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Effective Communication in the Intranational Workplace: Models for Public Sector Managers and Theorists

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INTRODUCTION

"There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Kurt Lewin)

Interpersonal communication is one of the most paradoxical areas of personal or organizational life. Key to healthy human relationships, crucial to effective management, face-to-face communication generally is an activity that public managers do the most of yet know the least about. Interpersonal communication is also an area to which theoretical researchers of public management have paid little attention.

Managers devote more time to communicating on the job than any other activity. Approximately 75 percent of a manager's day is spent communicating--listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Most of the time is spent in face-to-face communication (Harris and Moran, 1987).

In formal education, teachers focus heavily on improving written communication skills while devoting almost no time at all to the area of interpersonal communication. Even an impressionistic review of the pubic management literature reveals the paucity of attention paid to this area.

Should we then be surprised by the results of a classic study in interpersonal communication which found that in no more than

about half of the incidents did the subordinate receive the same message sent by the superior? An organization dealing with a tangible product would have a severe problem if about 50 percent of its output were defective (Burns, 1954).No skill is as important to a manager than effective communication. Yet we all have heard the most frequent explanation for any organizational complaint--that it was a "communication problem." And paradoxically, organizational failures resonate with the most easily correctable refrain, "I thought I told you to ..." followed by "But I thought you said that ..."

Effective interpersonal communication does not occur frequently enough in organizations. We teach and research too little about it despite (1) the relatively simple, classical theoretical models upon which face-to-face communication has been based and (2) the relatively homogeneous cultural context upon which those models were based.

It is the thesis of this article that our theoretical models of interpersonal communication (and our managerial application of them) are moving from relative simplicity to greater complexity--not only because research has yielded more sophisticated understanding, but also because America's population and labor force are themselves moving from relative cultural homogeneity to greater multi-cultural heterogeneity. In the future, moreover, managers and scholars of public administration will (of necessity) pay greater attention to this area. To develop this thesis, the author will first examine some relatively simple, classical models of face-to-face communication. Second, he will explore the changing demographic-cultural context of American society. Finally, he will suggest a recent model of interpersonal communication that is more congruent with the culturally diverse America which is emerging.

It is hoped that what follows will be of interest both to applied managers as well as to theoretical scholars of public administration, particularly given public administration's special responsibility both to reflect and to realize the core American value of equality.

The first classical (but perhaps less familiar) model of communication system was authored in 1949 by research mathematician Claude Shannon and electrical engineer Warren Weaver (Shannon and Weaver, 1949/1963). They depicted communication as a simple, sequential, and linear process through which information could be transmitted as easily by a telephone as by a human. Their mechanistic system included four components: a sender, a channel, a message, and a receiver (Figure 1).

CLASSICAL MODELS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

FIGURE 1
SHANNON-WEAVER MODEL

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              Channel
        ┌──────────────────┐
┌────────┐    Message    ╲   ┌──────────┐
│ Sender │                ╲  │ Receiver │
└────────┘    Channel    ╱   └──────────┘
        └──────────────┘
```

Channel

Sender   Message   Receiver

Channel

FIGURE 2
BERLO MODEL

Channel

Sender - Encoder   Message   Receiver - Decoder

Channel

Feedback

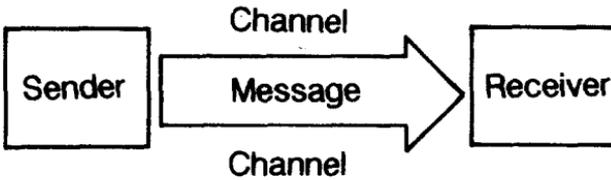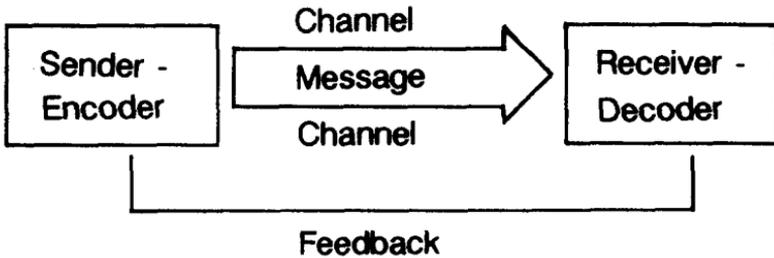### EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN MODELS

Often a public manager considers communication to be he or she (the sender) transmitting a message. The most conventional channels are sound and/or sight. Recognizing this opens up the possibility that the message can be verbal and/or non-verbal.

When does effective communication begin with this model? When the sender sends or when the sender receives? Drucker (1974) makes the point that all the sender does is to "utter". "Communication," Drucker goes on to say, is the act of the recipient." So managers who wish to communicate effectively should sensitize themselves to place less importance upon themselves **sending** a message than upon the fullness with which their colleague or employer **receives** it.

When is effective communication complete? Effective communication is complete when the message has been **understood**. A message has been understood when it has been both clearly sent **and** received. Effective communication is a requisite to every step in organizational process--from the mutual recognition and understanding of a topic or problem that triggered the communication in the first place to its final resolution. Communication, therefore, is the act of communicating and the act of understanding as well as being understood (Horan, 1976).

The second classical (and perhaps more familiar) model of interpersonal communication was published by David Berlo (1960). Wishing to understand "the way people communicate with each other," Berlo elaborated upon the Shannon-Weaver model. He recognized that interpersonal communication was a complex, mutually interactive and often subtle process between human beings. Berlo added a feedback loop as well as "sender-encoder" and "receiver-encoder" capabilities (Figure 2).

Berlo's model opened up the possibility of dealing with different messages **between** cultures (for example, the messages encoded in different languages) as well as more complex messages **within** a culture (correctly decoding the non-verbal message of a gesture). In its simplest form, a message "encoded" by the sender in a language "foreign" to the receiver may not be understood unless the receiver can bilingually "decode" it. More directly, the message encoded in the "thumbs up" expression of "good luck" or "victory" in mainstream white American culture can be less delicately decoded by other cultural receivers.

The above first two relatively simple models of interpersonal

communication reflect the relatively homogeneous demographic cultural context from which they emerged. To understand the basis for the third model of face-to-face communication, we must turn to the changing demographics of American society.

CHANGING AMERICAN DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Projections of America's future workforce composition generally are not the stuff of newspaper headlines. But the 1987 publication of *Workforce 2000* (Johnston and Packer) changed that. It did so by forecasting a rapid shift in workforce entrants--one in which rising numbers of women, African-Americans, Latino-Americans, and Asian-Americans seemingly would dramatically displace the traditional mainstay of the workforce, the native-born, white male. The key forecast (which caught everyone's attention) was: "Only 15 percent of the new entrants to the labor force over the next 13 years will be native white males, compared to 47 percent in that category today." This projection was restated: "White males ... will comprise only 15 percent of the **net** additions to the labor force" (emphasis added). While public and private organziations scrambled to deal with the projection of a dramatically different labor force, no one fully comprehended the significance of the word "net" for four years.

In their study, Mishel and Teixeira (1991) examined the central projection of *Workforce 2000* and concluded that it was "wrong in that key 'facts' are contradicted by available data." Concentrating on workforce entrants, they argued that workforce entrants should include the **total** not the "net" number of workforce entrants during any given period of time (Mishel and Teixeira, 1991:31):

> For example, in an economy of 100 workers, 20 workers might come into the workforce over ten years, while ten retired over the same period of time, resulting in a workforce of 110 (100+20-10) at the end of the period. But, despite the fact the net increase in the workforce was only 10 (110-100), the actual number of workforce entrants should still be set at 20, so that we can include the ten workers who replaced those retiring.

Thus, *Workforce 2000* erroneously undercounted native-born white males as only 15 percent of **net additions** to the labor force--a figure arrived by subtracting replacements for white males leaving the labor force from the total number entering it. But, according to Mishel and Teixeira (1991), **total** native-born male entrants *"will*

actually be almost one-third (32 percent) of total workforce entrants" (italics in original).

It is important to note Mishel and Teixeira's (1991) other projections of total workforce entrants between 1988-2000. Essentially, it remains true that white males and males will decrease among total workforce entrants, while women, Hispanics, Blacks, Asians, and other races will increase--though at a slower pace than *Workforce 2000* projected:

> White males (44% of the 1988 labor force and its traditional "mainstay") will provide a substantial, but declining 32% of total labor force entrants;
>
> Males (55% of the 1988 workforce) will decline to 48% of new entrants;
>
> Women (45% of the workforce) will increase to 52% of new workforce entrants;
>
> Hispanics (7% of the 1988 labor force) will double to 15% of new workers;
>
> Blacks (11% of the 1988 workforce) will rise to 13% of new entrants; and
>
> Asians and other races (only 3% of the 1988 workforce) will also double to 6% of new entrants.
>
> (See Fullerton for total 1988 workforce composition and Mishel and Teixeira for total 1988 workforce entrants.)

Important differences still are emerging between the composition of today's workforce and the workforce of tomorrow. America's workforce will remain largely composed of non-Hispanic whites, although their numbers will slowly decrease. While their total numbers will increase more slowly than *Workforce 2000* projected, more and more women, African-Americans, Latino-Americans, and Asian-Americans will continue to join white males to work, be colleagues, and hold decision-making positions in the workforce.

While it will be more of an evolutionary than revolutionary process, in the not-too-distant future a new American workforce will come into being--one which reflects less our previous North European homogeneity than the heterogeneous diversity of the globe.

GLOBAL HETEROGENEOUS DIVERSITY

In dealings with "foreigners," Americans recognize that certain "differences" exist between citizens of different societies--for example, between ourselves and the Japanese (whose language is quite different from ours), as well as with the English (whose language is

not). And that those *inter*national "differences" are cultural.

But Americans may not yet recognize a growing reality: that similar "differences" also exist in the workplace between Americans who are citizens of the same society. Those *intra*national "differences" are cultural as well.

In the past, a very thin slice of generally top- or mid-level American corporate managers were "internationalized" through their dealings with cultural different "foreigners" in the global economy. Today and in the future, every manager--public and private--at every level is on the threshold of being *"intra*nationalized" **at home** by an increasingly multicultural American workforce. That is to say, the scale and scope with which individuals from different cultures enter the workforce will create in American workplaces a novel situation conventionally comparable only to what heretofore had been known as the international setting. But, as realities change, so do conventions. And so, public (indeed all private) management will be "intranationalized for, as those who are "managed" change, indeed as those who "manage" change, so must what we term "management" change.

CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT

It will become important for each public manager in America to understand cross-cultural differences among individuals from the different groups who will compose the American workforce. One of the founding scholars of intercultural communication, Harry Triandis recognized this when he wrote (Triandis and Albert, 1985:391):

> In many countries, the population is polyethnic. This is the case in the United States, where a number of distinct groups (i.e., blacks ... Latin Americans to mention just a few) enjoy cultural traditions that are different from the traditions of the White, Anglo-Saxan or melting pot produced majority. Such ... cultures lead members of a cultural or ethnic group to behave in characteristic ways and to perceive their own behavior and the behavior of others in a particular manner.

For example, the non-verbal communication patterns of African-Americans and whites may differ. Johnson (1971) writes that as a Southern survival pattern, Black children were taught to look away from older persons and/or authority figures, especially while listening. In contrast, the dominant White culture encourages direct eye

contact while listening. Therefore, unless a White manager can intranationally "decode" Black culture, the Black gaze pattern meant to be respectful may be misinterpreted as disrespectful (*Ibid.*).

Similarly, Latino-Americans accord a central place to the inner qualities that give an individual self-worth and earn the respect of others. To call publicly into question the Hispanic's "Dignidad" can assault the core of his manliness and call into question the esteem of his social relationships. In contrast, it is mainstream American management practice sometimes to correct employee performance publicly. Culturally-aware managers will advantage themselves by delivering such corrections sensitively (and privately) to Latino-American males.

While cultural differences are generally associated with ethnicity, recent research indicates that gender differences may be akin to cultural ones. Consider the conclusion of Tanen (1991:17-18):

> Much as I understand and am in sympathy with those who wish there were no differences between women and men--only reparable social justice--my research, others' research and my own and others' experience tell me it simply isn't so. There are gender differences in ways of speaking, and we need to identify and understand them. Without such understanding, we are doomed to blame others or ourselves--or the relationship--for the otherwise *mystifying and damaging effects of our contrasting* conversational styles ... The sociolinguistic approach I take in this book shows that many frictions arise because **boys and girls grow up in what are essentially different cultures, so talk between women and men is cross-cultural communication** (emphasis added).

In the 1990s managers are discovering that knowing about cultural differences (gender as well as ethnic) is increasingly important if one is to communicate effectively in and manage American public organizations. Today, the astute White manager--along with the astute female, African-American, Latino-American or Asian-American--are coming to realize that they need to learn more about the culture, values and communication styles of each other.

No situation demands more effective face-to-face communication or fuller understanding than the psychological counseling session. Ivey *et al.* (1987:94)), psychologists and communication theorists, observed that in America counseling sessions are increasingly meetings between therapist and client(s) from different cultures. They developed a theory which addresses this situation. Building on the

FIGURE 3
FOUR "PARTICIPANTS"
THE IVEY MODEL
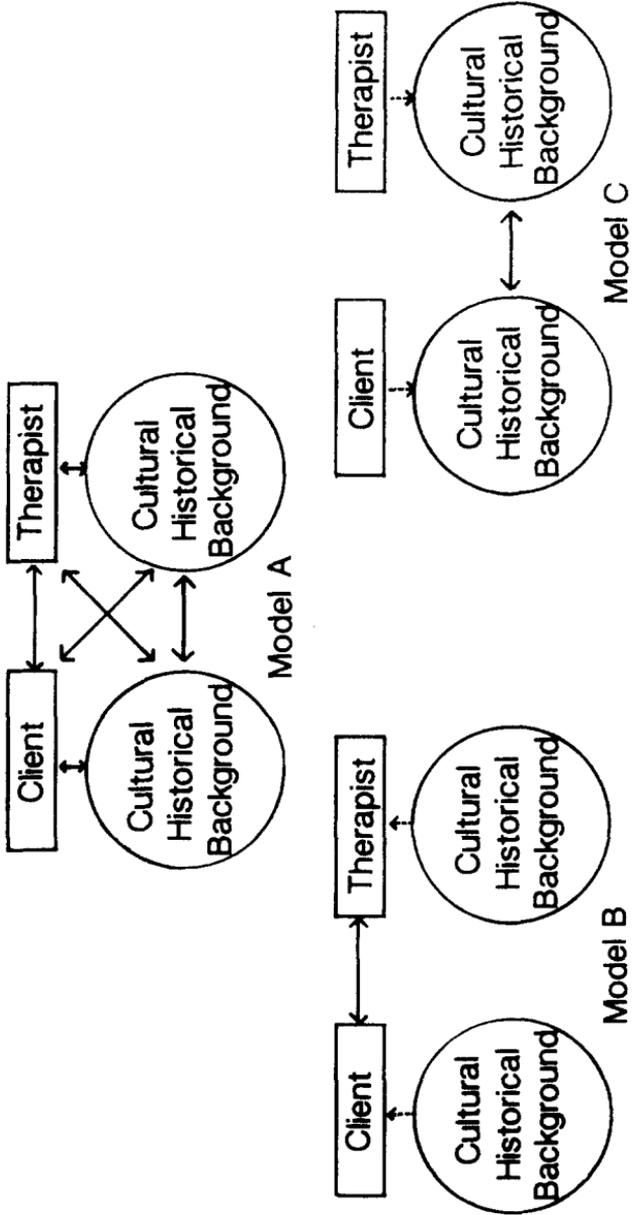
work of Jacques Lacan, they point out that multicultural settings may not just involve communication between the two physically present individuals of different cultures, therapist and client. Rather:

> There may be four participants in the interview: **the counselor or thera-pist and his or her cultural/historical background and the client and his or her cultural/historical background** ... What sometimes appears to be the therapist talking with the client may actually be two cultural/histori-cal backgrounds talking with each other (emphasis in original).

Ivey and his colleagues have found that effective communication in multicultural settings is more likely to occur when participants consciously have Model (A) in mind. Otherwise, therapist and cli-ent/manager and subordinate may communicate (B) with each other as "individuals," thereby ignoring their cultural/historical back-grounds; or (C) ignore the individual and communicate only with each other's cultural/historical backgrounds. To communicate unconsciously with everyone "as an individual" (Model B) may deny the impact of culture and history on a person. As one African-American female executive told this author, "I can't leave who I am, or all I've been through at the office every morning." And to dimin-ish the individual by communicating too much unconsciously with his/her cultural/historical background (Model C) may be to stereo-type. We need to learn how to strike the necessary balance.

CONCLUSION

To communicate effectively with an increasingly diverse and intranational workforce, we need a new model upon which to base our face-to-face communication. Effective communication truly begins not with the sender sending but with the receiver receiving. It is complete only when the message has been mutually and accurately understood.

We inevitably will come to live and work in what today are only demographic projections. Knowing, then, that face-to-face commu-nication involves encoding and decoding capabilities can lead to effective communication.

Finally, being aware of the Ivey model may help us all strike a necessary balance--first in communicating more effectively with the unique individual each of us is and, second, in taking into account the cultural/historical background that has influenced each of us to

varying degrees.

Public managers may be advantaged if they increasingly apply this awareness to their craft. Teachers and theoreticians of public administration may find, in the preliminary assertions of this brief article, valid reasons to refocus some of their teaching and research efforts.

Organization remains what it always has been: the achievement of complex tasks through collective effort. Face-to-face communication is crucial to that common effort. We have been inattentive in the past to an area that will become more complex and critical in the future. There is much to do.

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