term "verbal communication", because it is sometimes applied to the spoken word alone, and sometimes to both the spoken word and the written word.

Now, although we might assume that words provide most of the information we exchange, careful observation of people who are communicating reveals a veritable flood of non-verbal information. This may be exchanged at the same time as the verbal information. Alternatively, it may be the whole of the information in cases where no verbal component is present.

I am very tempted to revisit my earlier brief but important remarks about the non-transferable nature of meaning, because this chapter is also about our constant attempts to transfer meaning. However, you can easily find those brief remarks in the first chapter (and many references to them elsewhere in the book) so I will content myself with a reminder that sender and receiver have different sense organs and different cognitive function, and that many other factors also influence meaning.

NON-VERBAL SCIENCE

There have not been very many studies of non-verbal communication, and hardly any have been quantitative. However, a study by Albert Mehrabian[1] in 1971 provided some interesting information about the relative importance of verbal and non-verbal messages in determining the receiver's impression of the sender's emotions. Specifically, each receiver was asked to assess whether the sender was expressing liking, neutrality or disliking.

Mehrabian found that, on average, words contributed 7% of the total influence on this assessment, while tone of voice and visual clues contributed 38% and 55% respectively. These three aspects of communication are sometimes referred to as "verbal, vocal and visual" (or "the three Vs"). However, the three Vs do not cover all the input/output methods previously discussed. The vocal component provides a large part of the auditory information but not necessarily all of it. Similarly, the visual component provides a large part of the non-auditory body language – but again, not necessarily all of it.

When a verbal message was incongruent with a non-verbal message in Mehrabian's study, the non-verbal message determined the outcome. Unfortunately, though, this study is often cited in support of claims about the superior importance of non-verbal communication *in general*, a subject which it did not address. It only addressed the receiver's assessment of the degree of liking or disliking expressed by the sender.

However, it does seem reasonable to expect that non-verbal communication might be important in any situation involving emotions or attitudes. This certainly seems to be the impression of many authors who write about communication. However, it

[1] Mehrabian, A. 1971. Silent messages. Wadsworth, Belmont, California.

is important to remember that impressions derived from experience are not always confirmed by experiment.

It is also worth remembering that the considerable importance ascribed to non-verbal communication, when communicating about emotions or attitudes, is balanced by the similarly considerable importance of words, when communicating about facts, logic, concepts, philosophy and the like.

NON-VERBAL TERMS

It is not always immediately obvious whether an instance of communication should be considered verbal or non-verbal. Some gestures have agreed meanings which are at least as precise as those of some words. Perhaps, like writing and signing, specific gestures should be considered as verbal communication via the visual input. By the same token, a word which is screamed loudly and harshly could be thought of as non-verbal communication via the auditory input – especially if its meaning did not fit the context.

Another way of looking at this issue is to consider whether the meaning is *explicit* (precisely defined) or *implicit* (imprecisely evoked). Words are usually explicit, and gestures are usually implicit. However, in the above examples, the gestures were examples of largely explicit communication, and the screamed word was an example of largely implicit communication.

Another example of communication which has a considerable implicit element, despite being based on words, is the symbolic communication mentioned above under Shades of Meaning. Here, the words and their order are chosen in such a way that a meaning beyond the strictly literal interpretation of the words is possible. However, that meaning is not explicitly stated.

Despite these examples, most of the communication performed with words is explicit, while most of the communication

performed without words is implicit. Probably for this reason, non-verbal communication is often used to express sentiments which would not be acceptable if communicated explicitly. A frown, for example, can convey disapproval or disagreement without (usually) causing overt hostility.

A more complex classification of non-verbal behaviour was suggested by Ekman and Friesen.[1] Five types were described, and were referred to as *translatable*, *illustrative*, *affect-display*, *regulator* and *adapter*. Translatable (also called "*emblem*") non-verbal behaviour consists of specific actions with known meanings, such as some gestures. Illustrative behaviours are those which effectively demonstrate something, perhaps by drawing a picture in the air, or showing the movement required to perform a task which is under discussion.

Affect-display behaviour allows others to see the visible effects of emotions, and thus to deduce the nature of those emotions. Regulator actions are those which are designed consciously to control the behaviour of one or more other people present, such as holding up a hand to stop someone talking.

Finally, adapter behaviour consists of actions performed to improve or maintain the comfort or security of the person exhibiting the behaviour. This could be something as simple as changing position in a chair, or scratching an itch. (In most cases, this behaviour is not intended as a form of communication at all. However, everything which can be noticed by another person may communicate something – whether you know it or not, and whether you like it or not.)

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[1] Ekman, P. & Friesen, W. V. (1969). The repertoire of nonverbal behavior: Categories, origins, usage, and coding. Semiotica, 1, 49- 98.

Another common non-verbal behaviour, which is not specifically included in the above list, is *mirroring*. This means copying the behaviour of another person, such as crossing or uncrossing the arms, or leaning back or forward, during a conversation. It is often done unconsciously, and it may sometimes reflect agreement or approval. It can also be done consciously, perhaps in an attempt to put the other person at their ease. However, deliberate mirroring behaviour can easily appear artificial, and thus be counterproductive.

The previous paragraphs are a reminder of the *mechanism* of communication, which is *action*. In the case of words, the main actions are speaking, writing and typing. In the case of non-verbal communication, actions performed by almost any part of the body can create the "vocabulary". For this reason, non-verbal communication is also called *body language*. (Some non-verbal communication is also created indirectly, for example, by showing a film, choosing particular clothes or creating and maintaining a comfortable environment.)

Clearly, it will not be possible to list all the actions in the non-verbal repertoire. However, I will mention a few examples under the next heading. The stimuli to which a person may respond are many and various, and some can be almost infinitesimally small. Any of the five senses may be involved as inputs, and most parts of the body can create the output signals. Many of the ways in which we respond to these signals may be learned, but others are almost certainly instinctive.

NON-VERBAL EXAMPLES

Increasing your understanding of non-verbal communication is the first step in improving your own use and comprehension of this vital aspect of interpersonal interaction. Under the present heading, I will discuss various aspects of non-verbal communication between two people. I may sometimes refer to

one of the two as a client or a patient, if it suits the context. However, much of the content could apply to any two people, neither of whom need be in a professional role. Some of it could also be extrapolated to small or large groups of people.

First Impressions

Appearance and personal hygiene are two very important sources of non-verbal messages, especially at the time of the initial contact. Most people find it easier to relate to someone who is clean, reasonably well groomed, and dressed in a way which does not elicit strong reactions. Minor health problems such as bad breath or unpleasant body odours can have a disproportionately large effect on a patient or client.

An adverse first impression can be a considerable barrier to the development of a satisfactory rapport.[1] The damage done in the first few seconds may take hours to undo, and may occasionally mar a relationship forever. The relevant factors are not limited to those mentioned. Almost everything about a person can contribute to the all-important first impression. This includes the so-called "object communication" created by things like clothes, jewellery and hairstyle.

Distance

The distance between you and another person may affect the reception of directly transmitted information by the receiver's inputs. For example, if you are too far apart, you may not be able to hear each other's speech clearly. The other inputs can also be affected by distance, in similar ways.

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[1] The development of mutual understanding, trust and co-operation known as *rapport* is indispensable in virtually all interpersonal communication, whether the context is therapeutic, commercial or social.

Your position relative to a client also sends quite a few messages of its own. Talking to a patient who is in bed, from the corridor, may be interpreted to mean that normal proximity is not desirable. Any number of possible reasons could be imagined for this, such as that the communication is considered unimportant, the patient is thought to be infectious, or the prognosis is so terrible that you cannot bear to face them. Any unusually distant position could have a similar effect.

While excessive distance usually has an adverse influence, close proximity may have positive *or* negative effects. It might suggest friendliness, preparation for a confidential discussion or the natural behaviour of a warm and caring personality. On the other hand, it might seem threatening, or even downright offensive, depending on the situation and the person involved.

Orientation

Distance is not the only aspect of the spatial relationship between people. For example, standing above a person who is sitting or lying down may interfere with recognition of facial and ocular expressions and gestures, and may also make the person feel at a disadvantage in various ways. Sitting in a low chair beside someone in a high bed creates a more or less opposite vertical displacement, with its own set of drawbacks.

Even when two people are at the same vertical level, their orientation can vary greatly. The main possibilities are face to face, side to side, back to back and all the angles in between. In most situations, having at least an oblique view of the other person's face is highly desirable. Approximately face to face orientation has advantages, as all aspects of both verbal and non-verbal communication are then easier to exchange.

However, face to face orientation can seem confrontational, especially if the distance between the two people is small, so an

oblique angle may be preferred. When a desk is present, one solution is for the client to sit *beside* one end of the desk, instead of facing the interviewer across the whole desktop. The two then view each other across a corner of the desk.

Some interviewers prefer to leave the desk altogether and sit side by side with the client, turning their chairs in obliquely. This is less formal, but it makes it more difficult to manage multiple documents, take notes or use a computer. Therefore, in cases where a fair amount of data entry or retrieval is necessary, this would not usually be the ideal orientation.

Posture

The posture of the body is in some ways analogous to the expression of the face, and provides communicative output in a similar way. Sometimes, an unusual posture may be due to physical or mental illness, but usually it can be controlled consciously, with consequent improvement in communication.

Consider the following possible postures. Standing rigid and immobile; crouching, poised as if ready to escape; slumped in a chair waiting for backache to strike; squatting uncomfortably on the floor and wobbling precariously; or sitting comfortably in a position which allows both relaxation and balance.

Of those listed, only the last makes much sense as a posture for good communication. There are many other possibilities, of course – some suitable for good communication and some not. The important thing about posture is that it should provide a stable and comfortable base from which to communicate.

Movements

I will consider large-scale movements, and the body positions they create, under this heading. I will look at the movements called gestures under the next heading, and facial movements

after that. They are all movements, of course. However, I think it will be more convenient to discuss them separately.

Visual communicators probably notice movements more than other communicators do. However, tactile communicators may not be far behind, especially in cases where the movement suggests the possibility of contact, or perhaps evokes some aspect of bodily comfort. Auditory and verbal communicators are likely to pay least attention to movements (unless they have good visual or tactile communication skills as well).

Moving closer might suggest interest, concern, affection, aggression, deafness or many other things, depending partly on the context and partly on the receiver. Moving away might suggest a lack of interest in the conversation, an uncaring attitude, fear, dislike, shock, disapproval, considerately allowing the other person more space – or various other things.

Crossed arms might convey a superior attitude, a closed mind, disapproval, defensiveness, or perhaps just a comfortable position. Immobility might convey a lack of interest, falling asleep, or perhaps very close attention to the other person.

Touching one's own face during a conversation is often taken to mean that one is either lying or withholding information. However, it could just as easily be an attempt to hide part of the face because of shyness. For that matter, it could be due to an itch, an attempt to stifle a sneeze (or a yawn) or perhaps just a self conscious check on a previously noticed blemish.

Another action – actually a deferring of action – which is sometimes taken as a sign of a dishonest answer is a pause before answering. I suppose this could just as well be classified as a Sound Effect, because it affects the rhythm of the auditory component of communication.

Anyway, the idea is that it takes time to formulate a good lie, whereas the truth is immediately available. The problem with

this theory is that it can also take time to review the question and consider all the facts relevant to a good answer. Consequently, honest people might also pause before answering – and indeed, in my experience, they often do.

Some movements, and the consequent changes of position, cannot be avoided without sitting like a statue (which would send its own message). They therefore form an unavoidable non-verbal background to face to face communication. Consequently, it is important to pay attention to them.

Sometimes, paying attention to your own body language will allow you to catch inappropriate movements of your own before they even occur. For example, if a client shares something with you, which you find distressing or disgusting, you may notice some warning signs before you actually react.

You may feel your body preparing to recoil as if from a snake, or your face beginning to look disgusted. If so, you have a small window of opportunity in which to nip those disasters in the bud. Even if you only notice your mistake after it happens, you can at least try to ameliorate the damage – and also learn from the mistake, reducing the chance of a repeat performance.

Gestures

Gestures are, as mentioned above, a subset of movements, and a very important one at that. As also mentioned earlier, there are two main groups of gestures – the explicit ones, with specific meanings, and the rest, with relatively vague meanings. I have included both types under this heading.

It is important to remember that even the first group can never be trusted completely, as regards meaning, because the meanings of gestures are learned in a haphazard way and are not usually discussed very much. Dictionaries of gestures do exist, but they are rarely consulted. Consequently, even explicit

gestures may be interpreted by the person receiving them in a way rather different to that expected by the sender.

This is much more likely if the two people involved are from different cultures. In that case, a specific gesture, such as nodding or shaking the head, may even have the *opposite* meaning to that intended! Alternatively, a gesture can be explicit in one culture and implicit in another. Therefore, an intended meaning might not be received; or a very specific, but unintended, meaning might, unfortunately, be assumed.

In general, it is therefore wise to use gestures with extra care whenever they will have to arrive across a cultural border. This is not entirely restricted to people from different countries or with a different primary language. It can also apply to different age groups, or different regions within the same country.

If you pay close attention to the other person's body language while you communicate, you may notice when a gesture misfires. A simple explanation may then resolve the issue. Otherwise, it could interfere, to a varying and unknown degree, with the success of the interview or other interaction; and its repercussions might affect future interactions as well.

For various reasons, especially visibility and dexterity, small movements capable of creating messages mostly involve the hands or face. Like large-scale movements, they cannot easily be avoided, and their avoidance would create its own, rather strange, message in any case. As usual, the best approach is to be as aware as possible of your own output and the client's reactions; as well as the client's output, and your reactions.

The hands are very richly supplied with muscles and nerves, and have a disproportionately large amount of brain devoted to their service. It is therefore not very surprising that they can talk so well! As for the face, it can not only talk, it can also sing and dance, so I have given it a heading of its own, below.

If your hands are moving in a way that complements the rest of your communication, perhaps by sketching shapes in the air or imitating the subject of your words, then they are probably helping. However, if they are flapping around aimlessly, wringing, tapping on the table or cracking their knuckles, they may easily be doing more harm than good.

I will not try to list the many specific gestures which can be made with the hands, but I will mention a few examples which are common in Australia. Holding one hand horizontally, palm down and pointing forward, and rocking it slightly from side to side, suggests "approximately" or "so-so". Hooking the upward-facing index finger repeatedly towards oneself (usually called beckoning) means "come here". (In quite a few cultures, incidentally, all four fingers are used to beckon – and in some cultures, the whole hand is used.)

Rubbing the thumb against the first two fingers means "money" in many cultures. Writing in the air with thumb and forefinger opposed is understood by waiters in most countries to mean "bring the bill". There are countless other gestures, many of which are described in Wikipedia.[1]

Facial Expressions

Movements of the face could be thought of as analogous to gestures, or perhaps as a subset of gestures. Either way, they are of immense importance in communication. Some, such as a smile, a frown or a raised eyebrow, include a considerable proportion of explicit meaning, while others are mainly or wholly implicit. I will not attempt to discuss the enormous number of possible facial expressions, but I will make some

[1] Wikipedia contributors. Gesture. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Modified on 12 December 2008, at 08:04 AEST. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gesture. Accessed December 18, 2008.

general comments about a very few of them. I will include eye movements, but not eye contact, under this heading.

Importantly, even when an expression has an explicit meaning, that meaning is not usually the whole story. Instead, the explicit meaning acts rather like a framework, within which the overall meaning can be varied quite a lot. To some extent, this applies to all explicit non-verbal communication (and, to a lesser extent, to words as well) but I think it is more noticeable with explicit facial expressions than in most other cases.

Lack of movement is again significant – a poker face may not say much about the cards held, but it still transmits a message. Various other things which do not involve any movement can also contribute messages. Pallor, blushing, perspiration and tears are examples of facial characteristics which contribute to communication without the need for movement.

With practice, you can learn to feel most of what your face is doing, but not everything. Very tiny face or eye movements can convey quite significant messages, and yet remain unknown to the sender. Changes in pupil diameter, which may be interpreted consciously or unconsciously as having various meanings, are also not noticed by the sender.

The pupils tend to constrict in response to disapproval, anger or a reduction in cognitive effort; and to dilate in response to emotional warmth, affection or sustained cognitive effort. However, they also change diameter in response to ambient light intensity, constricting when the light is bright and dilating when it is dim or dark. A person who sees the size of another's pupils might conceivably compensate unconsciously for the light, but would not be likely to compensate for the artificial modifiers mentioned below.

Many eyedrops, and quite a few legal and illegal systemic drugs, can alter the diameter of the pupils, or inhibit their

responsiveness to other stimuli, or both. Adrenaline, released as part of the "fight or flight" response[1] to anxiety or fear, enlarges the pupils. The diameter of the pupil under standard conditions, and the amount by which it changes in response to various stimuli, also varies considerably from person to person.

In view of the many confounding factors just mentioned, it might easily be thought that pupil diameter could not possibly play any significant part in non-verbal communication. However, there may well be an instinctive element in the response to this signal, so it should not be discounted entirely.

The eyelids also have a role in non-verbal communication. As well as its effect on the pupils, disapproval or anger can cause the eyelids to move closer together, whether or not a frown is present. They may also move closer together when smiling, of course, or as a result of bright, windy or dusty conditions.

The eyelids often move further apart in response to surprise or fear, even though these are not the opposites of disapproval and anger. The upper eyelids are also elevated automatically if the eyebrows are raised, which may occur with surprise, or may be used as an explicit gesture to indicate the idea of surprise.

Another thing that the eyelids do is blink. Many factors affect the blink rate, but an unusually fast rate is bound to be noticed, and might be interpreted as anxiety. A slow blink rate is not so noticeable as a fast one, but may also be noticed. Unlike pupil diameter, eyelid movements can be controlled consciously to some extent – but only if you pay attention to them.

Movements of the eyeball itself, in response to the information processing consistent with different communication styles, have been discussed previously. These eye movements can

[1] The "fight or flight" response is explained in "An Introduction to Mental Illness", a free e-booklet (in preparation) from www.wanterfall.com

probably also be influenced consciously to some extent, but I think it is unlikely that anyone could maintain good control over them all the time. Apart from any information they yield about a preferred communication style, they might conceivably also contribute to unconscious non-verbal communication.

Eye Contact

I suppose eye contact might be considered as a gesture, or perhaps a particular example of eye movement, or just a general aspect of facial expression. However it is classified, I have given it its own heading, because it has significant effects on communication and therefore deserves careful attention.

Eye contact has different meanings for different people. It is sometimes used to signify the gravity of a verbal statement. It can sometimes imply that more has been meant, or understood, than can easily be expressed verbally. It can provide a sense of emotional connection, with a variable degree of intimacy. It can also carry the suggestion (not necessarily correct) that no part of the truth is being withheld from the receiver.

However, if you make prolonged eye contact, some people might feel that you are trying to stare them down, which is an aggressive behaviour in most contexts. Others might feel that you are looking deep inside them, to a degree which could be perceived as disturbing, intrusive or just plain impertinent.

Too little eye contact, on the other hand, might give the impression that you have something to hide, or perhaps that you dislike the other person and want to avoid closer interaction. Alternatively, the other person might assume that you consider them irrelevant and therefore can't be bothered taking much notice of them. Many other interpretations are possible, which makes it all rather confusing.

Adding to the potential confusion is the fairly common suspicion that there may be more to eye-to-eye messaging than has yet been scientifically demonstrated. Quite a strong sense of communication is felt by many people during eye contact. It is sometimes reported as a result of quite fleeting eye contact. Usually, the communication involved is sensed as implicit, but occasionally there may be an impression of explicit meaning.

I suppose this could simply be because each person has a good view of whatever the other's pupils, eyeballs and eyelids are doing, and therefore notices the messages exchanged in those ways with increased clarity. However, many people feel that there is more to it than that, even though no direct eye-to-eye communication input/output method has been demonstrated by means of controlled experimentation at the time of writing.

Whatever the reason for the various feelings people have about the eyes, it makes sense to adjust the amount of eye contact offered in response to all the clues you have to the client's comfort or distress. This should help you to avoid erring too much in either direction. I think a reasonable starting point is to make fairly frequent, but brief, eye contact, and to avoid prolonged eye contact until a fairly good rapport is established.

Sound Effects

The sound of the voice (whether or not it is also making words) is a very important part of non-verbal communication. The loudness, pitch, rhythm and timbre[1] of the voice all carry their own messages, as do changes in any or all of them. So does the rate at which the words are delivered, though this might be considered an aspect of rhythm. Complex combinations of

[1] Timbre is the tonal quality imparted to a sound by its harmonics, i.e. all the frequencies present in the sound apart from its fundamental pitch. Notes of the same pitch can have an infinite variation in timbre.

these five qualities can convey the attitude of the speaker, such as a superior, timid, accepting or authoritarian attitude, as well as many other fine shades of meaning.

Stress on particular words, or pauses in the flow of speech, also convey meaning. Timing, too, is not only vital for comedians – it is an important aspect of all communication, whether verbal or non-verbal. Different accents, whether regional or foreign, also influence listener responses – and sometimes comprehension as well. Different accents include a contribution from the sonic elements already mentioned, together with differences in pronunciation of variable degree.

Sounds which are not from the voice at all, such as clearing the throat, coughing, sniffing, snorting, sighing, giggling, a sudden inhalation, a sudden exhalation, wheezing, noises from the gastro-intestinal tract and so on, also contribute to the sum total of the auditory messages which are being received.

Sounds from the environment are also significant, especially if they are loud enough to compete with speech. Floor polishers, leaf blowers, loud music and car alarms are some obvious examples, but even a creaking chair, or a loudly ticking clock, might be a distraction in some circumstances.

Finally, the *absence* of sound can be a powerful form of communication. Indeed, silence can sometimes say more than words. However, it must be used with care, as it is easily misunderstood, and can be quite confronting when prolonged. Extending a silence for long enough to encourage the other person to talk, but not long enough to cause distress, requires some experience and sensitivity, and must be guided, as always, by the non-verbal clues provided by the other person.

Direct Contact

Tactile sensation, though not usually as important as sight and hearing, is nevertheless a major input. Apart from communicating with words via braille, the tactile input is used almost exclusively for non-verbal communication. Because it is mediated by direct physical contact, its use is governed to a great extent by cultural guidelines relating to such contact.

Direct contact might occasionally be misunderstood, especially by a timid person, as aggression. However, aggressive contact is not usually very ambiguous. By far the most common problem, when communicating by touch, is the possibility that it might be misunderstood as having a sexual motivation.

This varies enormously, both with culture and with time. My remarks will relate to Australian society at the time of writing (2008). However, even within a single culture at a given time, there are variations in what is considered acceptable.

Concerns about physical contact depend to a great extent on the gender and sexual orientation of the parties involved. If both are of the same gender, and both are heterosexual, there is relatively little likelihood that well-meant physical contact *of a conventional nature* will be seriously misunderstood. It might, however, cause embarrassment if the receiver is unused to it.

The same *usually* applies if the person making the contact is female, and the recipient is male – regardless of sexual orientation. For example, I have not heard of an Australian man complaining of feeling violated or otherwise attacked as a result of receiving a hug from a female counsellor or doctor. Of course, that does not mean that it will never happen.

When the parties to the transaction are of the opposite gender and the recipient is female, there is a greater risk of misunderstanding, which can have serious results. If tactile communication is interpreted as sexual harassment, it will not

only be embarrassing, but could also have legal repercussions; and good intentions might prove to be an insufficient defence.

Nevertheless, some examples of tactile communication survive. Handshaking, for example, is still widely practised. It is common when meeting or departing, in a wide variety of situations. It is almost always combined with eye contact, and a face to face orientation is usual when circumstances permit.

Although very widespread, handshaking is not devoid of potential difficulties. In some Muslim cultures, for example, handshaking between men and women is not acceptable at all. In any culture, the duration of a handshake could influence its acceptability. If unusually prolonged, it would no longer be a conventional gesture. At some point, it would begin to seem intrusive or eccentric, and ultimately aggressive.

The eye contact associated with handshaking, along with any other non-verbal behaviour noticed in the other person, should make it clear when the duration of a handshake (or any other contact) has become unwelcome. However, like all feedback, this will only work for you if you are paying attention.

It is also important to be aware of the possibility of arthritis or osteoporosis when shaking hands, especially in older people, and to apply minimal or even zero pressure as appropriate. This can be done while keeping your own hand slightly stiffened, which creates a vague impression that a grasp is occurring.[1]

Apart from handshaking, it is really very difficult to say what type of physical contact is usually accepted as a part of normal communication in a particular society. Those who work in

[1] Some people with arthritis offer two fingers to be shaken, especially if, as in the case of a vicar after a service, they will be shaken many times. This prevents their tormentors from getting a grip around the metacarpal bones, thus lessening the risk of bone or joint injury.

Australian government departments, however, cannot complain of being kept entirely in the dark, as they receive plenty of circulars explaining how they should *not* behave!

These sometimes make for amusing reading (unless, perhaps, you are a member of the target audience). I have recently heard that patting a colleague on the forearm is considered quite inappropriate and possibly illegal. I await the demise of the shoulder and upper back, as acceptable contact zones, with a certain degree of fatalism.

Despite such hazards, I am not quite ready to give up on tactile communication. Instead, I will muster up what courage I have left and consider another common example – the humble hug. This gesture has a lot in common with the handshake, as it most commonly occurs as an accompaniment to hello or goodbye. Indeed, in some cases, a handshake metamorphoses into a hug in mid flight. However it arises, a hug is generally seen as less formal, and more friendly, than a handshake.

Other common situations which often include a hug are comforting a person who is distressed, and thanking someone for something. Hugging is widely practised in Australia, and also in many other countries. It is more common in Australia than it is England, but the United States of America probably has the highest hug rate of any English speaking country.

Hugs are less likely to occur in the absence of a reasonable rapport between the protagonists. They are also less common, in many countries, when both parties are male. Older male heterosexual Australians, for example, are often embarrassed (and may even become violent!) when hugged by other males.

The above generalisations may allow an approximate prediction of the likelihood of a hug making a positive contribution to communication in a particular case, but they cannot ever provide a definite answer. Fortunately, though,

there is a preliminary phase to every such skirmish, when one party, by way of increasing limb trajectory and diminishing range, provides clear evidence of an impending engagement!

The other party can then choose whether to advance or retreat. If a feat of arms does ensue, it is important to pay attention to the prisoner's behaviour while confined. Specifically, it is necessary to notice promptly when he or she is trying to escape again. Alternatively, you might decide that it is time you escaped yourself. Ultimately, the mutual prisoners should release each other in good condition and without a struggle.

One thing I have not discussed under this heading is the *subjective quality* of tactile messages. As well as the presence or absence of touch, there is enormous variation in its quality. This is very important. However, I don't think there is much point discussing different qualities of touch in words. Instead, I would commend the personal, subjective study of quality of touch to every person interested in communication.

Well, I have only covered a very few examples of tactile communication under this heading, but I think they at least illustrate the sorts of issues which may be encountered. Perhaps my comments have discouraged you from including contact in your repertoire of communication skills. I think that would be unfortunate. On the other hand, perhaps I have just discouraged you from coming to Australia! I do hope I have not done that.

Consent Issues

Apart from a few exceptions created by legislation, anything which directly affects another person's body requires that person's consent. Without consent, the intrusion would be a form of assault. In most everyday situations, consent is negotiated informally, and often non-verbally. The behaviour

which may lead to a hug, as discussed under the previous heading, is one example of such informally negotiated consent.

In the case of the direct contact employed in physical examination, in the context of health care, the consent process often needs to be formal. Doctors, nurses and other health care personnel frequently need to touch various parts of a patient's body in the course of diagnosis or treatment. However, that does not mean that the patient's consent can be assumed.

The boundary between implied and explicit consent for medical examination has moved greatly over the last few decades. When I entered practice in 1970, stepping into a doctor's consulting room more or less implied consent for visual and tactile examination of any part of the body which could be reached without making a surgical incision.

Recently, in sharp contrast, I have read of doctors requiring informed and express verbal consent before wrapping a blood pressure cuff around a patient's arm. As for routine gynaecological examinations and tests, an increasing proportion of male doctors simply refuse to do them. They argue that, if a complaint is made, it will be taken very seriously – and may easily take years to resolve.

While such complaint hearings are pending, doctors have occasionally been murdered, or have committed suicide. More often, though, the doctor simply decides on a change of career. Looked at from this perspective, the idea of a male doctor excluding gynaecology from his practice appears less surprising – though no less detrimental to patient care.

I cannot suggest a comprehensive solution to this problem, though good communication at every stage of every consultation goes a long way towards reducing the likelihood of a complaint. I think all health care workers will soon be affected, though doctors are presently in the vanguard.

Providers of indemnity cover are taking an increasingly pro-active approach to risk management of all sorts, and perhaps their efforts will result in a practicable and effective remedy. If not, health care will simply be less effective, resulting in considerable unnecessary suffering, and sometimes loss of life.

Personal Qualities

Having looked briefly at quite a few of the practical aspects of non-verbal communication, I now come to the most important one of all. In most cases, the personal qualities of the communicators themselves have more influence on the quality of their non-verbal communication than any other factor.

No matter how much you learn about communication, what you *know* will never be as important as what you *are*. You bring the whole of yourself to the communication process whether you like it or not. The main reason for this is that a very significant proportion of non-verbal communication occurs without conscious intent or awareness on either side.

What you are is, of course, much easier to refer to than to define. There are many facets to what a person is. When discussing the qualities needed by facilitators of emotional catharsis in "Wanterfall",[1] I did so under the headings *personality, attitudes, knowledge, skills, experience* and *focus*.

The qualities I discussed under those headings are essentially the same as those which improve non-verbal communication. That in turn improves any interpersonal interaction, and especially counselling. I will not discuss all of the qualities which I discussed under those headings here, as the book just mentioned is easily available (and free).

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[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

However, I will comment briefly on three of them – a non-judgmental attitude, an urge to help, and the practice of self-awareness. Especially in the case of counselling, I think the most important personal quality of all is the extent to which one is able and willing to be *non-judgmental* about information and behaviour which become apparent during the interaction.

Not only is a non-judgmental attitude a prerequisite for further disclosures and a continuing good rapport, it is also useful as a way of teaching the client by example. So many of the problems which bring clients to counselling are at least partly underpinned by self-condemnation resulting from a judgmental attitude, that anything which helps to break that vicious circle may well be the most beneficial aspect of the whole process.

The next thing I promised to comment on was an *urge to help*. This might sound like an obvious quality for someone in a helping profession to have, but obvious and actual do not always coincide. If the urge to help is weak, most clients will notice the fact quite soon.

They might then "vote with their feet", which puts them back where they started, looking for a suitable counsellor. From the point of view of the provider, working in any helping profession without an underlying urge to help is usually both stressful and unrewarding – two of the worst possible adjectives to add to any job description!

If that is the situation, then the sooner you notice it, the better. Noticing things like that brings me to the last thing I promised to comment on, *self-awareness*. This is simply the awareness of what goes on in your own mind, from moment to moment – preferably all day long. I think it is tremendously important, not only for good communication, but for every aspect of life.

Personally, I think the best way for anyone to improve their self-awareness is simply to practice the "non-judgmental self-

awareness" technique which I described at some length in "Wanterfall", the book mentioned earlier under this heading – but then, I would say that, wouldn't I?

Another way of attempting to gain some insight into one's personal awareness is the Johari[1] Window technique, which compares a person's choice of adjectives for self-description (from a specific list) with those chosen from the same list by that person's friends or colleagues.

The results are then tabulated in four quadrants (called the "panes" of the "window"). For example, if both you and your colleagues think that you are shy, that quality would be placed in your "arena" pane to illustrate the fact that it is known to both self and others. Similarly, the results obtained for the other adjectives in the list are placed as described in the "panes" of the sample "window" shown in the following illustration.

[1] Luft, J, Ingham, H (1955) "The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness", *Proceedings of the western training laboratory in group development*. Los Angeles: UCLA.

The Four Panes of the Johari Window

	Known to self	Not known to self
Known to others	This part of your personality is well known to you and to others. It is your "open" or "public" self. You are aware, and you share. The authors referred to this pane as the "arena" (though it may not always be very large).	This part of your personality is well known to others, but not to you. It is the part of you that your "blinkers" conceal. The authors referred to this pane as the "blind spot" (though it may not always be very small).
Not known to others	This part of your personality is well known to you, but not to others. It is your "concealed" or "secret" self. The authors referred to this pane as the "façade", but I would say the façade[1] is what (partly) *hides* your concealed self.	This part of your personality is not known to you or to others. Its very existence is therefore hypothetical. The authors referred to this pane as the "unknown". An alternative name for it might be "the challenge"!

While nowhere near as important to the development of an understanding of one's inner environment as the routine practice of non-judgmental self-awareness, the Johari Window technique can certainly provide interesting and useful insights.

[1] The usual meaning of façade is the front or exterior face which a building presents to the world (especially if it looks better than what lies behind it).

Integration

Noticing examples of non-verbal communication can be a fascinating pastime, but to be valuable in real life situations, it needs to be merged with the rest of the communication process. This means learning to *notice without the noticing being noticed* by others, and also learning to use non-verbal output in ways that do not draw attention to themselves.

In other words, all the nuts and bolts need to be in all the right places, with none of them sticking out. Artifice may sometimes play a useful part, but only if it is not apparent. Active Listening, which is discussed in the next chapter, is one valuable approach to the integration of verbal and non-verbal communication skills in a practical context.

ACTIVE LISTENING

The simplest example of interpersonal communication in practice is a conversation between two people. As this activity makes up a significant proportion of the total amount of communication in any community, the degree to which it is successful must have a significant influence on the overall quality of communication in human society.

The deceptively simple concept called *Active Listening* is one important method of improving interpersonal communication. It was developed as a means of improving helping interviews involving two people, but its principles can also be applied to other types of interaction, or to a greater number of people.

Interestingly, there does not seem to be any universally accepted definition of Active Listening. This may be partly because its main elements were already in widespread use when clinical psychologist and psychotherapist Carl Rogers[1] brought the term to prominence. In addition, various other people have since published rather different descriptions, which they have nevertheless referred to as Active Listening.

In these notes, I will look briefly at the approach suggested by Rogers. He described two essential elements of Active Listening, which he called *listener orientation* and *reflective technique*. These two elements can almost always be recognised in later descriptions of Active Listening by other authors, though they often appear in rather modified form.

The underlying purpose of the application of these two essential elements was, and remains, to engage in a *therapeutic* interview – that is, one which is of benefit to a client. The idea

[1] Active Listening was discussed in a number of Rogers' publications. An example is: Rogers, C. and Farson, R.E. 1957. Active Listening. University of Chicago Industrial Relations Center, Chicago.

of *listening for meaning* (specifically, the meaning perceived by the client) is a recurring theme throughout the process.

LISTENER ORIENTATION

Rogers described the "listener orientation" as including the whole of the listener's personality, together with the listener's attitude to the other person and to the encounter itself. He felt that, for best results, the listener orientation should be characterised by *empathy*, *respect*, *acceptance*, *congruence*, *concreteness* and *undivided attention*.

I think that list could perhaps be expanded a little, as the qualities needed by the active listener are really the same as the qualities needed by any helping professional in an interpersonal role. As mentioned earlier, I have discussed those qualities elsewhere.[1] I will not repeat that discussion here, but I will look briefly at each of the qualities suggested by Rogers.

Empathy

Empathy is generally defined in terms of an understanding of, and entering into, another person's feelings, with an underlying inclination to help. In other words, it is not enough just to understand how the other person feels. Empathy also includes a sense of joining them, walking with them in their sorrow, wishing them well and usually also being willing to offer help where possible.

Not everyone possesses very much of this quality, and it cannot be acquired by taking a degree in psychology. Indeed, I do not know of any definable method by which it can be acquired.

[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

However, I think any form of therapy which depends for its results on the relationship between therapist and client is likely to be severely impaired by its absence. This simply means that some people are better suited to interpersonal forms of therapy than others – which will probably not surprise many readers.

Respect

Respect, which usually means an earned esteem or admiration, or sometimes acceptance, deference or even fear, was given a different meaning by Rogers. He saw it as a positive regard which does *not* have to be earned, but is given unconditionally to each client, simply because the client is a human being.

This rather esoteric concept of respect involves thinking well of every person, rather than judging each individual according to a preconceived standard of personal worth. As with empathy, the choice to accord a client this "unconditional positive regard" cannot be taught or learned.

Importantly, this concept of respect does not mean agreeing with, or encouraging, a client's ideas or behaviour. Indeed, some of those things may be causing the client's problems, in which case, one of the aims of therapy would be to change them. It is "the person within the problem" who is respected unconditionally – not the problem itself, or its causes.

An absolute prerequisite for this type of respect is the non-judgmental attitude frequently mentioned in this book. A non-judgmental attitude to others is another thing which cannot be taught or learned. However, the routine practice of non-judgmental self-awareness, as discussed in "Wanterfall"[1], will usually give birth to it sooner or later.

[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

Acceptance

Acceptance, in this context, simply means that no value judgements are made. This makes it very close to Rogers' concept of respect, and again requires an entirely non-judgmental approach. Clients are accepted as they are, and what they say is accepted as it is. That does not mean that anything is agreed with. Rather, it is accepted as the current state of play. This acceptance is the starting point for any progress that may be made. In other words, it is where you and the client currently *are*. Where you are is, after all, the only place you can start from – wherever you want to go.

Congruence

As discussed under Communication Styles in Practice, congruence when communicating simply means that all the messages received by the client at a given time are compatible with each other. They need not be identical, but if they are contradictory they are sure to wreak havoc in various ways.

For example, a counsellor who smiles reassuringly at a client, lays rough fingernails on her arm, and barks "I will always be here for you" – meanwhile perching on the edge of the seat, turning away and staring at the door – sends quite a number of messages. If they are all received, they will not fit together at all well! Fortunately, most examples of incongruent communication are rather less extreme than that.

Nevertheless, even those less extreme examples can have an adverse effect – and they are never likely to be beneficial. If incongruent messages are received clearly, there are only two possibilities. Either the sender is lying, or the sender does not know his or her own mind. More often, though, some or all of the conflicting meanings are only vaguely understood, which

can leave the recipient confused, frightened, irritable, suspicious and/or hostile, without quite knowing why.

Because of the many adverse consequences of incongruent communication, Rogers felt that verbal acknowledgement of any negative feelings such as anger or disgust was necessary, as the negative feelings would inevitably be evident to some extent in the listener's non-verbal output. That being the case, failure to deliver the same message verbally would result in incongruent communication.

My own opinion is that very few people are ready for completely unfiltered verbal honesty, and most prefer at least some adverse non-verbal responses to remain in the non-verbal sphere (where they are less likely to start a war). Of course, the non-judgmental attitude and unconditional acceptance already discussed would usually prevent unconscious transmission of adverse messages in the first place – and that is better still.

Concreteness

In relation to communication, concreteness usually just means not being abstract. However, Rogers also included the idea of *specificity*, meaning not being content with generalisations. For example, a client might say "parental behaviour has a lot to answer for". This may be a perfectly reasonable generalisation, but it does not contribute much of therapeutic significance for this particular client at this particular time.

A little gentle cross-examination might ultimately lead to the *concrete* statement "From when I was seven until when I was twelve, my father used to beat me with a tennis racket if I didn't get an A or a B for my homework. Then he had a stroke, and after that he wasn't strong enough to beat me any more". This statement, which is neither abstract nor nonspecific, would

have far more potential relevance in a counselling situation than the original generalisation.

Undivided Attention

Undivided attention may be pretty well self-explanatory, but that certainly does not make it inevitable. In fact, even to make it possible requires a certain amount of organisation and preparation. First of all, a suitable place for the interview needs to be arranged. If, for example, there are unwanted spectators or interruptions, any interview will be a shambles.

However, the most important preparation needed to make undivided attention possible is the preparation of the listener. Communication skills are the most obvious aspect of this, but I think reducing the listener's burden of unresolved emotions is even more important. The details of working with emotional "unfinished business" are outside the scope of these notes, but the concept is well known. My own thoughts on the matter are set out fully in my earlier book, "Wanterfall".[1]

REFLECTIVE TECHNIQUE

There is less variation in different descriptions of the reflective technique, which is the second aspect of Active Listening, than there is in the case of the listener orientation. The technique takes its name from its first major element, which is the *reflection* back to the client of what has been received by the listener. However, it also has a second major element, which is the *clarification* of the meaning of what has been heard.

[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

When the reflective technique is used in its original (therapeutic) context, it is primarily applied to the personal and emotional content of the narrative. However, the same technique can be used to improve the accuracy of retrieval of any sort of information about any subject matter.

In practice, reflection and clarification are considerably interlaced, in that reflection often leads to some degree of clarification, and attempts at clarification often require some degree of reflection. For this reason, there will be some repetition in the discussion of these two elements.

Reflection

The term "restatement" is often applied to this element of the technique. This term suggests returning verbal messages in the listener's own words, which is one important part of reflection. However, unless applied in a broad sense, restatement would not include the (very significant) non-verbal parts of the narrative, and these must not be neglected.

Non-verbal content is sometimes best reflected non-verbally, sometimes using the same input/output method that it arrived by. Sometimes, though, a different method might be chosen, especially if the narrator has poor facility with the input/output method originally (and perhaps unconsciously) used. Alternatively or additionally, a verbal interpretation of the non-verbal message might usefully be made in some cases.

When employing verbal reflection, shorter interjections have the advantage that they interrupt the flow of the narrative less. Keeping your output brief also forces you to stick to the main points. However, this ideal quite often conflicts with the ideal of concreteness, as discussed under Listener Orientation, because more words may be needed in order to achieve the degree of specificity required for concrete communication.

Four benefits that often occur as a result of reflection are *evidence* of the listener's attention, *encouragement* to continue the narrative, *restarting* of a completely stalled narrative and *reassurance* about the listener's acceptance of the content. I will look briefly at each of these potential benefits.

Evidence of Attention

It requires very little in the way of verbal or non-verbal output to remind a client of your presence and continuing attention. Rather than reflecting any of the client's specific messages, your "mirror" just has to show that the client is *present* and *heard*. On the other hand, equally small outputs can just as easily show that the client is going completely unnoticed!

To demonstrate attention verbally, you might say “Yes”, "OK", “Ah” or “Mm” at appropriate times (though the last two are on the borderline between verbal and non-verbal). The double-barrelled grunts "Mm-mm", "Mm-hmm", "Uh-uh" and "Uh-huh" need some care, though. They are well understood in the United States of America, where the "h" added to the beginning of the second syllable turns "no" into "yes", but they could easily cause confusion in other English speaking countries.

Non-verbal messages of attention can be as simple as a very slight change in posture, or any other slight movement. Brief eye contact or a change in facial expression may also be suitable, as long as it is appropriate to the situation. However, as mentioned under Non-verbal Examples, some gestures, such as nodding or shaking the head, have different meanings in different cultures, so great care is necessary when the reflection must negotiate a cultural border crossing.

Any of the three main input/output systems may be used for non-verbal reflection. However, visual messages will obviously only succeed if they are seen by the client. Importantly, tactile messages need to be used with great care when a client is

expressing emotions, as the temporary reassurance often experienced as a side effect of tactile communication can easily bring the externalisation process to an abrupt halt.[1]

Encouragement of the Narrator

Brief messages similar to those that provide evidence of attention can also be used to encourage the speaker to continue the narrative, at any time when it seems to be on the brink of petering out. If non-verbal nudges such as a raised eyebrow, or single words such as "And?" don't work, then repetition of the last handful of words the client said, or a paraphrase of them, is usually effective. An alternative might be a very brief classificatory or interpretive statement.

Restarting a Stalled Narrative

If the narrative has completely ground to a halt, the same measures suggested above for encouragement may be sufficient to restart it. If not, then judicious use of silence, an open question, or perhaps some more extensive paraphrasing of the story so far, could be tried. This has the combined effect of demonstrating your attention to what has been said so far, showing how well or badly you have understood it, showing that you also understand that things have ground to a halt, and finally, showing that you are willing to lend a helping hand.

Reassuring the Client

If you succeed in demonstrating a good understanding of the narrative, that in itself will be reassuring to the client, and will improve rapport. Demonstrating an understanding of the

[1] This is discussed in The Healing of Emotions, in Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

client's *feelings* is the most important aspect of this, and helps to create a stronger connection with the client. Non-judgmental acceptance of the content of the narrative is also very reassuring to the client, and in my opinion, this is the single most important factor in building a good rapport. Conversely, a judgmental response to the content will usually vaporise any rapport which may previously have developed.

The demonstration of understanding could be made verbally, non-verbally or in both of those ways. Non-verbal reflection of feelings is much more immediate, but is sometimes a bit nonspecific. Some things can be explained better if words are used, but the words need to be chosen with care, and limited in number. A mixture of verbal and non-verbal reflection is usually best, with the proportions depending on the situation.

Clarification

Clarification of the meaning of a narrative can be achieved by a mixture of reflection and direct questioning. This is useful in a number of ways. The listener may *correct errors* of comprehension and *fill gaps* in the narrative, thus gaining a *better understanding* of the overall situation. The narrator may gain *improved insight*. I will look briefly at each of these things. As mentioned earlier, reflection and clarification are considerably interlaced, so you may notice some repetition.

Correcting Errors

Reflection of content inevitably provides an opportunity for the client to point out inaccuracies in the listener's understanding of the narrative. However, this opportunity may not always be exploited by the client. Adding "Is that right?" (or a similar verbal or non-verbal query) to the reflection increases the likelihood of feedback – but still cannot guarantee it.

Close observation of the client's non-verbal responses during such attempts at confirmation is usually helpful. If the client looks dubious, it may be best to ask more specific questions about the meaning of the narrative. In most cases, confirmation or clarification of the meaning is achieved without too much difficulty. Nevertheless, one's understanding of a client's meaning should always be considered as a work in progress.

Filling Gaps

Confirmation, or the clarification which is sought when contradiction occurs instead of confirmation, can only be applied to content which *exists*. If, on the other hand, you suspect that information of potential significance is *missing*, you cannot reflect it in the usual way – because you don't know what it is. Instead, you have to somehow reflect its *absence*.

Perhaps the easiest way to conceptualise this is to think of the information already received as a virtual structure – with holes in it. Then you can, in effect, *reflect the holes* – and ask for them to be filled in. This step is usually included as part of the reflective technique – as it was by Rogers – and it can result in very significant clarification of the narrative. Leading questions should be avoided, as it is the narrator's task to fill the gaps.

Results (Listener)

The end result of clarification, from the *listener's* perspective, is a fuller and more accurate understanding of the narrative. Ideally, this should include both a broad understanding of the overall context and a detailed understanding of specific issues. In most cases, this degree of understanding would unfold progressively over a number of interviews, and continue to increase with further interviews.

In the case of therapeutic interviews, where the emphasis is on the personal and emotional aspects of the matters under consideration, this broad and detailed understanding provides the listener with a solid base from which to explore further and offer helpful suggestions. Without such an understanding, any attempts at helping the client would be severely handicapped.

Results (Client)

The end result of clarification, from the *narrator's* perspective, can be a fuller and more accurate understanding of the dynamic interactions between personal feelings, choices and actions, on the one hand; and the overall story, on the other hand. In other words, the "simple" process of telling a story, while the listener employs the reflective technique, can result in improved *insight* on the part of the teller of the story.

In the case of a therapeutic interview, where the emphasis is chiefly on the personal and emotional aspects of the matters under consideration, this improvement in insight might lead directly to significant emotional healing. Alternatively, it might open the way for acceptance of therapeutic interventions which were previously declined. In the latter case, the benefit to the client would be indirect, but it would be no less real.

SUMMARY OF BENEFITS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Various examples of the value of Active Listening have been referred to under the headings above. In general terms, the reflective technique, which is one of its two major elements, provides a showcase for the "listener orientation", which is its other major element.

All of the personal qualities at the disposal of the listener can be brought to bear more effectively by employing the technique of Active Listening. It is a formidable method of

simultaneously communicating and helping, and a far more powerful tool than its simple name suggests. When it is used skilfully, Active Listening can:

- Demonstrate the listener's undivided attention
- Encourage the client to continue speaking
- Restart a completely stalled narrative
- Reassure the client regarding self-disclosure
- Confirm the listener's understanding – or…
- Correct errors in the listener's understanding
- Fill any gaps in the content of the narrative
- Improve the listener's overall understanding
- Improve the client's insight into the issues
- Demonstrate the listener orientation to the client
- Progressively build rapport between listener and client

ASSERTIVENESS

In the previous chapters, we have looked at the various components of interpersonal communication, and we have also begun to explore how a better understanding of these components can be useful in everyday situations. Soon, I will talk about the application of communication skills during *negotiation*, and then I will make some observations about the effects of a *team environment* on our interpersonal interactions.

However, before approaching either of these topics, I want to introduce a quality which is an absolute prerequisite for each of them. Indeed, this quality is essential in any communication in which there is a possibility of conflict between the parties involved – a situation which is far from being uncommon. As you can guess from the chapter heading, what I am referring to here is *assertiveness*.

THE PROBLEM

Although assertiveness is my topic, I will first say a few words about the situations in which it is most needed. As mentioned above, these situations involve *conflict*. Conflict usually results from differences in what the parties to a discussion think, believe, feel or want to bring about. The intensity of the conflict is usually closely related to the intensity of any emotions which are aroused by those differences.

Conflict

Conflict is a broad term denoting opposition or incompatibility between people, ideas, feelings, processes or things. The type of conflict under consideration in this chapter is the interpersonal conflict which results when two or more people are striving for mutually incompatible outcomes. Those

outcomes might include anything from agreement about facts or opinions to plans for specific actions.

There are many possible causes for such conflict, but they all follow the same general pattern. Those involved want different things, and it is not possible for all of those things to coexist. Each individual or group then struggles to achieve its desired outcomes, at the expense of some or all of what is wanted by the other individuals or groups involved.

In some cases, a decision (though not necessarily agreement) may be reached by putting each matter to a vote. Arbitration by an external body is another possibility. In other cases, of course, the resolution might not be democratic, or even legal. In the case of countries, unbridled conflict may lead to war.

However, most of our everyday conflicts simply express themselves as a failure to reach agreement, usually associated with a sense of irritation or dissatisfaction. This sort of everyday conflict frequently occurs when human beings meet to discuss anything which they consider to be important. While it remains unresolved, such a disagreement may impair or prevent co-operation between the people involved.

Emotions

Although there are many possible reasons for desiring different outcomes, I want to emphasise the importance of the emotions felt by the parties involved. Not only can emotions be found lurking somewhere in almost every case of conflict, but they are frequently the chief catalyst when a minor disagreement escalates into a serious dispute.

However, if I discuss human emotions under the current heading, I will be repeating myself to the tune of more than

two hundred pages. That is because human emotions are the subject of my earlier book, "Wanterfall"[1], which has been mentioned a number of times already in these pages. The Appendix to that book, incidentally, addresses the various underlying causes of the desires which may underpin conflict.

As well as tending to promote the conflicts which make assertiveness necessary in the first place, unresolved emotions are very damaging to assertiveness itself. It is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to be appropriately assertive if you have much emotional "unfinished business" in the "pool of pain" discussed earlier in this book.

Instead, you may be either too submissive, or too aggressive; or else you may simply evade the issue in some way or other. Unless you understand your own emotions, and deal with them effectively, they will trip you up every time. In that case, whether you are "trampled on" or "win" (while making more and more enemies) you will never negotiate effectively.

THE SOLUTION

Principles

The emotional health necessary for assertiveness is, as mentioned above, addressed in Wanterfall. Here, I will only look at some of the more specific principles which underpin assertiveness. The first of these is *equality*. In a sense, equality is the very platform on which assertiveness stands.

Assertiveness is not bullying people until you get whatever you want. Nor is it letting other people bully you, in order to get

[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

what they want. Is it halfway between those extremes, then? No, not at all! Assertiveness is *not* the midpoint of a tug of war. Assertiveness is an *alternative* to war. Other people may be jumping up and down and reading from a warlike script, but the assertive person is not reading from that script at all.

Even though playing in the same production, the assertive person reads from a different script altogether (having first written it!) To be assertive is to be able to state what you think and what you want, and listen to what others think and want, and agree or disagree, all without fuss or drama – no matter how much sound and fury is going on around and about you.

Assertiveness is, therefore, as much a way of being and experiencing oneself, as it is a way of acting. It is perhaps most simply expressed in the famous self-help mantra "I'm OK – You're OK".[1] When calmly and solidly based in that mindset, it is much easier (though not always *easy*) to "keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you".[2]

This allows you to think relatively clearly, even as the feathers fly, and to state your own views – and also to defend them rationally, when necessary. Of course, that is greatly facilitated by having as many relevant facts at your disposal as possible. *Assertiveness is not a substitute for being up to speed*.

Here is something else that assertiveness is not. It is not a sort of interpersonal judo for the purpose of manipulating other people and twisting them in the direction of your own desires. It may, however, be employed to prevent other people from doing just that. It is important to understand such manipulative behaviour (which has its own chapter later in this book).

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[1] Harris T.A. 1967. I'm OK - You're OK. Avon Books, New York.

[2] Kipling R. If… (Poem). Multiple publishers.

Here is yet another thing which assertiveness is not. It is not reserved for Very Clever People. It can be started in a very small way, by anyone, at any time – and it can grow from there. If you don't find "I'm OK – You're OK" quite believable, you can always start with another famous self-help mantra, "I'm *not* OK – You're *not* OK – *and that's OK*".[1]

Practice

Although being assertive does not come naturally to most people, *it improves with practice*. If you practise it in a thoughtful way in simple situations, such as shopping or telephoning for information, it will gradually become easier in more challenging situations. Learning to say "no", *without* either getting angry or feeling guilty, is an excellent exercise.

Some aspects of assertiveness can even be packed in your lunchbox (metaphorically speaking) ready for use when needed. For example, a haematologist I used to work with would often, after listening carefully, calmly say "I don't agree, and I'll tell you why, OK?" Then he would explain exactly what it was he didn't agree with – and why. That stock phrase was always ready, and usually worked well for him.

However, it will probably *not* work well for you, unless you tailor it to suit your own situation. The haematologist in the example above was a middle aged male and was the head of his department. He was also well liked and highly respected by everyone who knew him. Should any of these things make a difference? Perhaps not. Do they make a difference? Yes.

Disagreement always needs to be handled with care, and the exact method depends on literally everything about the people involved. It often helps if you agree with something acceptable

[1] Kübler-Ross E. Personal communication (and many public lectures).

first. It may also be wise to disagree with one thing at a time, or perhaps with one particular aspect of a thing. The words you use, and the way in which they are delivered, must be tailored to the culture of the group involved, and your position in it.

There are also situations in which assertiveness may need to be avoided altogether. Not every individual or group follows democratic principles. Too much assertiveness when dealing with your boss might be bad for your career. Even a little assertiveness when dealing with a club bouncer or an angry policeman might be bad for your health. Assertiveness must always be filtered by common sense!

Face

Whatever specific or non-specific techniques you use in your assertive approach, it is very important that they do not cause anyone to "lose face". To lose face is to suffer diminished status in the eyes of other people, as might happen if a person were treated disrespectfully in front of friends or associates.

Some readers may feel that the whole arena of self-esteem is unfortunate, if not completely counterproductive. However, when practising assertiveness on planet earth, face is usually important to most or all of the parties to any discussion. That being the case, it is always best to seek solutions that allow all of those involved to "save face".

NEGOTIATION

The essential characteristic that turns communication into negotiation is an *attempt to reach an agreement*. Because agreement between the parties involved is necessary to the success of almost any undertaking, negotiation is one of the commonest practical applications of communication skills. Negotiating skills are almost always needed at work, and they can also be needed in many family and social situations.

Because of its obvious importance, it should come as no surprise that a great deal has been written about negotiation. In these notes, I will just be having a quick look at what is a very large topic. For those who would like more information, there are many books and articles available. One example is Baden Eunson's book "Negotiation Skills".[1]

GENERAL POINTS

The need for negotiation is not always known in advance – in fact, it quite often strikes unexpectedly. Whether planned or not, my usual generalisation applies: everything you know, and everything you are, will probably be needed. However, in order to deploy those resources effectively, a clear and simple framework is essential – especially when, as is often the case, the negotiation process proves stressful. Various such frameworks exist, one of which is offered later in this chapter.

Negotiation is basically a matter of finding a path to an agreement which, while rarely perfect for any one party, is acceptable to most or all of the parties involved. The subject matter could be literally anything, from arranging a lunch (or

[1] Eunson B. 1994c. Negotiation Skills. John Wiley and Sons, Brisbane.

perhaps a wedding) through buying a car (or perhaps an airline) to avoiding a brawl (or perhaps a nuclear war).

Importantly, negotiation is not always a win/lose process, in which each party attempts to obtain as much as possible of a scarce commodity, and the degree to which one party succeeds equals the degree to which another party fails. Especially when multiple issues are involved, differences in the desires of the various parties may make *win-win negotiation* possible. In other words, each party may be able get some, or even all, of its high-priority requirements, so that all parties benefit.

On the other hand, there is often plenty to *lose* in a negotiation. In many such cases, unfortunately, power is so unequally distributed between the parties involved, that one of them is almost certain to lose. This raises the question of whether the negotiation is worth engaging in at all. Sometimes, it may be better to defer it – or perhaps to negotiate on a different matter.

Quite often, there is an element of conflict between the parties involved in a negotiation, which extends beyond the matters ostensibly being negotiated. Such conflict might have its origins in disputed facts, differing values or incompatible policies. Alternatively, it could sometimes be a matter of saving face, as discussed previously under Assertiveness.

Indeed, many negotiations come to grief on the virtual reefs of the powerful emotions of the protagonists. However, as mentioned previously, my model for the understanding and healing of human emotions is contained in my earlier book, "Wanterfall"[1], so I will not directly address the immensely important emotional aspects of negotiation in these notes.

[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSERTIVENESS

Unless emotional "unfinished business" is destabilising the situation, it should be possible to apply assertiveness skills to any negotiation, and achieve good results. The framework which follows is best conceptualised as a natural expression of the assertive mindset previously discussed in its own chapter.

There are four simple steps to success in negotiation, and I have noted a few points about each. I have called the four steps *Quietness*, *Questions*, *Suggestions* and *Statements*. I named them with a view to ease of recall (**QQSS**) but I did not invent the principles they stand for. Those are widely recommended, under various different names, in the literature of negotiation.

The four steps described below are only suggested as a very general guide to the various phases of negotiation. Importantly, the *order* in which they occur is *not* fixed, though a general trend in the order shown is usual. *Deciding in advance what you wish to achieve, what can be traded and what is non-negotiable is absolutely essential in each phase.*

The degree to which a negotiation process appears to fit the QQSS outline naturally depends on the actual process involved. Most of the steps listed might occur during complex and protracted business negotiations, and quite a few of them might occur when planning a holiday with a number of people.

Many decisions, however, are reached very simply. For example, when one person suggests an idea and the other(s) immediately agree to it, there is just one suggestion (the idea) and one statement (the agreement) involved in the whole process. An example of this would be "Let's have lunch at that place near the jetty" – "OK, let's do that". In practice, of course, different parts of the QQSS process are likely to be more important, according to the type of negotiation involved.

Quietness

- Quietly remember what you aim to achieve
- Quietly remember what you can and can't trade
- Provide the information you consider appropriate
- Apart from that (and appropriate reflection) say little
- Absorb information – about feelings as well as facts
- Keep non-verbal output receptive and non-judgmental
- Pay very careful attention (to *all* inputs and outputs)
- Make notes when necessary, but be aware that this may cause some people to feel defensive
- Don't defend yourself, criticise others, or give opinions (yet)

Questions

- Some questions are for clarification of what you have heard
- Some may be about subjects not previously mentioned at all
- Questions which clarify the true needs of the other party are very important, as a win-win proposal may then be possible
- Questions are easily felt as threatening, so tact is essential
- Example questions: Did I understand… correctly? The price includes…? Could you explain more about…? What about…? When would…? How do you feel about…? What would you suggest? Who could help us with this?

Suggestions

- Suggest what you know (if anything)
- Suggest what you think (if anything)
- Suggest what you feel (if anything)
- Distinguish clearly between fact, opinion and emotion!

- Offer a possible solution (if you have one)
- Admit that you have no suggestions (if applicable)

Statements

- State your agreement, if applicable. Otherwise…
- State your assessment of the situation
- State what you are willing to do (but see below)
- State what you are *not* willing to do (but see below)
- State what you actually *intend* to do (but see below)
- State when you are willing to review the matter
- State nothing at all, unless you choose to!

SOME SPECIFIC TACTICS

Within or alongside the QQSS framework, there is room for the use of various specific tactics intended to increase the chance of gaining particular outcomes. Some of these are rather questionable, and you might not choose to use them. On the other hand, those with whom you are engaged in negotiations may have no such scruples. Here are some examples:

- Asking for more than you want
- Setting pre-conditions
- Planting true information
- Planting false information
- Declining to speak first
- Keeping the minutes
- Presenting demands
- Making last minute changes
- Insisting on deadlines

- Using good guy/bad guy tricks
- Using high-ball/low-ball tricks
- Presenting a fait accompli
- Using delaying tactics
- Engaging in strategic walk-outs
- Employing legal intimidation
- Employing illegal intimidation

The examples above are fairly self-explanatory, so I will not comment on them individually. They are basically ways of attempting to manipulate the end result of a negotiation. Readers who are interested in a detailed analysis of the tactics used by expert (and often unscrupulous) negotiators have a large body of political and military writings to choose from. Two which are often suggested (despite their antiquity) are Machiavelli's "The Prince"[1] and Sun Tzu's "The Art of War"[2].

[1] Machiavelli, Niccolo (1469 – 1527). The Prince. (Many translations and editions exist. A paperback edition of a translation by George Bull is available from Penguin UK, ISBN 10:0140449159 or 13:9780140449150.)

[2] Sun Tzu (a courtesy title for Sūn Wǔ, c. 544 – 496 BC). The Art of War. (Many translations and editions exist. The 1910 translation by Lionel Giles is available from Deodand Publishing, ISBN 0-9578868-7-X.)

WORKING IN A TEAM

In general terms, communication with the other members of a team is no different from communication in any other situation. However, the team context needs to be understood in order to use existing communication skills to best advantage. Therefore, I decided to include a brief discussion of the nature of teams.

CREATING A TEAM

What really defines a team? Will any group of people do? Certainly, a team requires a group of people. However, not every group is a team. Perhaps the essential difference lies in the collective responsibility and action found in teams. The members of groups which are not teams need not work collectively, and they need not take responsibility for the actions of other members of the group.

By contrast, in a team, although individual members inevitably make individual contributions, the ultimate responsibility for decisions and actions is carried by the team as a whole. In that sense, a team can plan as a single entity, and act as a single entity. That is what makes it a team, rather than just a group.

The following statement attributed to the famous nineteenth century industrialist Andrew Carnegie is still relevant today. "Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organisational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results".

What about the *number* of people in a team – does the size of a team matter? From a linguistic viewpoint, fewer than about three people would rarely be called a team, while more than perhaps ten or twenty would probably more often be called a committee or an association. From the viewpoint of efficiency

and quality, though, small teams tend to suffer from insufficient collective knowledge and skills, while large teams tend to be expensive to run and unwieldy in action.

The ideal size for a team has been debated ever since the French agricultural engineer Maximilian Ringelmann discovered that when more people pulled on a rope, each person pulled less strongly.[1] This tendency, to let others do the work as a group becomes larger, has been called the *Ringelmann effect*, and appears to apply to all aspects of effort, not just pulling on ropes. It is also referred to as *social loafing*.

The ideal size for a team almost certainly depends to some extent on the context in which the team exists, and especially on the problems it needs to solve and the actions it needs to take. Suggested "magic" numbers often fall in the range from five to nine, but of course the number of members is not the only factor which determines how well a team works.

Regardless of size, teams usually work better if they have a *leader*. However, the amount of influence exerted by a team leader varies greatly. In some cases, leadership may emerge informally from within the team. In other cases, a person is specifically appointed as Team Leader, or perhaps as the Chair[2] of the meetings held by the team.

Collective responsibility and leadership are easily noticed in sporting teams. Individual players may shine, but only the team can win a match or a grand final. The way in which the players

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[1] Ringelmann, M. 1913. Recherches sur les moteurs animés: Travail de l'homme" [Research on animate sources of power: The work of man]. Annales de l'Institut National Agronomique, 2nd series, vol. 12, pages 1-40.

[2] The Chair (or Chairman) is the person who presides over a meeting and ensures its orderly conduct according to agreed rules. The role is analogous to that of the referee of a sporting contest. Between meetings, the Chair acts as the representative of the group, unless specific office bearers exist.

work together is co-ordinated by the captain of the team, and the importance of this role is easy to see. However, the same general features can be seen in non-sporting teams.

PLAYING BY THE RULES

The fact that the members of a team are working together does not mean that no rules are necessary. Indeed, the relative lack of hierarchical governance characteristic of teams makes some basic rules essential for their efficient running. Some of these rules may be explicit, such as the rules governing the conduct of any formal meetings which may be held.

However, many of the rules governing the behaviour of the members of a team are unstated. These rules are nevertheless understood by most or all of the members. An example might be an unstated rule against taking individual credit for the work of the team, either by publishing it oneself, or submitting it to management as personal work.

Both the formal rules and the unstated rules will vary with the type of team, its particular membership and its purpose. They may also vary through time, partly because the members may develop an increasingly co-operative rapport and partly because specific issues may have arisen which were not easily resolved by applying the existing rules.

Sometimes, rules which are primarily beneficial can be exploited for other purposes. An example might be the vexatious use of "points of order" to prevent a decision from being made in a meeting. In such a situation, unstated rules regarding excessive interference with the team's intent might be brought to bear, usually in the form of social pressures.

In a team which is working well, the existence of its rules is virtually unnoticeable. However, this does not mean that those rules have been jettisoned. Nor does it mean that they are

unnecessary. On the contrary, it probably means that the invisible rules are being very effective. Indeed, they may be one of the main reasons that the team is performing so well.

AVOIDING INJURIES

Although it can be very rewarding to work as a member of a team, there are also some potential *dangers*. Some of these dangers are simply the opposite side of co-existing potential advantages. For example, if the team is a monumental failure, it will reflect badly on all of its members; but, on the bright side, success will reflect well on all members.

A slightly different aspect of inheriting the team's results is that the risks associated with failure, or the benefits associated with success, are *diluted* by the size of the team. It is better to be a member of a team which has created a disaster than it is to be solely responsible for that disaster. Conversely, it is more advantageous to be the sole architect of a success than it is to be a member of a team which has created a success.

Meetings can pose unexpected dangers for individual team members. Some teams have formal meetings, during which minutes are taken. Whatever you say in such a meeting may not only be considered critically by a number of people, but also recorded for posterity. You may not know some of the people at the meeting very well, but some of them may exert considerable influence over your future employment prospects!

Even when a meeting is "brainstorming" (throwing up suggestions without filtering them, in the hope that something useful may emerge) there is not an absolute guarantee against censure. Another thing that is often different in a meeting is that many of those present may not have full access to your non-verbal output, because they may not be able to see it well. In that case, they may easily miss it or misinterpret it.

If there is a general conclusion that can be drawn here, it is that it may be a good idea to join a team with competent members, when that is possible, but teams with incompetent members should definitely be avoided! It is also worth remembering that there are benefits (and risks) to be found in working alone.

GETTING IT RIGHT

A team clearly has a great advantage in being able to draw on the resources of a number of members. Not only will more knowledge and skills be available, but more ideas are likely to be generated in team discussions. Of course, a single administrator could delegate the various components of a complex task, without the need to create a visible team.

This type of delegation is not as popular, either with managers or employees, as it once was. "Horizontal" administrative structures with vague or absent leadership are increasingly used. In some cases, this choice may be based on an ideological preference. In other cases there may be a real or imagined benefit to productivity.

Apart from a need for multiple skills or a preference for a less hierarchical mode of work, there are some other possible reasons for preferring a team environment. There is a sense of safety in numbers which, though not necessarily correct, is nevertheless reassuring to those team members who feel it. In addition, communication within a team is sometimes simpler and more immediate.

There is also an opportunity for social interaction before and after team meetings. This opportunity often extends beyond the meetings, and also beyond the workplace. In many cases, there may also be an exchange of services, information and views, unrelated to the work of the team, which might not have

occurred without the physical and conceptual proximity caused by membership of the team.

However, as discussed under the next heading, teams are not perfect; so, is a team always the best way to get a job done? I think teams are most useful when the task in hand is simply too difficult for a single individual to complete. Then, the value of drawing on knowledge and skills from a number of different fields overrides the greater simplicity of individual work.

GETTING IT WRONG

Whether the overall results achieved by a team are good or bad obviously depends to a great extent on the qualities of the members of the team. However, it also depends on how well the members of the group work together. If some members, either consciously or unconsciously, undermine the team's work, an adverse effect on results can be expected. This problem can often be ameliorated by appropriate rules, but it can be very difficult to eradicate it completely.

If a synergistic interaction develops between the members of the team, the effect is usually beneficial. Unfortunately, though, teams which work well together do not always make good *decisions*. Just as an individual can be individually foolish, it appears that groups, including teams, can be collectively foolish. The aspect of the behaviour of teams which allows perfectly sensible team members to arrive at a remarkably silly team decision has been called *"groupthink"*.

One interesting type of groupthink occurs when a group decides on a course of action that is against the wishes of every single member of the group, simply because each member mistakenly believes that course of action to be what the *others* want. This has come to be known as "the Abilene paradox",

after an anecdote about an unwanted trip to Abilene, Texas, related by management expert Jerry B. Harvey.[1]

Another potential drawback of the team approach was mentioned at the outset when considering the optimal number of members for a team. The phenomenon of *social loafing* in teams can severely reduce their efficiency. When noticed by other team members, it is also likely to lower morale.

In summary, then, working in teams requires some caution. If a team of about five to nine members is created for a task which is not appropriate for an individual, there is certainly a good chance of getting good results. A good leader and sensible rules will considerably improve that chance. However, it is always necessary to watch carefully for the emergence of problems as these are not uncommon.

All of the communication skills discussed in this book may be relevant when working in a team (except, perhaps, some of the end of life issues discussed in the next chapter). Alongside these skills, team members need to maintain a steady focus on the task in hand and its progress, combined with an awareness of the available resources within (and also outside) the team. Lateral thinking and constant vigilance for possible threats to the team's effectiveness are also essential requirements.

[1] Harvey J. B. 1974. The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management. Organizational Dynamics 3 (1): 63.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE DYING

The aspects of communication discussed in this chapter are not by any means unique to people thought to be approaching death. However, I will be taking that group of people as an example, in order to make some points about communication with patients in a hospital, hospice or sickroom.

I have chosen this topic partly because it represents something that I have spent a great deal of time doing, and partly because it illustrates many aspects of clinical communication which are often found to be difficult, even by experienced clinicians.

In this chapter, I will suggest some simple ways of enhancing the helping interview in the context of serious or terminal illness. The ideas I suggest are not original, nor are they particularly exciting. Rather, they are included on the basis of their perceived value, during my years as a hospice physician.

These ideas are certainly not a substitute for communication and counselling skills. Nor are they a substitute for the personal qualities discussed under Non-verbal Communication. They are simply a framework, on which to build an overall approach to the patient or client. Within that framework, you will (as usual) employ "everything you know and everything you are".

BE AVAILABLE

This may seem a little obvious, but many obvious things are important in this context. Two sorts of availability are needed. The first is the logistical one, which, when absent, prevents any useful communication between dying patients and their carers. Getting past this hurdle may involve negotiating a maze of switchboards, intermediaries and frustrating delays.

At the end of that obstacle course, there is still the matter of the "next available appointment". In this context, too much delay,

or sometimes any delay, can have the same effect as refusing to see the patient at all. Even if the patient is still alive, their ability to communicate effectively may be severely impaired.

The second sort of availability is the ability and willingness to remain fully aware and engaged while end of life issues are aired, rather than hiding behind any of a multitude of available defensive tactics. It may be very tempting, for example, to listen with no sense of involvement, to respond with purely clinical information, or to "answer" unanswerable questions with a standard reply from a stock of platitudes.

This second aspect of availability is, of course, part of the listener orientation, which was discussed previously under Active Listening. Of particular relevance in this context are the listener's own feelings about end of life issues, and a willingness to join as a full participant in whatever conversation the patient wishes to have.

Any unresolved painful emotions relating to illness and death which the listener carries, may cause incongruent non-verbal outputs, as previously discussed. Therefore, previous and ongoing work on the resolution of painful feelings is even more important in this context than are well-honed communication skills. This is discussed a little later, under Drain Your Pool.

ENTER GENTLY

Most patients will prefer to be wearing something other than a bedpan when they greet you. The simple courtesy and respect that are considered important in everyday life can all too easily be forgotten in a hospital setting. At the very least, a verbal warning of your imminent appearance is usually a good idea.

Where possible, it is best to be introduced at your first meeting by someone the patient already knows. If this is not possible, at least make sure that your visit is expected. Then introduce

yourself fully, including your role and your reason for being there, and ask whether it is a good time to talk. If there is any hesitation, gentle negotiation is necessary.

As always, the listener orientation mentioned previously is essential to a gentle entry into the interview itself. Most patients will have had ample opportunity to become quite allergic to every possible type of insensitive behaviour, and of course many will have their own small (or large) volcano of "unfinished business" smoking away in the background.

It is sometimes said that talking about sensitive issues is like walking on eggshells. That analogy is not suitable for the whole of the process, but it does suggest one useful practice. Testing proposed statements and actions in one's own imagination, to see whether they could conceivably give offence, can often help to smooth the path to a good rapport.

SET THE STAGE

Some of this may be best done in advance, but some will always need to be done as you go along. First, see that the patient is physically comfortable. If significant pain or other symptoms are present, then their management must take priority. The interview can wait.

Ask whether the patient would like curtains drawn around the bed – or perhaps would prefer a different venue altogether. Reduce ambient noise as far as possible (but ask the patient before closing windows or doors, as the subjective sense of ample available air is of symptomatic benefit to many breathless patients[1]). Make sure there is a box of tissues handy! Finally, in most cases, you will have to decide where to sit.

[1] I am not aware of a physiological explanation for this phenomenon, but that does not detract from its subjective importance.

It is preferable to have your eyes at about the same height as those of the patient, and to be close enough to make physical contact if appropriate – but not close enough to seem intrusive. If you are going to sit on the bed, make *very* sure that you do not land on any part of the patient, or any attached devices!

As soon as possible, find out what name the patient prefers to be called by, and what name they prefer to call you by. This might be negotiated during the introductions, or left until some rapport has developed, depending on other aspects of the situation. The preferred names are not always equally informal. In Australia, quite a few patients prefer to call a doctor either "doctor" or "doc", and a nurse either "sister" or "nurse", while preferring to be addressed by their first name or nickname.

There are many other possible ways in which the "stage" may need to be set, and some of these relate to local rather than general conditions. By paying careful attention, you will soon notice most of the factors which are detrimental to rapport, and they can then be addressed. Then, on future occasions, it may be possible to address them in advance.

PLAY IT BY EAR

You probably know a great deal about communication, and perhaps also about counselling, but this knowledge must not intrude on the natural flow of the conversation. There will be things you want to achieve, but it is best to achieve them without fragmenting the interview. I'm sure you won't talk too much, but don't talk too little, either. Listening may be your main task, but sometimes the patient will ask for information. In all of this, it is necessary to be quickly responsive to the ever-changing situation.

A request for information may not be direct, so careful attention to the subtleties of meaning is necessary. Your own

language should usually be simple and direct, but symbolic, poetic or oblique statements are sometimes appropriate in response to a similar message from the patient.

Alternatively, accepting a symbolic statement as needing no explanation may be sufficient. For example, if a patient said "I don't think I'll buy any more lottery tickets" it might be sufficient to nod, make eye contact and say "OK". In some cases, this might lead to a more direct discussion of diagnosis and prognosis. In other cases, it might go no further.

Above all, be flexible. You may be there for a minute, or an hour (the latter is not often feasible, but the subjective sense of "plenty of time" may be). You may talk about feelings, facts, symptom control, trivia – indeed, literally anything. You may seem to be wasting your time at one moment, and find yourself swimming in a flood of significant content the next. You may be perfectly relaxed at one moment, and perhaps feel quite uncomfortable a moment later.

The cause of such discomfort needs attention, but there will not be much opportunity for that during the interview. In most cases, it is sufficient to note it at the time, and think about it later. On the other hand, if a personal issue is interfering with your ability to continue the interview, it is sometimes better to find a graceful way to withdraw and reschedule.

Essentially, "playing it by ear" just means responding to whatever happens next. There is no script, no director and no audience. Well, there might be an *unofficial* audience – on the other side of the bed curtains. People don't very often join in conversations conducted behind hospital bed curtains, but they most certainly do listen. Consequently, if confidential information needs to be discussed, "playing it by ear" would include "setting the stage" at a different location.

ACCEPT DENIAL

Denial of the unwanted reality tends to occur whenever ill fortune strikes, and it is especially likely when the near future includes one's own impending death, or the death of a loved one. I will also mention a related phenomenon, the "conspiracy of silence", later on under this heading.

Denial is a normal response, though not usually a permanent one. It may seem a bit surprising, when considered by a healthy person with healthy loved ones, but it is simply one aspect of grieving, and needs to be accepted in that light.

Denial may vary from a totally unconscious (and totally impregnable) repression of the unwanted information, right through to a slight tendency to minimise the seriousness of the situation. There is nothing more foolish than battering at the gates of the former. The latter, on the other hand, is sometimes little more than a ripple on the surface of the conversation.

All degrees of denial between those two extremes exist, and the degree usually varies, in either direction, over time. Such different, and changing, degrees of denial may also be found in different members of the patient's family and circle of friends.

The "conspiracy of silence" is a different, but related, phenomenon, involving refusal to share the truth even when it is wanted. In this case, one or more groups "protect" one or more other groups, including (usually) the patient, from the alleged disaster of knowing the diagnosis and prognosis.

The "conspirators" do not themselves deny the reality. Instead, they deny various other people the right of entry into that reality. Therefore, while a denial is involved, this is a different phenomenon from the denial discussed above. There might, however, be a rather similar secondary gain achieved, if the "conspirators" find that keeping the information secret makes it easier for them to avoid distress themselves.

Writing about the "conspiracy of silence" always reminds me of a midnight call I once made, as an after hours locum doctor, to a dilapidated terrace house in East London. (That part of East London had not yet been demolished to make way for the soul-destroying vertical concrete monstrosities seen later.)

When the door opened, I found myself facing a large number of relatives, jammed into a very narrow corridor. They were competing strenuously for the right to address me. Just when serious domestic violence began to look inevitable, one of them was finally acknowledged as the spokesman.

"'Ere, Doc", he said, very, very earnestly, "e's in there – 'e's got cancer, an' 'e's bleedin' *dyin*' – but fer *Gawd's* sake don't tell 'im – it'd *kill* 'im!"

The assembled multitude was emulating an operatic chorus, nodding in unison and repeating "it'd *kill* 'im". I struggled slowly through their ranks and went "in there" (the door didn't look very soundproof). When I got "in", I couldn't see "'im" at all – until I closed the door. While it was open, it hid his bed almost completely, boarding him up in a tiny cell.

"'Ere, Doc", he said, with even more earnestness, if possible, than the spokesman in the corridor (though with considerably less vocal power) "ah got cancer, an' ah'm bleedin' *dyin'* – but fer *Gawd's* sake don't tell 'em, it'd *kill* 'em!"

This sort of situation, far from protecting those who are denied the truth, simply prevents any real communication between the various parties who have been told different stories. Consequently, it interferes with preparatory grieving; and it allows no chance whatever for saying goodbye. This "conspiracy of silence" can present quite a challenge. I will look at how to respond to it under the next heading.

Fortunately, whether dealing with denial, refusal, or both, the initial situation is just the starting point. It must simply be

noticed, and accepted as a normal phenomenon. The interview then continues, and where the rest of it (or perhaps a future interview) might lead, is something which remains to be seen.

OFFER HONESTY

In most cases, the doctor under whose care the patient is will be the best person to discuss the diagnosis and prognosis. For this reason, I hope that some of my readers are doctors. However, the general ideas discussed under this heading are not limited to the medical (or any other) profession. In fact, they are not limited at all. They are just part of life.

Honest discussion of the diagnosis and prognosis is one of the most important aspects of communicating with terminally ill patients and their relatives. Clear and complete information needs to be available when requested. This does *not* mean ramming all the available facts down all the available throats, at every available opportunity. However, any tentative request for information should always be explored rather than sabotaged (as it easily can be, and often is).

It is actually incredibly easy to sabotage a request for bad news. You can look busy or harassed. You can appear to be deaf or preoccupied. You can finish some vital task on your computer while the moment fizzles out. You can agree, but choose to discuss something else first, and then forget. You can test your pager, and pretend that it is calling you away. In other words, you can do virtually anything *except* what you have been asked to do – and you will always get away with it.

However easy and tempting it may be to sabotage requests for information, doing so adds considerably to the suffering of patients and their loved ones. For this reason, requests for a discussion about diagnosis and prognosis must always be

accepted. Not only that, but it is often appropriate to create an opportunity, when such a request could easily be made.

To create an opportunity for important questions to be put to me, I would often ask a patient whether there was *"anything else you would like to ask me about, or tell me about, while I'm* [or *you're*] *here?"* Sometimes, they would almost shout their negative response. Probably, they suspected that there was bad news, but they didn't want to know about it.

On a later occasion, the same patient might ask whether I was "getting anywhere". If I said there were some findings, and offered to discuss them in more detail, they might say they would rather leave the details to me. Perhaps they were ready to accept the existence of unpleasant facts, but not yet ready to talk about them specifically.

Later still, the question might be much more direct. "Do you know what is wrong?" I might reply that there was quite a lot I could tell them, but the news would be bad. Sometimes, they would again change the subject, or perhaps they would say that they didn't feel like hearing any bad news just then.

At some point, however, most people want to know the news, even though it is bad. They would rather it were *not* bad, of course, but they would rather know it, than guess at it. In some cases, they are already pretty sure of the facts, and just want to confirm them. When people reach this point, they may or may not make a specific request for information, but they will rarely retreat from any openings prepared for them.

The "conspiracy of silence", discussed under the previous heading, is one situation in which honesty about diagnosis and prognosis may require even more care and skill than usual. In this case, many of those involved know the truth, but feel compelled to impose ignorance on others. Sometimes a family

conference, with all interested parties together at the same time, can resolve this issue.

Alternatively, if the destructive effect of the conspiracy is first explained to the group or groups withholding the truth, their agreement may sometimes be gained before talking to those who have been kept in the dark. This does not mean that the agreement of the "conspirators" is necessary, as it is the patient who owns this information, after all. However, a negotiated solution usually causes less turmoil than an imposed one.

In cases where no agreement is reached with the conspirators, and they remain determined to restrict access to the truth about diagnosis and prognosis, they are quite likely to make strenuous efforts to persuade you to promise to keep the secret. Obviously, such a commitment cannot be contemplated.

There is another, rather different, situation which also calls for honesty. That is the situation in which you do *not* know the answers to the questions put to you. Then, honesty about your *lack* of knowledge is what is needed. Attempting to fill the gaps with vague generalisations may get rid of the questioner, but it will not help them, and it is bound to damage rapport.

The last thing I want to mention under this heading is honesty about your own feelings. As mentioned under Active Listening, disclosure of personal feelings may well need to be filtered. However, pretending you are full of jollity, when your true mood is quite low, makes for very incongruent non-verbal messages. Likewise, if you are feeling very angry, a warm smile will probably not quite "come off".

Without necessarily realising exactly what is happening, most people will notice something phoney in such situations. Just like the evasive answers that fail to hide ignorance, this emotional evasion can easily damage rapport. A middle path

between excessive disclosure and an unconvincing façade is what is needed here, and that requires some experience.

LEAVE GRACEFULLY

The end of an interview can be just as important as the beginning. Sometimes, you will be informed (either verbally or non-verbally) that your departure would be appreciated. More often, you will have to arrange the time of departure yourself.

It is often a good idea to let the conversation gradually return to everyday matters before leaving. Sometimes, though, this would create an anticlimax. If, as may well happen, you are called away as a matter of urgency, just apologise and promise to return as soon as possible. Then keep the promise.

Imminent departure can also be used as a tactic to encourage meaningful discussion. If there has not been much progress during the interview so far, then (assuming that your time is flexible) it can sometimes be helpful to ask an open question as you are (allegedly) preparing to leave.

I mentioned my favourite question for this purpose under the previous heading: "Is there anything else you would like to *ask* me about, or *tell* me about, while I'm [or you're] here?" This sort of question is obviously not a good idea if you want to get away quickly, but if you have the time, it can sometimes lead into the most valuable part of the interview.

Finally, when you are actually in the process of leaving, inform the patient how they can contact you (or someone else). In addition, either arrange the next interview, or explain when and how it is likely to occur. This is really part of being available, which was discussed earlier, but departure is an important time to reinforce your continuing availability.

RETURN

Continuity is important in all helping interventions, but it is especially so, if emotive issues were discussed at the previous interview. In that case, it is often a good idea to return within a day or so to deal with any *repercussions* which may be occurring. This can sometimes be a rather intense business. You may even find yourself quite unpopular, being perceived as the culprit who "caused" those repercussions. (That is a sure sign that some progress is being made.)

Alternatively, you may need to go back a number of times before you ever have a significant conversation at all. Either way, go again and again. Occasionally, you may be denied permission to do so. In that case, hand over to another member of the team – who may then have the potentially valuable task of listening to what a terrible person you are!

DRAIN YOUR POOL

The importance of "going back for more", as discussed above, is a timely reminder that, whether in hospice work or any other field that brings us in contact with people in distress, we often do not *feel* like going back for more. Why is this so?

Is it because the suffering we witness all day long hurts us sufficiently to deter us? In other words, does the emotional pain suffered by our patients cause us pain too? There is a sense in which that is true, but I contend that it can only occur with the aid of our own emotional memories.

As Elisabeth Kübler-Ross[1] used to say (at the slightest provocation) *you cannot feel another's pain*. Whether physical,

[1] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, MD (1926 – 2004). The best known of her books is On Death and Dying (multiple publishers and dates, but first published in 1969 by Macmillan, New York).

emotional, or a combination of the two, pain is experienced inside each person's mind. I feel mine, you feel yours, others feel theirs – but nobody feels someone else's pain. What we *do* feel is the reawakening of painful emotional memories; and that occurs very easily, when witnessing another's pain.

In other words, if I think I am suffering another person's emotional pain, it is really because some emotional memory in my own mind is resonating to their distress. Kübler-Ross likened a person's store of painful memories to a "pool of pain". Because such memories have not yet been resolved and left behind, she also referred to them as "unfinished business".

In most cases, the majority of such unfinished business has been forgotten long ago. However, as we discover when something sufficiently similar to it wakes it up, it may have been forgotten, but it was not gone! These issues, and the "Emotional EEEEs" technique which I recommend for dealing with them, are discussed fully in my first book, "Wanterfall".[1]

It can seem very tiresome to have to work on one's own unfinished business, when so many other things are waiting to be done. In addition, those with multiple degrees in psychology, counselling or related subjects might easily feel that, with all their training, they should be able to rise above such mundane matters.

However, the simple truth is that everybody has some unfinished business, and some of it will certainly be stirred up, from time to time, by hospice work. When that happens, there are really only two choices. The first is to work through the feelings in some way, such as the "Emotional EEEEs"

[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

approach mentioned above. The second is to try to push them back where they came from, and forget all about them.

I would not be at all surprised if you are expecting me to recommend the first approach. After all, it occupies about half of my first book. Nevertheless, I think the second choice is usually essential – as a short-term solution. Why? Simply because the amount of emotional resolution achievable in the middle of a day's work is *very* limited, especially if you are conducting an interview with a distressed patient at the time.

However, as a long-term solution, that second choice simply doesn't work. If persisted with, there will be adverse effects for patients and carers alike. The patients will suffer because their carers are under intolerable stress, so that, no matter how hard they try, the care they provide will inevitably deteriorate. The carers themselves will also suffer, and increasingly so, from the effects of that unresolved emotional stress. Sooner or later, if the problem is neglected, they will "burn out".

"Burning out", which is also discussed in "Wanterfall", may be an insidious process, resulting in an unhappy life but no very obvious dramas. Alternatively, it can manifest as unexpected rows, serious accidents, depressive disorders, other mental disorders, loss of employment, divorce, harm from alcohol or other drugs, uncharacteristic violence, or occasionally suicide.

Any of those consequences can occur partly or wholly as a result of trying to do the impossible. In this case, trying to do the impossible means trying to do the work of caring for others, without doing the equally important and absolutely essential work of caring for one's own emotional health and wellbeing.

In summary, it doesn't matter how much work we have done on our own feelings in the past, or how many university degrees we have. If we work with people in distress, we *will* come

across unfinished business of our own. When we do, we will either have to work it through, or risk burning out.

Fortunately, the necessity for such (often tedious) work, which is really personal growth work as well as personal survival tactics, comes with considerable benefits attached. With every episode of unfinished business which is worked through, the pool of pain referred to above is drained a little more. As it shrinks, our innate capacity for things like joy, peace, kindness, friendship and love seems to expand. It is almost as if the shrinking "pool" leaves more "space" for better things.

WORK TOGETHER

The previous heading was about a hazard faced by *individual* carers which, in the worst case scenario, can destroy them personally. This heading is about a similar danger that threatens *teams*, and which, equally, can destroy them. It is related to the previous discussion, but it has an important twist.

Most carers are used to helping people who want to be helped, and who are therefore happy to accept help. They are usually also pleased to have received it. However, patients are occasionally encountered who appear determined to sabotage all attempts at helping them. In addition, such patients may try to hurt the team members who are caring for them, especially by setting those team members at each other's throats.

Unfortunately, this situation is far from unknown in hospice care. The patient involved might be one with a great deal of unresolved anger, who is expressing it in the form of hostility directed at anyone available. Alternatively, it might be someone who has lifelong experience in employing an abnormal degree of manipulative behaviour.

The latter is often the most difficult type of patient to care for, being usually far more expert at the game than any of the

carers. In some cases, an underlying personality disorder, or some other psychiatric condition, is also present. Sometimes, unfortunately, unresolved anger and abnormally manipulative behaviour coexist in the same patient.

In such a situation, each member of the team will find their personal resources tested to an extreme degree. Those resources will not usually survive the test unless they are combined with effective *teamwork*. I am not suggesting that this is the only situation that requires teamwork, but I think it requires teamwork more desperately than any other situation likely to be encountered in patient care.

As communicating with manipulative clients is an important aspect of communication and counselling in its own right, I have given it a chapter of its own. In other words, the present heading is really only an introduction. Most of my thoughts on this difficult and important aspect of clinical communication are to be found in the next chapter.

COMMUNICATING WITH MANIPULATIVE CLIENTS

The term "manipulative" needs some clarification, as it has been rather overused. I will address that matter a little later in the chapter. First, though, I would like to tell you an entirely fictitious story, which I think will give a general idea of the territory I intend to explore in this chapter.

My story paints a rather extreme picture. I have made little use of pastel shades of meaning. However, I do not think any of the story's elements will be particularly difficult to imagine. Indeed, if you work with distressed patients, and find that this story does not remind you of one or two of them, I can only assume that you have led a charmed life, and be happy for you.

I am going to take you on a mythical journey with a mythical patient, whom I will call Mrs D.[1] She has recently been admitted to a hospital ward, where you, dear reader, are kindly requested to imagine that you work. In case it is not already crystal clear, Mrs D is not her real name. Apart from being a very short name, it would be impossible – because the patient concerned does not exist.

Perhaps I should say, she exists in this chapter, but nowhere else. She is not a little mythical. She is entirely mythical. It follows that any resemblance to any real person or persons, living or dead, is certainly either an accidental disaster or a disastrous accident. Indeed, I suspect it is probably both.

[1] Of course, I could have told you about the equally mythical Mr D. He has rather more pronounced antisocial tendencies, and an even greater lack of impulse control, than Mrs D. In general, though, he is equally obnoxious.

SUFFERING MANIPULATIVE BEHAVIOUR

Even before she has finished unpacking, Mrs D begins to be a nuisance. As soon as she arrives, she starts to make frequent demands, some of which are quite unreasonable. All attempts to satisfy those demands are extremely frustrating. Nothing is satisfactory. It is quite impossible to please her. Right now, her further demands are continuing so relentlessly, that there is hardly time to attend to the other patients.

Somehow, Mrs D also has a knack of making all concerned feel guilty about – well, about almost anything; indeed, often about nothing tangible at all. Even while feeling angry about her incessant demands and constant dissatisfaction, you find yourself feeling vaguely guilty and ashamed. You don't usually feel like that, but today, you do.

Other facilities and their staff members, incidentally, have always treated Mrs D with very great kindness. She has simply been blessed by encountering so many good people, wherever she has gone. Your colleagues, on the other hand, have been quite rude to her – which she doesn't understand at all. As for you – well, she knows you have done your best. At least she can see that you are trying, and she is grateful for that.

In due course, your patient shows herself to be capable of making trouble in various other ways. Usually, she contents herself with a little non-violent nastiness, such as lying about various staff members, to get them into trouble. She can get a bit physical sometimes, though. The other day, one of your colleagues asked her if she felt angry and if she would like to talk about it – and copped the contents of Mrs D's bedpan.

Next day, Mrs D tells you she was only angry with your colleague because of the terrible things she was saying about… *you*. She really hates to repeat them (but she does). She doesn't

believe a word of it, but feels she must assure you that your secrets will be safe with her. You need not feel afraid at all.

She does not apply such benevolent restraint to your colleague. Instead, she files a formal complaint, stating that your colleague retaliated in a fury after a very slight accident with a bedpan, twisting her arm painfully and threatening to "see to her" unless she kept quiet about the whole thing.

Mrs D now tells you that she felt very diffident about making a complaint, but as she was a sick and defenceless patient, and had felt real fear for her life, she was forced to report the matter for her own protection. However, she would consider keeping the details from the press, and might not even involve the police, as long as your colleague was dismissed without delay.

I think I will take myself forward in time now (one of the great advantages of fiction) so that I can tell the rest of this story in the past tense. The next day, Mrs D was visited by a doctor. She immediately asked him to pull the curtains around her. She refused to have a nurse present during her examination, as that would embarrass her terribly. Some of the nurses were – well, she would rather not talk about it, it was all too distressing.

While the doctor was examining her, she cried out and told him (very loudly) to get away from her. She did not explain what had distressed her. She just said that misunderstandings could easily happen. She thought perhaps the whole thing had better remain their little secret. The doctor departed, shaking his head.

Whatever it was, it did remain their little secret – for the rest of the day. That night, though, she shared it with the night nurse, enjoining her to refrain at all costs from putting it in her report, as she did not wish any harm to come to such a nice doctor as a result of – well, it might all have been a misunderstanding.

Some days later, however, she spoke to that night nurse again, telling her that such matters really should be dealt with

properly, and not just swept under the carpet. However, as it had been left out of the report at the time, she could see what a difficult position the nurse would find herself in – so perhaps the whole thing had better remain their little secret.

Mrs D continued to cause trouble, and to prepare the ingredients of future trouble, as long as she was in the ward. I could tell you a great deal more about her. However, so much of it is – well, misunderstandings can so easily occur. I am terribly afraid that you would think very, very badly of her, if you knew just a few of the things I know. Therefore, I think the rest of Mrs D's story had better remain… my little secret.

DEFINING MANIPULATIVE BEHAVIOUR

Although Mrs D's actions are often called *manipulative behaviour*, this term needs to be used with some care. This is, firstly, because everyone is manipulative to some extent. It is part of the process of trying to get what we want, so it can be difficult to distinguish exactly what is meant by the label.

Secondly, anyone we don't like, or whose behaviour we don't like, is at considerable risk of being labelled as manipulative – by us. Indeed, the more often the term is applied in appropriate cases, the more popular it seems to become as a convenient label for anyone we think is a bit unpleasant.

In some cases, manipulative behaviour is part of a larger syndrome. People with certain personality disorders intentionally exploit others in order to gratify their own desires, caring nothing for the pain they cause in the process. In addition, they show other features of their particular disorder.

Personality disorders which include abnormally manipulative behaviour include the antisocial, narcissistic and borderline personality disorders. However, in some cases, behaviour

which is clearly suggestive of an abnormal personality does not fit the picture of any of the defined personality disorders.

Despite these difficulties, it is possible to list characteristic features that define *abnormally* manipulative behaviour – whatever its cause may be. Fortunately, not all are present in every case! However, abnormally manipulative people typically display a number of the following behaviours:

- They make frequent demands but are never satisfied
- They are "passively aggressive" (by inducing guilt)
- They are "covertly hostile" (via lies and gamesmanship)
- They are verbally, or occasionally physically, aggressive
- They "split" the staff by playing one off against another
- They covertly "undermine" their care and then…
- They complain that their care is unsatisfactory
- They claim "special" relationships with some carers
    - In some cases, it will then be suggested that the relationship is rather "questionable"
    - Innuendoes and veiled threats about disclosure of "questionable" matters may then follow

As a consequence of the behaviours described above, abnormally manipulative people progressively alienate their carers, who then tend to avoid them.

MANAGING MANIPULATIVE BEHAVIOUR

While it may be interesting to identify abnormally manipulative behaviour, it will only be of any practical use if something can be done about the behaviour or its effects. Fortunately, although there is no magical or perfect solution, a

great deal *can* be done to reduce the damage caused by such behaviour, which may otherwise be very considerable.

The approach suggested below can be applied whether the problem is mild, moderate or severe. However, it takes a lot more effort when it is severe. Of course, the headings I have chosen for the ten steps that I suggest could easily be put in a different order, or given different names, or both.

1. Share information

Sharing information is the first essential whenever a team faces a problem. Some staff meetings waste a lot of time, but the time spent on this issue is never wasted. Nursing handover is another opportunity for making the situation known. The "grape vine" is also useful, but is not sufficient by itself.

Regardless of the method employed, every staff member needs to be aware that the team is, effectively, under attack – and that its resources are about to be tested to a considerable degree. However, written comments of a critical nature should either be avoided or worded *very* carefully. The same applies to spoken comments which might be overheard.

2. Support each other

Supporting each other is, hopefully, nothing new. It will be more difficult while this is going on, though, and it will be more vital than ever. Importantly, all accusations made must be shared with the whole team, and the innocence of those accused must be assumed by their colleagues. This is especially important when it is alleged that one colleague has transgressed against another (the quintessential "splitting" ploy).

Administrators should also support and be supported, but in some cases they may dig in with the "enemy". This is unfortunate, especially as many of them were carers once, and

should therefore know better. Of course, some administrators are excellent, and their contribution is extremely valuable. However, if administrative support is lacking, peer support simply has an even greater task to fulfil than usual.

3. Agree on strategies

Agreeing on strategies is simply a matter of making plans and making sure that everyone knows them. One good plan is to have two staff members present when the patient is attended. Another good plan is to document everything carefully, as a contemporaneous record is the only reliable defence against any future accusations. As always, the documentation must be clear, unambiguous and emotionally neutral.

Some plans might have to do with setting limits on certain behaviours. These limits then need to be applied *consistently* by all staff members. Another good idea is to involve selected educators and clinicians with relevant expertise, and invite them to attend team meetings and suggest more solutions.

4. Keep draining the pool

Draining unfinished business from each person's pool of pain was discussed under Communicating with the Dying, but it is relevant to any stressful situation. I am not suggesting that the problem is *caused* by your own unfinished business, but it is very likely to be stirred up by patients like Mrs D!

Unjust accusations are powerful triggers for many people. When a master troublemaker is looking for buttons to push, some will usually be found. There may also be official investigations into various allegations to add to the stress. As

previously mentioned, dealing with these emotions is the subject of "Wanterfall"[1], so I will not discuss the process here.

5. Plan ahead

Planning is not always possible as far as the problem itself is concerned. However, various aspects of your response to the situation can be planned in advance. For example, before entering the patient's room, decide what you choose to say and what you need to do. The patient will probably ask you to change your statements or your actions – perhaps both. This may be woven into the conversation very skilfully, so that you hardly notice it. Whenever possible, though, it is best to…

6. Stick to the plan

If someone asks you to change your plan, your first inclination may be to comply. Sometimes, this may be a very good idea, but this is almost certainly not one of those times. If you find yourself contemplating compliance, at least give yourself some time and space to consider the matter carefully.

Perhaps you could agree to think about it, but be sure to do that thinking somewhere else. Never deviate from your considered plan in the heat of the manipulative moment! If possible, also discuss the issue with a colleague. If a change involves previously agreed limits, of course, it will ultimately need to be discussed with the whole team.

Quite often, the result of this process will be that you decide to make no change at all, or perhaps to make some, but not all, of the requested changes. Report this decision to the patient in a matter of fact way, without displaying any apprehension about

[1] Coates, G.T. 2008. Wanterfall: A practical approach to the understanding and healing of the emotions of everyday life. Free e-book from www.wanterfall.com

the storm of complaint you are probably expecting. If necessary, repeat the information using the "cracked record technique".[1]

7. Charm the snake

Snake charming may seem like a strange addition to the present discussion. However, there are some parallels between caring for manipulative patients and managing dangerous animals. For example, it is generally best not to seem as terrified as you probably feel. Therefore, if possible, act as if you fully expect the patient to behave sensibly, rather than acting as if you are attending to the oral hygiene of a poisonous snake.

Don't be fooled by your own subterfuge, though. Always remember that (figuratively speaking) you actually *are* providing mouth care to a serpent. Therefore, remain alert with every sense. At the same time, watch your *own* feelings like a hawk. If you notice that you feel very bad, that is very good! (One of the chief dangers lies in *not* noticing that you feel bad.)

8. Be perfectly paranoid

Perfect paranoia may seem like another rather odd inclusion in our current context. You may even consider the term to be an oxymoron. Perhaps I should explain what I mean by it. By perfect paranoia, I actually mean two things. Firstly, I mean being suspicious of absolutely everything about the patient. Secondly, I mean processing that suspicion in a clear mind, by mixing it with equal parts of logic and equanimity.

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[1] If you don't remember vinyl records, think of this as the *looped sample technique*. It is simply an answer that is repeated, calmly and politely, as often as necessary – instead of changing the answer on request.

In other words, I mean considering the possibility that absolutely anything might be yet another nasty, underhanded scheme, however much sweetness and light it is clothed in. At the same time, it is important to continue the patient's care in a methodical fashion, and to maintain as calm an atmosphere as possible. A calm atmosphere may not always deter the patient from creating further mischief, but perhaps it will help a bit. It will also make things less unpleasant for the carers involved.

For example, if the patient is kind to you, or praises your work, you should immediately suspect that you are being set up. You should also calmly consider that perhaps you are not being set up. In other words, assume that anything the patient says or does *might* be a barbed and baited hook. Sometimes, that will not be the case, which might be a sign of progress. Be glad of that – but don't forget to resume your perfect paranoia!

9. Be ready to duck

If you follow the above suggestions, such patients will not achieve their desired results, and this quite often causes a veritable avalanche of anger! It is often better if another person takes over at that point, as they may be able to address the anger without being a part of it. They will hear what a terrible person you are, but you will be spared the litany of your faults.

Next time you see the patient, just follow these same ten rules all over again; and always be ready to let go of the past, and start a new relationship which is not poisoned by what has gone before. While doing that, don't forget to remain perfectly paranoid, and always ready to duck!

10. Never retaliate

You may sometimes feel the urge to frown at such a patient, or perhaps even (gasp) speak sharply to them. OK, you will more likely want to swear and scream at them, though I won't

mention homicide – oops, I did. If you blame yourself for such feelings, you will feel guilty as well as enraged. Now things are really proceeding according to plan (and no, it isn't your plan).

The two main things to remember about such feelings are (a) they are all "normal" and (b) many of them nevertheless need to be worked through, as mentioned under step 4, so that the urge to retaliate does not become overwhelming. If this urge is not well managed, retaliation of various sorts may well occur.

Perhaps the least specific form of retaliation is the most common. Often, such patients are moved to the bed furthest from the nurses' station, sometimes with their door kept shut. This is understandable, but it may place the patient at risk. It also makes it much less likely that anyone will be there to offer help if the patient is ever ready to accept it.

If you make the mistake of retaliating in a more specific way, all hell will break loose (and most of it will land on your own head). Retaliation is the only certain way of losing this game. In fact, it is one of the main things that you are being set up for. If you retaliate in an emotional way, you have no hope of winning. This patient is a master of psychological warfare, and you will be reeled in like a fish and roasted over a slow fire.

If you retaliate with physical violence, you will not only lose the game, you will probably lose your job as well. You might even feature on national television, face criminal charges, or both. Even though all you wanted to do was to care for patients, encountering this *particular* patient could make your life a misery. It is remarkably easy to get bitten, when caring for venomous snakes.

Fortunately, though, most cases do not go quite so far as that. Nevertheless, they are always difficult, and usually quite unpleasant. For those readers who are kind enough, and brave enough, to provide "mouth care for venomous snakes", I hope

the above ideas will help you to avoid being bitten too often – and also help you to survive those bites that you do not avoid.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is one of the most important topics in any book about communication, even though it has more to do with *not* communicating, than it does with communicating. Perhaps, therefore, this should have been the first chapter, instead of the last. However, I think a better understanding of communication facilitates a better understanding of the need for confidentiality, so here it is at the end of the book.

I think it is self-evident that some information can cause harm to some people in some situations. It therefore follows that the possession of information raises the issue of its proper management. The central requirement of any satisfactory approach to this issue is to protect the interests of the original owner of the information. As we shall see, that is not always the only requirement, but it is always the best starting point.

Apart from the sometimes considerable direct harm which may result from failure to protect the interests of a client who has shared sensitive information, there is another important consequence. That consequence is the possibly irreparable damage to all aspects of rapport, and especially to the vital trust which may have grown up over a period of time.

In broad terms, confidentiality is the term applied to the process of handling information in a way designed to protect the interests of its original owner, thus promoting trust and making it possible for honest and open communication to occur without fear of adverse consequences.

More specifically, my dictionary tells me that confidentiality means "discretion in keeping secret information".[1] Like most

[1] Princeton University Cognitive Science Lab, 1991 – 2005. WordNet online lexical database.

dictionary definitions, I think this could benefit from some explanation. I will therefore comment briefly on each of the key words. It may be clearer if I take them in reverse order, that is, *information*, then *secret*, then *keeping* and finally *discretion*.

INFORMATION

It is obvious, on the briefest reflection, that some information, if transmitted further, can cause harm; often, though not always, to its original owner. Sometimes, just a little harm results. At other times, very great harm may occur. Perhaps that harm will take the form of mental anguish. Perhaps it will be a financial loss. Occasionally, disclosure of information can result in loss of liberty, or even loss of life.

Perhaps this may sound a little melodramatic, especially in the case of minor details, such as name and address. After all, things like that are probably in the phone book in any case. Well, perhaps they are. However, what is trivial in a particular situation, and what could be important, depends on many things, some of which may not be known to you.

For example, an address which is not known to certain people may be all that is keeping its owner safe from harm. In some cases, a few apparently minor details could fill the gaps in a large dossier, thus being much more important when collected than they might seem in isolation. Therefore, it is never safe to assume that a piece of information is of no significance.

SECRECY

Because of the risks which may attend disclosure, secrecy is the only safe starting point when handling information, until or unless it is known to be appropriate to release it. (It is also worth remembering that a person who is harmed as a result of your failure to maintain secrecy may well be able to sue you.)

It doesn't matter whether you are a professional or not. Unless you have the permission of the person involved, or some other authorisation as discussed below, the best rule is not to say anything at all about what you learn about another person, to anyone at all. "Anything at all", incidentally, includes whether or not any information exists.

An important consideration here is that the "privilege" which is often assumed to protect information received by various professional service providers is *not* recognised by most courts of law. In most western countries, for example, only communication between a lawyer and client is exempted from compulsory disclosure to a court.

For this reason, some commentators have suggested that extremely sensitive information should neither be recorded nor committed to memory. (In that case, nothing which points to its possible existence should be recorded or remembered either.)

It is worth remembering that many organisations insist on access to a person's medical record before providing services such as insurance. Likewise, many employers require access to medical records before considering a job application. This means that the contents of a medical record can have effects which are quite unrelated to the provision of medical care.

Obviously, maintaining secrecy will sometimes require a refusal to answer questions. This is best done with a mixture of tact and firmness. I have found the following statement useful in such situations. "I'm sorry, but if I had any information about a matter of that nature, it would be confidential, so I really can't make any comment at all."

Although declining to divulge information is easy enough in theory, some lawyers (and their secretaries) are quite ferocious in the way they make their improper requests. They will often rephrase their strident demands in cunning ways, and try very

hard to trick information out of you. They may even insist, with supreme confidence, that you are required by law to answer their questions. In such cases, I recommend using the *cracked record technique*[1] mentioned in the previous chapter.

When you get sick of that, I guess you could put them on hold for a while. Sooner or later, though, you may have to say goodbye. It is best to do this just as calmly, quietly and politely as in the case of the "cracked record" refusals. A disappointed unscrupulous lawyer is not nearly as dangerous as an enraged one. (It is quite possible that everything you say is being recorded, incidentally, although that is usually not legal.)

Even the sharing of clinical information within a clinical team is not always acceptable. The main factors, which determine whether it is appropriate or not, are the degree of sensitivity of the information, and the degree to which it is necessary to the team's work. There is no simple rule to cover this.

Of course, even if it is appropriate, it will still breach confidentiality requirements if others can overhear what is said, or read what is written. For example, in many hospitals, clinical records are neatly placed in a purpose-designed container at the foot of the bed, even during visiting hours. This practice would be very difficult to defend if it resulted in a significant leak of confidential information.

KEEPING

As well as being kept secret, information often needs to be protected against loss or damage. If it is no longer needed, an effective method of total and permanent destruction is the best

[1] If you don't remember vinyl records, think of this as the *looped sample technique*. It is simply an answer that is repeated, calmly and politely, as often as necessary – instead of changing the answer on request.

way to prevent future leaks. However, multiple backups make this impracticable in most digital systems. There are also many situations in which information needs to be available in the future, as well as being safe from unauthorised access now.

Keeping information secure has never been easy. With modern information technology, the difficulties are different, but still very considerable. As discussed in Appendix 4 (Digital Communications), today's "perfect" solution for securing digital files is, unfortunately, usually tomorrow's child's play.

DISCRETION

There will always be some situations in which the best interests of the original owner, or sometimes of other people, can only be served by *not* keeping certain information secret. In other words, the default position of total secrecy may not always be the best solution. This is where discretion is required.

Discretion has various shades of meaning. It often means having the freedom to act or judge on one's own, rather than taking orders from someone else. Delicacy, diplomacy, circumspection, prudence, wisdom and objectivity can also contribute to the meaning of discretion, depending on the context in which the word is used.

You are sure to need some or all of those qualities, if you sail in the murky, and incompletely charted, waters of disclosure of confidential information. Such a voyage is never pleasant, and it can be downright dangerous. Nevertheless, there are two situations in which this hazardous voyage cannot be avoided.

Firstly, in most countries, there is a legal requirement to inform the police if you have information which could prevent the commission of a crime. In this case, the welfare of others is the reason for disclosure, and is considered to override the interests of the client. (The client will probably not share that view.)

Secondly, there may be occasions when it is actually the welfare of your client which is best served by disclosing confidential information. There is no easy way to make that decision. As with communication itself, everything you know, and everything you are, will contribute to the process; but it will still, usually, be a difficult decision.

Finally, but most certainly not least in importance, if you have a professional indemnity insurer, any matters of concern should obviously be discussed with them as soon as they arise. They have a great deal of experience in this area, and should be able to provide very helpful advice. Not only that, but you may well need their assistance with any repercussions which occur.

APPENDIX 1:
THE BASIC COMMUNICATION PROCESS

In this appendix, I will discuss the *process* involved in communication, and while I do that, the essential simplicity of exchanging messages may appear to recede a little. However, although the conceptual elements of communication include various complexities, their overall effect is just to enable that simple phenomenon we all know, the sharing of information.

I think quite a large proportion of the apparent complexity found in discussions about communication results from a lack of agreement about terminology. Consequently, different authors sometimes use a different word for the same thing, and they sometimes use the same word for a different thing!

Imagine being taught to fly a plane by a number of different instructors, if each instructor meant something completely different by the words "up" and "down". That is how I tend to feel when I read articles about communication theory; and the feeling is even more intense if I tiptoe apprehensively around the borders of the closely related field of semiotics.[1]

I will try not to make you feel that way, as you read this appendix. Wherever possible, I will use words in their usual sense, as given in any English dictionary. If I cannot avoid using a word in a special sense, I will explain what I mean by it when I first use it, and make sure that it is listed in the Index.

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[1] Semiotics (sometimes called semiology) is the study of *signs* and their role in representing and conveying meaning. A sign, in semiotics, is anything that stands for something else. So far, so good – but from that point on, this discipline, which is of potential significance to virtually every field of human study, sometimes generates more confusion than clarity – partly because of a lack of agreement about terminology.

In principle, the task of transferring information from one or more people to one or more other people could hardly be simpler. The information just has to be moved from "here" to "there" and/or "there" to "here". Nevertheless, the mechanism involves quite a number of steps. I will discuss these steps under the next heading, and, as promised, I will give each of them a plain English name and a plain English description.

However, in order that my description does not find itself marooned in splendid but irrelevant isolation, I will also show where various terms derived from other models of communication can mesh with my model. They certainly should be able to. After all, no matter how many models there may be, they are all descriptions of the same process!

I will consider the basic elements in terms of one-way communication between one or more people ("the sender") and one or more other people ("the receiver"). These elements are exactly the same in the case of two-way communication. To reply, the sender and receiver swap roles, but everything else stays the same. In other words, the direction of information flow is different, but the process itself is not.

While reading about the steps in the communication process, it may all seem a bit simplistic and mechanical. However, the concepts used to describe communication are deliberate simplifications, which leave both its content and its subtleties to the imagination. The more you learn about communication, the more you will appreciate its underlying complexity. However, this will not make your own communication more complicated. On the contrary, it should become *less* so.

It is interesting to notice that, although the steps associated with the sender do not all have the same names as the steps associated with the receiver, most of the communication process is nevertheless symmetrical. The receiving part of the

process effectively reverses the steps made by the sending part of the process, in order to retrieve the original information.

However, as discussed under Information and Meaning, near the beginning of the book, because human beings do not have identical minds or identical sense organs, and because many other factors also influence meaning, the meaning attributed to the same information by two people will never be exactly the same. Therefore, although the *process* of communication is symmetrical, and can be made fairly reliable, the *results* of communication may not be either of those two things!

In other words, as I have stressed frequently in the book, even though it exists within each individual mind, *meaning is never fully transferable*. All communication is subject to this limitation, whether we like it or not (and we usually don't).

Factors such as the choice of words, the surrounding words and sentences, various language features, sentence structure, timing, stress, intonation, and the overall structure and organisation of the message, all exert an influence on the meaning ultimately attributed to a communication performed using words. So do the individual characteristics of the sender and the receiver, as well as any other messages (often non-verbal) that they are exchanging at or about the same time.

The pre-existing knowledge of both parties, the relationship between them, the method and form of delivery of information, the purpose of the communication, the audience for which it is designed and the overall situation in which it takes place, including both local and distant events, also play their part.

Many of the factors mentioned above influence non-verbal communication, as well as spoken or written communication. In either case, meaning is not, and never can be, fully transferable. The deliberately simplistic representation of the

communication process which follows must be viewed in the light of the above remarks, and those made in the book itself.

THE ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

SENDER:

- **Meaning**
- **Information**
- **Representation**
- **Departure**

T R A N S M I S S I O N

- **Arrival**
- **Perception**
- **Information**

RECEIVER:

- **Meaning**

I will comment below on each of the elements shown above. However, when discussing one element, I will frequently refer to others. This is because they are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they are considerably interlaced. Completely separate discussions would therefore be artificial, if not impossible, and would also result in a lot of repetition.

SENDER

In most situations, the sender must possess some cognitive capacity, as the information will usually need to be processed and directed to some extent. Sometimes, part or all of that processing may be provided by someone other than the sender, who will then require fewer innate resources.

While communication between people must have at least one person at each end of the process, some of the steps in the process can be provided by a machine, and often are. In unusual circumstances, some of those steps could be provided by an animal (such as a St Bernard rescue dog) or conceivably by inanimate objects. The concept would still be the same.

Sender's Meaning

Meaning is a word most people use quite often, and usually without the slightest uncertainty about its – er, meaning. It is not uncommon to advise a child, or for that matter an adult, to "say what you mean – and mean what you say". This sounds simple enough, but the more you think about it, the more this idea of meaning seems like anything but child's play.

Sometimes, I think I know what I mean, but I cannot even express it to my own satisfaction. At other times, I read or hear what others have expressed, but I am not at all sure what they mean by it. There are also probably many occasions when I think I know exactly what another person means, but in reality my idea is not even close to what was actually intended.

In some contexts, the definition of meaning is fairly simple, and has to do with significance, importance, consequence or intention. However, in a more general sense, meaning often refers to something that is understood in a person's mind, and I think that goes a long way to explaining the rather slippery

nature of the concept. After all, where is the mind? If you cannot find the mind, how can you examine what is "in" it?

Meaning is generally agreed to exist, but it is rather hard to pin down. Even within the mind, what form does meaning take? Sometimes, the meaning in our minds is represented in a form reminiscent of one of the five senses. Alternatively, we might represent it in words, numerals or other symbols. However, some ideas simply do not fit those forms; they are abstract. These abstract ideas certainly have meaning for their owner, but I wonder how they could be transferred to anybody else.

Indeed, the transfer of *any* idea to another person raises quite a few questions. In the absence of telepathy, an idea surely could not get into another mind unless it had somehow got out of the first mind and crossed whatever it is that separates the two minds. How could that be achieved? At the very least, the idea would need to be represented in a form which could exist outside the first mind and be accessed by the second mind.

Well, I guess it's a good thing I promised to refer to all the wrong terms under all the right headings, because I have already started doing just that. Two examples of *representation* have crept into this discussion of *meaning* – representation in the mind, and representation outside the mind. To add confusion to complexity, any type of representation, and also whatever it is representing (or re-representing) is sometimes referred to as *information*, which is my next topic.

Information

Information is another common word, but, like meaning, it can get a little complex if you think about it much. In general usage, depending on the context, information can mean a message received and understood, a collection of facts from

which conclusions may be drawn, or knowledge which has been acquired in some way, such as by learning or experience.[1]

In the above examples, information is a rather abstract idea. For example, the information in a bank statement is a sort of virtual counterpart to the numbers on the paper. However, the bank statement itself might also be referred to as information. Instead of saying "Here is a document in which the information you require is represented as alphanumeric symbols printed on paper" we might just say "Here is the information you require".

Quite a few other words can be used as synonyms for information. It is sometimes called *content*, *substance*, *message*, or even (with some help from the context) *thing*. I hope all this doesn't seem too clear, by the way. If it does, I can only apologise. I will do my best to remedy the situation, starting with an example which should take the level of confusion to new heights.

Hmmm, perhaps I am joking. We'll see. Let's say that I have learned the way to my home. That acquired knowledge is certainly information, and it could come in quite handy, but where does it live? Somewhere in my brain, presumably. However, I can't consciously translate the neuronal electrochemistry which my brain employs, no matter how much I want to get home. Even if I could measure the behaviour of those useful little electrons and molecules, it probably wouldn't mean anything to me. What should I do?

Fortunately, the information which I need to get me home is in my mind as well as my brain.[2] In my mind, I have a

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[1] As usual, other meanings may be understood in specific contexts. For example, in computer science, information usually means data which has been entered, processed, stored or transmitted.

[2] Distinctions between the brain and the mind are complex, and lie beyond the scope of these notes. However, brain is more often *(to next page…)*

representation of the way home, and that does mean something to me. It is information, but the mind represents it in various ways, such as a mental picture of the territory, or a series of distances and turns. Information always has to be represented somehow or other, whether it is inside or outside the mind.

Am I giving you the impression that the terms meaning, information and representation mean more or less the same thing, but in slightly different ways; except when they mean slightly different things, but in more or less the same way? I do hope so. There are two very important caveats, though.

The first is that, while meaning may be closely related to information and representation for a given person, *my* meaning may *not* be closely related to *your* meaning – even when the information and its representation are the same. The second caveat is that, while there are many ways of representing and re-representing information, they are all equally useless as regards communication unless they are *transportable*.

Representation

From the point of view of the basic communication process, the element which I have called "representation" means a *transportable* representation as mentioned above. Of course, if the information is already represented in a transportable form, this step is conceptual rather than actual. However, if it is not, then a transportable representation must be created.

It would be more logical, really, to talk of *re*-representation (unless referring to the very first representation of an idea in its

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(brain, continued) associated, in common usage, with the physiological aspects of sensation, cognition and action; while mind is more often used in association with, for example, awareness, thought, emotion, reason, creativity and choice.

owner's mind). Indeed, there are layers and layers of different representations possible for any given piece of information. In the mind, some ideas have an abstract representation. Others are represented as pictures, sounds, feelings, tastes or smells. Still others are represented in the form of words or numbers.

Outside the mind, most of the mental representations referred to in the previous paragraph can be re-represented, with varying degrees of accuracy, as images, sounds, alphanumeric characters, musical notation and so on. Those things can then be re-represented as a digital file consisting of binary numbers. Any of these representations which are *transportable* can be pressed into service as the element of communication which I have referred to (rather loosely) as the representation element.

Some information needs to be re-represented in a carefully chosen way in order to make it transportable. On the other hand, some things are in a transportable form when we first encounter them. For example, a painting, which is a representation of something seen or imagined by the artist, could simply be carried or mailed to the receiver.

Sometimes, the appropriate representation involves a number of steps. A good example is the way in which abstract thoughts, which are next represented mentally or sonically as words, are finally transported as text. To achieve this, the words, which were originally defined by their sound, are re-represented in a graphical form, as writing or printing. That is done by applying something visible, such as ink, to something stable and portable, such as paper.

The resulting document might be handed or posted to the receiver. Alternatively, it might be further re-represented on microfiche, having the same appearance when magnified, but taking up very little room when stored. On the other hand, it might be re-represented, via a digital camera, as a digital image file. If retyped on a word processor or computer, it could be re-

represented as a digital text file. The last two can be sent by any method capable of transferring binary data (e.g. e-mail).

In other words, this representation step can vary from not being necessary at all, to involving quite a complex procedure. Talking of complexity, I think this is a good time to fulfil my promise to show how some other communication terms can be made at least partially compatible with the model of communication I have been describing.

The terms I have in mind are *modality*, *format* and *medium*. I have avoided these terms simply for the sake of clarity, because they are used differently by different authors when discussing communication, in addition to having quite a few other meanings in other contexts. However, I will say a little about them here, and then I will leave them in peace again.

Modality

The representation of information is sometimes called the *modality* of the information. However, when applied to communication, the word "modality" is also used to refer to the type of information, the sensory system receiving the information, or the combination of a type of representation and its physical form or vehicle. In general usage, modality has still other meanings, often carrying a sense of category, sort, type or method. Therefore, when the term modality is encountered, it is important to remember that, unless it has been defined by the author, *it might mean almost anything*.

Format

Format is another term which is sometimes used for a representation, or alternatively for a representation plus its physical form or vehicle. The general usage of the word format has to do with how things are arranged and presented, and it

also has various specific meanings unrelated to communication. It is thus at least as variable in meaning as modality, so it also needs to be defined whenever it is used.

Medium

Like modality and format, *medium* has numerous general meanings, as well as various specific meanings when applied to communication. In the latter context, it often refers to a transportable representation – but not always.

Back to Topic

However you look at it, representation of information is a fascinating, and apparently quite enormous, topic. Fortunately, though, it is not necessary to go into great detail about representation in order to understand the basic communication process. Instead, we can simply note that information *must* be represented in a transportable form if it is to be communicated.

The most common representations used in communication between people are probably natural languages, both spoken and written. Language is discussed briefly in Appendix 2, so I will not go into it here. The digitised form of written language is a frequent interim step when the information must travel far. Digitisation of information is discussed briefly in Appendix 4.

There will always be some cases where it is not possible to perform the transportable representation step – in which case, no transmission will be possible. Some ideas simply cannot be moved from one mind to another. Alternatively, as mentioned earlier, successful transmission will still result in a somewhat different meaning in the mind of the receiver. This issue will be discussed again under Receiver's Meaning, below.

Departure

As soon as the information is represented in a transportable form, it is ready to be dispatched. Although obvious, this step should not be taken for granted, because it is the last chance to reconsider the undertaking. It is usually not possible to recall information once it has been sent, so if there is any doubt about the wisdom of sending it, this is the time for second thoughts! After that, the sender simply has to perform whatever action is necessary to start the chosen method of transmission.

TRANSMISSION

The transportable representation now has to be moved from sender to receiver. This is generally referred to as *transmission*. Transmission can be as easy as handing over a letter, or as complicated as sending radio signals to reach an astronaut in space at a given time and location. In either case, the concept itself could hardly be simpler. The remaining steps must then be completed by the receiver.

RECEIVER

Whereas some (or conceivably all) of the sender's tasks might be performed by external agencies as discussed previously, there are three things which the receiver cannot delegate. The receiver must be sufficiently *accessible* for arrival to occur, and must also possess and employ both *sensory capacity* (so that the represented information can be relayed to the receiver's brain) and *cognitive capacity* (so that the input received by the brain can be processed sufficiently to be understood). These are the prerequisites for the perception step discussed soon.

Arrival

As mentioned above, the receiver has an indispensable role in enabling the arrival of messages. That role is to be accessible. Accessibility can be achieved in many different ways, such as having a postal address, an e-mail address, a telephone number or any of the many other possible entry points for incoming messages. If, on the other hand, there is no way at all for a message to arrive, then communication will be unsuccessful – like a message in a bottle, lost at sea.

The *way* in which the represented information arrives is also significant. It depends partly on the type of transmission which is used, and partly on the way in which the message has been represented for transport. Neither of these alters the content of the message, but they can certainly alter the frame of mind in which the content is processed by the receiver. Therefore, it is wise to consider both form and method of delivery as being important aspects of any message, rather than purely mechanical steps in the communication process.

Consider a message crudely written in blood on a torn sheet of newspaper, wrapped around a brick and thrown through a closed window in the early hours of the morning. It will certainly be received and processed *very* differently from a neatly written message on a beautiful card attached to a gift-wrapped parcel brought to a birthday party by an invited guest.

The importance of this tendency for the communication *process* to bleed through into the *message*, influencing its palatability, changing the meaning attributed to it, or (frequently) both, was expressed very succinctly by Marshall McLuhan[1] when he said "the medium is the message".

[1] McLuhan, M. 1964. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. Many editions and publishers, the first being Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

McLuhan also suggested that it was worth pondering the terms "massage", "mass age" and "mess age", as interesting alternatives to "message", when considering communication. In fact, three years after the publication of the book from which the famous quote above is taken, he actually co-authored a book called "The Medium is the Massage".[1]

Perception

The term perception is sometimes applied to sensation alone, as in the phrase "sensory perception". However, I am using it here in its more common meaning, which includes two closely linked processes. The first is sensation, which is the only way information from outside the receiver can get into the receiver's brain. The second is sufficient cognitive activity to allow that sensory input to be recognised, if it has been encountered before, or to be noted as a new phenomenon, if it has not.

Before sensation can occur, a further short transmission step, to which I have not given a separate heading, is needed. We usually take sensation for granted, but in fact our sensory organs do not send any useful messages to the brain until they are stimulated in the correct way.

For example, a document or a picture needs light waves, reflected from its surface, to carry the represented information to the eyes of the receiver. Similarly, sound waves are needed to carry an auditory representation to the ears – and so on. In some cases, the appropriate stimulus will have been employed throughout the transmission step, but otherwise this interim step is necessary to get the information to the receiver's brain.

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[1] McLuhan M. and Fiore, Q. 1967. The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects. Bantam, New York.

An opera singer can transmit an auditory signal to everyone in the audience by creating sound waves with the vocal cords which reach all the ears in the auditorium directly. On the other hand, if you send someone a recorded voice message, it will not reach their ears until the stored information has been decoded, amplified, and finally transduced into sound waves by a loudspeaker or headphones.

Even when the information received by a sensory organ reaches the brain, the communication process is not complete. Some sort of interpretation, which varies greatly according to both the message received and the mind receiving it, is still necessary. In the case of a printed document, the characters are usually recognised, decoded into words and at least partially understood, in the single operation called reading. Further cognitive activity then continues for a variable period of time, as discussed under the next heading.

If the document is printed in a foreign language, an extra processing step called translation will be needed before any interpretation can occur. The same will apply if it is written in a secret code, in which case the step is called deciphering. If these steps can be completed successfully, the situation will then be similar to the one discussed above. However, translation from one language to another is not an exact science, and some nuances of meaning may be altered or lost.

Information

This is a rather misleading heading, because I am actually going to combine my discussion of information at the receiving end of the communication process with the next heading, Receiver's Meaning. When discussing meaning and information from the sender's perspective, I used separate headings, but explained that the two were closely related. This

time, I will use a single heading, but explain that the two elements, though considerably interlaced, are not identical.

Receiver's Meaning

The perception step discussed above results in the transportable representation of the information originally provided by the sender being accessible to the brain and mind of the receiver. It is then either recognised or classified as something new, and in most cases some further processing also occurs. It is tempting to declare the communication process complete at this point.

However, as mentioned at the outset, there is still one vitally important aspect of communication to consider. The information, which has now been received, was originally an attempt to represent the *meaning* understood by the sender. Now it will be used to provide meaning to the *receiver*. Attribution of meaning by the receiver is virtually inevitable, once the information has arrived – but that meaning will rarely, if ever, be identical to the meaning originally intended.

The meaning attributed by the receiver can be influenced, as mentioned earlier, by the form in which it is represented and the way in which it arrives. It is also, inevitably, influenced by the knowledge, experience and emotions of the receiver. Naturally, the information itself has a very considerable influence on the meaning attributed to it. However, that influence is clearly not the only one involved.

Although it may seem obvious enough, that simple fact about communication is really of tremendous significance. It means that, *although the message can be controlled, the meaning cannot*. That is not to say that the meaning attributed to a message is completely divorced from the meaning originally intended. However, it does mean that transferring meaning is not a simple matter – and certainly not an exact science.

What if you want to share your intended meanings as accurately as possible? In order to do that, communication has to become an art, as well as a science. The elements described in this appendix only provide a basic idea of the processes involved. The book itself is intended to encourage the beginnings of effective communication. Beyond that, further understanding of the vast territory involved in the transfer of meaning is something which may be improved throughout life.

PROCESSING INFORMATION

I have referred to the need for some cognitive activity in association with most of the steps of the basic communication process. Cognitive activity usually continues after the communication has been completed, in order to reflect further on what has been received, integrate it with existing thoughts and feelings, and formulate an answer if desired.

Theories about the ways in which the human mind goes about these things are outside my scope. However, I will mention a few related ideas in passing. Various sets of mental tactics or rules are often useful when approaching particular mental tasks, though they may not always be employed consciously.

The rules we refer to as *logic* are often useful when processing qualitative content. The rules we refer to as *mathematics* are always necessary when processing quantitative content. The rules we refer to as *statistics* are frequently applied (though often misapplied) when processing probabilistic content.

It is also quite common to consider the processing of information under the headings *semantic*, *syntactic* and

pragmatic.[1] The semantic aspect of communication involves things with an agreed meaning, such as words. The syntactic aspect involves the agreed rules, such as grammar[2], which govern the relationships between semantic elements.

The pragmatic aspect of communication involves the actual meaning ultimately attributed to the received information. This is sometimes called the *impact* which that information has on the receiver. As we have seen, the same information can have a very different impact on different people.

Regardless of the way in which the processing is done, communication between two or more people always involves three *personal* aspects in addition to the basic communication process previously described. Firstly, people experience emotions, and their emotions both influence, and are influenced by, the content of the communication.

Secondly, people have a tendency to employ two or more means of communication simultaneously[3], mixing them in real time and also making judgements about the weight they give to each. Thirdly, people have a tendency to start processing, attributing meaning and responding, while they are still in the act of receiving the rest of the message. This all adds to the complexity – and richness – of interpersonal communication.

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[1] This classification of information processing was suggested by the Vienna Circle, also known as the Ernst Mach Society, a group of philosophers who used to meet at Vienna University in the early 1920s.

[2] See Appendix 2 for a less simplistic view of grammar.

[3] This makes it possible to send or receive contradictory messages simultaneously. The importance of the congruence of messages received simultaneously is discussed in various parts of the book.

APPENDIX 2:
SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT LANGUAGE

(There was a small amount about language in the chapter called Communicating Using Words. I will repeat most of it here, and also expand on it.)

I will start by including some of what I said about *meaning* in the first chapter, because the purpose of language is to transfer meaning. It is therefore essential to remember that, while always present within an individual mind, *meaning is never fully transferable*. This does not mean that language should be discarded. It simply means that the imperfect transfer of meaning, a limitation inherent in all communication, inevitably applies to language and everything it is used for.

The meaning attributed to any message by the receiver can never be exactly the same as the meaning intended by the sender, because they are different people, with different sense organs and different cognitive function. There are also many other factors which influence the degree to which the receiver's meaning differs from the sender's meaning.

In the case of a word or phrase, the surrounding words or phrases usually provide useful clues. Language features (such as formal, informal and idiomatic language) and sentence structure (sometimes called syntactical grammar) also provide extra information. In the case of speech, factors such as timing, stress and intonation are very significant.

The overall structure and organisation of the communication (sometimes called textual grammar) must also be considered, as should the individual characteristics of the sender and the receiver. Any concurrent messages, especially non-verbal ones, will exert an influence, as will the pre-existing knowledge possessed by each person, and the relationship between them.

The method by which a message is delivered, and the form in which it arrives, will inevitably have an impact on the receiver, too. The purpose of the communication, and the audience to which it is directed, are also very relevant. The overall situation in which the communication occurs, and the local and more distant events surrounding it, also play their part.

These various things which influence the meaning attributed to an instance of communication are often referred to as the *context* of that communication. However, context is not always applied in such a broad way. Sometimes it is used to refer to particular aspects of the influences surrounding a message.

Having said that, language is an important method of communicating, though certainly not the only method. A language is simply a system whereby agreed sounds or other symbols are used for the purpose of exchanging information. Many languages have evolved gradually as humans interact, but there are others which have been designed deliberately.

The term *natural language* is applied to any language that has evolved spontaneously within a community. An example is the English language, which I am doing my best to write these notes in. This natural, spontaneous evolution distinguishes the natural languages from the artificial languages. The latter include computer programming languages, as well as languages which have been deliberately designed and constructed for human use, such as Esperanto.[1]

Communication by means of a language can obviously only work if the sender and the receiver have a language in common, at least to some degree, and use it. This *common language requirement* is not negotiable. After all, the

[1] Esperanto is an artificial language constructed as far as possible from words common to all the European languages.

representation and transfer of information discussed in Appendix 1 would be useless if the representation meant nothing to the receiver upon its arrival.

Whether natural or artificial, any language is a type of *code*, which relies on agreed rules for its functionality. Essentially, these rules determine the meanings of the elements of the language, and also the ways in which those elements are used. However, the "rules" in a natural language are rather fluid!

The most basic elements of a natural language are its words, and the rather fluid rules governing the usage of the words are generally called its grammar.[1] The context[2] in which words are used also provides vital information about their meaning. That is a nice simple way of looking at language, but in fact everything about language is hotly debated, and the debates are often far from simple.

Firstly, it must be remembered that the meanings ascribed to words change constantly, and there are many deliberate changes instituted by subcultures, for example. Secondly, grammar is no longer thought of simply as a set of rules governing structure and usage. Rather, it has come to be seen as a way to describe what can be observed as recurring language patterns, and the way those patterns function, in different cultures and subcultures.

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[1] Linguists expand this simple description considerably, using words like lexicology, morphology, phonetics, semantics and syntax among others. (Artificial languages also have rules analogous to vocabulary and grammar, but they are usually given other names, such as "commands" and "syntax".)

[2] The context, as previously discussed, includes the surrounding words, the way the words are delivered, any concurrent messages, and the overall circumstances. This in fact adds up to a very large part of language, including such things as word placement, timing, stress, intonation, other non-verbal factors, pre-existing knowledge, the relationship between sender and receiver and the situation in which the communication occurs.

Despite the rather uncooperative tendencies of words and grammar, and the variable dimensions of context, information encoded as a natural language can be exchanged in practice by one person listening while another person is speaking, or by one person reading what another person has written. Each of the four activities mentioned, listening, speaking, reading and writing, depends on vocabulary, grammar and context.

WORDS

To satisfy the common language requirement referred to above, those who wish to communicate using a language must know the meanings of a sufficient number of words for the purposes of the topic involved. Each word in a language has one (or often more than one) defined and agreed meaning.[1] Because of this, *that word can be used for that meaning*. Then, later, *that meaning can be derived from that word*.

Significantly, a word does not look, sound or feel like the thing it represents (though there are a few instances in which the sound of a word is at least compatible with its meaning). However, because the word's meaning is already known to both sender and receiver, this does not matter. Whenever a word is used, it represents the thing(s) that it is known to represent.

When a word has more than one meaning, or when the meaning itself is not very precise, the use of that word might cause a variable degree of ambiguity. However, as mentioned above, the context usually clarifies the meaning. In natural languages, the importance of context is enormous, because a word or phrase very often has more than one possible meaning.

[1] As previously discussed, this simplistic statement does not apply to the overall process of communicating using words. During that process, many factors influence the meaning ultimately understood by the receiver.

Despite the possibility of having more than one meaning, a word is often more *precise* than other methods of representation, such as gestures or pictures. Further, because one word can represent quite a lot of meaning, the use of words can save time, increasing the *efficiency* of communication.

Yet another advantage is that, if it is subjected to deliberate processing in any reversible way, the meaning of each word will be preserved after that change has been reversed – which is often extremely *convenient*. The use of words therefore brings with it the benefits of *precision*, *efficiency* and *convenience* – though none of these qualities is invariable.

GRAMMAR

For all their precision, efficiency and convenience, and despite the invaluable assistance provided by the context in which they are used, words still require some further help to do their job effectively. That help comes in the form of the grammar mentioned above, which, though no longer seen simply as a set of rules, nevertheless provides information which is essential to achieving particular meanings in particular contexts.

Without such help, words might not be understood in the same way by the sender and the receiver – at worst, the appropriate collection of words could still result in a meaningless "word salad". Grammar influences the *order* in which words appear, and also dictates small but important changes in their *form*, which add vital temporal or relational information.

In the case of most natural languages, the gradual and haphazard evolution of grammar has resulted in many exceptions to its own rules! This makes it very difficult to master the grammar of a new language as an adult – though young children often absorb it without too much difficulty.

When grammar includes as many irregularities as it does in English, it becomes quite difficult to describe. Indeed, there are currently a number of approaches to English grammar. When I was at school, the favoured approach was to ignore the formal application of grammar almost completely – which may explain a few things about this book. However, that approach is not usually very helpful to those learning a second language.

SPEECH AND WRITING

The knowledge of words and grammar allows the creation of properly organised *groups* of words which, together with the context, can provide very useful information to the receiver. However, this requires a suitable method by which to transfer parcels of language from sender to receiver.

As is often the case when exchanging information, this may require a change in form. Here, the encoding which is a central feature of language is a great advantage, as it makes *recoding* into a suitable form relatively easy. Perhaps the most useful example is the recoding of *audible* speech into *visible* writing.

Originally, the individual words in natural languages like English were recognised by the way they *sounded*. However, fairly simple rules can be devised, which allow words to be represented as written or printed *text*. That allows them to be recognised by the way they *look*. They can then be received via the visual input, instead of by the auditory input.

One way of doing this is to construct the words from a relatively small number of symbols, each of which represents one sound (or occasionally two or more possible sounds). Various special symbols, especially numbers, can then be added. The *alphanumeric characters* from which the text you are reading is constructed provide an example of this approach.

The spelling and pronunciation of words must be agreed, so that the words can be written or spoken in ways that will be recognised by the receiver. Major exceptions to these rules may prevent a word from being understood, or alternatively may cause it to be misunderstood. Minor variations such as spelling errors and regional accents, or greater variations such as are found in dialects, will be tolerated to a degree which depends on the skills of the receiver. Native speakers can usually adjust for considerable variations in spelling or pronunciation.

For those who learn a language in early childhood, many of the things discussed above are learned almost automatically – though reading and writing require specific learning efforts. For those who are learning a new language as an adult, the learning of all the prerequisites requires considerable effort. Similarities, if any, between the new language and a language already known, naturally lessen the difficulty of the process.

ALTERNATIVE SYMBOLS

The various *sign languages* used by people whose hearing is impaired are examples of another way of recoding speech to allow it to enter via the visual input. Alternatively, if vision is impaired, alphanumeric characters can be made palpable, usually in the form of the *braille* symbols which were mentioned under Inputs, so that words can be recognised by the way they feel.

In some languages, pictograms (or pictographs) are used instead of alphanumeric characters. Pictograms are graphic representations which to some extent evoke the thing represented[1], so a new or modified character is needed for

[1] Because of this characteristic, pictograms include a non-verbal element, giving them some of the advantages of pictures, as well as those of words.

every word. This results in a very large number of characters, which takes a great deal of time and effort to learn. On the other hand, these languages can be very efficient, as a single character can represent a whole word, or a whole idea.

A message consisting of words may thus be received by any of the three main inputs: visual, auditory or tactile. Writing, printing, pictograms and sign language can be seen; spoken words or words reproduced via loudspeakers or headphones can be heard; and braille symbols can be felt.

Alphanumeric text, braille, sign language and pictographic symbols can all be considered as types of *writing*, in that they represent words by using symbols which are different from the original sounds of those words. Further, the various automated representations of text, such as typing, text displayed on a screen, and printing, are (almost) equivalent to handwriting, as they use the same characters (allowing for slight morphological differences) in the same ways.

APPENDIX 3: WATZLAWICK'S FIVE AXIOMS

Quite a lot of communication is carried on below the level of consciousness. You don't have to think about this sort of communication, it just happens automatically. This certainly saves some effort, but it does not always have the effect you might have chosen, if you had had the opportunity to consult yourself about the matter!

Even when you think you are *not* sending any messages, that absence of messages is quite evident to any observer, and can itself constitute quite a significant message. Not only that, but we usually transmit quite a few non-verbal messages unconsciously, even when we think we are not sending any messages at all.

This means that, unless you are a hermit, you cannot really avoid communicating. You can, of course, very easily get your communication scrambled – often in both directions – but that is not much consolation. In other words, you cannot *not* communicate… but you *can* not communicate accurately!

The "cannot not" part of that last sentence is in fact the first and best known of Paul Watzlawick's *five axioms of communication*.[1] Despite their age, and the changes that have occurred in the usage of some of the terms employed, each one has something helpful to offer. I will therefore list these axioms, and comment very briefly on each.

[1] Watzlawick, P., Beavin-Bavelas, J., Jackson, D. 1967. Some Tentative Axioms of Communication. In Pragmatics of Human Communication - A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes. W. W. Norton, New York.

Axiom 1 (cannot not)

"One cannot not communicate." Because every behaviour is a kind of communication, people who are aware of each other are constantly communicating. Any perceivable behaviour, including the absence of action, has the potential to be interpreted by other people as having some meaning.

Axiom 2 (content & relationship)

"Every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a meta-communication." Each person responds to the *content* of communication in the *context* of the relationship between the communicators.[1] The word meta-communication is used in various ways (and therefore not at all, by me) but Watzlawick uses it to mean the exchange of information about how to interpret other information.

Just as the interpretation of the words "What an idiot you are" could be influenced by the following words "Just kidding", it could also be influenced by the relationship between the communicators. In the example given, the word "idiot" might be accepted quite happily from a close friend, but convey an entirely different meaning in other circumstances.

Axiom 3 (punctuation)

"The nature of a relationship is dependent on the punctuation of the partners' communication procedures." In many cases, communication involves a

[1] The content is sometimes called the *denotative* level of communication, and the relational meaning is sometimes called the *connotative* or *interpretive* level of communication.

veritable maelstrom of messages flying in all directions. This applies especially to the non-verbal messages. The "punctuation" referred to is the process of organising groups of messages into meanings. This is analogous to the punctuation of written language. In either case, the punctuation can sometimes alter the meaning considerably.

For example, consider the occurrence of an angry response after an interruption, the latter having followed a suggested course of action. This might be interpreted as anger at the suggested course of action, if the interruption was "punctuated out" of the sequence, so that the suggestion and the anger were effectively grouped together as a tight sequence. However, if the receiver punctuated the information so that the interruption and the anger formed a tight sequence, it might be interpreted as anger at the interruption.

Axiom 4 (digital & analogic)

"Human communication involves both digital and analogic modalities." This one needs a bit of translating! The term "digital", which today usually refers either to numbers, computers or fingers, is used in this axiom to refer to discrete, defined elements of communication. These are usually words, but very specific gestures with generally agreed meanings would also qualify.

The term "analogic" also needs some translation. It is a variant of analogical, the adjective derived from analogy. It therefore refers to a correspondence, in certain respects, between things which are otherwise different. In this case, it describes a type of communication in which the representation to some extent evokes the thing to which it refers. For example, shaking a fist in front of a person's face would evoke the idea of violence.

What else needs translating? Oh yes, "modalities". As mentioned in Appendix 1, the word "modality" is used in very many different ways. In this case, I think Watzlawick is using modalities in the sense of types or sorts of information transfer.

Axiom 5 (symmetric or complementary)

"Inter-human communication procedures are either symmetric or complementary, depending on whether the relationship of the partners is based on differences or parity." A "symmetric" relationship here means one in which the parties involved behave as equals from a power perspective. The chance of airing all the relevant issues should be greater, but it certainly does not guarantee that the communication will be optimal. The parties could simply be equally submissive, or equally domineering. However, communication between equals often does work well.

A "complementary" relationship here means one of unequal power, such as parent-child, boss-employee or leader-follower. This is much more efficient in some situations. For example, the unequal (complementary) relationship between soldiers and their officers means that soldiers are very likely to obey a surprising order, such as "Get out of the truck and jump in the river!" without delay – rather than debating it, perhaps with great interest, but quite possibly at fatal length.

APPENDIX 4:
DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Some of the advantages of recoding information which is already in a coded form were discussed in Appendix 2. One very important advantage of such recoding is the possibility of changing a message into a form which is easy to transmit over a distance. Early examples of such transmission included alarm fires, smoke signals and message sticks.

More recent examples of the transmission of recoded messages over a distance have included signal flags and semaphore. In the case of signal flags, each flag often stood for a short but complete message. With semaphore, each position of the two arms (either the arms of a person, or those of a semaphore machine) often stood for a letter of the alphabet.

Signal flags took some time to hoist, but each flag gave quite a lot of information. The semaphore arms gave less information at any one time, but their positions could be changed more quickly – and, given sufficient time, there was no limit to the length or complexity of the message.

Morse code, which employs sequenced short and long pulses of any convenient stimulus, was a further useful development. It had the advantage of being independent of the mode of transmission. For example, a hand which intermittently hides a candle flame can send Morse code – but so can a machine employing the most advanced technology in existence.

From Morse code, it is only a small conceptual step to other machine-friendly methods of communication based on the repetitive use of one or more convenient stimuli. In fact, all current methods of digital information management are based on repeated instances of the presence or absence of a single stimulus, thus creating the binary numbers explained below.

Although the ramifications of this small step are already so complex that no single human being thoroughly understands more than a small part of the whole field,[1] the basic principles are very simple. As mentioned above, a numerical system with a base of 2 was chosen for the purpose. With only two options (0 and 1) at any position in such "binary" numbers, it is relatively easy to design a machine that can work with them.

In a computer, for example, the two options are typically represented by the absence (indicating 0) or presence (indicating 1) of a low voltage spike in an electronic circuit. If the base 10 numbers which we use in everyday activities had been employed for this purpose, nine different responses would be needed, as well as the absence of any response.

A binary "word", as the binary numbers are often called, can be a very long string of 0s and 1s, so it is often more convenient to use numbers with a higher base, usually "hexadecimal" numbers (with a base of 16) when writing programmes. However, everything can (and must) be translated back into binary code before it communicates with the hardware components in a typical computer.

Having information in this digital form makes it possible for computers to deal with it in many useful ways. Storage of vast amounts of information in small physical volumes, rapid search and retrieval, easy analysis of content, editing, copying, printing, rapid transmission, and relatively secure encryption are among the commonest of these useful operations. It is therefore hardly surprising that digital technology has revolutionised the management of information.

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[1] Some software engineers specialise in a single process, such as "opening" a digital file so that it can be accessed in an application. This is analogous to medical specialisation in a restricted field such as surgery of the hand.

This revolution, however, has not been entirely bloodless. For example, if editing or copying is done illegally, the speed and ease with which it proceeds can be a decided disadvantage! The possibility that an unknown person, anywhere in the world, might access, copy, alter or destroy vital information, perhaps without the knowledge of its owners, is a very disconcerting aspect of modern information technology.

In some cases, unauthorised manipulation of files is achieved by direct access to the computer on which they are stored. In many cases, however, it results from communication between two or more computers.[1] Fast and convenient communication between different computers is thus a feature of the advantages *and* the risks of the information management revolution.

Connecting computers together is not difficult – it just requires a protocol (an agreed method) for output and input, and the necessary devices to implement that protocol, plus a connection which might be literally anything that can carry a signal. In practice, wires, optical fibres and radio waves are the most common signal carriers, at the time of writing.

Connection to any available computer in the world is now a simple matter, as the global network of computers called the Internet[2] can be accessed very easily via "Internet service provider" (ISP) companies which operate in most parts of the world. Much of the information available on computers connected to the Internet is fully indexed by advanced "search engines", making it readily accessible to any user.

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[1] The act of connecting computers is called *networking*, and can involve any number of computers, from two up to the one or more billion computers currently thought to be connected to the Internet.

[2] Originally created (as the ARPANET) for US military communications, but now in the public domain and readily accessible for private or business use.

Assuming that everything is working properly, connections between computers have no overall effect on the information exchanged between them. However, the transmission process itself involves various layers of recoding of information, to facilitate operations such as compression, encryption, authentication and compliance with transmission protocols.

Fortunately, the enormous recoding tasks involved in those things are done by the computers themselves. They could not possibly be done by humans, as the number of operations involved is astronomical. Unwanted modification of the data during recoding is carefully guarded against, and in the case of modern communication systems is extremely rare. Unwanted modification of the data by a human intruder is also carefully guarded against, but it still cannot always be prevented.

Indeed, the vulnerability of digital information to unauthorised access has spawned a gigantic security industry. There are many good "antivirus" and "antispyware" applications which, when combined with the latest "firewall" technology, provide considerable protection against most of the methods used to gain illicit access. However, that protection is never absolute.

Similarly, the latest encryption technology can usually keep the content of a document secret – though it might still be copied or deleted. On the other hand, relying on antivirus, antispyware, firewall or encryption technology a few years old (or virus or spyware definitions even a few days old) can leave both data and system dangerously exposed.

Security can also be breached very easily by carelessness, or by a criminal act – either of which can defeat even the latest and best technology. Some security breaches, such as those involving modification of a computer operating system's kernel code, can go undetected for quite some time, potentially providing the perpetrators with full access to the system.

Despite these dangers, good security practices do keep information management systems pretty secure most of the time. However, it seems likely that the overall problem of unauthorised access to data is here to stay. Preventive measures get more sophisticated almost by the week, but so, unfortunately, do the methods employed to defeat them.

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