



I Don't Think You Get My Point: **The 5 Hurdles to Effective Communication**

From a blog by David Pollard

"The biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred."

-- George Bernard Shaw

If Shaw is right, what can we do about it? We spend over half of our working life, and a considerable portion of all our waking hours, engaged in some form or another of communication, yet for all our practice most of us seem to be very poor at it. The problem, I think, is that it's hard to learn from your mistakes when you don't know you're making them.

I've often watched and listened to someone try valiantly to make some critical point about which they are both passionate and informed, and then when I talk with their audience immediately afterwards I've discovered that almost no one got it. I've been equally astonished at some of the comments and e-mails my weblog articles have provoked that indicate the reader has not understood in the least the point I was trying to make.

But I'm less stressed and self-critical about that than I used to be, because I've learned that the miscommunication often wasn't my (or anyone's) fault. I've come to appreciate that there are five major hurdles to effective communication, and you have to vault them *all* or your communication will fail. Here they are:

1. **Your point must be explainable using language.** This might seem obvious, but most of our important life learnings are *not* taught through language. We learn for the most part by *doing* (and by making mistakes), not by listening to someone tell us something. Try to explain to someone (or write a manual to explain) how to ride a bicycle. Try to describe the difference in taste (or smell!) between a Merlot and a Shiraz. Much of our knowledge is instinctive, and much of what we learn is subconscious or unconscious. The comprehension 'bandwidth' of oral and written language is surprisingly narrow, and language is much better at conveying some things than others. Language itself is an artificial construct, a feeble model to try to depict reality abstractly. What's worse, we may have a shared vocabulary of no more than a few hundred words with our audience, and their *subjective connotation* of many of these shared words may be completely different from ours. I once listened to two people on a train argue vociferously for an hour over what strategy their organization should pursue, only to discover that they had a completely different idea of what the word 'strategy' meant. Why should we be so surprised at

language's limitations? There are a variety of devices that can be used to push the idea you want to communicate across the line from incomprehensible to comprehensible -- most notably metaphors, analogies, stories and conversations (iterative communications) -- but we would be best to realize that there are many explanations and teachings that language is just not equipped to do. When we love to teach, it is hard to acknowledge how much cannot be taught with language. Maslow said "When your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail." (That's a metaphor: did it help you understand this hurdle?) If your point is not explainable using language, take your audience out of the lecture hall and into the laboratory and *show* them instead.

2. **You must be able to articulate your point clearly and persuasively.** If you've vaulted the first hurdle, this next one is just as tough. There are two parts to it -- clarity (rational appreciation) and persuasiveness (emotional appreciation). Although debates are supposedly models of persuasiveness, their focus is really on clarity. Clarity is tough enough to do, which is why the aforementioned techniques like stories and conversations and metaphors are so vital. Persuasiveness is a much subtler achievement, one that requires both personal conviction and an understanding of and empathy for the audience. I don't know whether this is a lost art, or if we have just given up trying. I see a lot of sermonizing (in churches, on talk radio and in the editorial pages) but no real *persuasion* -- sermonizers preach only to the choir, and change no one's mind. They only reassure. True persuasion takes an appreciation of why the audience doesn't agree with you now. It involves tact, diplomacy, consensus-seeking, compromise, and creative thinking. Such skills tax our patience and attention span. It is usually easier to use power and deceit than persuasion to get what you want. So it's not surprising that those who want to change people's minds are more preoccupied with getting power and perpetrating myths than with appreciating other perspectives and thinking through how to win people over in a non-coercive and non-manipulative way. The only way over these hurdles is through a ton of research (face to face as well as online), openness, attention skills, empathy and an enormous amount of practice.
3. **Your audience must be ready to listen.** If your audience is ignorant of the lessons of history, or complacent about the state of the world, trying to teach them about the importance of separation of church and state, or the steps they need to take to reduce their contribution to global warming, is like trying to teach calculus to pre-schoolers. Your audience needs an appropriate intellectual and conceptual foundation, and an informed sense of what is urgent and what is important, before they will be ready to listen. Daniel Dennett says "On any important topic, we tend to have a rough idea of what we believe to be true, and when someone provides the words we want to hear, we tend to fall for it, no matter how shoddy the arguments". If your audience doesn't think they need what you're selling, they probably won't buy. Until your audience is ready for what you have to tell them, you're wasting your time, and theirs. There's only one thing you can do to overcome this hurdle -- pick (and invite) your audience carefully.

4. **Your audience must be listening.** They're probably not. They're thinking about the cutie they met last night or sitting next to them, or what they have to do next, or what they'd rather be doing now than listening to you. They may be multi-tasking. They're almost certainly daydreaming. So you need to get their attention. To do that you need to distract them from all their other distractions. The best way to do that is not by impressing them with the importance or urgency or cleverness of what you have to say. It's to *entertain* them. The word 'entertain' means literally to hold attention. That means start, and pepper what you're saying, with interesting stories, amusing anecdotes or jokes, and facts. That means talking in an animated manner. That means relating to the audience in a personal way that keeps them engaged -- first names, eye contact, relating something about them. That means giving them something. That means paying attention to the audience, understanding why they're not listening (perhaps because their sidebar conversation is more interesting, urgent or important to them), and drawing them gently but powerfully back in. That *doesn't* mean criticizing them for not paying attention -- that's blaming them for your inability to keep their interest. How many of us are good at doing all this? I don't see many hands. We need to go back to school on this, and learn how to be better presenters (even if we're only 'presenting' to one person) -- not just more prepared and articulate, more entertaining as well.
5. **Your audience must be able to understand your point from their frame of reference.** This is not the same as point 3. Even if they're ready to listen, they're coming to whatever you're talking about from a very different place, and their brains, like yours, is wired by history of personal experience. Lakoff says: "Frames trump facts. All of our concepts are organized into conceptual structures called frames (which may include images and metaphors) and all words are defined relative to those frames. Conventional frames are pretty much fixed in the neural structures of our brains. In order for a fact to be comprehended, it must fit the relevant frames." That means even if they're ready for your message, even if they need to hear what you have to say, you still need to say it in a way they can understand. How do you do that? Spend lots of time talking with people whose frames are very different from yours, and practice understanding their frames and explaining things in their context. And rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.

All of this isn't as hard as it might sound. We have an enormous number of opportunities to practice vaulting each of these hurdles every day. Mostly, we just need to pay better attention, be more conscious of what we're doing wrong, and work on all those bad communication habits we've picked up. And these five hurdles apply as much to written communications as oral ones. As I worked through this list, I cringed at how much work I have to do at improving my own communications. So I'm guessing it must be a pretty good list.

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