Perfecting the Communication Process

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by Jill Burrington-Brown, MS, RHIA

Most of us do not think of communication as a process but rather as a talent or ability that only a few people possess. But when communication is considered a process, anyone can be an effective communicator.

The work of Stanford University computer science professor Terry Winograd, PhD, in the 1980s focused on the design of successful computer systems by taking the perspective that language is action. According to Winograd, by starting with a language/action perspective on communication, it is possible to create systems that can be effective in getting work done, whenever that work involves communication and coordinated action among a group of people.[1] While this idea relates to developing computer systems, Winograd's work has much to offer in terms of human-to-human interaction, too.

Who Benefits from Good Communication?

Why should we make any effort to improve communication? And why don't we understand each other?

"Work is not carried out by a homogeneous collection of individuals," Winograd states.[2] In other words, we all come from different backgrounds with different patterns of communication. Also, within every organization are competing interests—for money, for projects, and for time. Research in computer-supported, cooperative work points out that face-to-face communication must be improved along with the information systems.

Winograd describes four types of conversations:

- for action
- for clarification
- for possibilities
- for orientation

We'll explore each of these in more detail below.

Conversations for Action

According to Winograd, conversations for action are central to cooperative work.[3] The elements of a conversation for action are:

- Party A makes a request of Party B
- A and B each interpret the conditions of satisfaction A desires
- B either accepts, declines, or negotiates alternative conditions
- A and B agree on the conditions
- B reports back that the conditions of satisfaction have been met
- A accepts the conclusion

While this seems straightforward, we make common mistakes in conversations for action. Examples of those mistakes include:

- A does not communicate a clear **"what"** statement. A will get what B thinks A wants. B has to be a mind reader
- A does not communicate a clear **"by when"** statement. Both A and B may have different expectations of the completion date. For example, the phrase "next week" may be days different to A and B
- A phrases what is really **an order as a request**. If B does not have the opportunity to decline the request, it is an order. This changes the relationship between A and B from direct to manipulative. An example is an order beginning with the

phrase "I'll let you. . ."
- B accepts the request when she or he should have declined or negotiated. B isn't able to do exactly what A requests, but also isn't able to negotiate an alternative. This will lead to an unsatisfied Party A
- If B does not report back to A that the work is complete, A could assume the work is either complete or incomplete
- A does not accept the completion or gives a false acceptance, leading to incorrect or a lack of feedback to B. B may never know his or her work was unsatisfactory

Conversations for Clarification

A conversation for clarification occurs when A and B discuss the conditions of satisfaction. For example, the request "Can you pull 10 charts for an audit?" might cause Party B to respond in several ways. "Right now, tomorrow, or next week?" or "Any 10 charts, or do you have a specific 10 in mind?" are two responses. If the conversation for clarification does not occur, A may not have the outcome she or he desires. Here, B must be as responsible as A in making sure the conversation for clarification occurs.

Conversations for Possibilities

Conversations for possibilities are the conversations we have when we are seeking solutions or ideas, and action is not the primary goal of the conversation. In a 1985 article in *Center for Quality of Management Journal* Ray Stata, chairman of Analog Devices, Inc., a manufacturer of integrated circuits used in analog and digital signal processing applications, said, "I've had to shift my conversations for future possibilities from a mode of advocating to a mode of inquiring. That is, I have to ask, 'what do you think?' versus declaring 'it shall be' and then really listen to legitimate concerns and thoughtful alternatives."[4]

A conversation for possibilities is an exploration and may or may not result in a conversation for action. Those participating in the conversation must clearly end it with an understanding of whether there will be action or not. The common error in this conversation is to assume that a conversation for action has occurred when only possibilities were discussed.

Conversations for Orientation

Conversations for orientation, according to Winograd, are the conversations that "create a shared background as a future basis for future interpretations of conversations."[5] Examples of this type of conversation might include orientation to your organization and department. When the mission and goals are communicated, other employees might tell stories and in turn share their backgrounds with each other. This provides a common place for people to begin the communication process.

When we think about what we do as extensions of the conversations we have with one another, we can see the benefit of working for improvement. Our ability to achieve results depends on our ability to communicate where and how we want to get those results.

Notes

1. Winograd, T. "A Language/Action Perspective on the Design of Cooperative Work." Human-Computer Interaction 3, no. 1 (1987-1988): 2. Available at http://hci.stanford.edu/~winograd/papers/language-action.html.

2. Ibid., p. 21.

3. Ibid., p. 11.

4. Stata, R. "A Conversation About Conversations: Analog Devices CEO on Building High Performance Organizations." Center for Quality of Management Journal 4, no. 4 (1985). Available at http://cqmextra.cqm.org/cqmjournal.nsf/reprints/rp06200.

5. Winograd, p. 11.

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