

WHAT EVERY PERSON NEEDS TO KNOW BEFORE COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES

By Orville Boyd Jenkins

Your goal is to establish communication. You must do this in terms familiar to your receiver, your target individual or audience. Initial appeals should avoid the areas of conflict or uncertainty, and stress interests and commonality. You, as communicator, are stepping into the world of the receiver, incurring the responsibility to prove yourself and your message.

When I was a boy, my father owned a radio station in north central Texas. It was wet in the fall and dry in the summer. It was also flat, so radio signals went a long way with a little power.

I grew up in the radio business, learning music, business, sales, news and programming. I learned to think with the audience we were transmitting to, and the merchants my dad had to sell advertising to.

In the first case, we had to know what the audience liked and wanted, and provide services and programs that met those desires and needs. At the same time we had a civic responsibility to challenge the listeners to expand their tastes in music and to inform them of current events.

Our station was the first in Texas (1951) to plan a music-news format with news on the hour and headlines and weather on the half-hour!

In the second case, we had to know what the merchants wanted for their businesses and how to appeal to their needs to sell them the "spots" (now called ads) that would meet their requirements.

We also had the civic responsibility to involve the merchants in community affairs, to introduce them to new or better marketing techniques, and to develop store promotions such as live broadcasts from stores to increase public interest.

The broadcaster, or communicator, had the responsibility to provide what was needed (or at least wanted) to keep the listener from turning the dial, or to keep the merchant from pulling his ads. Broadcasting gives us exactly the right model to understand the dynamics of communication and to illustrate our responsibility as communicators.

It is the responsibility of the communicator, to distinguish between form and substance in the message.

As foreign workers in a host culture plan projects, many factors are at work which are not visible on the surface.

It appears that decision-making is a culturally determined process which is dependent on deep-set concepts of the world, on significant values for a particular society and on complex expectations based on the unique set of experiences common to the particular culture group.

The assumptions of the host culture entail a unique set of beliefs and expectations different from the culture of the foreigner. If the foreigner, or newcomer, is unaware that these differences may exist, many errors can be made.

The unique set of assumptions and expectations, referred to as a world view, determines much of the design and likely success of any plan or project carried out in that cultural context.

Every encounter or exchange between humans can be analyzed as a **communication event**. The insights from communication theory can help bridge the gaps in cross-cultural communication.

These insights can sensitize the newcomer to the dynamics to watch for and inform us of some approaches

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to diminish the differences between home and host cultures.

The Process of Communication

A commonly accepted theory of communication is called the *Process Theory of Communication*. This theory assumes there are at least two persons or groups involved in the communication event: a sender and a receiver, also referred to as a source and a respondent. From my background in radio and TV, I like the term transmitter and receiver.

This theory assumes that basic encounters between human beings entail the exchange of some information-the message-which can be transmitted from one to the other.

Normally the event will be structured so that each participant is at some time the transmitter, and the other the receiver. The analysis of the communication event will apply no matter which participant is "transmitting" and which is "receiving" at any particular time.

This does not diminish that most encounters between humans also have broader social meaning, beyond the simple exchange of information. One way of putting this is that in every communication event, cultural information is exchanged. This fact is a result of the cultural identity of a human being.

We are cultural beings – there is no way around that. This cultural identity is always an aspect of our encounters with other humans who also have their particular cultural identity.

The transmitter, or sender, sends a message to the receiver. The idea in the transmitter's mind is formulated out of the transmitter's range of experience, and thus their range of knowledge, then expressed with a language and style format.

This means that the idea is encoded and communicated orally or visually with various combinations of communication media.

The receiver then has to decode the message in terms of the receiver's previous experience, knowledge, assumptions and sophistication in terms of the communication media used by a transmitter.

What the receiver decodes is what has been communicated. This may not be the same thing the transmitter originally intended to communicate.

Filters

When the transmitter formulates, or encodes, the message it must be processed through cultural and personal factors called filters. The major filters are: World Views, Cognitive Processes, Linguistic Forms, Behavioral Patterns, Social Structures, Media Influences and Motivational Responses (ways of deciding).

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The message takes form in terms of these factors in the transmitter's culture and person. Similar factors in the receiver's cultural and personal background then recreate the message as the form and content are decoded through these filters.

The more the transmitter knows about the receiver-that is, about the receiver's filters, background and expectations-the more effective the communication will be. The less the transmitter knows about the receiver, the more errors will be made.

Communication theory directs us to the learning of the "filter factors" of the culture of the receiver, whether a group or an individual.

Encoding

Look over the list of filters given above. These factors are components of what we normally refer to as culture. These filters are based on the common experience of the group of which the receiver is a member.

The major filters are: World Views, Cognitive Processes, Linguistic Forms, Behavioral Patterns, Social Structures, Media Influences and Motivational Responses (ways of deciding).

The receiver may also be the group as a whole, as in a radio broadcast to a certain language group. Cultural factors are always involved in our communication. Awareness of these seven cultural factors defined as filters will enhance

communication.

This will affect planning, approach, choice of participants, materials and so forth involved in a project.

A basic principle we can draw from this discussion is that communication is based on commonality. The more in common between two participants the less ambiguity there will be. Errors are most likely to occur in areas where there is a lack of commonality. Errors of communication may be made in either content or format.

The transmitter may make no sense at all. There may be no commonality of concept enabling the receiver to make sense of the content of the message. It may be, as we say, "over their heads."

The channel (medium) or the level of language used, i.e., the format, may also interfere with communication. This interference is referred to as noise, just as we get static on a radio signal, or just as passing traffic noise may make it hard to hear someone's words clearly.

One possibility is to communicate something different from that intended. Symbols the transmitter uses may have a different meaning to the receiver and, therefore, be decoded differently by the receiver.

The language used, the particular words chosen, the order in which concepts are presented, the illustrations used, the administrative structure used to run a project – these may in themselves be "noise" because they obscure, rather than enhance the message or motive of the transmitter as perceived by the receiver. It is the responsibility of the transmitter, as the communicator, to distinguish between form and substance in the message.

The same **form** may communicate a different **substance** while the same *substance* may require a different *form*. It is the responsibility of the communicator to convey the meaning intended. This means the communicator must know as much as possible about the target group or individual. Investigation becomes an inescapable and major part of communication planning.

Format

Format of the communication event includes the media used to convey the message but is broader. Let's consider the question of visual versus oral format. Westerners have a much harder time with this than they think. I have observed Americans are so literate they even talk in print format.

For instance, they will be talking along and when quoting something someone else said, they draw quotation marks in the air, as though they were writing! At the same time they are very visual, being used to television commercials and MTV, which flashes several images on the screen in one second. The communicator must take into account the visual literacy as well as the verbal literacy of the receiver.

The design of a project among people who are largely illiterate will be different from that for people who are literate. For such people, effective formats must include simple real life pictures rather than those which

are abstract or graphic.

Dramas representing events or practical problems such as children's diseases or water problems; and stories, told in the traditional narrative format, should be used if possible. Direct teaching of abstract points will not likely communicate.

Life Oriented

Images or topics should be very practical, life oriented for illiterate peoples. The format of thought among pre-literate and many new-literate peoples is concrete relational. That is, things must be life related, not abstract concepts. It is the immediate questions of survival, obligations and relationships that are important. These are the contact points for any changes in their worldview.

Visual Impressions

The appearance of an item is the most important factor in the choice to purchase or read a book unless there already exists a prior "insider's" interest. "Packaging" or "marketing" techniques are often overlooked only at the peril of the communicator.

If you, as the communicator, ignore the shape, visual appeal, verbal format or thought approach to your message you must take responsibility for the reception or non-reception of the message you thought you were presenting. The form, format, organization or tone of voice may have obscured your intended content.

Language

Some foreigners decide to use their native tongue rather than the native tongue of the target audience, thinking that since they already know English, or French, it will serve to get going on the project without wasting the time to learn the local language. This overlooks that a language "maps" a worldview.

African people using English normally are mapping an African worldview with its assumptions and expectations in their English which means that there will be little commonality with the native European speaker of English. Preferred forms of presentation, discussion, reasoning and argument may also be obscured by the foreigner's language.

In bilingual or multilingual countries the communicator must give careful consideration to which language is used for what purposes, what concepts are conveyed in which language. It amazes me still how easily some people dismiss the critical question: In

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which language do they think and make their basic life decisions?

It is too easy to overlook the obvious question: What language do they use in their leisure time (at the coffee shop, when work is slow)? This is the language they feel at home in. The communicator needs to be on the common acceptable level of communication to really make any significant difference to people. Think about it.

Media

*What media of communication will you use?
How do your target people normally
communicate with each other?*

Organizational format for radio and TV is also important. The communicator must evaluate each medium's suitability for the purpose. Radio, for instance, is a limited medium.

If the listeners do not like what they hear, the radio can be turned off. You cannot harangue and abuse people on the radio--unless they want to be harangued and abused.

You cannot bring people to the actual point of decision on the radio, because it is impersonal, a mass medium. Radio is great for creating interest, giving information, advertising meetings, building awareness of planned projects. It is suitable for teaching or training an audience who voluntarily continues to listen for more insight.

Consider posters or leaflets to announce a project or meeting. Think of the people who will read the announcement. Remember: Your goal is to establish communication. You must do this in terms familiar to your receiver, your target audience.

Initial appeals should avoid areas of conflict or uncertainty and should stress interests and commonality. You, as communicator, are stepping into the world of the receiver, incurring the responsibility to prove yourself and your message.

Goals and Objectives

How do you, as communicator, set your goals, define your project, design your appeals, map your strategy, state your objectives? You must consider the cross-cultural factors to avoid mistakes. You must learn as much as practical in order to lessen the "noise" in your transmission.

Who do you want to communicate with? You must define your target group – a language or ethnic group, geographic range, socioeconomic group, educational level, etc. The truth is that you cannot reach everybody.

What are the concepts, assumptions and preferences of your target group? What materials, schedules or approaches will meet those factors? What does your target group need to know or need to know how to do? How can you best inform, teach or train them? These are indispensable aspects of effective project planning and implementation.

How do you determine these factors? The most important activity is to observe. You must use critical and active observation. This means you must spend time with your target people. This is why the effective communicator is one who learns the local language, or one of the local languages and learns to appreciate the people on their own terms, in their own context.

BEFORE YOU START TALKING

Reading is another important approach. Read materials and observations by insiders and outsiders to your target society, group or region. Consciously engage cultural informants who can answer specific questions and help you gain the insider views you need to communicate effectively. Be a systematic learner.

These factors should help you to become effective in communication and in planning and implementing effective projects. It means more time for each project, more time spent with people and research resources. But it also means monumentally more effective use of the resources and personnel involved in the well thought out project! And it means success!

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First published in the Communications Journal *Geode* (Issue 1, May 1998), Nicosia, Cyprus

Prepared for Orville Jenkins Thoughts and Resources 31
January 2010

Last edited 1 April 2010

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Filename: *What Everyone Needs to Know.doc*