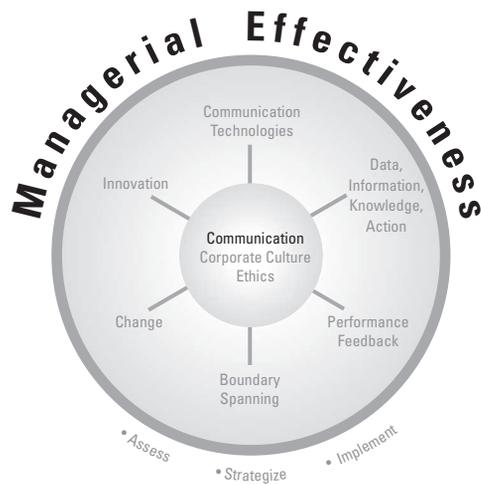# 1

How Managers Communicate

Human communication permeates the human condition. Human communication surrounds us and is an in-built aspect of everything human beings are and do. That makes any effort to explain, predict, or to some extent control human communication a pretty big order. How does one get a handle on the totality of human communication?

Frank Dance

I f, by a wave of a magic wand, managers could communicate perfectly, how would organizations change? Would the company be more productive? Would employees be more satisfied? The magic wand presents an intriguing dilemma for the manager. On the one hand, managers know that their success is largely a function of their communication skills. On the other hand, they are often unclear about what constitutes "perfect" or effective communication. Some argue, for example, that if employees completely understood their managers, organizations would function smoothly. Yet,

misunderstandings may prove useful as in the case of an employee who misinterprets a manager's sarcastic criticism as a legitimate suggestion. Such a misunderstanding may temporarily preserve "the peace." How managers might use this "magic wand" proves revealing. It creates the illusions and reality of their world. Typically, managers choose to wave the wand in one of three ways. The Arrow, Circuit, and Dance approaches are highlighted here.

The Arrow Approach

Chapter 1: How Managers Communicate by the Numbers

60%
of employees are satisfied with communication from their supervisor

55%
of managers are unfit for their job

20
Average number of people murdered at work each week in the United States

45%
of employees have confidence in the job being done by senior management

70%
of communication metaphors describe the communication process as a conduit

Mr. Taylor managed the information technology (IT) division in an organization. He almost perfectly, although unwittingly, articulated the Arrow philosophy during a meeting with a consultant. The consultant was presenting the IT division's results of a communication satisfaction survey to Mr. Taylor and his management team. Mr. Taylor asked the consultant numerous technical questions about how some survey data were analyzed. After each response, Mr. Taylor appeared increasingly uneasy and antagonistic. When the consultant suggested that his employees were less than satisfied with the communication system, Mr. Taylor's technical questions assumed an almost acidic quality. The tone of the conversation became increasingly combative. As frequently occurs, Mr. Taylor's technical questions masked his actual concern. Finally, he exploded with a fifteen-minute diatribe, with comments such as:

Why should I take *my* time to ensure that people understand? I send e-mails because then I know that I've communicated my message. Then I don't have to worry about it. They got my message. These meetings you propose may make people feel good but I just see them as a waste of my time and the company's time.

After this rather illuminating soliloquy an uncomfortable silence prevailed for a moment. Yet there was also a sense of relief because Mr. Taylor had laid all his cards on the table. His comments had some merit. He clearly pointed out one of the greatest challenges in organizational communication: providing efficient methods of communication. Yet, there were significant flaws in his thinking.

First, he assumed that messages sent via e-mail would be received at the proper time. But what about messages that are filtered out because they are inadvertently treated as spam? Second, Mr. Taylor assumed that if the message was received, it was read. With information overload being one of the facts of organizational life, this assumption may be suspect. Finally, he assumed that if the message was actually read, it also was understood in the way intended. This is probably the most tenuous of all his premises. Yet these are exactly the kinds of assumptions that all Arrow managers make.

Judging Effectiveness

Nowhere is this orientation more evident than when managers are asked about the meaning of effective communication. These are typical responses:

- "Being able to clearly and precisely put my thoughts into words."
- "Speaking with credibility and authority on topics I know about."
- "Getting the results I want by talking to my people."

Certainly managers should seek to speak clearly, concisely, and with credibility in order to achieve results. Yet, a re-examination of each of those statements in light of the underlying assumptions proves revealing (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1   Arrow Manager's Assumptions about Communication Effectiveness

Communication Effectiveness	Underlying Assumptions
• Being able to clearly and precisely put thoughts into words.	• What is clear and precise to one person is clear and precise to another.
• Speaking with credibility and authority.	• Credibility is something the speaker possesses and not something given to the speaker by the audience.
• Getting the results desired by talking to employees.	• Communication is primarily a one-way activity.

In short, Arrow managers focus on accurately encoding their thoughts into language—much like selecting, aiming, and firing arrows at a target. They see communication as a one-way activity based primarily on the skills of the sender. Receivers of messages are viewed as passive information processors who react appropriately if the words are "on the mark." Thus, feedback is not only improbable, it is unnecessary.

Explaining Communication Breakdowns

Even with "proper" encoding, communication inevitably breaks down. Yet, many managers tenaciously hold to the Arrow approach with explanations such as:

- "Why didn't they just follow my instructions? If I told them once, I told them a thousand times."
- "How could this project get so fouled up? I told them exactly how to do it."

In each case the Arrow manager assumes the receiver errs. After all, the meaning of the words is self-evident and fixed; therefore, everyone should understand the message similarly. And certainly the workers heard what was said because management repeated it a "thousand times." This type of reasoning inevitably leads some managers to the conclusions that their employees are inherently ignorant, lazy, or subversive.

But what if the Arrow manager fails to understand someone? Curiously, the onus of fault shifts from the receiver to the sender. The Arrow manager's likely responses include: "I should have been notified." or "Why didn't you just say that?" In these cases the sender clearly failed to "hit the target" because the "proper" words were not uttered. In sum, communication breakdowns are always the fault of the sender or the receiver. Arrow managers never think that the problem, and hence the responsibility, might be mutual. They fail to recognize that effective communication is a shared commitment between senders and receivers.

Origins

Why would a manager adopt this orientation? It is probably not the result of a conscious decision. Rather, through countless individual experiences, an unconscious pattern forms that becomes the modus operandi. There are three major factors that appear to contribute to the process.

First, the technical training of many managers reinforces a stimulus/ response orientation. On a number of occasions I have talked with engineers who had recently assumed managerial responsibilities. Many experience special challenges in managing people. For years they have been trained to use precise formulas that exactly predict certain outcomes. If the design is developed according to standards, then it works and performs as expected. Transferring such logic to management is as natural as it is problematic. As managers, these engineers tend to view communication as another type of design problem. After all, like the design specifications, everyone should interpret the message in the same way. Choosing the right language, as in selecting the proper materials, should lead to effectiveness. Of course, people do not always react like they are "supposed to" and human beings are not passive objects like girders, cable, and concrete. It requires great intellectual dexterity to get rid of these conceptions, built up literally through years of training and countless daily experiences.

The second contributing factor, strangely enough, is the "speech teacher." The very term, "speech teacher," implies a one-way view of communication. Why not "speaking and listening teacher"? Or just "communication

teacher"? Historically, teachers of public address have been profoundly influenced by Aristotle's remarkable work, *The Rhetoric,* which was one of the first truly systematic treatises on the spoken word.[1] He emphasized the speaker, or the orator, arranging an appropriate message in accordance with general principles. Audience members were seen as passive and reactive rather than active and interactive. In short, Aristotle primarily viewed communication as a one-way act of influence.

More recently, communication theorists have taken to model-building in an attempt to represent the communication process. Claude Shannon, an engineer at Bell Telephone Company, developed one of the classic and most influential models. This model, shown in Figure 1.1, was developed to help engineers decide how to most efficiently transmit electrical impulses from one place to another. Other models having a more social-psychological emphasis were developed based on Shannon and (his colleague) Weaver's basic premise.[2] These types of models represent communication as a one-way activity, not only visually but also conceptually.
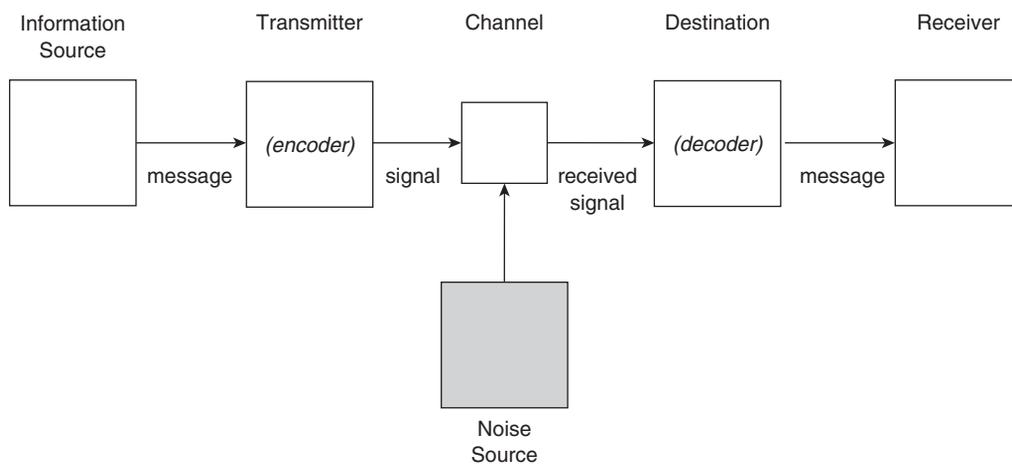

Figure 1.1   Shannon & Weaver Model

Finally, certain people may have personality predispositions to communicate in this way. Treating communication as a one-way event allows the Arrow manager to avoid the complexities, ambiguities, and paradoxes of human behavior, thereby creating the illusion of permanence and finality. Dynamic contexts, unique individuals, adjustable styles of discourse, and multileveled conversations can prove not only bewildering but also deeply troubling to those who tenaciously cling to a simplistic worldview. Arrow managers avoid all this, with seeming efficiency and total control. Their personal psychological makeup may make this some sort of functional necessity. After all, a world in which all elements are dynamic can be profoundly unsettling and deeply disturbing.

Evaluation

Arrow managers believe that:

Effective Expression = Effective Communication.

This belief simultaneously limits and expands our understanding in the following ways.

Arrow managers assume that receivers are passive information processors. This assumption trivializes the listener's role and limits our understanding of the communication process. Although some Arrow managers recognize the difficulty of transforming an idea into a code and transmitting it, they usually fail to appreciate the listener's or reader's challenge of accurately reconstructing the message from the sender's signals. In short, they incorrectly treat communication as an *event* instead of a *process*. Consequently their work units are often devoid of interpersonal warmth, sapped of the creative spirit, and soured by employee resentment. Taken to an extreme, this can be enormously debilitating. Consider, for example, the communication practices of top military leaders during the Vietnam War. Their Arrow style of communication prompted one distinguished pilot to remark:

I didn't hate them because they were dumb, I didn't hate them because they had spilled our blood for nothing. I hated them because of their arrogance . . . because they had convinced themselves that they actually knew what they were doing and that we were too minor to understand the "Big Picture."[3]

He targets his anger and resentment at those "leaders" who would not treat fellow military personnel as thinking human beings. He implicitly recognized that effective leaders treat communication as an *active,* not passive, process fraught with potential points of breakdown.

Arrow managers inappropriately assume that words are containers of meaning. The language we use subtly works against us in this respect. The expressions we use every day convey the notion that we put meaning into words and the words act as carriers of meaning: "capturing ideas in words," "putting ideas into writing," or "I have difficulty putting my thoughts into words." In fact, linguistics professor M.J. Reddy has made extensive studies of the metaphors used to describe the communication process.[4] He conservatively estimates that about 70% of the English language is directly, visibly, or graphically based on metaphors that stress this perspective on communication. For example, when managers exclaim, "Just read my e-mail," or "Read my lips," they create the illusion that meaning resides in the words themselves. In reality, words act as useful, although usually imprecise, stimulators of meaning, more than they do as containers of meaning. We actively construct meanings within a unique vortex that includes the words used, the context of the utterance, and the people involved.

The Arrow approach encourages clear thinking, lucid expression, and organized speaking. Emphasizing the sender's skill benefits the entire organization. Corporate recruiters often complain that new college graduates lack basic communication skills, such as how to make presentations, write a memo, and develop a meeting agenda.[5] Arrow managers tend to excel at such communication tasks.

Finally, the Arrow approach appropriately links communication behavior and action. Arrow managers discourage idle chatter, discussions of personal problems, and unnecessary information sharing. The result is often higher productivity because potentially time-wasting communication activities are eliminated. Provided that subordinates do understand directives and management knows what's best, the Arrow approach may actually encourage maximum performance.

Circuit Approach

If the language of the Arrow manager involves "targeting an audience," "attacking arguments," and "firing a volley of commands," then the discourse of the Circuit manager involves "networking," "going with the flow," and "making connections." The Circuit approach represents an evolution from the arrow to the circle. Circuit managers stress feedback over response, relationship over content, connotations over denotations, and understanding over compliance. They view communication as a two-way process involving a dynamic interplay of an active sender and receiver.

Mark, a district sales manager for a national life insurance company, was the quintessential Circuit manager. His office visits to "touch base" with the sales agents in his district were met with eager anticipation. Why? Mark conducted his "meetings" in exciting off-site locations such as a golf course or ski village. The meeting agenda was equally stimulating because the team rarely talked about business, production goals, or skill development. Yet, Mark was a master at building rapport, camaraderie, and a team environment. He assumed that because the agents "felt good" about working for him, and hence the company, they would then be more motivated to produce. The result? A happy, cohesive team that improved their golf scores more than their selling skills or sales record. Everybody loved Mark but few respected his managerial abilities.

Judging Effectiveness

The effectiveness issue exposes the Circuit manager's ultimate aims:

• Communication effectiveness is actively listening to my workers, so I know what makes them happy.

- I'm effective as a manager when I am sensitive to employees' needs and concerns. Then I try to communicate that sensitivity by adapting my message to each individual.
- My communication is effective when my employees feel included and understood.

As seen in Table 1.2, Circuit managers reveal their implicit perspective about the communication process in these comments. They make conceptual leaps from communication behavior to job satisfaction to productivity. The research suggests that these leaps, particularly from job satisfaction to productivity, are dubious at best.[6] The odds are about the same as one athlete completing the high jump, the broad jump, and the pole vault in one bound.

Table 1.2   Circuit Manager's Assumptions about Communication Effectiveness

Communication Effectiveness	Underlying Assumptions
• Listening to employees in order to make them happy. • Showing sensitivity and openness to employees by adapting messages to each individual. • Make employees feel included and understood.	• Job satisfaction is the goal of organizational communication. • Messages are exclusively interpreted in the context of interpersonal relationships. • Openness is useful in all circumstances. • Understanding will lead to agreement. • Understanding is the primary goal and is always more acceptable than ambiguity.

Explaining Communication Breakdowns

The Circuit manager recognizes the certainty of communication breakdowns. According to this approach there are three primary reasons for breakdowns.

First, people just "don't connect." Circuit managers are fond of saying "meanings are in people, not in words," which suggests that everyone has a unique interpretation for each message. They also believe that employees' values, ideas, or feelings are often so dissimilar that they have difficulty in relating to one another. Thus Circuit managers invest vast amounts of time in "reaching an understanding" and "building relationships" instead of other task-oriented goals. Employees in these types of organizations often dread meetings because they perceive them to stifle creativity, suppress productivity, and squelch progress. Nevertheless, Circuit managers are hopeful that everyone can "get on the same page" because they believe that ultimately everyone shares the same basic needs and desires.

Second, people are poor listeners. Circuit managers often encourage their employees to develop active listening skills such as paraphrasing others' remarks, giving feedback, and asking the appropriate probing questions.

These skills help employees think about possible misinterpretations of their remarks as well as check for unintended messages. Therefore, employees involved in a misunderstanding are frequently reminded of the maxim, "You cannot not communicate."

Third, people fail to develop the proper communication climate. The Circuit manager believes that communication relationships, like electrical circuits, can operate only under certain conditions. Specifically, a defensive as opposed to a supportive climate inhibits communication effectiveness. Spontaneity, equality, and adaptation promote supportive climates. Evaluative comments, a dogmatic demeanor, and an attitude of superiority produce defensive climates. Proper climates can also be disrupted by "hidden agendas," which occurs when employees hide their underlying goals or true feelings from one another. Circuit managers believe that trust will emerge once the hidden agendas are exposed.

Origins

Managers develop a Circuit orientation to communication for a variety of reasons, but three are particularly noteworthy.

First, the human relations school of management has influenced many leaders. The well-known Hawthorne studies often provide the key arguments used to build the human relations case. These studies began as an attempt to investigate the relationship between the levels of lighting in the workplace and worker productivity. Employees at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant increased their productivity in all instances: in the test group when lighting was improved as well as made more dim, and even in the control group where there were no changes in illumination. Therefore, researchers determined that factors other than lighting influenced performance. The mistaken interpretation of the research often passed down in folklore was that employees thought management was interested in them, so they continued to increase their production regardless of the physical conditions. Hence the axiom, "Satisfied Workers are Productive Workers." Yet researchers have discovered that a satisfied worker can also be a very lazy one.[7] In fact, those who believe the folklore make an inappropriate inference. The key reason for the productivity increases was not managers' behavior but the *interpretations* made by employees.

Second, some communication teachers encourage a Circuit orientation. Courses in Interpersonal Communication have been quite popular on campuses. Such courses typically focus on receiver listening skills, giving appropriate feedback, and relationship-building. Even the communication models used in these courses stress the circularity of the communication process. The Schramm model in Figure 1.2, considered a classic, looks like a circuit diagram. [8] It highlights the feedback concept and the interaction of communicators. Such models lend theoretical justification to the Circuit perspective of communication skills.
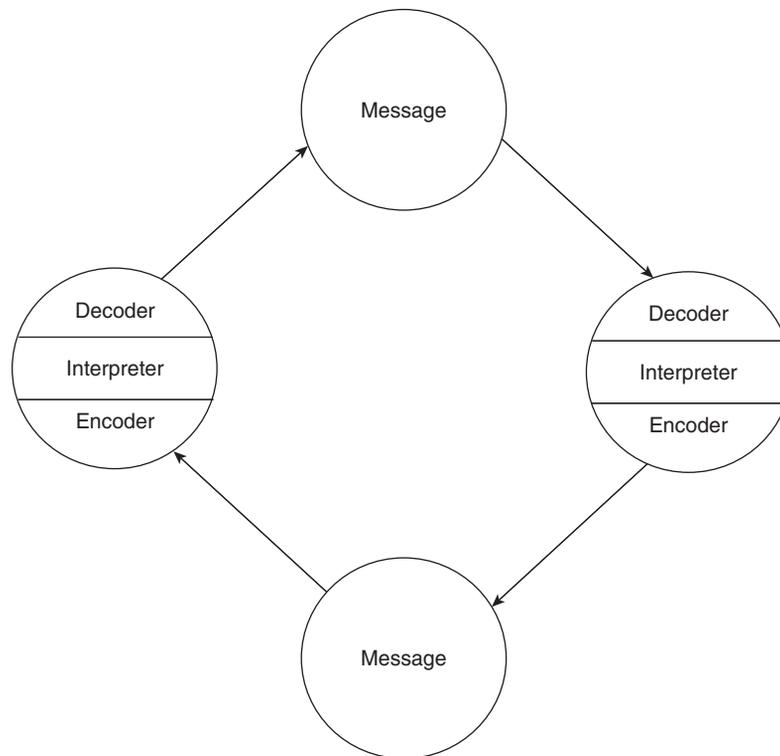
Figure 1.2   Shannon & Weaver Model

Finally, some people have a natural affinity for the Circuit orientation. They tend to focus on people's feelings and interpersonal relationships. People are naturally attracted to those who are sensitive to their feelings. Circuit managers tend to avoid controversy, build up self-esteem, and meet affiliation needs. Hence, the Circuit manager may have a deep need to keep peace and harmony.

Evaluation

Circuit managers believe that:

Understanding = Effective Communication.

This belief both enhances and detracts from our understanding of the communication process in the following ways:

Circuit managers incorrectly assume that understanding always leads to agreement. They believe that most "communication problems" occur because the parties do not understand one another. But the problem may be

that they understand one another all too well, and they simply disagree. For example, an employee may well understand that the company needs for him to work overtime, but he refuses to do so because of family obligations. Unlike the Arrow manager, the Circuit manager acknowledges that people do not always understand a message in the same way. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that two people might not agree. Ironically, such thoughts are rarely entertained because Circuit Managers will spend endless hours trying to ensure that their messages are "really understood."

Circuit managers inappropriately assume that understanding should be the singular goal of communication. People communicate for a variety of reasons. Effective managers, like politicians, may equivocate in order to induce creativity or give themselves room to change. As two well-regarded scholars note, "Ambiguous missions and goals allow divergent interpretations to coexist and are more effective in allowing diverse groups to work together."[9] Moreover, there are instances in which a manager may not have time to explain, just as a physician gives orders during an emergency.

Accommodation strategies, although useful at times, do not guarantee solutions to difficult problems. Chris Argyris perceptively notes:

> The ability to get along with others is always an asset, right? Wrong. By adeptly avoiding conflict with co-workers, some executives eventually wreak havoc. And it's their very adeptness that's the problem. The explanation for this lies in what I call skilled incompetence, whereby managers use practiced routine behavior (skill) to produce what they do not intend (incompetence).[10]

Paradoxically, an organizational culture that emphasizes "understanding" often breeds a reticence to bring up areas of disagreement. Employees become afraid to clearly articulate their views for fear of exposing how deep the gulfs really are. Hence, differences—important and meaningful ones—are often glossed over in the name of "understanding."

Circuit orientation highlights some important communication skills. Building strong relationships and providing feedback generally enhances communication effectiveness. Research has shown that competent communicators do pay attention to these aspects of interaction.[11] And these are precisely the issues the Arrow manager ignores. The Arrow manager focuses on constructing the best possible message, but the Circuit manager looks at the meanings imposed by listeners. This shift in perspective is enlightening and useful. Even though the link between job satisfaction and productivity has proven tenuous at best, the Circuit approach has persuaded many that job satisfaction is an important variable in its own right.

We can learn much from the Arrow and Circuit approach. However, both are incomplete and limit our understanding. The lens of each perspective creates a somewhat distorted view of the communication process. There is a better point of view. I call it the Dance perspective of communication.

Communication as Dance

Some have argued that dance was the first form of communication. There are so many similarities between dance and communication that few people would disagree. Dance involves patterns, movement, and creativity. Participants as well as observers can enjoy it. There are as many styles as people. Tastes vary, styles change, and trends come and go, but dance will always be part of the human community. Once performed, a dance can never be recaptured in the same way again; it is unrepeatable and irreversible. Even the simplest of dances involves thousands of intricate and complex maneuvers. So, too, with communication. The list of similarities could be quite lengthy indeed. A few of the more important ones are highlighted here.

Communication Is Used for Multiple Purposes

People dance for a wide variety of reasons: to entertain, inform, persuade, incite, and even seduce. Some dance as a form of self-expression, whereas others dance for audiences. The same can be said of communication. The famous physicist and poet, Leo Szilard, once commented:

> When a scientist says something, his colleagues must ask themselves only whether it is true. When a politician says something, his colleagues must first of all ask, "Why does he say it?," later on they may or may not get around to asking whether it happens to be true. A politician is a man who thinks he is in possession of the truth and knows what needs to be done. Scientists rarely think they are in full possession of the truth, and a scientist's aim in a discussion with his colleagues is not to persuade but to clarify.[12]

Herein lies a problem. The scientist, politician, salesperson, philosopher, and preacher all use the same language but with different objectives in mind. So we can never be sure of a communicator's precise intentions. In fact, communicators often have multiple goals for a single message. The effective teacher seeks to enlighten and motivate, the salesperson to inform and persuade, and the philosopher to clarify and question. Effective managers, at one time or another, perform each of these roles.

Therefore, communication effectiveness cannot be limited to either the "results" or "understanding" criteria as characterized by the Arrow and Circuit perspectives, respectively. For instance, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, once "explained" to a Congressional committee how he made decisions regarding interest rates: "If I say something which you understand fully in this regard, I probably made a mistake."[13] Was he saying, "This is too difficult to explain"? Was he telling the committee,

"This is none of your business"? Was he merely equivocating? It remains unclear. But clearly, communicators can have any number of goals, including obfuscation, confusion, or deception. So no single measure of communication effectiveness exists, just as no one criterion should be used to evaluate all dancers.

Communication Involves the Coordination of Meanings

Dancers have to learn to coordinate their movements with one another regardless of the type of music. Communicators do as well. As long as communicators know how to respond in their roles or according to the "rules of the game," it may not be necessary or even desirable to totally share meanings. In fact, this notion provides the foundation for a theory of communication, called the Coordinated Management of Meaning. These theorists argue that:

> . . . Communication is the process by which persons cocreate, maintain, and alter patterns of social order, but . . . the coordination of talk through which patterns of order emerge is not necessarily based on mutual understanding or a shared social reality.[14]

Subordinates may not know why the boss asks, "How are things going?," but in time they learn how to respond. It may be interpreted as "intrusiveness" on the part of the subordinate and "concern" on the part of the boss. Despite the vastly different interpretations, they learn to maintain social order. Meanings are not necessarily shared but they are coordinated.

So what? This view of communication underscores how messages facilitate social order, maintain structure, and set up patterns. Dancers are evaluated, in part, on the degree to which their actions are coordinated with one another. Managers can use similar criteria to judge communication effectiveness. Organizations and dance studios do not reward clumsiness, whether self-inflicted or induced by others. So Dance managers focus on this question: How does communication help or hinder the process of coordination in our organization?

Communication Involves Co-Orientation

In order to coordinate actions, dancers must learn to co-orient. They must be able to sense one another's cues, anticipate their partner's possible actions, and know the appropriate responses. So, too, with communicators. When communication breaks down, people have failed to co-orient; they have no adequate predictive capacity. Effective communicators are able to forecast with some accuracy the actions of others, their responses, and

interpretations. For example, the CEO of a paper manufacturing firm was bewildered by rampant rumors about layoffs and plant closings that circulated in the plant after his brief announcement about forthcoming pay freezes. In his speech he specifically noted that layoffs and plant closings were *not* viable alternatives to cope with an industry slowdown. When asked if he ever had a meeting like this before, he said, "I never had the need to." Even though he had personally hired most of these workers, he could not anticipate these possible reactions to his announcement. He did not effectively co-orient.

Professional dancers whirl, pirouette, and leap into one another's arms with seeming ease. Yet, their artistry only emerges after long and tedious hours of practice. Even when improvising they co-orient because they have learned how to respond to one another's subtle cues. If you are lost in a forest, you try to calculate your position in relation to some fixed location. Dancers do not have that luxury. Rather they must simultaneously orient with one another, even as their "locations" constantly change. Likewise, this complex and difficult challenge faces communicators, who must simultaneously orient to each other while both are constantly evolving.

Communication Is Rule-Governed

How can dancers cope with the tremendous range of possible movements? How can all the possibilities be mastered? Communicators, like dancers, develop rules-of-thumb to cope with the uncertainties. For every style of dance there are rules of written or unwritten rules. Joan Lawson, who for seventeen years taught at the Royal Ballet School, wrote, "Principles and rules should all be studied by aspiring dancers and choreographers if they are to create the style and qualities of movement necessary to communicate the mood, emotion, theme, and story of classical dance." [15] Years of experience are distilled in these rules.

Communicators, as well, develop a wide range of implicit rules that govern conversations, such as who has the right to initiate or terminate a conversation, what topics are appropriate to speak about, and under what conditions such topics may be discussed. These rules affect the conversation in much the same way that rules of dance constrain movement. Conversational rules, too, are a way to handle uncertainty and distill the essence of learning into a few easily manageable units. When employees enact these rules they coordinate their actions.

There are basically two types of rules at work in conversations: interpretation rules and regulative rules.[16] *Interpretation rules* are the communicator's rules for abstracting the meaning out of a message.[17] For example, during a meeting a manager might say to an employee, "Tell me more." The employee's interpretation: "I have a great idea; the manager wants the details." On the other hand, the same manager who says, "Tell me more,"

after an employee gives an unacceptable explanation for being late to work, communicates a very different message. The manager's message: "Shape up; this excuse is unacceptable." Even though the same words are used, the context has changed and different interpretation rules apply.

Regulative rules are those that regulate or guide the ongoing action of the communication event. Effective listeners, for example, often have these kinds of regulative rules:

- Initiate conversations with questions about unrisky topics.
- If a person's comments are unclear, then ask for clarification.
- Terminate conversations by summarizing the conversation.

Note that in each case these rules help guide the conversation in a particular direction.

Effective communicators learn the special rules that apply in different settings. They, of course, vary from person to person, department to department, and organization to organization. Yet, there are some common rules regardless of the situation, just as there are fundamental dance steps. The rules do not exist on some unseen tablet waiting to be discovered. Rather, people are actively engaged in negotiating the rules, particularly during the first stages of relationships. As a result, Dance managers pay particular attention to the orientation of new employees

Communicators Develop a Repertoire of Skills That May Pass from the Level of Consciousness

Beginning dancers have to consciously think about each movement in executing a pirouette, for instance. Over time they become concerned less with body mechanics and more with artistry. The ease of execution comes from years of practice, as movements that were once conscious submerge into the subconscious. Communicators learn in much the same way. When we learn a foreign language we have to think more consciously about syntax and semantics. But over time, through trial and error, we learn the rules and can speak more naturally by relying on subconscious processes. Language skills are, in essence, the ability to utilize the right rules. The same can be said of pragmatic rules of conversation.

Frequently, communication problems are the result of an unconsciously used rule, long ago forgotten. For example, one manager told me that her employees often accused her of being a poor listener. She had difficulty understanding their perceptions. During a lull in a social conversation, I mentioned being involved in a minor car accident. Her response: "That reminds me. Did I tell you about *my* new car?" Clearly, such episodes might cause her employees to infer that she was uninterested in them and lead to the "poor listener" assessment. This manager apparently never learned the

regulative rule: "When someone mentions an unusual event, probe for further information." Effective conversationalists utilize this rule all the time without any conscious thought of it. Instead, this manager's operative but unconscious rule was: "When someone mentions an unusual event, talk about something similar that happened to me." So I was not surprised when the manager was asked to step down and assume a lower paying job.

Most individuals' existing set of rules need to be refined to become better negotiators, speakers, or motivators. For example, skilled negotiators don't make concessions all at once; they use a more deliberate approach.[18] At first, they may consciously have to think about appropriate behaviors, but with practice over time, it becomes natural. Dance instructors use a similar technique when they point out a motion that should be consciously attended to in order to execute a graceful maneuver.

Communication Can Be Viewed as a Patterned Activity

Choreographers map out patterns for their dances, a kind of circuit diagram drawn with arrows. Even with improvisational dances, a map can be drawn of the dancer's movements. Likewise, there are patterns of interaction in a conversation. The patterns emerge from the interlocking of the communicator's rules of interaction.

Expert chess players who are familiar with an adversary's style of play (i.e., personal rules), are frequently able to sense deep but recurring patterns to their opponent's games—not move by move, but in a more general sense. Communicators, like amateur chess players, may not be aware of their own patterns but perceptive observers can see them. For example, a manager may jokingly insult an employee by saying, "Hey, Pat! Has your golf game improved yet? The employee may respond by placating: "I haven't been golfing lately." The manager could react to the placating with even harsher insults, to which the employee responds with more placating responses. The pattern repeats itself until either someone else steps in or the employee gets angry. The manager's regulative rule: "Respond to placating with playful insults." The employee's regulative rule is: "Respond to insults with a placating reply." These rules interact to form a pattern in which the manager sees the employee as the problem and the employee feels the manager causes the problem (see Figure 1.3). Such problems, technically known as punctuation difficulties, occur when each party sees the other as the source of the conflict.[19] Neither the manager nor the employee sees the overall pattern resulting from these personal rules of interaction.

The patterns are not always counterproductive. In fact, exceptional communicators identify and eliminate the destructive patterns while they establish and reinforce constructive ones. They often have an artistic appreciation for intricate patterns of coordination. The aesthetic thrill of an illuminating discussion or a scintillating meeting may prove elusive and rare, but to the Dance manger there are few experiences more pleasing and fulfilling.

Manager's Interpretation (meaning rules)	Manager's Regulative Rules	Actual Conversation	Employee's Regulative Rules	Employee's Interpretation (meaning rules)
Greeting.	Initiate conversations with playful repartee.	**Manager:** *Hey, Pat, has your golf game improved yet?*		Insult. Manager doesn't care about my game or me.
Employee is ignoring me.		**Employee:** *I haven't been golfing lately.*	Respond to insults with placating reply.	Factual reply to a question.
Playful question.	Try to re-establish conversation with another playful comment.	**Manager:** *Well, how's that clunker of a car running?*		Another insult. What kind of game is the manager playing?
Employee is catching on, but still takes the conversation too seriously.		**Employee:** *I sold it.*	Respond to insults with a placating comment.	Another factual reply.
Joke.	Continue conversation with another playful insult.	**Manager:** *I hope you didn't buy another lemon.*		Another insult. Now the manager is questioning my decision-making ability.
What is the employee so upset about? I'm just trying to build some rapport. The employee is a poor conversationalist.		**Employee:** *Why don't you just get off my back and mind your own business!*	If placating doesn't work, then stand up for yourself.	My only alternative was to be assertive. The manager is insensitive and unprofessional.

Figure 1.3   Conversation Analysis

Conclusion

The anthropologist, Mary Catherine Bateson, said ". . . there are few things as toxic as a bad metaphor."[20] The Arrow and Circuit approaches mask the complexity of the communication process. Managers who view communication as a dance have a more vivid metaphor with which to analyze organizational situations. They see the complexities in the apparent simplicity of communication. They are concerned with patterns and unwritten rules. They look at the degree of co-orientation between employees as well as departments. They do not expect to be understood at all times and do not always see understanding as the goal of communication. Their communication style and choice of medium vary according to the goals and context. Unlike Circuit managers, they are not exclusively concerned with relationships. Unlike Arrow managers, they are not solely focused on immediate results, but seek deeper patterns of sustained success. They do not share the Arrow manager's belief that humans are basically lazy but neither do they believe that all humans are well intentioned. Finally, they take comfort in the fact that there appears to be no relationship between their ability to communicate and their ability to dance.

Notes

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