

## **Effective communication** by Durk Meijer, March 31, 2016

Most of the stories I have and will share deal at one level or other with communicating. Actually much of life is about communicating. Often it may not at all be intentional. Regardless what, every action, every gesture, every word, yes, also every smell, color, feeling and sensory expression communicates. Most of the time we don't even think how we communicate, since it is so integrated in who we are as a person. It becomes a subconscious process, yet when analyzed it is a very complex thing. Many models about the process of communication have been developed and every one I have seen at least includes four components, some even more than two dozen. It always includes the person who sends the message, it includes the message, it includes the recipient, at least one channel or venue of communication, and finally there are many other factors that need to be considered.

The Merriam Webster dictionary online defines communication simply as 'a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.' As we have seen before, the communication process is much more complex. This definition only focusses on intentional communication and it does not seem to consider oral communication, as well as implied communication, meaning that the memories of both the communicator and the receiver are not considered. These memories can unintentionally affect how something is communicated and received. Actually all our senses are normally involved in the communication process. So not only are hearing and seeing a part of it, but like mentioned earlier also smelling, tasting and feeling. Our brain takes in and filters all the information it registers during the communication process, including what is already stored in the brain. For example, just mentioning the word 'lemon' can make many people salivate or on the other hand smelling a nice wood fire can evoke also many feelings (like for many Africans the cooking of a meal, while for many Americans a cozy fire place in winter time). Effective communication is most likely to happen when there is harmony between those who communicate a message or information, the ones who receive it, the environment, and the system or systems used that transfer it. We want our audience to understand and be able to engage with whatever we're communicating. So, if I want to be wise, it is important for me to get to know the people I am communicating with and learn about the ways they receive and engage with the message the best way possible.

Now, receiving a message doesn't mean that it is understood. At one point I attended a training which brought a diverse body of students together. Some were yuppies from California, some were farmers from Illinois, and others were American middle class country folk from East Tennessee. My friend Leah, from California, invited another friend for 'dinner.' For Leah 'dinner' meant the evening meal, while her friend understood it to be the midday meal. She showed up with all her six children at noon. Leah was very surprised and it took them quite a while to figure it all out. One word, two different meanings. At least in this case they afterwards all had a good laugh, but not so where God became Satan as happened in one situation in Africa. Two related language groups listened to the same radio program and the group that had prepared the program used a specific word for God that actually meant Satan in the other group of a neighboring country who had not been involved.

Sometimes we may not even have a clue how we blunder. The following happened during the first consulting session for the South African team of deaf translators as they met with an American consultant. He wanted to address them by name, so he asked for their name, feeling safe that his American signs would communicate enough. The first answer he received was 'no' and thinking that his sign might not have been clear enough, he tried again, only to receive another 'no'. After several more

attempts he gave up and started to figure out what was going on, only to learn that he had been asking them in South African sign language -- if they needed to go to the toilet. It was almost like my mistake, after I just arrived as an exchange student in the USA in 1976. My host family had an old dog, a German Shepherd. With my limited English I asked if he was a 'race' dog. Their kids rolled on the ground laughing, while I was clueless. Soon I learned that my transliteration from the Dutch 'ras' dog, to 'race' dog would be more in line with a Greyhound, a dog bred for racing. What I meant to ask was if he was a purebred Shepherd dog. Another day my American mom made hot Ro-tel, which is a spicy cheese dip that she served with Fritos, a particular kind of corn chips. This was a new meal for me and I loved it. As I was dishing up seconds, my American mom asked me if I liked it and I answered that it was 'all right'. Now to her that meant barely palatable, so she was wondering why I was so eagerly heaping my plate with seconds. From my proper English classes in the Netherlands I had learned the meaning to be 'great' and after we resolved that one, every time she blessed me with Ro-tel, we couldn't help but remembering that it was definitely more than just all right.

As part of our training with Wycliffe Bible Translators, we went through a month long intercultural communication course. We were confronted with many different worldview perspectives, yet it was challenging what to do in many of the situations we were put in. Some exercises allowed us to stumble blindly into situations where we really embarrassed ourselves... at least, I did and it was a good lesson for me. One day a man came, who was introduced as adhering to the Islamic faith. We were supposed to learn about him and his culture by asking questions. Many people asked questions and I did too. In my zealotry, I just wanted him to hear about Jesus' love for him. My questions were full of things I wanted to tell him. I was not really wanting to learn about him. At the end of the session our course facilitator reintroduced the man, telling us that he was born again. Besides through his life experiences, he also studied Muslim culture and was an expert in his field. He then was asked to give some feedback to us on how we did. Right way he pointed at me, saying that I had been asking questions with an agenda in mind... I wanted to convert him. He then proceeded by telling me that if I want to do anything to push a Muslim away, it would be by trying to convert him and worse was that I did it through tainting my questions that were intended to learn about him. I learned a lot that day, not to say that my wife never had to remind me.

We take communicating often for granted as something natural, and so it is, but effective communication is something else. It is important to communicate clearly. Still, I obviously communicated clearly in that session with the Muslim man, but not effectively... as a matter of fact it was very counter-productive in trying to establish a relationship with him. Rather than showing him God's love by having a real interest for him as a person, in my ignorance I just pushed my religious views upon him. I was behaving like a salesman, doing my best to make a sale rather than really caring for this man. This is a good sample of blatant miscommunication. I could give hundreds of samples of ways to miscommunicate and all may have different factors. Here are just a few more. In some cultures people point with their faces (be it eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, or chin) and using your hand to point at something could even be offensive. In some cultures you never would look a person in the eyes while talking with them, while in other cultures not looking would show shame, guilt, or disrespect. In some cultures most communication when you meet another person starts with a greeting, asking how they are doing, and perhaps in very elaborate ways how their family members are doing. Not doing so is just like not getting started. In some cultures certain subjects are only talked about at the proper occasion, such as a feast, a wedding, a funeral, or in the evening around the fire. In some cultures only men can

teach men and women only can teach women. In some cultures face to face interaction is key to get anything done, while in other cultures you'll be wasting time if you do more than sending a memo or a text message by phone, same time or another relevant electronic venue... face to face meetings would mean that there is a serious issue to be dealt with. It is clear that communication is far more than the transfer of information. It is easy to miscommunicate.

I remember sharing with many church groups, helping people understand that communicating is not as simple as it looks like. I started out with looking at the age of the group and if they included older people I would say that some of them probably had been married for many years. Next, I solicited a response and normally at least one couple had been married for 40 years. They were always open for me to ask a few questions, so I started with asking them if they spoke the same language. Almost laughing at my silly question, they said 'yes,' even though some said they started off in different languages. Next I asked if they both were born again and they confirmed that too. Next I asked if they were from the same culture and for most of them this was true. Then I queried if they knew a lot about each other and of course they did. Finally I asked if they ever miscommunicated and the responses were often very funny as they immediately told samples and times when they completely miscommunicated, often even that same day.

I ask you, don't we automatically expect people to right away be able to understand us, as well as the message we bring? Even if they have another language, have another faith, or are from another culture? The gospel is not as simply communicated as listing that:

- God created the heavens and the earth.
- Every person is a sinner.
- The wages of sin is death.
- Jesus paid for our sins by His death on the cross and He rose from the dead so we can be born again.
- If we accept that as a gift by faith we will be saved.

Unless God has been doing some previous seeding, watering, and weeding, and they at least understand my words, their response at best may include some of the following questions:

- We know about our creation, so who is this God?
- What is sin?
- Why is there death because of it?
- Who is Jesus anyway?
- What does death on a cross mean?
- What does born again mean?
- What is faith?
- What does 'saved' mean?
- What if I have to oblige other spirits that I know are real?

Sometimes people don't even know how to respond, because they didn't understand enough to even ask questions and at worst people will become defensive and build up resistance to this foreign gospel, before they have a chance to understand it.

We may say that most people wouldn't minister at such basic a level. Yes, I summarized this gospel presentation. In a real sense much ministry is still done this way. We hand out tracts. We only show people a two hour (or worse a 20 minute) film about the life of Jesus. We preach a 20 minute message without any follow up.

On a large annual market in the Netherlands a church group diligently was passing out nice looking printed gospel tracts. Most people politely accepted the flyer only to drop it almost instantly. Consequently, the area looked trashed in no time and the ground even became a slippery hazard from the coating of the flyers on the damp ground. The testimony of the cleanliness of Dutchmen went down the drain that day, because people didn't even want to put these intruding flyers into their purses and bags, but the Christians pushed many people further away from the gospel by intruding on the people in such a sly and rude way.

In one East African country an evangelistic team visited 10 different villages in one language group to show a film about the life of Christ and they ended the meeting with a gospel invitation. Every time the response was overwhelming, even more since there were always at least 10 times as many people watching the movie than were living in the village. The team felt that the impact of the movie was great and they readily counted the responses and reported the results. When I talked to a local missionary, who was serving these people long term, he was very sad about it all. Yes, the film made a great impact... it was the only movie in their language and it was a good movie. People were so interested to see it that they traveled from all 10 villages to see every single showing, responding every time to the invitation to be saved. They obviously didn't understand the message and there was no follow through.

Most tools are good tools, but they are most fruitful in a proper context and not all tools will fit every situation. We often practice a 'one size fits all' mentality and use the excuse that God's Word will not return void. I read about a success story of distributing scripture on the streets in India. It talked about a poor beggar who was looking for food and valuables on a rubbish heap, when he stumbled on a page out of the Bible explaining the gospel. Interesting enough it was in a language he could read, not to mention the fact that he was able to read being a person of his low rank and state. God had done already His seeding, watering, and weeding. Now it was harvest time and this person responded to the gospel, as written in this single page of scripture, by embracing new life in Jesus. A while later he saw some people waving books in the air as they were passing them out. He approached one of these foreigners and asked if his page came from their books. They confirmed that it did and together they rejoiced. To me it was the joy of God's Word not returning void and the salvation of this one man. How many thousands of books would be used for cigarette paper or toilet paper instead? Is it really wise to invest money and time for this kind of distribution? Most of the people they were serving normally couldn't read or if they could, they still wouldn't normally read a book and especially read such a book as the Bible.

These samples all address mostly small but real issues in life and they always will be a part of learning about other people. Depending on the depth of learning that goes on, challenging errors can still creep in and they end up being part of causing major embarrassment, they can destroy, confuse, or send the wrong message. This is one key reason why Bible translators put a lot effort in finding the right word or phrase, especially for key terms, like god, spirit, salvation, faith, sin, and forgiveness. Sometimes certain things that we don't even think about are just not part of the world of the people we serve, like a large ship or a river are not known to the Ju//huansi in eastern Namibia. They first need to be exposed to

these things, start to understand them and then process carefully what words to use to effectively communicate these things.

So, is there any hope in being able to communicate effectively... of course, just look at our world in general. There are many things that work very well. One significant example comes from air traffic control worldwide, which completely depends on a clearly defined language used in the air by well-trained pilots, as well as the controllers on the ground worldwide resulting in a safe environment for airplanes to fly with millions of people globally every year. Just one small mistake can make the difference in life or death of many people. I could mention many more areas where communication systems work very well and where small mistakes can make a big difference. A computer system is a sample of a communication system that is so structured that it works with predictable outcome, but still it depends on what the end user does with the outcome... and since people are not machines, that person as the final processor will respond from his or her worldview perspective in ways that would differ from every other person. Effective communication in our context is not like air traffic control or like a computer. But societies do function normally well within their cultural worldview boundaries. Therefore, again we need to remember that it is vital to get to know our audience. Together with knowing our message and applying sound communication principles we can achieve a lot. It is beautiful and it not only can work, but it must work.