

# DRAWING UPON EXPERIENCE AND RESEARCH TO IMPROVE FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper demonstrates how an assignment is used to have students reflect on their own experience to understand and apply the concepts being covered. The assignment that is described and the exercise that is built upon it are designed to improve the participants' communication skills. Prior to the class the students complete an assignment that describes a communication breakdown that they contributed to and requires them to assess the extent they applied specific communication principles. Their experiences and the frequency that they applied or failed to apply the communication principles are discussed. After this discussion the students individually plan, and then in small groups, discuss how they will improve their communication effectiveness. Working in those groups they critique each other's plans and then discuss the communication skills they applied while they were reviewing each other's plans. The class concludes with a debriefing of the key learning points.*

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this exercise are multifold. One is to have the students reflect on a communication breakdown that they were in part responsible for causing. The second and third objectives are for them to understand what they did that contributed to the communication breakdown and to have them recognize how those actions relate to the concepts covered in the course. A fourth objective is to have them plan what they would do in the future to lessen the probability of their having communication breakdowns. The fifth objective is to have them practice the listening responses that would enable them to be more effective communicators.

## COURSE CONTENT PRIOR TO THE EXERCISE

Prior to engaging in this exercise two classes would have been conducted in which supportive communication, listening skills and listening responses would have been addressed. They would also have read power point slides relating to Communication and to the concepts in the books, *Difficult Conversations* and *Getting to Yes*.

## INTRODUCTION

The week before the exercise is conducted the students are given an assignment to describe a communication breakdown that they contributed to causing and were personally involved in. The assignment is highly structured. The purpose of this is to have the students reflect upon the research and concepts being covered in this part of the course. It is also designed to readily obtain how frequently the students applied those specific communication concepts. This helps clarify how what is being studied relates to effective communication. The assignment given to the students is as follows.

## THE ASSIGNMENT

1. In your introduction, describe what you did that helped contribute to a communication breakdown. The example you select should be one that had some consequences for you. Provide an overview as to what you said and the effects your communication had. Include a description of the setting and your relationship with the other person (e.g. friends, boss-subordinate, etc.) This part of the assignment should not exceed one half of a page. Failure to complete this part of the assignment will result in a 20% deduction from your grade.
2. **Describe** what you did (or failed to do) and what happened with regard to the concepts relating to supportive versus defensive communication, listening responses and the learning points from the slides in the book, *Difficult Conversations* (What Happened, Feelings, Identity, Learning/Listening and Problem-Solving). This is to be achieved by explaining what you said when you answer the following questions.
  - a. To what extent were you defense provoking versus **supportive** by being person-oriented (versus problem oriented), evaluative (versus descriptive), global (versus specific)?
  - b. To what extent did you use **listening responses**, such as reflective (or paraphrasing) and probing listening responses (versus advising and deflective responses)?
  - c. To what extent did you assume (and act as though) **you were right** (and by implication the other was wrong)?

- d. To extent did you believe your *intentions* were positive and the others were not?
  - e. To what extent did you *blame* the other person?
  - f. To what extent did you recognize your *feelings* and the other person's feelings; did you address them; if so how and what was the affect?
  - g. To what extent did you feel that your *identity* was threatened, or that the other person's identity was threatened; why and what was the affect?
  - h. To what extent were you trying to *solve a problem* versus trying to win?
3. This part of the assignment should not exceed two pages. It is worth 80% of this assignment.
  4. What should you have done differently and why? This part of the assignment should not exceed one half of a page. It is worth 10% of this assignment.
  5. What, specifically, will you do differently in the future? This part of the assignment should not exceed one-quarter of a page. It is worth 10% of this assignment.

### GATHERING DATA AND CLARIFYING LEARNING POINTS

At the outset of the class the results from the assignments are summarized. The number of students who engaged in each of the following actions is recorded on a power point slide. This is done by a show of hands.

- Person-oriented
- Evaluative
- Global
- Advising or Deflective
- Assumed you were right
- Assumed negative intentions of other
- Blamed other person
- Recognized and addressed feelings
- Identity threatened
- Solved the problem

After the data is recorded the first three items are discussed together as they relate to defense provoking responses, rather than to encouraging supportive communications (Whetten & Cameron, 2011). The fourth item consists of advising or deflecting, which are two different listening responses and are in contrast to probing and reflecting (Whetten & Cameron, 2011). The discussion that follows demonstrates how and why defense provoking responses (being person-oriented, evaluative and global) as well as advising and deflective listening responses are generally associated with communication breakdowns. The remaining six concepts are based upon *Difficult Conversations* (Stone, Patton & Heen, 1999). The first three of these, assuming you are right, that the other person had negative intentions and that you blamed the other person are discussed. It becomes apparent that almost everyone believes that they were right and most blame the other person.

The impact these have on listening, trying to understand the other's perspective and working to solve the problem is discussed. Few students indicate that they recognized or addressed their feelings or the other person's feelings. The reasons for this and the negative effects of not doing so are discussed. The concept of identity, what happens when one feels that one's identity is threatened and what one may be able to do about it is reviewed. The final question focuses on the issue of solving the problem versus winning. It is linked to the importance of communicating in a way that facilitates the learning and understanding of each other's points of view. The distinction between winning and solving the problem is emphasized and is concluded with the advice of "don't win the battle and lose the war". The following provides the results of the students' answers to the questions asked. It is from two undergraduate classes with seventy-three students responding.

- 50 Person-oriented
- 40 Evaluative
- 40 Global
- 32 Advising or Deflective
- 68 Assumed you were right
- 30 Assumed negative intentions of other
- 58 Blamed other person
- 19 Recognized and addressed feelings
- 38 Identity threatened
- 12 Solved the problem

### EXERCISE – INDIVIDUAL TASK

Upon completing this discussion they are asked to reflect on their communication breakdown and are told to write what specifically they will do to improve their communication in the future and when they will start to do so. They are also asked to describe how they will measure whether their future communication has been effective.

### EXERCISE – GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL TASKS

The students form groups of three and review each person's plans to improve their communication. This is done by having one person being the presenter, another serving as the coach/counselor and the third being an observer. The role of the coach/counselor is three-fold. The first is to help the presenter to more effectively implement his or her plan to improve his or her communication. The second is to help the presenter assess the usefulness of the measure that he or she established to determine if his or her communication was effective. The third is to do this in a way that applies the communication principles that were reviewed in the class. At the conclusion of the discussion between the presenter and coach/counselor, the observer provides feedback to the coach/counselor. The observer describes what the coach/counselor did that demonstrated supportive or defense provoking communication as well as the extent he or she used probing and reflective listening

responses. When the observer has finished providing feedback to the coach/counselor, the presenter provides feedback to the coach/counselor. Each of the three members performs each of the three roles. When the class size requires it, one or two four-person groups are formed.

### **DEBRIEFING**

After concluding the reviews of each person's plans the class reconvenes to discuss what was learned. The questions asked include the following.

- What are you going to do to improve your communication effectiveness? Based upon the responses, a follow-up question may be asked, which is, what will you do differently to ensure that you do this?
- When will you start to do this?
- What measures are you going to use to determine whether your future communication would be more effective?
- What difficulties did the coach/counselor encounter? Why might these problems have occurred?
- What should a coach/counselor do to be more effective?
- What is the single most significant insight you obtained by examining your communication breakdown, planning what to do differently in the future and/or providing feedback as a coach/counselor or observer?

The class is concluded by stating that they need to practice the skills they want to develop and that this may be achieved by applying the action plan they created.

### **REFERENCES**

- Fisher, Ury & Patton, (1991). *Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Penguin Books.
- Stone, Patton & Heen, (1999). *Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most*, Penguin Books.
- Whetten & Cameron, (2011). *Developing Managerial Skills*, (8<sup>th</sup> ed.), Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.