

## **Communicating in Society with People who are Difficult**

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### **Abstract**

Communication everywhere and especially in society is imperative and Biblical because its origin can be traced to God. At times it is easy and at other times complex, with easy going people or with people who are difficult. This paper focuses on communication in terms of what it means, the purposes for it in society, the meaning of difficult people and the strategies to engage in communicating with such people. The paper concludes with the point that the purpose (s) which draws people together in any society should be paramount in their minds and motivate them to overcome all obstacles including those relating to the difficult people in the society.

### **Introduction**

'And God said...!' (Gen. 1: 1- 3) is the origin of humanity and of human communication. Through what God said, humanity and all other things came to be and human beings, having been made in the image and likeness of God, communicate like God! People must come together in groups other than family affiliations in order to exist. Such coming together makes communication an imperative. The coming together is to enable the achievement of some purposes that without communication are not possible. The type of communication so implied is interpersonal like that which God Himself initiated in these instances: He talks to human beings like Adam and Eve, the first human creatures: "The Lord God called to the man: Where are you?" (Gen. 3: 9) and a whole dialogue follows. In a similar way he talks to Cain

“Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen. 4: 9). (N A, 2005)

Generally, the communication which must take place among humans should be managed in such an efficient manner that it remains an asset to society. The reality is that while people may think that they are expert communicators simply because they can speak and write, in fact many are not. In every society, among the people it embodies are those with whom it is not easy to communicate even though their views and services are required. As people of God, we must find ways to communicate with such people for the good of our society and the benefit of humanity.

Therefore, this paper examines the definition of communication and of people who are difficult, the purposes of societal communication and how to communicate with the people who are difficult in society.

## **2. Communication defined**

Many definitions of communication exist because many scholars have shown concern on the concept since its inception in ancient Greece. One of its definitions described by the Encyclopaedia Britannica is:

Communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its Environment that another mind is influenced and in that other mind an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind and is caused in part by that experience (Richard, 2009, p. 5).

This definition is apt and calls to mind the following implications:

- Communication is a synergy.
- Communication influences.
- Communication is an experience.

In addition, “communication is said to be the life blood of organisations” (Heller & Hindle, 1998, p. 18). The picture of blood in this immediate definition denotes the true essence of communication because no society can do without it since organisations are embedded in society. So, rather than ask why we communicate, we should be seeking the ways to improve our

communication. In fact, it has been estimated that people spend more time communicating than they spend on other activities of life. Communication takes place in small and large organisations, and at many levels of society, from the simplest interpersonal and small group exchanges among friends and family to organisational communication and mass communication as experienced in public speeches, places of worship, magazines and news broadcast.

### **3. The Difficult People in Society**

Difficult people are those people with trying personalities in our homes, offices and everywhere. What makes them difficult may be an undisputed character flaw, in which they may either be sycophantic or self centred or perpetually gloomy. Simply put, they are people who easily get on others' nerves. Lampton (n.d.) calls difficult people crank pots and says they are the people who would not know a smiley face if they saw one, would never be optimistic nor see things from the perspective of others easily.

Indeed, there are people who are identified as difficult by their nature. However, once in a while, anyone may become difficult depending on the prevailing situation. Therefore, Donadio (2003) is right to mention that although we don't look forward to dealing with a difficult person, inevitably a time comes when one has to deal with such people.

### **4. The Purposes of Societal Communication**

In our societies, communication can serve a number of purposes including:

*To share information:* People communicate to share the knowledge that facilitates the realisation of their societal objectives and responsibilities; such knowledge is expected to be objective which means truthful and unbiased. To ensure a free flow of communication in this regard, heads of organisations are encouraged to ensure that communication channels are open from top to bottom and bottom to top as well as horizontally

(Osasona & Onjewu, 2003).

*To express feelings:* People in society also communicate in order to express their feelings about things, themselves and others as well as policies and ideas as they pertain to the functioning of the organisation. Also called affective communication, it is what contributes to the formation of self concept - what one thinks of oneself. One's concept of one's self is very important to how successful one is in life generally and how one relates to others in an organisation.

*To communicate imagination:* This refers to the process through which invented situations are shared for the growth of the society. We should realise that the communication in organisations is not and cannot only be on serious issues or formal matters. There is always in addition to such, jokes, stories, day dreams and make-believes that people invent and circulate. These help to cushion the effect of the pressure of the work and hence influence production, at times positively and at other times negatively (Langs, 1993).

*To persuade:* This is the communicative act which influences the beliefs or actions of others because in society, people need to influence others and vice versa. Persuasive communication is useful in carrying everyone along for the achievement of set goals or objectives.

*To establish and maintain social affiliations:* The type of communication which serves this purpose is, according to Johannesen (1990), called ritualistic communication. It takes the form of greetings, small talk, leave-taking, teasing and joking. For instance, in society, it is expected that we use polite expressions such as "May I please ...", "Yes, you may ...", "Thank you", "You are welcome", "May I be excused", and "Pardon me". People are also expected to introduce others gracefully, use telephone etiquette, demonstrate table manners and show interest in what others are saying. Furthermore, in group discussions, participants are expected to share leadership roles, meet the emotional needs of other group members, and so on.

## 5. Communicating with Difficult People

No one ever looks forward to dealing with a difficult person, whether it is a family member or not. But inevitably, problems arise and at some time, it will be your turn to address them. It is not only important that we deal with people in difficult situations, but we need to learn how to deal with people in general remembering the Bible injunction to be patient with others [1 Pet 2:20]. There are some common mistakes people make when dealing with difficult people, whereas, a few simple actions can ease the situation.

The first step is to identify what type of person you're working with and the rationale behind their actions. Understand that you might need to communicate differently with various types of people. The quiet person, for example, might need some advance warning about your meeting and some prompting in order to share ideas. The complainer wants some assurance that his or her voice will be heard and that you'll actually take some action in response.

All people should receive some kind of training in communication skills and it is helpful to keep a 'tool box' of techniques one can draw from to address difficult situations. In an organisation, instead of devising elaborate avoidance scenes, professional managers, as many of us in our various capacities are, can change their dynamics with such people by following these steps:

- *Step back from the situation.* Often, people think they need a quick comeback when faced with a difficult situation, or they make assumptions about the problem at hand. Take the time to step back and try to get the other person talking. Find out what their style of communication is and try to accommodate it. People forget that the person they're facing isn't exactly like them, so take the time to find out as much as you can before you address the problem.
- *If you can, practice your response.* When situations don't have to be dealt with on the spot, take the time to practice your response. Try to think like the other person. It's helpful to say

things out loud so you hear what you could be saying to the other person. Anticipate their responses and adjust your delivery. Practice helps us make the mistakes beforehand and reduce misinterpretation once we are face to face.

- *Stay in the "adult" mode.* There are three modes of communication - child, parent and adult. When dealing with conflict, it's important to stay in the adult mode. Don't act like a parent and be judgmental or a child and be defensive. Accept any responsibility that may be yours. Realize that it's OK to agree to disagree. Ultimately, if tempers begin to flare, realize that you may need to take a break and get back together later on.
- *Try to find an agreement.* It is always helpful to find some agreement to the problem at hand; even if it's only that the problem exists. Coming to an agreement conveys understanding and works to move the conversation along. It can also be beneficial to speak in positive terms, by telling the person what you can do as opposed to what you can't do.
- *Communicate and explore alternatives.* Never assume you can't help someone. By thinking about alternatives and offering suggestions about what you can do, you keep the conversation on a positive plane. You can also ask the person, "What would you like me to do?" Not only could you help solve their problem, but you might also find that what they want is less than you imagined.
- *Establish some boundaries for yourself.* Know what you are going to be able to put up with. Sometimes you might want to communicate those boundaries; sometimes you may not.
- *Speak in private.* If you're dealing with a difficult issue, speak with the person in private. Remember the adage: Praise in public, criticize in private.
- *Use more "I" language than "you" language.* "You" language can make a person become defensive. Instead of saying "you should" or "you must," try "I was expecting" or "I encourage you to..."

- *Don't take things personally.* It's hard not to, but it's not necessarily about you. You need to separate yourself from the issue. People often don't realize the reason their co-worker is upset does not have anything to do with them.
- *Find agreement.* See if you can find any agreement at all, or at least acknowledge that you understand the person's perspective. Say, "I can see your point." In a worst-case scenario, agree to disagree: "Evidently we both have different opinions on this, and that's OK."
- *Focus on what you can do.* Tell the person what you can do, not what you can't do, about their request or complaint.
- *Rehearse.* Rehearse if you need to before communicating with a difficult person.
- *Keep your cool.* If one or both parties start to get upset, suggest resuming the conversation in twenty minutes after you calm down and collect your thoughts.
- *Keep the lines of communication open.* Remember that seventy to ninety percent of the message is screened by the receiver. For example, if you tell someone you want to meet biweekly, he or she might interpret that to be either twice a week or every other week. Ask questions, listen, repeat the problem/solution and restate or rephrase your message. Checking for understanding is a great way to make sure the message you sent is the same message they received. Engage the person you are speaking with in the process.

When dealing with a difficult person, we forget there are all these choices we have. Slow the whole process down to give yourself some ability to think before you respond (Donadio, 2003).

## 6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that communication is not often as easy as it sometimes seems. In fact, it is dynamic and situational. Therefore,

the people involved in it must constantly devise the means of making it as successful as possible. Like in other things, human beings can seek God's grace to know and to explore the strategies for communicating with difficult people in society. Hopefully, these strategies should work, if we believe in them and engage them when necessary and conscientiously. The bottom line is, we must not allow any obstacle come in the way of our communication in order to achieve the set goals of our society, bearing in mind God's will for us to love and share with all people.

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