

SECTION 3

COMMUNICATING AS A FORM OF BEHAVIOR

13. THE STRANGE WAY WE COMMUNICATE

Communication will be defined broadly as the transfer of information, intentionally or unintentionally, from one creature to another by any means.

Almost everyone communicates so easily now that it seems to be as natural as breathing and digestion. Far from it. In fact, an intelligent alien who studied our bodies carefully would conclude that a human simply does not have the equipment to transfer his thoughts intact to another person. And he would be right!

All your conscious information is in the form of thoughts within your brain. If a thought could be transferred intact, the receiver would always get exactly the information the transmitter intended, so that there would never be any misunderstanding.

Thoughts, however, are intangible objects. You can't take a thought from your brain and physically transfer it to another person. You can't take a picture of your thought to give to someone else. You can't scan it with a TV camera or trace it with a laser. In short, there is absolutely no way anyone can transfer a thought intact to another person. So how do we do the impossible?

Nature came up with an ingenious solution to this problem. Instead of designing new equipment for this activity, it simply used the system that had evolved for the survival of all creatures. The result is about what you'd expect when you use any equipment that was designed for some other purpose. There are a lot of bugs in it. In fact, as will be shown, all errors in communicating occur because the hijacked equipment isn't entirely suitable for this new use.

Communication started with those single-celled creatures described in Chapter 2. However, we needn't go back in time to find them. Their descendants are in the water in any pond, communicating just as their ancient ancestors did. To understand what they are doing, you might want to reread Chapter 2. This time, however, their activity will be interpreted from the viewpoint of communication.

The cell that makes a change in the environment will be called the "transmitter" (with an "o" to distinguish the creature doing the transmitting from any mechanical equipment that might be used). You already know that any change in the environment that causes a creature to move is a stimulus. The creature affected by the stimulus is the "receiver" (again with an "o"). Communication began when a single-celled creature (the transmitter) discharged a molecule into the environment, which was detected by a receiver.

Detection of the stimulus causes the receiver to respond to it in some way. The stimulus can be considered a message from the transmitter instructing the receiver to move in that way. In effect, a transmitter sends a message that changes the receiver's behavior in some way.

So communication began when one single-celled creature responded to a change in the environment initiated by another single-celled creature. Strange as it might seem, this is still the basis for the way all creatures, including people, communicate today.

At this stage in the evolution of communication, nothing in the process is intentional. The transmitter does not purposely form the stimulus. The stimulus doesn't purposely seek out the receiver or purposely react with it. The receiver doesn't decide how to respond to the stimulus. Its body contains a preset series of reactions that cause it to move in a certain way whenever that particular stimulus is detected. In short, the transmitter isn't aware it is transmitting information and the receiver isn't aware it's receiving it. So this earliest form of communication is automatic, unintentional, and nonverbal.

As this unintended nonverbal communication occurs through the basic survival system, the mechanism is the same as the detection and response to any other stimulus. The receiver always responds to these unintended nonverbal messages and always responds in the same way. Moreover, the receiver always moves toward messages that represent benefits and away from those that represent threats.

Creatures that respond promptly to a stimulus increase their chances of survival. As unintended nonverbal communication occurs over the basic survival mechanism, all creatures respond instantly and automatically whenever they receive an unintended nonverbal message.

The next type of communication did not occur until creatures had the beginning of a brain. Although nonverbal communication could still occur through the basic survival system, a creature with a brain could now initiate a stimulus intentionally. Very likely this started with the use of the same stimuli that occurred unintentionally. For example, a parent animal might unintentionally make some sound as it flees with its offspring from a predator. The offspring detects this sound and associates it with flight. When the offspring detects the sound again, it will flee even if it doesn't detect the predator. This is an automatic response to an unintended stimulus. Years later, this creature might make this sound intentionally to warn its own offspring to flee. This is the beginning of intended nonverbal communication.

The development of a brain also had a major effect on the receiver. Although detection of the stimulus still triggered an automatic physical response in the receiver, it also initiated an intellectual signal, which could modify the emotional response. Eventually, when bigger brains evolved, the intellectual signal could not only modify but could suppress the emotional response. As a result, the receiver no longer had to respond automatically to the stimulus. It could decide to respond or not to respond. Moreover, it could now decide how to respond.

While this growth in the brain was going on, some creatures were developing more and better equipment for detecting changes in the environment. For example, humans can detect many types of molecules in the environment through our senses of taste

and smell. We developed pigments that detect patterns of light through our sense of sight. Cells that detect objects in contact with our bodies evolved into our sense of pressure. The ability to detect changes in air pressure became hearing. The more senses a creature has, the more different types of stimuli that can be used for communication.

Any change in the environment that can be detected accurately by any of these senses can be assigned a meaning. It can be puffs of smoke, the pattern of drumbeats, a series of sounds, a mark on a surface, or a change in the position of all or part of the transmitter's body. In short, communication can occur through any change in the environment that can be detected by any sense of the receiver.

The next step in the evolution of communication vastly increased its scope. This change was the evolution of a vocabulary of sounds or marks, each of which has about the same meaning for all members of a group. This "verbal" communication greatly improves the volume and complexity of information that can be communicated intentionally in a given time.

Almost all verbal communication is intended, but only for certain receivers. Oral messages can be overheard. Written messages can be intercepted. For these receivers, the message is unintended. In addition, there's the occasional "Freudian slip" in which a person says something he means but did not intend to say. This fourth and last category of communication is that of unintended verbal communication.

In summary, you communicate by making a change in your environment. This can be a movement of your body, a sound, or some marks in the sand. Any change that can be detected by any of the senses of another person will do the job. You make a series of these changes to describe the thought in your brain. Detection of the changes causes some response in the receiver. This response might be a physical movement or the formation of a "thought" in his brain. So you don't transfer your thought physically, which is impossible, but try to cause a similar thought to form in the brain of the receiver.

This is indeed very clever, except for a few little details. You might not describe your thought completely or correctly in the stimuli you send. Stimuli from other sources might interfere with those you form. Moreover, the thought triggered in the receiver's brain is determined by his own unique experiences with each stimulus you use so that his interpretation of the message might be quite different from the one you intended. In fact, there are so many sources of error in the process that the wonder is not that we communicate poorly, but that we are able to communicate at all!

In the next chapter we'll examine how you behave when you receive each of these forms of communication.

14. COMMUNICATING WITHOUT WORDS

All human communication occurs when a receiver detects a change in the environment that was made by another person. No detection, no communication.

Some of these stimuli represent complete thoughts in themselves, such as a smile or an upraised spear, and so are “nonverbal.” Others represent spoken or written words, which are only parts of thoughts, and so are “verbal.”

Some stimuli used for communication are formed purposely. Others are formed unintentionally, but still convey a message. As a result, there are four basic types of communication:

Unintended nonverbal	(NV/U)
Intended nonverbal	(NV/I)
Intended verbal	(V/I)
Unintended verbal	(V/U)

Each type of communication affects behavior in a different way. The receiver responds to some types of communication immediately and responds to others more slowly or not at all. Each type will be examined separately before they are put together again to show how you respond when you receive them all simultaneously. Nonverbal communication will be described briefly here, with verbal communication covered in the next chapter.

Although our modern society is swamped with oral and written words, most communication, especially important communication, continues to be nonverbal. Most of your information about people, for example, you get from nonverbal observation of how they behave.

As nonverbal communication hitched a ride on the same mechanism that evolved to promote survival, the response to an unintended nonverbal stimulus is very fast. The receiver always responds instantly and always in the same way. Moreover, he almost always responds before he interprets the meaning of the stimulus. Indeed, he does not interpret the stimulus in words, analyze them for meaning, and then responds. He simply responds automatically and emotionally with little or no intellectual content.

Many of the stimuli used in unintended nonverbal communication are natural movements of some part of the transmitter’s body. As there are only a relatively small number of these stimuli, the types of messages that can be transmitted in this way are limited. As a result, unintended nonverbal messages usually deal with some aspect of survival.

Since nonverbal communication operates through the basic survival mechanism, the feelings it triggers are very strong. A caress gives you a more intense feeling of well being than any lecture on love. At the other extreme, a frown or an insult makes you feel intensely bad.

Unintended nonverbal messages always help the receiver and hurt the transmitter. For example, a tiger and a deer might be hidden from each other in tall grass. If the tiger communicates its presence in some way, it loses its food. If the deer communicates its presence, it loses its life.

As a result, all creatures try to reduce their unintended nonverbal communication to improve their chances of survival. Predators avoid making sounds as they approach their prey downwind. People put on "poker faces" to conceal their feelings or intentions.

The number of nonverbal stimuli that can be formed intentionally is much larger than the unintended variety. You can make changes in your appearance, in your movements, in the sounds you make, in the way you make marks, and so on and on. You and your friends can attach any meaning you like to one ring on the telephone, two honks on a car horn, or three raps on a door. These additional stimuli increase considerably the amount of information that can be transferred nonverbally.

Also, by using a series of different nonverbal stimuli, each representing a part of your thought, you can express somewhat more complex ideas. A series of different hand signals can be used to barter for goods and a dance can be used to describe the results of a hunt. Nevertheless, it's impractical to use smoke signals to convey theories in astronomy, to make distinctions in laws, or to teach nuclear physics. So the stimuli used for intended nonverbal communication usually convey simple, one-way messages. Typical examples are highway signs, a wedding ring, and the clothing of teenagers.

Your interpretation of a nonverbal message is usually all right or it's all wrong. If a word or two in a verbal message isn't detected, is heard incorrectly, or is misinterpreted, you are usually aware that it doesn't fit in with the rest of the message. In nonverbal messages, a single stimulus is often all there is. If you misinterpret it, you get the entire message wrong. What's more, you have no way to know you made the error.

Almost everyone, in cultures as different as Stone Age people and modern Americans, has the same meaning for some unintended nonverbal stimuli. There's no trouble interpreting a smile or a frown, a clenched fist, or a scream of fear. But problems begin when the receiver doesn't know the meaning the transmitter assigned to the nonverbal stimulus he uses intentionally. No one has been considerate enough to prepare a dictionary of intended nonverbal stimuli and their meanings. You can't look up "shoulder shrug, arms extended, with the palms of the hands rotated away from the body, typically French" or "upraised right hand with the index and middle fingers spread apart, obsolescent British." As a result, unfamiliar nonverbal stimuli are often misinterpreted.

When a receiver doesn't know the meaning of a stimulus, no message is received so no communication occurs. The problem is worse when the transmitter and receiver have different meanings for the same nonverbal stimulus. For example, a construction worker thinks his "wolf whistle" is a compliment, but most women interpret it as an insult. The dress and hairstyle of some adolescents mean "cool" to them but have a very different meaning for their parents.

A still more subtle error occurs because some nonverbal stimuli have different meanings under different conditions, even to the same person. You interpret a caress from your lover in private to be a sign of affection but the same caress from the same person in public might be interpreted as bad manners. Is a gift a token of affection, an attempt to get your attention, a bribe, or a payment for a past service? The meaning you give it varies with the circumstances. The type of gift, how much it's worth, and the person who gives it all influence its meaning.

Your meaning for a nonverbal stimulus also changes with your emotional state at the time. Consider again your interpretation of that private embrace from your lover. Wonderfully reassuring, isn't it? But how would that same embrace make you feel when you have just learned that he has another girlfriend?

The absence of a message when one is expected might also be a nonverbal message. How do you feel the first time your mate omits the usual goodnight kiss? What does it mean when your boss no longer invites you to lunch?

These absent messages are especially subject to error. Sure, the absence of a kiss could mean that your mate's affection has cooled, but it could also mean that he or she is overly tired or has some other problem. Similarly, it might show dissatisfaction when your boss doesn't compliment you on a job well done, but it could also mean that he's preoccupied with some personal problem or that he's stingy with compliments.

A phantom message is the opposite of an absent message. You sometimes receive nonverbal messages that were not sent. Not every change in the environment is a message. Or it might be a message but not meant for you. Is that woman's look a "come-on"? It could mean that, but aimed at the fellow sitting behind you. Or she might be thinking of something nice that happened to her earlier. So how do you know when an item represents a message and when it doesn't? The only sure way, whether the stimulus is verbal or nonverbal, is to ask the transmitter what his stimulus means.

Intended nonverbal communication is somewhat slower than the unintended type. It takes a bit of time for the transmitter to select the stimulus to be used and for the receiver to interpret its meaning. Also, since the receiver has interpreted some of these stimuli incorrectly in the past, he is more cautious about uncritically accepting his interpretation as correct. The significance of the speed of response to a stimulus and the receiver's belief in his interpretation of its message will be clearer in later chapters.

The next chapter explores the same factors in verbal communication before comparing all four types of messages.

15. COMMUNICATING WITH WORDS

You have some information in your brain that you would like to transfer to another person. You can transfer some of this information nonverbally. All you need to do is make some change in the environment that he can detect. A single sound or gesture can be used to convey part of your thought.

Nonverbal communication can transfer a surprising amount of information. Groups that do not speak the same language can communicate nonverbally well enough to get along with each other. Nevertheless, the amount and type of information that can be transferred in this way is limited to tangible objects and familiar activities. As the information you want to transfer is complex, nonverbal communication is too cumbersome for this task.

Over time, various groups began to use specific sounds as stimuli to represent common objects, such as Bob, tree, or rabbit. That is, the sound became a label (or an icon in computerese) for that object. When two or more people adopt the same label for an object, the label can be used as a stimulus to trigger that object in the mind of another person.

Sounds can also be used as labels for various familiar activities, such as “running” and “eating.” Other sounds can be used as labels to describe the portion of a thought that refers to a period of time, to something that might or might not happen, or to something that will happen only if something else happens first, and so on. Still other labels show the connections among the objects and activities in the thought, as with, “Bob was eating a rabbit under a tree yesterday.” All language describes items and the connections among them. These items might be tangible objects detected in nature or intangible thoughts formed in your brain by a mechanism to be described in a later chapter.

This assignment of a label (e.g., a “word”) to a part of a thought has had a profound effect on the human thinking process. It is much easier to combine words into new patterns than it is to combine the thoughts themselves. In effect, you transfer each part of your thought into a word, recombine the words in various ways, and then transfer the words back into a new thought. This makes possible the more complex thoughts that distinguish people from all other creatures.

Incidentally, you do this so automatically now that you seldom recognize that you are doing it. However, this transfer of thoughts into labels and back again is crystal clear when you start to learn a new language.

Verbal communication is commonly thought of as being oral or written. Our familiar language of spoken words is detected by the sense of hearing while written words are detected by sight. Nevertheless, verbal communication can occur through other senses as well. The verbal language of the blind (Braille) is detected by the sense of

touch. Those unable to hear use a collection of body movements (“sign language”) that are detected by sight.

Both verbal and nonverbal communications start with the selection of a stimulus by the transmitter. Both involve detection of the stimulus by the receiver. The principal difference is that nonverbal communication usually uses only one or a few stimuli to describe an entire thought while verbal communication uses combinations of many stimuli each of which describe only a small part of the thought. By using smaller bits of a thought, you can construct a more complex pattern, just as you can make a more complex mosaic from smaller pieces of tile.

Verbal communication greatly increases the amount of information that can be transferred in a given time. Also, by picking and choosing among the large number of words available, you can describe your thought more accurately. Words also permit you to express abstract thoughts, such as “If you do X, I’ll do Y.” You can’t do that very well with smoke signals or drum beats.

Nevertheless, verbal communication has some important limitations. All natural languages evolved from common usage and so were not designed to keep errors to a minimum. Some words have different meanings in different situations. Many sounds are so similar that they trigger the wrong thought in the receiver. Careless preparation of the marks for handwritten words sometimes causes serious errors, as many doctors have discovered. And not everyone in the group has the same meaning for a given stimulus. So while complete misinterpretation of a verbal message occurs less often than in nonverbal communications, smaller but significant errors occur frequently.

Verbal messages are slower than nonverbal because the transmitter needs some time to select the words to describe his thought and the receiver uses some time in interpreting their meaning. As a result, verbal communication is too slow for situations where immediate action is required. If a rock is speeding toward your head, an oral description of its trajectory won’t save you. A friend yelling, “Duck!” might do it. Although the sound “duck” is also used as a word, its verbal meaning has no significance here. The message is conveyed in the nonverbal tone of his voice.

As very few verbal stimuli are associated with survival, the feelings generated by verbal communication are less intense than those for nonverbal communication. Also, the stimuli used for verbal communication requires considerable processing by the intellect for their correct interpretation. This intellectual activity dilutes some of the emotion triggered by the stimulus. That is, reading about the death of a friend generates less emotion than witnessing it. The more abstract the message, the less intense the feelings it causes.

Although verbal communication is very good for describing objects and pretty good at describing actions accurately, it is rather poor in describing feelings. It takes an exceptional transmitter to trigger subtle feelings with words. Whatever feelings are transmitted almost always occur through the nonverbal stimuli in the communication,

such as the tone of voice and the hesitations in speaking. Comparing the best of them with a simple scream, a sigh, or a sob shows the **weakness of verbal stimuli for this task.**

Everyone has made many mistakes in interpreting the verbal message received. And almost everyone has been purposely misled by some verbal messages. So unlike unintended nonverbal messages that are accepted as correct, most people are cautious about accepting the correctness of the verbal messages they receive. This has led to the saying, “Don't believe anything you hear (i.e., verbal) and only half of what you see (i.e., nonverbal). As a result, verbal messages have lower credibility than nonverbal messages.

Almost all verbal communication is intended but only for specific receivers. Oral messages can be overheard. Written messages can be intercepted. Messages intended for one receiver might be passed on to others, so that, for these secondary receivers, these messages are unintended verbal communication. A “slip of the tongue” is a verbal message that is not intended for any receiver.

The reception of an unintended message is itself a nonverbal stimulus that conveys a message of its own. Since the receiver was not expected to get the message, there seems to be no reason why the transmitter would send false information to mislead him. As a result, an unintended message is more likely to be accepted as correct. For example, if you overhear your boss compliment you to someone else, you are more likely to believe it than if he transmits the same message directly to you. Sometimes, especially in love and war, intended messages are disguised as unintended in order to increase their credibility.

As the stimulus used for unintended messages is nonverbal, unintended verbal communication is somewhat faster than the intended kind and generates more intense feelings.

The principal differences among the four methods of communication are summarized in the following table:

	Nonverbal		Verbal	
	Intended	Unintended	Intended	Unintended
Accuracy	Fair	Poor	Best	Good
Credibility	Good	Highest	Fair	High
Response Speed	Fast	Fastest	Slowest	Slow

Unintended nonverbal stimuli convey primarily emotional messages, such as anger and fear. Intended nonverbal stimuli are used for messages that are primarily emotional but include some intellectual content. Intellectual messages with little emotional content are conveyed by intended verbal stimuli. Unintended verbal messages are primarily intellectual but with significant emotional content.

Hidden in this little table is a major source of the errors in social behavior. You do not respond in the same way to each type of communication, even when they are in the same message. As all messages, except the simplest, use more than one type of communication, this leads to the kinds of errors that will be examined in the next chapter.

16. COMPOSITE MESSAGES

You are preparing to give a talk to your local civic association about the need to set aside some land for a park. You have studied the subject thoroughly and arranged your material in an orderly way so that you are sure almost everyone will agree with your conclusions.

As you review your material for the tenth time, you add an exclamation point here and there for emphasis. You underline a passage to remind yourself to deliver this point slowly and clearly. Then you make some stars at places where you want to make a forceful gesture. After you finish going over your notes, you lean back, satisfied and confident. You decide to wear your dark blue suit with a white shirt and conservative tie.

Anticipation of your talk has attracted a large audience. Your presentation starts off very well. You can tell that you have their attention and that they understand and agree with what you're telling them. Then you notice Betty Driscoll frowning in the front row. Even with the blur of faces in the audience, you'd know that down-turned mouth anywhere. You just know she's going to say something to embarrass you in the question period after your talk. But she doesn't wait for you to finish. In the middle of a sentence, you hear her booming voice say, "But how much is it going to cost?"

The chairperson raps her gavel, which gives you a few seconds for frantic thought. You intended to cover the reasonable cost of the park in the last part of your talk. You can't jump to the cost before you explain why the park is worth it. So, thoroughly flustered, you decide to continue your prepared remarks but you can't remember where you were. As you try to find your place in the dead silence, you loosen your tie, unbutton your shirt collar, and wipe the sweat from your forehead. You begin to read but stumble every few lines. You sense that your audience is now thinking more of the cost than the benefits. You've lost them. You sit down to that scattering of applause that is worse than a chorus of boos.

A friend comes by and whispers to you, "I was watching the mayor. He was beaming at first but then he began squirming." You intend to say, "Thanks," but what comes out is "That old battle-ax!"

A few minutes later the mayor comes over and says, "Very nice piece of work. I'll give it very careful consideration."

Almost all verbal communication includes some nonverbal stimuli, both intended and unintended. In giving your talk, you purposely transmitted some nonverbal stimuli with your gestures and in the way you stressed some words. But you also transmitted some nonverbal stimuli unintentionally in your frown, your hesitation between thoughts, and your signs of distress. After the talk, you sent an unintended verbal message in your "slip-of-the-tongue" about Betty. Then you received an unintended nonverbal message when your friend told you about the mayor's discomfort in response to your talk. So all four types of communication were present in your report and its aftermath.

These different forms of communication are also present in most written material. The written draft of your talk was primarily verbal but it also contained several nonverbal stimuli. You purposely added exclamation points and underlines to emphasize some words. Someone skilled in handwriting analysis would find several unintended nonverbal stimuli in the size of your margins, the color of the ink you used, as well as in the way you formed your letters.

Incidentally, the clothes you chose to wear are also a form of nonverbal communication that will be examined in the next chapter.

If you would like a simple but effective example of the influence of nonverbal stimuli on a verbal message, repeat the following message six times, emphasizing a different word each time:

“I think she doesn’t like me.”

Let’s examine the different way in which you respond to a verbal and a nonverbal stimulus.

Your response to mixed verbal and nonverbal stimuli - Your boss comes storming over to your workstation. Although he is normally mild mannered and does not use profanity, he says “Damn it, John, you did it wrong again! Now this is the last time I’m going to tell you! The right way to do it is” What messages did you receive? Did you learn how to do the task right?

As “Damn it!” has no significance as words, your boss’s approach and the first part of his message are unintended nonverbal stimuli. This nonverbal stimulus is a threat to your employment, which is indirectly a threat to your survival. Because this part of the message is nonverbal and unintended, you automatically give it high credibility. You respond to it immediately, trying to think how you can do to defend yourself against this threat. As a result, your brain is so busy dealing with the nonverbal stimulus that it ignores the verbal information on how to do the job right. In a message containing both verbal and nonverbal stimuli, you respond first to the nonverbal stimuli and might not even receive all or part of the verbal message.

Credibility - Even when a nonverbal stimulus does not involve survival, it always has more credibility than the verbal. The nonverbal portion of the message then influences your interpretation of the verbal portion. For example, if you interpret a transmitter’s nonverbal “shifty eyes” as dishonesty, you probably won’t believe the verbal portion of his message, even when it’s correct.

Sometimes a person transmits one message verbally and a contrary message nonverbally. An example is someone who “says one thing and does another.” As both messages cannot be correct, which one do you believe? Chances are you will believe the

nonverbal action instead of the verbal statement. In fact, it is part of folk wisdom to “Pay attention to what a person does and not what he says.”

Intended vs. unintended stimuli - Unintended stimuli, both verbal and nonverbal, have higher credibility than intended stimuli. In the opening example, the mayor made some positive comments about your talk to you directly and intentionally. However, while you were speaking, he made some movements that disclosed a different response to your presentation. As he did not expect you to receive that message, he made no attempt to conceal it. So do you think he will give your proposal careful consideration? Although his intended message is received directly with little chance of distortion, you're more likely to believe the message you were not intended to receive.

Mixed messages - A mixed message is one that contains both positive and negative stimuli. These stimuli might be verbal or nonverbal, intended or unintended. Any contradictory stimuli can be a mixed message, even if no direct threat is involved. An example is making a negative comment about someone while presenting him or her with a gift.

In receiving a mixed message, the receiver tends to move toward the positive stimulus and away from the negative one. If one or the other is clearly more important to him, he moves in that direction and ignores the alternative. However, serious problems arise when the stimuli are of about equal strength. The receiver cannot move both ways at the same time, so he shifts back and forth, under considerable stress, until the impasse is broken in some way. In extreme cases, this type of conflict leads to a nervous breakdown.

Controlling your transmission - Understanding the differences among the types of stimuli used shows you some ways to improve the accuracy of your communications. One is to reduce the use of unintended nonverbal stimuli as much as possible. These stimuli tell others something about you without giving you any benefit in return. What's worse, this type of stimulus has the highest rate of misinterpretation. You'll do better by transmitting the information you are willing to disclose by intended verbal or nonverbal stimuli and eliminate unintended transmission as much as you can.

You can also reduce errors by changing nonverbal to verbal stimuli. This has two benefits. The first is that the receiver will make fewer errors in interpreting your meaning. He won't have to guess if your frown means that you're angry or puzzled. If you verbally explain your reason for a gift, the receiver won't have to guess if it's a repayment for a favor or a token of a romantic interest.

Equally important, some nonverbal stimuli result in an immediate, emotional response with strong feelings and little or no intellectual content. In contrast, a verbal stimulus triggers the brain as well as the emotions. This intellectual response reduces the intensity of the feelings generated by the nonverbal portion of the message and so permits a more appropriate response to the complete message. For example, you are more likely to learn the right way to do your job if your boss informs you of his dissatisfaction verbally than if he transmits it nonverbally.

Try to keep the verbal and nonverbal portions of the same message apart to the extent possible. Otherwise the meaning of the nonverbal portion will influence the interpretation of the verbal message. In the earlier example, if your boss does express his dissatisfaction with a subordinate nonverbally, he should wait until the subordinate's emotional response has gone down before he delivers his intellectual message. Obviously this isn't easy to do, especially when you are upset, but even minor progress will greatly improve your communication.

In the next chapter we'll examine how you affect the messages you transmit and receive.

17. YOU ARE PART OF YOUR MESSAGE

When you love someone, everything he (or she) does seems to be correct. Even his or her ridiculous comments seem profound. Yet when you begin to dislike him or her, your interpretation of the same stimuli changes dramatically. You find yourself disagreeing with everything he or she says, even when he or she is right. Why do you do that?

The receiver usually detects the transmitter as well as his message so that both sets of stimuli are part of the same message. As the image of the transmitter is a set of unintended nonverbal stimuli, you respond to him immediately, even before you interpret his message. These stimuli also trigger an emotional response, positive or negative, which you accept uncritically as being correct. Your emotional response to the transmitter then influences your interpretation of the other stimuli in his communication. In some cases, your reaction to the transmitter is so strong that it blocks out or seriously distorts the reception of his intended message. The French philosopher, Voltaire, is reported to have said to an opponent, "What you are speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say."

A transmitter can almost always describe his thought in several different ways. He can choose any combination of intended verbal and nonverbal stimuli. He can choose big words, elegant phrases, gutter language, or parables. As each stimulus has a somewhat different meaning, it transmits some variation of the basic thought.

Similarly, a person can choose among a variety of similar actions to achieve a desired effect. Many different types of clothing can cover a woman's body equally well. She can choose a business suit, a dress, or a skirt-and-blouse. She can add a wide variety of adornments from a religious symbol on a delicate necklace or a vulgar message on a dirty T-shirt.

Each choice among alternative stimuli is an unintended nonverbal stimulus that conveys its own message, separate from that of the intended stimuli in the message. The receiver interprets these choices as telling him something about the transmitter. A person who scribbles a note on scratch paper is interpreted as being different from one who carefully writes a formal letter on personalized stationery. A person who criticizes someone in public is considered to be different from one who tactfully informs someone of an error in private. How comfortable would you be with a physician who made his routine hospital rounds in sport clothes? The message here is not in the sport clothes themselves but in the meaning of the doctor's choice in wearing them.

As with all nonverbal stimuli, it is difficult to interpret the meaning of a single choice by a transmitter correctly. However, as you get additional messages from the same person, you become aware that his choices usually have some common thread that helps you to identify their meaning. Harry is always bragging. Hillary shows a sincere interest in others. Jack talks too much. The choices a person makes, intentionally or unintentionally, in the way he transmits his thoughts is his "transmission pattern." As a

person's transmission pattern is also an unintended nonverbal stimulus, it discloses a something about his true nature.

Once you identify, even subconsciously, the transmission pattern in a person's messages, it comes to mind each time you get a new message from him. It then influences your interpretation of his message. If Toby's pattern includes sarcasm, you'll think her new message is sarcastic even if it isn't. President Ford was never able to shake off his image of being clumsy, even though he was an outstanding athlete. Once Vice President Quayle established a transmission pattern of seeming stupid, it influenced the interpretation by the press of everything he did and said.

Shrewd communicators carefully develop their transmission patterns to trigger the response they want in their receivers. They wear a business suit and tie in applying for a job, carry a stethoscope in a hospital, or turn their collars when seeking converts. Their objective is to initiate a positive emotional response that will carry over into what they have to say. Advertisers know that people are more likely to buy a new diet product if a trim starlet delivers the message instead of the pudgy person who developed it. Even a child is clever enough to say to a classmate, "You ask my mother if you can sleep at my house tonight."

Of course the intellectual portion of every message should be examined for correctness regardless of who sent it. A message from a person you dislike might nevertheless be correct. Yet note how hard it is to agree with someone you dislike. In fact, you might have to control yourself not to disagree automatically with everything that person says or does. As a result, the transmitter's transmission pattern is a powerful influence on your interpretation of even a neutral message.

Despite its importance, most transmitters are blissfully aware of the effect their transmission pattern has on receivers. They don't realize that the way they express themselves makes the receiver feel threatened, angry, or repelled. Would you hire an applicant who comes to a job interview in dirty clothes and uses crude language?

In short, the transmitter is always part of his message.

The receiver often has a somewhat different meaning for the stimulus used by the transmitter. A teenager's interpretation of "clean" might be quite different from his parents' meaning for the term. "Research" has different meanings for scientists and journalists. As a result, most stimuli have some generally accepted range of similar but not identical meanings within a society. As a stimulus triggers a different meaning in a receiver's brain, the receiver seems choosing a different meaning. Each choice the receiver makes among meanings for a stimulus tells something about him. For example, a receiver who interprets "dirty" as meaning unclean is considered to be different from someone who interprets it as "sexy." Taken together, these choices form a person's "reception pattern."

Some transmitters take the reception pattern of the intended receiver into account in the communication. If your boss reacts unpleasantly to messages he doesn't like, you might consciously or unconsciously change your message to something closer to what he wants to hear. If you never know how Tony will react to your messages, you might water it down. So even when the receiver interprets the message he receives correctly, it might nevertheless be incorrect because it isn't the message you intended to send. Some people distort your message so much that you decide they aren't worth talking to.

Your opinion of other people is strongly influenced by their transmission patterns. You like people who express themselves in about the same way you do, whether elegantly or crudely. You dislike people whose transmission patterns make you feel threatened or uncomfortable through gestures, tone of voice, or the use of words or concepts you don't understand. In short, you like people whose transmission pattern makes you feel good and dislike those whose pattern makes you feel bad.

A similar effect occurs in the way people receive your messages. Even a harmless distortion of your intended message annoys you, as when the receiver trivializes it with a humorous or sexual twist. You feel threatened when the receiver reacts angrily to what was intended to be an innocent message. You feel bad when your routine comment hurts the receiver's feelings. You like people whose reception pattern shows acceptance and dislike people whose pattern distorts your messages significantly.

With this background in the mechanics of communication, let's go back briefly to visit an early group to see how your ancient need for survival still influences what you say as well as how you say it.

18. COMMUNICATING IN A HIERARCHY

Since our constitution protects your right to free speech, you might think you can say anything you please, both in private and in public. Well, go ahead and try it. Sure, you can let fly a few obscenities and can even say something gross about the President and his policies. But try being uppity with your boss or talk down to your peers and see what happens to you.

Your constitutional protection of free speech doesn't require your listeners to approve of what you say or how you say it. Although they will be punished if they attack you physically, there's nothing to stop them from hurting you in more subtle or indirect ways, from refusing to speak to you to finding an excuse to discharge you from your job.

Norms for Communicating

As you know from your membership in an early group of our ancestors, the members used social pressure to control every aspect of behavior that could affect the group's survival. This control included the way members communicated with each other because this can cause almost as much dissension as physical aggression. The group controlled not only who said what and how they said it, but also how those on the bottom of the totem pole spoke to those above them, and vice versa.

Communicating in a hierarchy

The members in your group do not speak to the headman in the same way he speaks to them. In fact, there is a difference in how all members at different levels in the hierarchy communicate with each other.

The way a member communicates is determined by his status in the hierarchy. When a member near the low end of the hierarchy meets a member near the high end, he communicates in a way that shows he is aware of his inferior status in the hope that this sign of submission will prevent the stronger member from abusing him too much. Although we now feel that we are all equal members in a democracy, we recognize that some members are more equal than others. As a result, we still show submission in the way we communicate with our superiors.

A member also shows his status in the hierarchy by his nonverbal communication. The member of superior status sits while a person of inferior status stands. The person of higher status sets the pace of the conversation, and might use words or terms that he would not use with someone of his own or higher status. In effect, a superior "talks down" to a person of subordinate status, who "talks up" to him. In many societies, this difference in status is built into the language, with one set of words to be used with superiors and another set with equals and subordinates. Even without knowing the language, a stranger observing a group of people has no difficulty identifying the relative status of each person through his nonverbal communication.

Changing position in the hierarchy

When a person's position in the hierarchy changes, the way he communicates also changes. A member who advances is now addressed with more "respect." His new status permits him to show less respect in communicating with his former peers. The reverse is also true. A person whose status is reduced soon finds that some of his former peers now talk down to him.

Most adults have a hard time handling the change in the way their children communicate with them as they become teenagers and then adults. Some mates cannot handle the change that occurs when a formerly submissive partner begins to "speak up for herself." As an adult ages, he feels diminished when people call him "Pops" or "Old-timer" instead of the former "Sir." As a decrease in status was once a threat to survival, this change in how others address you still generates the intense feelings associated with survival.

Occasionally someone over-estimates his status in the hierarchy. Or he might purposely adopt a mode of communicating that is above his status. When this is done with peers, it is usually dismissed with mild disapproval as "putting on airs." When used with superiors, however, it is considered "uppity." Most people feel that being addressed as an equal by someone of lower status reduces them to that level. A common response is, "Hey, who do you think you're talking to?" Not so long ago, being uppity could result in a lynching.

So a change in your status in a hierarchy changes the way you communicate with others, but you cannot change your status simply by changing the way you communicate.

The Effect of Specialization

As the early groups became larger, there was increased specialization in the functions of their members. Each function had a different set of standards for behavior, which included how they communicated.

A person's function influenced both his manner of speaking and what he talked about. A chief was expected to speak decisively about the big picture and not about how he hurt his toe. Hunters were expected to talk about things that concerned hunting. What would you think about the courage of a warrior who expressed fear or pity for an enemy? Crude language was acceptable in a warrior while delicacy of expression was suspect. Women were expected to speak in ways and about things that reflected their inferior status.

A member's function in the group also influenced his nonverbal communications, including the emotions he was permitted to show. Men, who were expected to face the

enemy in battle, were required not to show fear or weakness in any situation. Pity might be tolerable in a girl, but not in a chief or a warrior. Women, who had to do laborious, monotonous tasks, were required not to show anger or frustration. Of course, this did not prevent the individual from feeling fear, being weak, or being angry, but social pressure prevented him or her from showing it.

A person's function continues to influence communication in our society. Errors in grammar might be acceptable in a truck driver's speech but not a schoolteacher's. The price of diapers can be discussed at a women's bridge club but would raise eyebrows if it is brought up in a men's poker club.

Every group has its own set of informal standards that control the communication among its members. Social pressure sets some imprecise range of what is acceptable in every aspect of communication to eliminate behavior that offends other members. (Don't shout at me! You don't talk about those things in polite society! You've already told us that a dozen times.) By forcing its members to communicate within the acceptable range of what they say and how they say it, social pressure reduces a major source of dissension.

The standards for communicating are quite different in different societies and even within subgroups of the same society.

The informal standards for a conversation with a friend in our modern society include:

Physical factors

Each person has an invisible circle of personal space around him. You stand or sit far enough away from him so that your space does not overlap his. Only mates, family members, lovers, and some old friends are entitled to show their special relationship by entering your space and there is some limit even for them.

Your volume of speech must be within a level that can be heard by the receiver without straining but not so loud that he's uncomfortable. Also, it should not be so loud that it disturbs others nearby.

There is some maximum rate at which the brain can process new information, so there is some maximum acceptable rate of talking. Speaking faster than that makes the receiver uncomfortable. Most listeners become impatient when the transmission is too slow or the information is too detailed.

Communicating outside the acceptable range causes others to be uncomfortable, even when the behavior is not harmful in itself. Consider how you feel when someone is standing very close to you, talking very loud and very fast. How do you feel when the speaker's language is unnecessarily vulgar? You might be so offended by the "bad

manners" of his unintended nonverbal communication that you don't hear his verbal message.

Manner of communicating

The participants are expected to alternate in transmitting and receiving for approximately equal periods. Also, one person should not speak too long at a stretch before giving others a chance to speak. Hogging the conversation causes resentment. At some point, "talking too much" becomes offensive.

The acceptable style of speaking is different in each group. An Oriental might say, "This unworthy person begs ..." Also, to avoid offending others, they avoid direct contradictions. Our society tends to be more informal in our manner of speaking and more direct in what we say. Nevertheless, a certain civility is expected, which includes the absence of obscenities, insults, and unnecessary disagreements.

There are also standards for the type and amount of emotion that can be communicated in public. Any display of an emotion that might harm others, such as anger and hostility, is not acceptable. Sorrow, tears, and wailing are acceptable when the person has suffered the loss of a family member but are not considered appropriate in describing a loss on an investment.

Communication as a transaction

Communication is also a type of transaction. As with the exchange of tangible items described in Chapter 12, people want to get back at least as much they give in a conversation. If one person offers a greeting and the other ignores it, the exchange is unfair so that the greeter's feelings are hurt. The value of the items of information exchanged also can be fair or unfair. A favorable exchange, such as useful information or a compliment, can make a person feel just as good as receiving a tangible benefit. An unfavorable exchange, such as useless information or an insult, is just as hurtful as any other loss of social approval.

There are also standards for public speaking, for written communication, and for some nonverbal items, such as the types of gestures that are acceptable during a conversation.

Group standards gradually change over time. The manner of communicating that was standard in Shakespeare's time would be considered ridiculous today.

In the next section we'll examine how these early conditions still influence what you do and say in our modern society.