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Communication in a virtual world

Are you feeling overwhelmed by the increase in virtual communication? After generations of honing our face-to-face communication skills, we are sophisticated 'readers' of others; their meaning, intentions and potential to help, or harm us. The rich nature of traditional communication feeds our need to 'fill in the blanks' of what people are saying, reaching deeper into the meaning behind the words. Virtual communication is sterile, and if not used consciously, can lead to misunderstanding, mistrust and conflict. This paper will get you thinking about communication – and how to make the most of virtual communication, while avoiding some of the pitfalls!

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Communication in a virtual world: Summary of key concepts

This was originally a reflective piece, however many of my personal reflections have been removed for brevity.

Human communication

Through communication, we are able to exchange complex information, ideas and emotions.

Face to face communication is enhanced through context, gestures, body language, facial expression and eye contact.

The human voice is an instrument that assists us to convey complex meaning: by changing our pitch, intonation, stress, volume and speed, we can change the meaning of the words or the intention of the speaker; our voice communicates our emotions to the listener (Tiwari & Tiwari, 2012).

This richness of human communication developed face to face, under the stressful circumstances of survival of the fittest; those who were able to read the intentions of another, assess potential threat and react appropriately survived and continued to thrive (Morgan, 2018). By reading another person's intentions we are able to establish if they are / are not a threat to our survival; once deemed a non-threat, we can establish if this person is more or less powerful than us and if they are of benefit or not to our life.

This makes us evolved to be excellent readers of people, their intentions and their communications. It is important for us to know that understanding the context, intentions and emotions of the communicator is not just 'nice', but we **need** to know; it is an ingrained, instinctual requirement of the receiver.

Enter, virtual communication

Virtual communication includes any form of communication that is facilitated by a computer or smart phone.

Today, virtual communication is fast, easy, accessible, cost effective and efficient. I think I am on safe ground to suggest that it is now essential to functioning effectively at work, and at home.

It has increased our ability to connect with others, learn, share and collaborate. We can more easily work with a variety of organisations and people, all over the world. My current role in international development would not be possible, without all the advantages of virtual communication.

But...there's a down side

There is a down side, and it's a big one. **Virtual communication is sterile.** It is the exact opposite of human, face to face communication. It often lacks the emotional; the non-verbal; the clues and cues as to meaning and intention.

We are unable to use our powerful, unconscious minds to analyse and interpret the emotions of the person we are talking to, and line ours up with theirs – this is called mirroring, and it is the foundation of human, social interaction.

Humans are wired to seek and understand the context of the communication, and the intentions of person communicating it. Without this crucial information, our brains make it up, and you can be sure that our brains are not inventing a positive situation (Morgan, 2018).

Why? From a basic survival perspective, there is no benefit for us to 'assume the best' in others.

Isn't email straightforward?

Emails arrived with computers, and while we were shown how to technically send an email, there were generally no rules discussed about what to send, and how to send it.

The research shows that emails are a source of many workplace conflicts, and the main reason for this is that a lot of emails are simply misunderstood by the reader. These misunderstandings are not just big, throw-your-hands-in-the-air type of conflict, but they are the small misunderstandings that over time affect relationships. There are potentially hundreds of emails that we send in a year, that have been quietly misunderstood.

Why is this the case?

Apart from the problems of all virtual communication (lack of context and emotion), email runs into an additional problem of ego. We all overestimate our ability to communicate accurately and effectively in an email. This is compounded by the fact that we also overestimate our ability to understand emails that are sent to us (Kruger & Epley, 2005).

So, the sender is *sure* that they communicated well, and the receiver is *sure* they interpreted it correctly. You can see how a misunderstanding can arise and become so entrenched. Small misunderstandings build up over time into a pattern or a perception of who someone is, and how competent (or not) they are.

More worryingly for our workplace relationships, when communicating by email, we reportedly feel less cooperative – and fully justified in not cooperating. We feel more confident to lie, and we feel entitled to do so.

We evaluate the other person communicating with us more harshly. We have reduced feelings of social obligation – we have no connection to them, and so owe them nothing! We have a survival instinct to assume that the other person is probably 'being mean to us', and we invent all sorts of justification to 'be mean' back to them. (Morgan, 2018; Kruger & Epley, 2005).

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

George Bernard Shaw

What about video conferencing?

Although using a video conferencing tool such as skype / zoom does have additional benefits compared with that of email, or other text-based communication tools, video conferencing has its own issues.

These include a restricted visual field; reduced variety in stimulus; compressed voice transmission that removes the undertones and the variety in the human voice; lack of easy emotional cues; lack of natural turn taking in a conversation; lack of eye contact and emotional connection, and; a time limit on our concentration (10 minutes maximum online) (Morgan, 2018; Kruger & Epley, 2005)

This is before we take into consideration the distractions of technological hiccups and the high numbers of people on the call who are actually doing something else at the same time...emails can be typed while pretending to concentrate on what is being said.

What does this mean for my remote working?

Virtual communication as many people use it, is not conducive to effective communication, collaboration or relationship building.

Although not focused on virtual communication, Fisher & Ury's "Getting to Yes" provides a useful perspective:

- **Fear leads to perceptions, and perceptions to actions:** Because our brain essentially 'makes up' or 'fills in the blanks' of emotion in emails and other virtual communications, our fears play out on the computer screen.
- **As useful as looking for objective reality is; it is ultimately the reality that each of us sees it that matters.** Even though your email seems clear *to you*, even though you *meant* something else – it is the receiver who you need to consider when writing your emails or other, text based, virtual communications.

Remember...

- People's brains / fears / experiences will colour what I say, and change the meaning of my words.
- Virtual communication lacks the emotional connection that people need in order to communicate effectively, make decisions and feel connected.
- Virtual communication risks alienating people from the team, and the partnership.

Taking control of virtual communication

There is a lot that science can teach us about the process of communication, and help us to consciously communicate better. Below is a summary of my 'take-aways', they are the things that resonated the most with me...this is certainly not an exhaustive list!

- **Minimise the amount of communication carried out virtually:** While not possible to remove virtual communication completely, it is important that face to face communication happens as often as possible. This is particularly important when developing new relationships, repairing relationships or dealing with conflict / stressful decision making.
- **When you must communicate virtually, choose the right method:** Video conferencing is better than phone calls, phone calls are better than emails, emails are better than text messages. Make sure you mix it up, and keep people genuinely interacting as much as possible.

1. Set some ground rules

- **Agree in advance which virtual communication tools you will use:** Communication plans that detail communication ground rules, expectations and methods need to be established, monitored and adjusted throughout the life of the partnership.
- Remember when drafting these plans to include which method of communication you will use: What should be done via text message? How often or what type of conversations should be held over the phone or via video conference? What should go into an email? Who needs to be included in each type of communication.

2. Cut people some slack!

- **“Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity”:** Although ‘stupidity’ is a bit strong here, *Hanlon’s Razor* is appropriate for virtual communication. Understanding as we do just how difficult it is to get virtual communication right, be willing to give people the benefit of the doubt. Consider that they *probably did not mean to make you feel that way*, and approach them to discuss it further. Remember that fear leads to perception – consider what you may be ascribing to others out of your own fears.

3. Do a better job at communicating via email

- **Give email writing your full attention.** Although we can now write emails anywhere, it is important not to. If you must write emails on the go, wait to send them until you have had the chance to re-read and check the content. Sending a quick email to your colleague or partner in haste can come across as annoyed or dismissive; check and re-check if you are writing on the go.
- **Put the emotion back into your email communication:** Although the emoticon can feel unprofessional, there is a reason they are so popular! Adding emoticons into an email or a text message can help to convey meaning and put the emotion back into the conversation. Of course, you need to be selective which ones you choose, where you add them AND you need to know that everyone understands what they mean.
If you are uncomfortable using them or unsure if it is appropriate, add in a sentence or two that shows your intent or shares your emotions / context or perspective.
- **Remember that it is difficult to imagine what it is like for someone else to not know, what you know.** Steven Pinker (2014) calls this the curse of knowledge. Things that sound straightforward and obvious to us, who *know*, can be very confusing for others. Take the time to consider your audience, before you write that email. Explain clearly, in simple terms your intention in communicating, and any background information that people should be aware of before they contribute / make a decision / take action.
- **Write the email / text message / trello communication / online comment and then WAIT to push send.** Take 60 seconds (or more) and then come back to it. Re-read it. Consider it. Does this make sense? Am I being clear? Is this what I want to say? Will my intention be understood by the reader? Have I tried to do too much in one email? Are these the right people to send the email to?
- **Remove the word ‘just’ from your email vocabulary (“I am JUST following up to see if”)** along with the phrases “I am not sure if you saw / read / received my previous email” and “as per our previous email / conversation / meeting”. These phrases and words regularly make the list of the most despised email content to receive.

Improve video conferencing

- **Role model to others sharing your emotions or saying that you do not understand.** In face to face meetings, it is possible to gauge from facial expression and body language that those you are communicating with do not understand. This is much harder on a skype call; role modelling being explicit when you do not understand or what to check in on a point someone else is making, will help others to do the same when you are talking.
- **Use social cues to help others on a video conference to anticipate the conversation** (as we do face to face). Body language, tone, eye contact all let us know when our turn is coming up to speak. Adding in explicit cues can make conversation flow more easily. It can be as simple as “I am almost finished and will hand over to you, Alison after my next point”. Respond to people when they are speaking, nod your head or say “yes, I agree” helps others to know you are engaged in what they are saying.

- **User video conferencing consciously, with purpose:** Use the opportunity of video conferences to ask others to share how they are feeling about the partnership or the topic that you are discussing – or simply share something they are feeling positive about from their work or home life. Build the connections amongst the team and avoid focusing too much on ticking off the to do list.
- **Remember the 10-minute rule.** No matter how disciplined you are, the lack of emotion and cues in virtual communication is exhausting for your brain. No one can concentrate passively for more than 10 minutes, so if you are running the meeting you will need to change it up and ‘recapture’ people’s attention every 10 minutes.

Take responsibility for your virtual communication

- **Regularly and specifically reflect on** your virtual communication skills.
- **Get creative** about how you communicate and try out new ways of ‘putting the personal back into the virtual’. **Ask others** for feedback as you try new things. **Talk** about what you are trying to do, and why – get as many people on board as you can!
- **Follow up** on negative virtual communication as soon as possible with the person concerned. Get on the phone and have a chat, or meet face to face (if you can!).

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