

Communications and Public Service Program.

Nabeel A. Jurdi*

* Ph. D. in International Communication, University of Southern California & Claremont
Graduate School, 1977.
Associate Professor, Dept. of Mass Communication, Kuwait University.

243

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Peter F. Drucker's article entitled "The Deadly Sins in Public Administration"¹ said *"No one can guarantee the performance of a public service program, but we know how to ensure no-performance with absolute certainty, the same principle can be applied to communication. Commit any two of the common mistake in the process of communication and non-communication will occur. Committing all five, is quite unnecessary and can be an exercise in overkill"*. Drucker identified six "no-nos" as sins². My description of the five errors or mistakes are not discussed in a chronological order or importance, except for the first error which I believe is the most serious shortcoming, and the one that occurs with the greatest frequency in interpersonal communications.

The mistake of limited definition

Communication is a universal term encompassing much of human activity. Yet it is too often narrowly conceived as the exchange of oral or written messages between two or more people. Typical dictionary definitions state that communication is the *"act or fact of communicating, interchange of thoughts or opinions"*; or *"an organized group of symbols representing ideas or information"*. Moreover, communication describes all the processes by which humans affect each other since the mere awareness itself is a form of communication. It seems, at first glance, that it is such a simple process; yet it is the subject of an increasing number of conferences, research papers, books, articles and Monday morning staff meetings with a frequency that suggests it is often misunderstood or not fully understood. While everyone acknowledges the need for effective communication, not everyone is successful in sending or receiving interpersonal messages effectively. Communication embraces all processes by which humans affect each other. If there is awareness, if there is cause and effect, if one person affects the actions of another, then communication has occurred - even though no spoken or written words have been exchanged .

In his interpersonal relations, a human does not have the freedom of choice given prince Hamlet through the words of William Shakespeare's-. question *"to be or not to be "*. A person cannot choose not to communicate. One can forsake the spoken or written exchange of words, but it is impossible not to affect or be affected by another. If communication between persons is needed, it will occur knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, willingly or unwillingly. In the absence of a real message, one will be assumed and to the receiver the assumed message is as real as any other message he has experienced.

The validity of this reality is demonstrated by the many questions people ask themselves about their relations with others . If a person finds himself asking why he reacts in a certain way or why he feels there is more to

something than meets the eye, he is reacting not to particular messages of that exchange, but to the accumulation of experiences he has encountered throughout his life. Thus, messages are given and received in a variety of contexts-the immediate one prompting that particular exchange, the social context that made it possible, the situational context which made it necessary or desirable, and the historical context that gave the exchanged message meaning.

If the sender of a communication is aware both of the broad meaning of that term and that the receiver will not accept a message in a vacuum, then the opportunities for misunderstanding have been considerably diminished. That is a worthwhile accomplishment in itself.

The Mistake of Volume

It is a truism that not all voices speak with equal clarity and certainly not all messages are received by equally receptive eyes or ears. Yet communications are often greater in volume than is required or too brief or incomplete to be sufficiently informative for the receiver. This error may be called the mistake of quantity. More communications in terms of quantity do not automatically result in more reception in quantity. The common occurrence of drowsiness or actual napping by the audience in the course of a professor's hour-long lecture or by the congregation during the Sunday morning church service can serve as two obvious examples of this fact.

Just as the three "r's" of elementary education are reading, writing, and arithmetic, the three "m's" of communication are presumed to be meetings, messages, and memos. If communication fails to result, the remedy is to have more meetings, exchange more messages, and prepare more memos. While repetition is a legitimate educational device, it does not follow that it is a successful one - and the same is true for repetition in communications. When more of the same is applied to overcome communication problems, it is possible that the symptoms of the problem are being met rather than the causes of the problem. More messages to overcome resistance and/or inaction may result in more resistance, and/or continued inaction. Increasing the quantity of communication does not guarantee the enhancement of its reception or of the anticipated response.

Just as "too much" communication can be a problem, "too little" is another common shortcoming. The sender of a message is often in a position to have a fuller comprehension of the situation that calls for communication than does the receiver. Without that comprehension, the receiver may not respond in the way deemed most appropriate by the sender - not because of intent but as a result of lack in completeness of content in the message he received.

The question of what is an appropriate quantity of communication is an unanswerable one in the abstract. But a concerned and a caring sender should

be able to acquire the "feel" for what is needed in a given situation so that the extremes of "overkill" and "undersell" can both be avoided. While this is not a solution to the communications problem, it, too, is an objective worth striving for and can help overcome some communications problems.

The Mistake of Trappings

It is a common characteristic of communicators to believe they are successful in that undertaking. An obvious outward symbol of that success is for that person to surround himself with the essential means or "trappings" for communicating. Thus, a manager who believes he should communicate with his employees may decide to establish an "open door" policy and announce that appointments are not needed by anyone who wants, wishes, or needs to see him about anything at any time.

But an open door policy is effective only if employee messages are acted upon promptly and effectively. Access to the manager does not refer to the size of his doorway nor to the number of hours it is open. Rather, it refers to his willingness to respond to them.

Another common "trapping" is the holding of frequent staff meetings. Some managers hold these ritually on Monday mornings as the work week begins. Often there is reporting around the room by each participant as to his accomplishments of the previous week and his expectations for the coming one, while these are sometimes billed as "no holds barred" sessions, they are often a mutual waste of time. The obvious is reported; the problems are concealed since no one wants to reveal it that problems exist. The result is a lack of real benefit to either the individuals reporting or to the audience that listens to their statements of past and future performances.

Yet another "trapping" is the employee suggestion box. Anonymity is promised the employee who wants to air a gripe and a financial reward is promised the employee who suggests a method or process for improving production or decreasing unit or item costs. Sometimes the mere availability of a suggestion box prompts its use for communicating for other purposes. One employee may be self-serving and tell the manager what the employee feels the manager wants to hear. Another may use this means to tell the manager that he disagrees with an action or decision of the manager, so the employer will not mistake the employee as a "yes-man" but as one who can be counted on to tell it like it is. In neither use is the box serving its intended purpose, nor as an effective means of communication.

When one is surrounded by the trappings of communication, one is likely to believe that communication is occurring. The trappings are important if they are means to their intended purpose; they are not successful if their availability and use become an end in itself as they have been, are, and will likely continue to be in some places at some times.

The Mistake of Method

Effective communication requires two things - clear messages and the means to get them to the intended receiver. The latter requirement we will define as a technique or method. It is obvious that good messages can be unsuccessful if they are not transmitted effectively or by an appropriate method. Written messages not in Braille are useless for blind receivers and vocal messages are not helpful to the non-lip reading deaf employee. While these two examples are obvious and not too commonly experienced, they illustrate the point that, for want of the right method, the message can be lost.

It is only recently that the act or skill of listening has received much attention. Now certain advertisers boast that they are better listeners than their competitors, so it is obvious (to them) that consumers should patronize their companies for the services or products they need. Listening can have therapeutic value - if it is followed by action. But in communications, listening without action is as much a problem as acting without listening. The problem is to have both listening and action in the proper amounts and in appropriate order.

A common reaction when communication problems develop is for the affected agency to establish a training program. These programs are almost always for the sender of messages and concentrate on preparing "better" messages and transmitting them through "improved" channels. There is nothing wrong with either of these objectives - and improvement is probably needed in both areas in many agencies. But the sending of better messages through improved channels does not necessarily result in better communication. The missing component in this training program is the receiver of those messages. Such training programs appear to have adopted the Biblical recommendation that "it is better to give than to receive" as their operating motto.

It is a truism that skills in understanding messages also need improvement in many agencies, this, improvement becomes possible when communication processes are broadened from words and symbols to include concern of employee reactions to other employees. Since this is not a simple task, it is often not attempted or efforts are abandoned before they are successfully implemented. As we have stated before, the social context of information exchange must be understood if the messages between and among persons are to be understandable and acted upon.

It must also be recognized that the inevitable informal communications machinery known as the "grapevine" exists and is functioning. Keith Davis has described the process and problems of this method quite vividly. In his words:

It (the grapevine) cannot be abolished, rubbed out, hidden under a basket, chopped down, tied up, or stopped In a sense, the grapevine is man's birthright, because, whenever men congregate into groups, the grapevine is

sure to develop. It may use smoke signals, jungle tomtoms, taps on prison walls, ordinary conversation, or some other method, but it will always be there. No manager can "fire" it because he did not hire it. It is simply there ⁽³⁾"

A final comment on methods or techniques relates to barriers to communication. It is often assumed that these are physical only and can be eliminated by rearranging the path of message flow rather than improving the messages. If a barrier is viewed as an obstacle to communication, then we must admit that they frequently do exist. But more commonly these barriers are not physical but distorters or interrupters and thus are not stoppers of communication. Such interruptions need to be carefully considered because they are usually meaningful in explaining interpersonal breakdowns such as the relations between two persons who have quit talking to each other and resort to written and dated memos as a means of exchange. In such a setting, words are no longer exchanged but communications between them continue. For such interpersonal problems, the careful choice of method and/or technique can often be ameliorating and productive.

The Mistake of Change - Too Little or Too Much

In some agencies when communications break down, the manager assumes the methods are faulty and opts for changes. In another agency, the manager may assume the system is a good one and the employees are the culprits that render it ineffective. While both are explainable reactions, both may be quite wrong. In the first office, the methods may be satisfactory; in the second, the methods may be the problem.

One of the common mistakes in communications is the failure to abandon old, tested and even unworking methods or techniques because they are a known quantity. A rational assumption is that every communication system, method and technique will sooner or later outlive its usefulness and effectiveness and should be replaced. Any new program, no matter how well conceived and carefully considered will run into the unexpected, perhaps unanticipated problem areas, or perhaps the degree of its success exceeds expectations. These cannot be planned away, but advance planning does help meet them when they do occur.

Communication systems are developed to serve objectives and fulfill needs. There are many systems because agency objectives and needs are so diverse. While an agency cannot afford the luxury of a trial and error period before implementing a new system or making substantial change in an existing system, it can and should "shop around" before opting for change in whole or in part.

Similar programs on larger or smaller scales will have been tried in other agencies. With some adaptation, innovations can be transferred or transplanted successfully. Without some innovation, success of any system cannot continue indefinitely.

An important question that needs to be asked is: "What is the smallest communications system that can meet the needs of an organization rather than to question what methods, techniques, devices and equipment can be added to make the system more effective. It is possible that more communication can occur when there are fewer trappings that get in the way of the flow of messages and information. A dogmatic attitude to toss the existing system out or one to believe that the existing system needs no alteration in form, method or size, can be a serious mistake and yet it occurs frequently.

Avoidance of these five identified mistakes or errors does not guarantee immediate success in any agency but their avoidance is essential for successful communication within an agency or between agencies. Successful communication is an art, a science, and a skill. As in many other settings good people can make a faulty system work and poor people can render a good system inoperative. A goal for every agency is to have both good people and a good system. A problem for many agencies is to identify properly who and what works and to make it possible for both to continue to do so as smoothly as possible.

It seems to make very little difference whether we are considering a large agency or a small one when discussing communications. Both have to provide effective communication all the time and this communication has to make sense and has to be relevant. Although he was writing about administration in general, the list of "rights" advances by Ordway Tead Four years ago are still worthy objectives for any communication system. That system will be effective and successful if it advances the right of every employee i.e. (1) to be treated as an individual and respected as person; (2) to have a voice in his/her own affairs; (3) to receive recognition for his /her contribution to the common good; (4) to develop and make use of his/her highest capabilities; and (5) to be treated with fairness and justice in all his/her relationships with superiors⁴. Effective communication is hard work. It can be achieved if messages are improved in clarity, if transmission is improved by methods and techniques, and if reception is followed by appropriate response. It is the role of management to see that these "ifs" become reality so that communication can serve its proper role and achieve its intended purposes and goals.

NOTES

1. Peter F. Drucker "The deadly sins in public administration" **Public Administration Review**, vol 40, no.2 March - April 1980) pp. 103-106.
2. **Ibid.** the six administrative sins identified by Drucker are: (1) to have too lofty an objective; (2) to try to do several things at once; (3) to believe that "Fat is beautiful"; (4) to not experiment and to be dogmatic; (5) to make sure that you do not learn from experience; and (6) to be unable to abandon an activity or program once it has been undertaken.
3. Keith Davis. **Human Behavior at Work** (New York: McGraw Hill, (1992) p. 263.
4. Ordway Tead. **The Art Administration** (New York: McGraw - Hill 1991 p. 630.