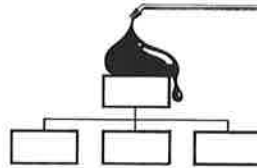


Interpersonal Communication: Lubricating the Organization's Machinery

Tim S. Hopf and Bonnie S. Baker



The desired outcome of interpersonal communication training is common understanding. Its purpose is to have you discover what and how you think, feel, and behave.

All organizations must have a structure that allows them to operate. If the system is fairly large, there is usually a CEO, plus several vice presidents and a number of managers, supervisors, etc. This hierarchy is necessary for the ongoing success of the company. But so often, persons leave their positions to join other similar organizations, to start their own companies, or to go into another occupation. Often these moves are made for very rational reasons, but there are several negative causes for these changes in position. Often the individual feels alone. There he or she is, sitting at a desk doing the day's work. No one talks to this person—or even seems to care about the individual—except that he or she is filling a chair and doing what it takes to get the job done. This employee may receive directions from someone higher on the corporate ladder, or give out directions to someone lower on the corporate ladder,

but that is about all the interaction that takes place. The individual doesn't feel a part of the team and so assumes that since no one cares, why should he or she care about anyone else at work—let alone the firm—and thus begins the search for some other position that he or she feels might fill those relational needs.

Most of our training in school focuses on our abilities to read and write. And yet a great deal of our time is not spent in this arena but rather in listening and talking to others. In fact, if the interpersonal relations within the organization are not good, then there may not be much business because of the lack of awareness regarding public relations. Some of us may not have had much training in interpersonal communication, and almost none of us have had any training in listening. Listening does not mean memory recall. It does mean that we develop the ability to listen to others and in so doing we accept the other person and hear them out, objectively, before we judge the individual's words and deeds. *Acceptance* does not imply that we agree or disagree (or like or dislike) what the other person is saying but rather that we attempt to understand the other person. This is seldom

done in any world, be it in the ivory tower of the academic person or the real world of the right of way agent.

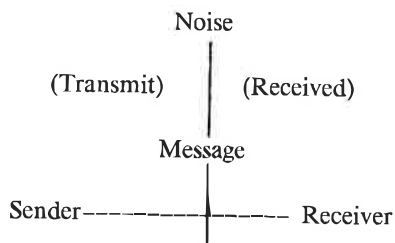
There is another important factor that relates to the structure of the organization that must be understood. If the firm lacks good, purposeful interpersonal communication among the top, middle, and lower levels of management, then the organization will fail. It might be said that interpersonal communication is the "oil" that keeps the "machinery" (the organization) running. Without the "oil" the machinery will break down. Staff will leave the firm, the number of satisfied clients may decline, and the company may eventually have to make tremendous cutbacks in staff.

Often, when interpersonal communication training is mentioned, it is defined as being some kind of T-group training or sensitivity training. Those of you who have completed IRWA Course #202 already have a different perspective on this. For those of you who haven't completed Course #202, let's clarify the intent of interpersonal communication training. Although some of the tools are similar for training persons to communicate better with those around them, interpersonal communication is not concerned about having everyone "love" everyone else. Instead, the desired outcome of interpersonal communication training is common understanding. Its purpose is to have you discover what and how you think, feel, and behave. Once you've checked out the other persons' perceptions of what you have said and vice versa, then there is a basis—a real basis—from which to operate that does not allow for making inferences on fictional data. This can really be an anxiety-free timesaver if properly developed. In other words, you now have some understanding of how you are perceived and how you perceive others. This means that every cog in the wheel of the organization, from the top executive to the lowest level employee, has mutual respect and understanding for all of those persons with whom they work day after day. This kind of understanding can *only* be gained through *face-to-face verbal interaction*. So often, we find dittoed memos in with our paychecks, on our desks, or in our mailboxes. This kind of message-sending device can often be functional, but if the concern of the sender is to make the receiver really understand and care about the communication, then a face-to-face interaction is best. Not only does it allow the sender to clarify his or her point but it allows the

Tim Hopf, Ph.D. and Bonnie Baker, Ph.D. are co-owners of Communication Training Systems in Spokane, Washington. Tim is also affiliated with the Communications Department, Washington State University and is an IRWA Communications instructor.

receiver to ask questions that cannot be asked on a piece of paper. In other words, feedback is in action!

Shannon and Weaver's Mathematical Model of Communication (developed for the Bell Telephone Laboratories) is often used as an analogue to human interaction. Essentially, it looks like this:




There is a sender of a message, who verbalizes sounds that are transmitted through the air, where various noises may disrupt the understanding by the receiver. This model often does describe the communicative behavior in an organization. But note what is missing! Communication is not just a one-way process. It is a two-way process in which the sender also receives messages from the receiver. Another important factor is that the model pre-

sumes that the message sent is the message received. This is seldom the case, since everyone has their own feelings, attitudes, and reactions to the data. Thus, feedback is vital to common understanding. If you don't check out the data, improper inferences are likely to be the end product. For instance, a coworker walks by your desk and doesn't acknowledge a greeting. This often creates anxiety and you wonder why this individual didn't respond—"doesn't he or she like me?"—you ask yourself. If you had only checked it out, you would have possibly learned that your coworker had a problem on his or her mind that blocked any response.

Another factor that increases the interaction and production of an organization is the amount of in-depth knowledge gained about one's self through others. The more you know about yourself through various interactions with others, the more you will share of yourself with others and they with you. This will lessen the game-playing behavior, and the tasks of the firm will be more efficiently and effectively done. This is because: (1) you care about

what happens to the organization; (2) you know where you stand as a person and as a fellow worker; (3) you understand each others' goals, aspirations, etc.; (4) you are willing to work *together* to get the job done because you know each other well enough to put aside petty games and one-upmanship for the benefit of everyone; and (5) you know the firm is made up of every individual there, and you care what happens to the firm and to every person in it!

This means that everyone in the firm should get to know their superiors, coworkers, and subordinates. Too often, communication comes from the top down (as suggested by the Shannon-Weaver Model above), and the inferentially disastrous "grapevine" is the only means for data to be sent to the top echelon.

How, then, can interpersonal communication be facilitated in the business setting of a right of way organization? It might be wise to set aside periods of time during the work week or the weekends for group training sessions or interpersonal communication training more formally through your right of way association's list of excellent courses, but make certain that your group leaders and/or the directors have the proper credentials (i.e., a Ph.D. in communications, business, psychology, adult education) as well as some professional experience in the business world. Another way of developing interaction patterns within the firm might be to use coffee breaks or lunch hours for this purpose. At these times you tend to ignore those people you don't already know or *think* you might not like. Usually you will use these times to maintain old relationships with established friends. Why not reverse this behavior once or twice a week and see what a difference this can make to your own attitudes as well as the other persons' perceptions of you! The more company information that is made public knowledge, the fewer distortions and inferences that are likely to occur, and the "machinery" will run a lot smoother. And never forget that the right of way agent's professional success is not dependent upon just paperwork; the agent's job is primarily one of public relations, which develops through good interpersonal communication. Thus, the success of any organization depends on the interpersonal interaction *within* the organization as well as the employee's ability to relate to the clientele. Interpersonal communication *IS* the key to the internal and external success in any business! 

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