

Communication

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Yet the art of talking, listening and ascertaining the truth seems more elusive than ever in this Internet and cable age, lost in a bitter stream of blather and misinformation.¹

It's freedom of speech, not freedom of listen.²

Many universities require a speech or communications course. Most of these classes require a public presentation, while others require team projects in which communication to the class is an integral part of the evaluation. We've been communicating from the time of birth with howls and motions, later in life using words and body language. However, good communication is not the same as communication and in some cases, bad communication might even be worse than no communication. We live in a world that is caught in a web of almost constant communication. We have e-mail, instant messaging, Twitter, Internet on our phones, blogs, and twenty-four hour news. Celebrities complain that they are stalked for that embarrassing picture at the same time that individuals from the general public seems to be willing to share intimate details of their lives with anyone with a computer or cell phone—details that their grandparents would find to be a major breach of privacy. In this world of ubiquitous information and communication choices, we also find ourselves in a communications nightmare. How much information is actually communicated compared to how much opinion is screeched out on the airwaves or the blogs? The summer of 2009 featured a number of town hall meetings that seemed to promote yelling and unsubstantiated opinion rather than rational, critical discussion. It seems as if many have decided to accept Stephen Colbert's statement above, that

with the first amendment to the Constitution we have the freedom to speak, but that listening isn't important. But are we really speaking if no one listens?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines communication as "transmission or exchange of information, knowledge, or ideas, by means of speech, writing, mechanical or electronic media, etc.," and communication skills as "abilities that enable one to communicate effectively with other people, esp. considered as a qualification or asset; (sometimes) *spec.* an aptitude for conveying information and ideas combined with good listening and comprehension skills."³ It is clear from these definitions that communication is not simply using words or talking at another. There is a real exchange of information, and effectiveness is involved. While most people talk or write something every day, that does not necessarily mean we are actually communicating. Yet, it is a vital part of our lives. Communication can make or break a relationship, a meeting, or an organization. The issue is important but often overlooked. There are a large number of resources that can provide insight into the myriad aspects of communication.

That is the happiest conversation: when there is no competition, no vanity, but a calm interchange of sentiments.

Booher's *Voice of Authority* is a short, practical book on good communication regardless of the means of delivery. As she writes, "The answer is not about technology. Blogging, instant-messaging, text-messaging, smart phones—all, just like e-mail and faxes, will be passé after a few years. New technology appears and disappears from the scene. The one constant is *human* communication."⁴ She lists symptoms of poor personal communication (lack of input, no change in people, confusion, conflict, frequent reworking) and poor organizational communication (conflicting goals, priorities, and schedules, turf wars, low morale, rumors, poor attitudes). She then lists ten reasons for employee resistance



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(lack of trust, incomplete information, unclear message, evasion, inconsistent behavior, no credibility, no connection/lack of caring, delayed communication, perception of incompetence, isolation and no feedback). Subsequent chapters deal with each of these communication problems. Very easy to read and provides usable advice for addressing this important topic. Highly recommended.

If I had to describe the communication skills needed in today's global economy, it would sound like an order in a restaurant: "Surf & Turf, please."⁵ We need to be able to surf and use the Internet, be technically adept with use of the gizmos and gadgets of technology. . . In addition, when we're on the same turf, in the face to face space, we need to be equally facile, comfortable and communicative.⁶

What a good description of the world of librarianship. While the book *Face to Face* recognizes the extent to which electronic communication has dominated so many aspects of our lives and it is the communication format of choice of so many, the book looks at the role and benefits of face-to-face communication. Topics covered include small talk; small, medium, and large groups; diversity; talking on the phone; speeches; gossip; challenging situations; and more. The book has a number of rules, reminders, suggestions, tips, and lists of things to consider, as well as examples. Some are so basic you'd wonder why it needs to be listed—until you actually see the number of people breaking that rule and the people that it annoys. For example, the individual who cannot bear to be without their cell phone, playing with it or talking during a meeting or while in conversation with you. For a summary of the book, the last chapter lists sixty-six basic rules that make a great deal of sense for communication and basic civility in interactions. The book ends with thirty-six questions that could be used to begin a conversation either with a discussion group or for self analysis. A very basic, easy-to-read book that might encourage readers to increase both the number of face-to-face interactions and to carefully consider the quality and quantity of their use of technology. Well worth the time to read this interesting book.

Matha and Boehm target their book at senior level leaders, but anyone can benefit from their insight on communication.⁷ Noting the importance of communication they state that many leaders have difficulty with both communication itself and with the means to address communication problems. They offer three steps—clarification, preparation, and communication—largely through a conversation with and among employees.⁸ Each of these steps is developed with clear examples. Communication that actually conveys information and encourages open discussion that gets results is critical. If this is an issue or of interest, this book is well worth taking the time to read.

For a scholarly look at new communication models,

take a look at *Mediated Interpersonal Communication*.

Much attention is paid to how new technologies challenge the more traditional definitions of interpersonal communication. Recent trends in mass communication (such as the personalization of messages) and interpersonal communication (such as the increasing use of technical devices to communicate interpersonally) have blurred the boundaries between the two fields, forcing us to develop more sophisticated theories and models. New technologies can be seen as relationship enablers—they not only add new forms of interpersonal communication, but they fundamentally change how individuals interact (e.g., communication with avatars, para-social interactions).⁹

How true and very evident in libraries. This book provides a multidisciplinary approach that looks at the different types of communication, how it changes relationships, the behaviors of people in electronic communication, and why it appeals to so many. There is a lot to be learned from this very technical book. While not necessary reading, for those interested in the research in this area, this well referenced and intriguing book may be for you.

Harvard Business Press, especially the Pocket Mentor series, appears frequently in this column for good reason. They are fast, practical, insightful guides and *Managing Difficult Interactions* continues in the tradition. In the first chapter we read,

Difficult interactions are those exchanges with other humans [*sic*] beings where the questions we're asking ourselves don't have quick answers. We experience uncertainty. Our uncertainty leads to feeling of fear. We intuit that we may not be able to meet a need, and we enter a zone called The Threat Zone.¹⁰

The book has a number of charts, bulleted lists, a case study, and self studies to walk the reader through some ideas on identifying and resolving difficult situations. Especially interesting is "Step 3: Managing Threats to Your Self-Image," as this can be a serious issue for some. Others topics covered include emotions, motives, listening, and coaching. Reading this book will take less than an hour, but considering the points made will take a much longer time. Highly recommended.

An AMACOM title, *People Styles at Work* looks at the various styles of people, how to recognize them, work with them, and be flexible enough for a more productive and pleasant work environment.¹¹ The four styles identified are analytical (less assertive and responsive), driver (more assertive, less responsive), amiable (less assertive, more responsive), and expressive (more assertive and responsive). These styles are how others see us based on

our outer behavior (body language and words), not our inner behaviors (emotions, thoughts, values). The Boltons remind the reader that you can't change your dominant style, you are more than your style, you are different from others, you are your style, acceptance of styles help you to make the model work for you, and it takes all styles for success.¹² Whatever your style, you can be successful. After this discussion, the book describes ways to work with the different styles and in different situations, case studies, and an appendix of useful, insightful suggestions for each style. Fun, useful reading.

Communication Highwire was written because the authors felt communication style is an important topic because they have seen how "communication style disconnects wreaked havoc on the people involved and the jobs they were doing."¹³ They use the metaphor of a circus throughout the book (hence the highwire of the title) because there is much going on at one time—there are both discrete performers and careful interaction, and a great deal of behind-the-scenes activity is necessary to make a successful circus.

Right now it might help to picture communication style—the patterns of how we communicate—as our entry ticket to the Big Top. This ticket to the circus, that is, communication style, provides a window into the differences that make a difference and a pathway to better understanding what is really important, so that we can collaborate more productively and enjoyably.¹⁴

With this imagery carried throughout the book, the exercises, stories, and discussion are easy to read, informative, fun, and useful. The activities and self analysis are enlightening. Definitely worth a careful reading. Readers might also take a look at the website from the U.S. Small Business Administration. It offers a very interesting inventory called Understanding Your Communication Style (www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/sba/comm_style.htm) that is worth a look.

We the people never seem to have discussions anymore; we all just rant to our like-minded friends with our like-minded rhetoric.

Gallagher begins his book with several negative comments about coworkers he has overhead and then states,

These people all have one thing in common: *they don't know how to positively influence the behavior of other people.* They struggle with how to talk with their employees, their bosses, and their peers about difficult subjects—or perhaps they have tried airing their grievances and gotten nowhere—so instead, they gripe to others and feel powerless. They don't realize that the right kind

of honest and authentic communication, delivered in a nonthreatening way, could actually change many of these situations for the better.¹⁵

To overcome these problems and to move toward painless discussion, check out this book. Gallagher's approach is based on strength-based psychology, which emphasizes strength for growth and changes rather than weakness.

Nowadays, common wisdom about difficult conversations has become kinder and gentler—and more effective—by focusing on acknowledging the other person, and then telling them how we feel about the situation. In the process, we are now learning that mutual respect and acknowledgment of strengths is a very powerful force for effective dialogue.¹⁶

Following AMACOM format, the book has bulleted lists, many examples, and is very easy to read. Seven chapters describe the CANDID approach (compartmentalize the message to create a neutral opening, ask questions based on response, normalize the situation, discuss the details factually and neutrally, incentivize the outcome, disengage).¹⁷ The next half of the book discusses the "advanced course" of reframing ("replacing harmful and judgmental observations with neutral and factual ones")¹⁸ response scenarios, phrases you shouldn't use, like "I hate to tell you this," and feedback. The last section includes case studies. Very useful, interesting, practical, and fast reading. Highly recommended.

I'm not sure what reader hasn't worked with or heard of someone whose position in an organization is simply mindboggling. They have smarts, the right degrees, maybe a number of excellent publications, but they have no skill in interacting with others. They might be fine holed up in an office, but when they need to communicate in any form, the result is dismal. Bob Wall, in both *Working Relationships: the Simple Truth about Getting Along with Friends and Foes at Work*¹⁹ and *Working Relationships: Using Emotional Intelligence to Enhance Your Effectiveness with Others*²⁰ addresses this. The best introduction to these works comes from the author himself:

In today's complex workplace, it takes more than sheer brainpower and training to succeed in high-IQ professions, in jobs requiring people to do complex work, and in leadership. To stand out from a workforce of highly intelligent and trained people, you must study and develop mastery of the personal and social characteristics and competencies associated with emotional intelligence.²¹

Wall uses Peter Salovey and John Mayer's definition of emotional intelligence as "a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's

feelings and emotions to discriminate among them and use this information to guide one's thinking and action."²² He bases his work on Adele B. Lynn's model of emotional intelligence, which includes self-awareness and self-control, empathy, social expertness, personal influence, and mastery of purpose and vision.²³ As is common in these books, there are case studies, bulleted lists, exercises, and very practical advice. Topics of special interest are sections on dealing with various forms of conflict and the chapter titled "When You Are Your Own Worst Enemy." While the books are written so they can be read rapidly, there is much to consider, so take the time to do the exercises, read some of the suggested references, and consider how the book might speak to your work situations. Excellent reading for all.

No matter how practical the subject, it usually helps to have some background in the research aspects of the field to provide the basics and the new frontiers. *New Directions in Interpersonal Communication Research*²⁴ is an excellent resource for those with this level of interest. The chapters are well referenced and detailed, and while not directly applicable to the work environment, they are nonetheless very interesting. Especially recommended are the chapters titled "Hurtful Communication," "Advances in Deception Detection," and "New Technologies and New Directions in Online Relating." Recommended for those with a strong interest in research in communications.

A true knowledge of the world is gained only by conversation.

While not specifically on the subject of formal or workplace communication, Miller's *Conversation* provides a more general, historical view of the art of conversation.²⁵ The text liberally name-drops both the widely known (Goethe, Woolfe, Boswell, Johnson, Socrates) and many who are not as famous, individuals from popular television shows and movies, fiction writers, and modern politicians. In his preface, Miller states, "This work, then, is an extended essay on conversation in Western civilization . . . an informal attempt to clarify a subject, one that includes personal anecdotes."²⁶ This style of writing results in a very readable and enjoyable look at the evolution of conversation from the very early history (the Book of Job, Socrates, the Sumerians) to the instant messaging, e-mail, and t-shirt slogan communication patterns of our day. The book predates Twitter, but one can imagine that technology added to the discussion. Absolutely fascinating, and a must-read for those interested in our communication patterns.

Conversational Style is not going to have direct application in the workplace, but this study of a "microanalysis of audio-taped dinner-table conversation"²⁷ is fascinating and does provide insight into a less formal aspect of our lives that has workplace implications. We do simply converse at work and, author Deborah Tanner writes,

in a heterogeneous society, in which people come into contact with others from more or less different backgrounds, the automatic use of different conversational styles leads everyone far astray. Speakers are judging others and being judged by their ways of talking. . . . People are frequently misjudging others and being misjudged and misunderstood. You try to be nice and are judged pushy; you try to be considerate and are judged cold.²⁸

The topic is complex but interesting, and the analysis of the conversation makes it well worth taking the time to check out his book. Tannen also has a video *That's Not What I Meant!*²⁹ that is interesting viewing. If there is a need or interest, it might be worthwhile to review what other DVDs are available on the topic of communication and take some time to review those of interest. *Gender and Communication*³⁰ and *The Art of Listening*³¹ are just a few examples of titles that might be informative and serve as discussion starters.

There are a number of books on gender and communication. An overall look is the *Sage Handbook of Gender and Communication* that covers a broad range of subjects including the evolution of the field, organizational issues, media, and cultural perspectives.³² Very well researched, this interesting book is for the serious student of the subject.

For another scholarly work that has more direct application, take a look at *Gender and Communication at Work*.³³ Each of the twenty chapters includes consistent sections: review of the current research, conclusions, and references. In addition, chapters have sections particular to the topic in question. Topics include employment interviews, interpersonal communication, promotion, groups, harassment, electronic communication, emotion at work, and some case studies. While scholarly, the book will be useful for the manager. If time is an issue, at least read the review of research and recommendation sections of pertinent chapters.

If you've ever felt that you were speaking at cross purposes with someone, that you meant one thing and someone took it in a completely different meaning, you are in good company. There many factors that influence how we interpret communication, and a basic understanding of some of these factors can help, to some extent, this problem. *Gendered Talk at Work* looks at the role of gender in the communication jungle.³⁴ The best summary of the book is given by the author, "This book explores the ways in which gender contributes to the interpretation of meaning in workplace interaction, and examines how women and men negotiate their gender identities as well as their professional roles in everyday workplace talk."³⁵ The book summarizes the research on a number of pertinent areas in the field in an understandable manner. Styles of speech, working with others, humor, and conflict are a few of the

subjects discussed. Numerous dialogues are cited in the book and discussed to clearly illustrate points. There are a few charts and illustrative cartoons. More than forty years after the feminist movement, there are still concerns in the workplace. Holmes quotes a researcher as saying, “for the most part, workplace organizations operate on masculine assumptions and approaches to life and women are expected to adjust to this male model if they are to be successful in the workplace.”³⁶ While this may not be as prevalent in the library field, the book offers interesting and important insight for all concerned with workplace communication. A well researched book, it is also very readable and well a worthwhile read for all.

In addition to gender issues in communication, one must consider the very important issue of cultural differences. There are a number of books and videos that can help with this topic, as well as workshops offered on many campuses. Bowe and Martin’s *Communication Across Cultures* uses a number of charts, examples, summaries of research, and excellent chapter reviews with summaries and focus questions to clearly illustrate the topic.³⁷ Chapters look at the role of context in communication, politeness, the role of terminology of names, and successful intercultural communication. The chapter on how to address people is especially useful. We are now global, and some understanding of these topics is critical. Bowe and Martin teach much in an interesting book.

Gurdham’s *Communication across Cultures at Work* is a textbook with exercises and questions at the end of each chapter.³⁸ However, studying this book can be recommended for the wealth of information on this important topic. While European in focus, the discussion of communication styles, culture and behavior, and communicating interculturally provide some fascinating insights. Scan it and stop for those sections of special interest.

Wang and Frank³⁹ provide a good, short overview of the cross-cultural communication, including whether individuals from certain cultures are comfortable asking for help, nonverbal communication differences, and a bulleted list of pertinent suggestions for better interactions. Garner presents an important look at reference interactions with Asian students with very concrete examples and recommendations and an extensive bibliography.⁴⁰ Li Zhang discusses ways to understand international students from East Asia.⁴¹ Osa, Nyana, and Ogbaa present a useful set of guidelines and tips for better communication with a link to the checklist hosted at the ALA website.⁴² Finally, *The Communication of Leadership* is an analysis of the verbal and non-verbal communication styles of six non-Western leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro, Ayatollah Khomeini, Mahathir Muhammad, and Lee Kuan Yew.⁴³ This is definitely not essential for the manager, but an interesting look at culture and communication.

Politeness is essential for conversation, and conversation is one of the great pleasures of life.

One last aspect to consider is the role of the new technologies in our communication landscape. Whether the issue is using the new technologies to communicate with our users or communicating with the information technology experts who help manage these options, informed communication is necessary. While the focus of Johansen and Gillard’s article⁴⁴ is the Information Resources Project Manager (IRPM), the discussion of verbal and environmental (place, people involved, timing barriers to communication) is very important. Many times the message sent is not the message received, and this interesting article provides very useful insight. They summarize their article with “Identical *information* always provokes different meanings in us because our interests, motivation, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, sense of relevance, etc. are always personal and changing—almost minute by minute.”⁴⁵ Because the primary reason for failure of information systems projects is wrongly defining customer requirements, it is important that the IRPM’s proactively destroy or avoid communications barriers that would impede the creation of information systems that best meet client needs. This brief theoretical review of communications barriers serves as a checklist for the IRPM whose attention must be directed more and more heavily to audience and the very humanness of communications. Very worthwhile reading.

RUSA MARS published an interesting review of the literature on communication with IT and the results of a survey of 151 colleges and universities.⁴⁶ There were specific questions for IT professions, and others for the librarians, but the questions mirrored each other. They conclude “that tensions exist between IT staff and reference librarians on campuses of various sizes. The results also provide evidence that the two groups do seek better communication and ways of working effectively together.”⁴⁷ There are a number of articles, both scholarly and popular on Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, chat, and whatever new technologies have arisen since the writing of this column. A quick search in the professional or the popular search options can help bring up the latest on the rapidly changing topic. One example is the article by Miller and Jensen that provides pithy insight into the use of Facebook.⁴⁸ Walter and Mediavilla write a thought-provoking look at online reference and the disconnect between librarians and teens.⁴⁹ Very interesting articles that might make us all step back for a second before we rush headlong into new technologies without some research and instructional planning.

Are we heading toward a future where an increasing number of people engage in rambling soliloquies? Are the ways we don’t converse likely to increase?

It may be a biased opinion, but after almost thirty years in the profession, it seems highly unlikely that librarians are part of the groups that shout out unsubstantiated claims, or make nonsensical leaps from unverified blog

postings, or make groundless rants about public policy. However, we do communicate as a regular part of our lives, whether one-on-one to staff or patrons, in meetings, or via electronic formats. And communication is a major part of our daily workplace lives that can be rewarding and constructive but can also be quite the opposite. Attention to this routine aspect of our lives can have dramatic effects on those around us and on the success of our endeavors. Communication is that critical. Johansen and Gillard conclude their article that “communication is a skill, and like any other skill it must be developed over time through education and practice. The successful project manager will see an organization change and evolve as the result of strong insightful communication practice.”⁵⁰ Almost any position could be substituted for project manager—reference librarian, instruction librarian, cataloger, acquisitions librarian, administrator. The role of understandable, fair, calm, consistent communication is critical to all levels of employees. Added to the basic skills of communication are the issues of the increasingly diverse population, the pervasive growth of technology in our lives, and the increase in job requirements and pressures due to the decreased resources and increased demands. All of these are stressors that can diminish our communication skills at the same time they need to improve. The authors reviewed here can provide the resources for understanding these issues, improving our communication skills, and for helping librarianship to continue to be a profession of high-quality communicative skills.

Headings are taken from the book Conversation by Stephen Miller.

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