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Communication Insanity by Bob Manna & Matt Manna • D5EABFB2(R06)

“Communication is what the mind makes out of the messages it receives thru the senses. Any other belief is an exercise in communication insanity.”

The quantity of poor communication flowing from organizations is shocking. Examples include presentations laced with attention destroying bullet slides, literature overwhelmingly populated with stand alone facts, and trade show booths emulating a department store display window replete with human manikins.

These examples are shocking for two reasons. First, they’re used repeatedly even though they don’t work. Second, they demonstrate a total ignorance of what communication is and how it works.

Communication is what the mind makes out of the messages received through the senses. This activity is unyielding and unconnected to the intention’s of the sender. In fact, sender intention’s almost always lack the compulsory ingredient of effective communication — appeal to emotion.

Emotion is potential behavior that exists in the mind. Emotion is evoked by *some* of the messages that come through the senses. Messages that evoke emotions are communication. Messages that do not evoke emotions are noise. This process occurs inside the mind and is not, in any way, respectful of sender intention(s). Here are some examples...

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When driving while talking with a companion, it's your emotional self that continuously monitors the traffic around you, and signals you to stop talking and pay attention when the situation demands deliberate concentration.

You're probably not aware that you stop talking when exercising intense concentration. In all probability your companion, experiencing the same emotion as you, will also stop talking. Steering clear of an automobile accident is as much about emotion as it is about turning a wheel and stepping on a pedal.

Think back to the last "car wreck" of a presentation you attended. The chances are many to one that the presentation was laden with bullet slides. What is your first response to such a presentation? Do you serenely get on with the business of reading and evaluating each bullet, or are you overcome with remembrances of the many less than enthusiastic moments spent while a presenter plodded one by one through a seemingly never ending list of bullets?

Even if you suppressed your initial feeling of dismay, and began reading each bullet, another feeling will soon take hold. Namely the feeling of frustration as the presenter begins discussing the bullet you read moments before. Your frustration is naturally directed at the presenter whose conduct indicates either indifference to, or ignorance of, the fact that audience members read considerably faster than presenters speak.

The relevant, and sad, point to be made here is that truly great bullet slide material is incapable of changing the negative feelings inherent to a bullet slide presentation. That's because all communication is evaluated by our emotional self before our logical self. This fact is put most succinctly and convincingly by award-winning neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, "The human mind is not a thinking machine, it is a feeling machine that thinks."

Assume it's 2:00 AM and foggy. You're walking alone to your car located at the far end of a dimly lit, almost empty, parking garage. Suddenly you hear an unfamiliar and unexpected noise. What do you do first? Do you serenely decide to survey the environment, looking to collect data for analysis of the situation, or do you get a chill down your spine?

Let's change the environment from a parking garage to a jungle. You're walking through a jungle when you become aware of a rustling in the brush beside you. Is that rustling the wind or a predator? What do your emotions tell you to do? If you run, you may be wrong, but you will survive. If you ignore your emotions and decide it's the wind and you're wrong, you're lunch.

Be it jungle or garage your response to an unknown sound is exactly the same, even though each of those environments is vastly different. The reason your response is the same is because of emotion. Emotion initiates and dominates almost all communication.

Why then, with such abundant evidence, do communicators continue to do the wrong thing? Such behavior is reminiscent of Albert Einstein's famous definition, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Consider the case of sales literature dominated by stand-alone claims and facts. If claims and facts, standing alone, could convince a prospect to buy, the seller would need only to send prospects a list of facts and wait for orders. Everyone knows that doesn't work, but materials continue to be created and distributed in a like manner.

Almost everyone has heard the saying, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." And yet, trade show literature is replete with phrases like, "The Superior Solution For..." The only response that phrase brings about is a judgement of being the same as all other claimants of "Superior Solutions." Can there be a worse first impression than the judgement of being the same as others?

Such a judgement is not only a terrible first impression, it's very likely the last impression ever to be made. Indeed the saying — "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." — is wrong. You'll never make any kind of impression if the first one doesn't connect emotionally!

Presentations made for the purpose of recruiting talent usually begin with a "This Is Who We Are" slide. Typically the presentation opens with an illustration of an organization chart and words such as, "XYZ, The Leading Supplier Of..." The obvious intent is to convince recruits they are being presented to by a successful organization. But the claim, "The Leading Supplier Of...", is devoid of anything that connects emotionally.

Now consider a slide depicting enthusiastic people at work with these words, “Successful Organizations Don’t Have To Recruit Talent, They Attract It.”

That message summons a powerful emotion. First, it’s true. Talent flocks to success. Second, a boisterous message stimulates an emotional response which causes an audience to go into challenge mode. That’s exactly what a talented presenter wants, a well kindled audience, intently listening, and thereby providing the presenter with the ideal opportunity to make his or her case. That sort of presentation environment is many times preferable to one in which the audience is sitting in a coma-like stupor thinking, “Here we go again, another ‘Leading Supplier Of’ company.”

There has to be a reason or two as to why flawed communication practices continue. In the simplest case, it is a forlorn admission of not knowing what else to do. That’s regrettable, but honest.

Less honest, but with a very strong emotional appeal, is the “safety in numbers” scheme. The “safety in numbers” scheme is an attempt to hedge against failure’s comeuppance. The idea is that enactment of historically successful procedures will, *first and foremost*, provide cover if the future does not work out as the past suggests. Demographic and psychographic research, case studies, and “big data” analysis all provide this type of cover.

But the very alluring feeling of security provided by a “safety in numbers” scheme is wholly different from success. The fact that a large number of organizations recruit by way of “Leading Supplier Of” claims, and the fact that a large number of presenters use bullet slides, means only that a large number of recruitment programs, and a large number of presenters fail. Is there any real safety in numbers when the numbers represent failure?

The truth is that historical procedures are no more a guarantor of future success than is historical failure prevention against future failure. To say it directly, it’s not what happens in history that creates success, it what happens inside the mind.

The only thing focus groups, case studies, or “big data” research can do is summarize what came before. They cannot foretell what is *possible* in the future. Future possibilities can only be revealed by understanding the human mind as defined in the fields of cognitive neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and biology.

“The human mind is not a thinking machine, it is a feeling machine that thinks.” The application of Antonio Damasio’s pronouncement is universal and obviously applies to more than the examples of communication insanity this brief article provides. It applies wherever and whenever it is desired to have an individual, group, or populace choose a desired action.

There is no mystery involved in creating successful products, making sales, getting votes, raising funds, or motivating a specific intended action within another. The mystery is why so many continue to believe that success can result by employing insane communication practices.



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