

A LINE ON LIFE

8/11/96

The Depths of Communication

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Sometimes, when we don't feel comfortable talking about something, we don't discuss it openly. We hint at it, hedge, but rarely get to the point. As demonstrated by the following story (source unknown), this vague communication can lead to problems.

A lady was rather old-fashioned, delicate and elegant, especially in her language. She and her husband were planning a week's vacation in Florida, so she wrote to a particular campground and asked for a reservation.

She wanted to make sure the campground was fully equipped, but didn't quite know how to ask about the toilet facilities. She just couldn't bring herself to write the word "toilet" in her letter. After much deliberation, she finally came up with the old-fashioned term "bathroom commode". But, when she wrote that down, she still thought she was being too forward. So she started all over again, rewrote the entire letter and referred to the bathroom commode merely as the B.C. "Does the campground have its own B.C.?" is what she actually wrote.

Well, the campground owner wasn't old-fashioned at all. When he got the letter, he just couldn't figure out what the woman meant. That "B.C." business really stumped him. After worrying about it for a while, he showed the letter to several campers, but they couldn't imagine what the lady meant either. The campground leader finally came to the conclusion that the lady must be asking about the location of the local Baptist Church. He sat down and wrote the following reply:

"Dear Madam, I regret very much the delay in answering your letter. Now I take the pleasure to inform you that a B.C. is located nine miles north of the campground, and it is capable of seating 250 people at one time. I admit that it's quite a distance away if you are in the habit of going regularly, but no doubt you will be pleased to know that a great number of people take their lunches along and make a day of it. They usually arrive early and stay late.

"The last time my wife and I went was six years ago. It was so crowded; we had to stand up the whole time we were there. It may interest you to know that right now, there is a supper planned to raise money to buy more seats. They're going to hold it in the basement of the B.C.

"I would like to say it pains me very much not to be able to go more regularly, but it is surely no lack of desire on my part. As we grow older, it seems to be more of an effort, particularly in cold weather.

"If you do decide to come down to our campground, perhaps I could go with you the first time you go, sit with you, and introduce you to all the other folks. Remember, this is a friendly community."

These vague or incomplete communications are frequently found in the hilarious plots of situation comedies on television. However, when they happen in real life, they rarely seem funny at all — until long afterwards. How can the problem be resolved?

From the viewpoint of campground owner, the fault seems to lie with the old-fashioned lady. In her letter, she did not clearly state what she meant. However, he also was vague in his reply. If he had said, "*Baptist Church*," instead of also using "*B.C.*," it would have ended the lady's confusion upon receiving his reply. (However, the situation would have lost most of its humor.)

Another source of error in communication is **noise** — anything between a sender and a receiver that distorts a message. It can be sounds, like many people talking at once in a crowded room or static on a radio. However, it is not limited to sounds. "*Snow*" on a television screen is also noise. If you were sending smoke signals, wind would be a source of noise.

Regardless of the source of the problem, communication can be made more effective by sending less ambiguous messages. (Just because you understand what you're saying does not necessarily mean that whoever is listening also understands.) Unless your listener has a similar background of experience, do not use abbreviations or jargon. **Jargon** is language that has special meanings in relatively limited fields. For example, "*I have 3 gig of RAM and 500 gig on the HD of my iMac.*" If you are not familiar with computers, that sentence will have little meaning for you.

The sender of the message can also reduce the use of pronouns or make the meaning of the pronouns clear. For example, "*Bill and Bob were walking down the street. He insulted him, then he hit him, giving him a bloody nose.*" Who did the insulting? Who did the hitting?

Feedback is an effective method to find out if what you heard is what the other person meant.

As a listener, you can improve communication by giving feedback. **Feedback** is repeating the message you think you have heard in your own words. With the previous example, as a listener, you could reply, "*Are you saying that Bill insulted Bob, so Bob hit Bill?*" Whether the sender agrees with your feedback or not, the message will be clearer. "*No, Bob insulted Bill, then he hit him.*" More feedback is needed, since you know who did the insulting but are not sure of who did the hitting. "*Bob both insulted and hit Bill?*"

To this feedback, you might receive a reply like, "*Yeh, that's what I told you the first time.*" (At least now you will understand what he meant.)

Don't just assume you know what is meant by the message or merely curse the message sender for being unclear. You can avoid many communication problems by providing repeated feedback. Otherwise, you are likely to find yourself in the depths of *miscommunication*.