

Improving Communications: Awareness and Management of Perceiving Disagreement

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Abstract

Interpersonal communications often fail to communicate the intended message. Language, contextual, and cultural differences between the sender and receiver of the message influence the receipt of the intended message exacerbates a lack of understanding when the message contains inexact words and phrases. The resultant message obtained by the receiver may or may not be in agreement with what the intended message was supposed to convey. This creates a phenomenon named Perceiving Disagreement. When Perceiving Disagreement occurs, actions taken because of the message can conflict with the intended actions expected by the message sender and result in inappropriate performance and behaviors. This paper discusses the phenomenon of Perceiving Disagreement and encourages organizations and individuals to support the use of awareness training and practice of using more exact language and exchanging feedback between the receiver and sender of a message to improve the understanding and effectiveness of all communications. This is particularly important when using intervening media and translators for international communications.

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JEL classification: L20; M12; Z00

1. Introduction

This author has studied and lectured on organizational communications for many years. His goal is to make his audiences aware of the possible words and phrases we often use that fail to communicate the intended idea – concepts, words or phrases which leave it to the listener/receiver to interpret. The diverse behaviors and communication outcomes following receipt of such communications have been observed many times over. This phenomenon has been designated as: “*Perceiving Disagreement.*”¹ Executives and managers from many different countries reported

¹ Rosen, T. (2007), “Perceiving Disagreement: It’s All About Communicating.” In, Trim, P. and Lee, L. (Eds.) (2007), *The International Simulation & Gaming Research Yearbook, Volume 15 Effective Learning from Games and Simulations*, pp.1-9, SAGSET.

similar experiences and have reinforced the power of this phenomenon. Intercultural activities, particularly when using translators, make this phenomenon a critical communications issue.

The resultant cognitive outcome of receiving sensory input from our environment is a perception. “Individuals try to make sense of environmental stimuli by observation, selection, and translation. Perceptual selection is the process of focusing on the stimuli that are important, large, or intense.”¹ The resultant outcome, or perception, is unique to each of us because of our cultural, educational, physical, gender, and other individual differences particular to each of us. Those differences lead each of us to reach varying conclusions from the common stimuli that impact human interaction. A perception is a “physical sensation interpreted in the light of experience.”² It can also be considered as a mental response to a physical stimulus leading to a physical behavior. Words utilized during communications can be such mental responses that must be interpreted.

More simply put, with diverse bases of cognitive functioning and experiences, differences in meaning among us result from a common communication (sensation). Unless there is common understanding of the content of the communication, multiple receivers of a particular sensation create different perceptions on which actions are taken. This situation creates a disconnect among receivers. Staff and organizational groups rely on their executives and managers to interpret and define plans, goals and missions, as formulated by the organization. If this disconnect occurs and each executive or manager has a different interpretation of the goals for a project or budget period, then the organization, as a whole, becomes dysfunctional and groups are acting in an unfocused, chaotic fashion in an honest attempt to achieve the organization’s goals and mission.

This paper expands earlier discussions of Perceiving Disagreement and suggests ways to reduce Perceiving Disagreement and improve organizational communications. There is a continuing need to be more precise in our communications (from sender to receiver) and this discussion emphasizes why the receivers’ resulting perceptions must be brought into a common understanding with the communicators’ to improve the unity and effectiveness of the resulting outcomes and performance in all settings and contexts.

2. Thesis

Dr. Joseph Firestone, CEO of Knowledge Management Consortium International, began his talk, entitled *On Doing Knowledge Management*, by declaring: “There is too little agreement on the nature of Knowledge Management (KM) among researchers and practitioners.”³ Firestone focused on “the

¹ Ivancevich, J., Konopaske, R., and Matteson, M. (2005) *Organizational Behavior and Management*. New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin, p. 111.

² <http://m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary> (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

³ Speech at The George Washington University, February 26, 2008.

significance of this problem for evaluating KM as a discipline and discussed what to do to facilitate evaluation and to create conditions that will encourage self-organization around the most successful concepts of KM.”

The thesis of the present paper is that groups often are unsuccessful in unifying organizational focus, project tasks and objectives, or, as stated by Firestone, an area of work, in this case, Knowledge Management. Misperceptions and misunderstandings of an issue or concept result as a failure to agree on a common perception and understanding required from a single organizational communication. This is a key point at which Perceiving Disagreement occurs. It is the failure to clarify communications and to verify objectively what is being communicated that sends work groups and individuals in different directions to perform different work activities after they hear or read a single message. Why does this occur?

Usually, Perceiving Disagreement occurs upon the initial presentation or transmission of a message. Various work groups within the organization all receive the same message, but incorrectly assume they understand the message as intended by the sender. Furthermore, they all assume that there is a common understanding among individuals, or across groups, of what needs to be done. However, each work group attaches its own perception to that common message. This is known as “Phenomenal Absolutism.” The concept of Phenomenal Absolutism ...

“... refers to one ubiquitous and misleading attribute of naïve conscious experience, namely, that the world is as it appears ... one important aspect of phenomenal absolutism is **the observer’s assumption that all other observers perceive the situation as he does**, and that if they respond differently it is because of some perverse willfulness rather than because they act on different perceptual content.”¹ (Emphasis added)

It is often thought that everyone automatically agrees on what a message means, rather than taking the time to think that chemists, economists, nurses, statisticians, accountants and other members of the work force come from different backgrounds. Each profession has its own way of describing things: its *jargon* – “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group.”² In addition, it is seldom considered that workers interpret – perceive – the original message (sensation) in a different light due to their diversity, and then take what is perceived to be the **only correct** action that is necessary and appropriate. Perceiving Disagreement is the result of that perceptual experience and leads

¹ Segall, M., Campbell, D., and Herskovits, M. (1966). “The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception.” Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, pp. 4-5.

² <http://m-w.com/dictionary/jargon> (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

people and groups toward conflict. We do not all agree on what is communicated, even when it is written down, because we do not verify with the communicator and each other on what the communication means in context.

Inexact language often leaves the communicator (sender) and recipient of a communication (receiver) apart when it comes to agreement on what action succeeds that communication. Different meanings lead to different expectations and different outcomes. Successful communication between parties requires the message sender to be as clear as possible when putting together the message. It also requires that recipients of that message provide feedback to the communicator as to what they think the communication means and whether their meaning matches the intent of the communicator. Many of the words that comprise our everyday vocabulary have no single, exact meaning that is common for all, and these are words on which we may take actions that could potentially affect the many. That action may or may not be appropriate, or uniform, due to the fact that when the recipients of our messages receive them, each receiver's perceptual processes create different meanings resulting in different actions.

Words with multiple meanings are barriers to effective communications. This might not be a revolutionary thought or idea. However, we must begin to question the communicator for more precise explanations of those words or thoughts being expressed in order to establish a common understanding of the message among all the recipients.

The popular literature is replete with statements noting how men and women do not communicate well because of gender differences. Authors John Gray, in "Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships" and Deborah Tannen, in "You Just Don't Understand," two popular books, demonstrate, quite vividly, how the perceiving disagreement phenomenon works, at least at the level of inter-gender communications. It is noted in comments about Tannen's book that she "... brought gender differences of ways of speaking to the forefront of public awareness... Tannen shows why women and men can walk away from the same conversation with completely different impressions of what was said."¹

But, it is not just gender differences that should concern the communicator. In a global economy, we continually experience different cultural values, norms and languages, in addition to age variation, and educational differences, among those we communicate with. In our work places, we are keenly aware of how different occupational groups use jargon specific to their professions. Fisher, in his popular textbook "Communication in Organizations," discusses the use of jargon leading to misunderstandings when each profession is unaware of the effects of their differences on other collaborating professionals.² In research going back to

¹ Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand*, New York:HarperCollins, back cover.

² Fisher, D. (1981). *Communication in Organizations*, West Publishing: St. Paul, MN.

work organizations in the 1930's and 1940's, Korzybski,¹ and also Schwartz and his colleagues,² discussed how, although producing clarity and understanding for those *in* a particular profession, jargon has created a barrier to organization-wide communications. This occurs, for example, in cross-disciplinary communications or even union-labor negotiations. Even within a discipline, Maier and his colleagues showed that hierarchically related jargon – staff to managers, managers to executives, and so on – created different responses to the same concepts and issues.³ Fisher concluded: “These studies show that even when people are located close together on an organization chart, the semantic gap between them can be large.”⁴

Elliot Jaques, in “The Life and Behavior of Living Organisms,” notes that

“... problems of clarity of definition of concepts have been a major difficulty that has stood solidly and steadfastly in the way of developing an effective science-based understanding of human behavior, and the failure had been not only to develop and sustain unequivocal definitions of our technical concepts, but even to attend adequately to the task of doing so.

Nowhere had this problem shown up more starkly than in the failure of linguistics itself to have established an agreed, generally applied, clear, and univocal definition of the term “language.”⁵

Jaques later raised the question John Locke once asked: “How do we know that we understand each other?” Jaques answers that “... we know that we understand each other when we are signaling to each other if our signaling assists us to collaborate in what we assume is a tangibly evident activity observable to all of us.”⁶ Is Jaques saying we have a tendency to fall prey to Phenomenal Absolutism?

¹ Korzybski, A. (1948). *Science and Sanity*, 3rd ed. Lakeville, CT: The International Non-Aristotelian Publishing Company.

² Schwartz, M., H. Stark, and H. Schiffman. Responses of Union and Management Leaders to Emotionally-Toned Industrial Relations Terms,” *Personnel Psychology* 23 (1970); 361-67.

³ Maier, N., L. Hoffman, J. Hooven and W. Read, Superior-Subordinate Communication: A Statistical Research project,” *AMA Research Report* no. 52 New York: American Management Association, 1961, pp. 9-30; N. Maier, L. Hoffman, and W. Read, Superior-Subordinate Communication: The Relative Effects of Managers Who Held Their Subordinates' Positions, *Personnel Psychology*, 16, 1963, pp 1-11.

⁴ Fisher, D. (1981). *Communication in Organizations*, West Publishing: St. Paul, MN. p. 97.

⁵ Jaques, E. (2002). *The Life and Behavior of Living Organisms: A General Theory*. Praeger Publishers: Westport, CT. p. 50.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 64.

Perhaps one of the most famous quotes demonstrating Perceiving Disagreement is from a classic and popular movie: “Cool Hand Luke.”¹ Without going into the whole story, suffice it to say Luke, a prisoner, continues to break prison rules, suffering additional, increasingly adverse punishment. The frustrated warden continues to punish Luke, and eventually tells him and the other prisoners:

“What we’ve got here is failure to communicate. Some men you just can’t reach.”

We need to work hard to ensure messages get through as intended. As Jaques noted, we know we are communicating when there is collaboration in an activity observable to all involved, and there is agreement as to the process and outcomes.

With increased globalization, Jaques’ comments are more critical to understand. Can a communicator using one language be assured the intended message is getting through to the receiver of another nationality as intended? In this context, the message could be influenced not only through words, but voice inflection, cultural mores and body language.

3. The Experience of Perceiving Disagreement

In order to better understand the thesis presented here, one needs to experience the phenomenon of “Perceiving Disagreement.” We all take in the same stimuli or sensations, but do we respond to them in similar ways? To demonstrate this, the author often asks individuals to respond to common phrases in the English language. (It is firmly believed that this learning activity can easily be translated into any language.)

The participant is given a list of statements with highlighted words to respond to, words that have inexact definitions, but indicate a quantity measure. The words are embedded in sentences so that there is a common frame of reference for the respondents. Also, some of the words have more than one connotation (“... the suggesting of a meaning by a word apart from the thing it explicitly names or describes.”).² The words were chosen to demonstrate that in communications, many receivers will apply their cognitive experiences and put many different meanings on the same inexact words. – Perceiving Disagreement.

For example, one word that creates the greatest range of answers is the word *overwhelmingly*. The sentence given is:

The proposal was approved *overwhelmingly*. What percentage of the vote was in favor of the proposal?

The context is that there was a vote and to approve anything by a vote, there must be at least 50% plus 1 vote in its favor. Once the individuals are finished defining the list of given words, the author debriefs the exercise by putting up on a

¹ “Cool Hand Luke” – 1967 – Warner Brothers. (see www.IMDB.com)

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/connotation> (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

blackboard or poster paper the responses for 1 or 2 listed words chosen by himself and the subjects. He then listed the actual responses on the board. Visually, it quickly becomes clear to the participants that there is a wide distribution of responses to that single word. Often the range of percentages offered by a single group of participants to “overwhelmingly” is from 51% to 100%. After 2 or 3 of these words are discussed, Perceiving Disagreement is now real to the participants.

Do we see such disagreement in real life? The answer is yes, especially in elections or legislative work. Several real examples follow.

Figure 1, below, demonstrates one way an Internet news website discussed an **overwhelming** statistic.

Glass ceiling exists, women say
By Lucy Bennett
03/07/2006
From: NEWS.com.au

“The survey, carried out exclusively for NEWS.com.au, found that while an overwhelming number of women (81%) agreed or strongly agreed that a glass ceiling ...”

Figure 1 News Report from Website

The writer, Ms. Bennett, talks about the number 81% as an **overwhelming** statistic. But, we continue with another example from a referendum held in 2005 in the State of California. In Figure 2, below, we are given a headline of a referendum result of an election that is defined as **overwhelming**.

OVERWHELMING VOTE – 2005*

“It was a sobering evening for a man once considered among the most popular politicians in America. The contest represented the biggest test yet of a faltering Schwarzenegger's leadership.”

“Voters *overwhelmingly* defeated Proposition 76, the governor's centerpiece proposal to slow the growth of state spending. Proposition 77, which would have redrawn legislative and congressional districts, was knocked down by a similar margin.”

* (From: AOL News, by Michael Blood, AP, November 9, 2005)

Figure 2 Headline

Mr. Blood does not provide numbers to define what **overwhelming** mean in the context of voting, and the readers are left to interpret what **overwhelming** means to them. Figure 3 presents a copy of the referendum results' website¹ found elsewhere on the Internet.

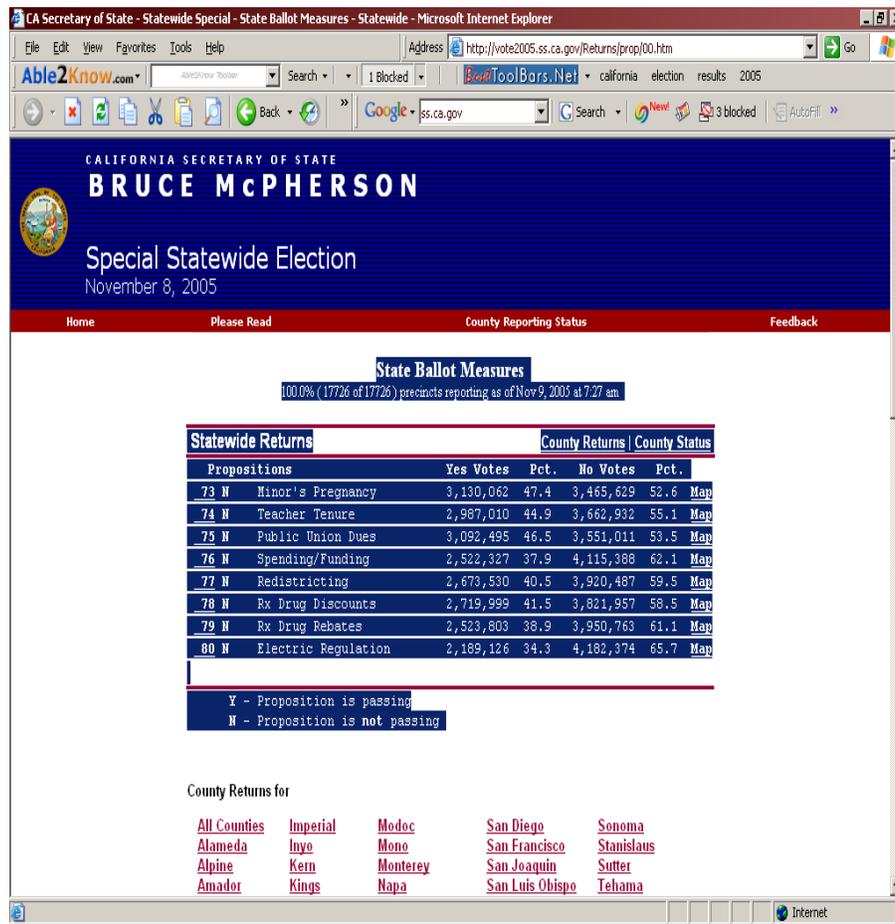


Figure 3 Actual referendum numbers

Readers can now attach meaning to Blood's comments. Table 1, below, focuses in on those **overwhelming** votes against propositions 76 and 77 that were presented above in Figure 3.

¹ Source: CA Secretary of State <http://vote2005.ss.ca.gov>Returns/prop/00.htm>

Focus on Referendum Votes for Propositions 76 and 77 from Figure 3

Table 1

Proposition #	% Votes in Favor	% Votes Against
76	37.9%	62.1%
77	40.5%	59.5%

When we look back at some of the other results in Figure 3, questions should arise as to why if Propositions 76 and 77 had **overwhelming** votes, why was the vote for Proposition 80 not considered **overwhelming**? We see that Proposition 80 had 34.3% of the voters in favor of it, while 65.7% of the voters rejected it, an even greater discrepancy than presented in the propositions in Figure 3 and Table 1.

The visual impact of these numbers cannot be mistaken nor ignored. There is clearly a Perceiving Disagreement situation here regarding how to define an overwhelming vote. We must raise this question: If 59%, or 62%, or 81% is an overwhelming vote, what defines a landslide vote (another often used term) in a referendum or election? Is a landslide greater, less than, or equal to an overwhelming vote? In the United States, we often call an election vote a landslide when 53% or more of the votes are for one person.

In 1980, a newspaper headline read: "Gandhi returned by landslide vote." The article went on to say that:

The people of India have voted Indira Gandhi back into power – less than three years after rejecting her "emergency dictatorship."

When the last of the 196 million votes in national elections were counted, her Congress (Indira) party had won 351 of the 525 contested seats in the lower house of parliament, or Lok Sabha.¹

[NOTE: Ms Gandhi's majority is 66.9%.]

But, a landslide of this magnitude sounds so ... well, **overwhelming!** We have the actual percentages to give us objective and indisputable anchors for discussion. Even the dictionary has trouble conclusively defining landslide in a voting sense. A landslide is defined as "a great majority of votes for one side; an overwhelming victory."² The dictionary seems to equate the terms landslide, overwhelming, and great majority, but not indicating what amount or number that equals.

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/7/newsid_2506000/2506387.stm

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/landslide> (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

In the 2008 presidential election in the United States, the Associated Press reported on the Internet¹: “It was just over a year ago that Obama won the White House in an electoral landslide and Democrats padded their congressional majorities.” The actual results of that election are in Table 2:

United States Presidential Election Results from 2008

Table 2

Candidate	Obama	McCain
# of Electoral Votes	365	173
Percent Electoral Votes	67.8%	32.2%
# of Popular Votes	69,456,897	59,934,814
Percent Popular Votes*	52.9%	45.7%

* Total does not equal 100% due to votes for other candidates.

Was it the popular vote, or was it the electoral vote that was the landslide, or were both?

Other words that often result in Perceiving Disagreement include: *expensive, recently, several* and *many*. In addition, the context in which the communication occurs is also an important moderator of the resulting Perceiving Disagreement. An *expensive* car to someone with a \$30,000 income might actually cost \$15,000. However, if your income is \$150,000 or more, the \$15,000 car is considered cheap or inexpensive. An *expensive* car might be one that costs \$75,000 to a person with a \$150,000 income .

Time is another concept that is of interest to many psychologists. Many variables come into play when we refer to quantities of time. What follows is a real example of time Perceiving Disagreement:

Person A says on Monday: we will meet next Friday. The recipient of that message, Person B, thinks that the immediate upcoming Friday, 5 days from Monday, is the “next” Friday and prepares to meet person A. However, person A meant the second Friday, 12 days from Monday. The first Friday, 5 days from today, to A, is “this” Friday, whereas the second Friday is, therefore, the “next” Friday.

So, the outcome was an unhappy B, who prepared and scheduled the immediate Friday as the “next” Friday. Back and forth email messages and then a phone call were necessary to clarify this Perceiving Disagreement between persons A and B.

Recent publications might be those that came out during the past 6 months, but some people might think publications that are 5 years old are still *recently* published. When we hear of a *recent* database utilized to make a decision, it is

¹ http://news.yahoo.com/s/sp/20091111/ap_on_go_pr_wh/us_obama_ap_poll

important to know specifically when that data was generated. Varying levels of importance and significance are attributed to data that is 2 months old versus data that is 2 years old.

Several, a few and many are words that play off each other. Which word or phrase represents a larger amount? Objectively speaking, how *many* are *several*? With a change of reference or context, an actual number might be one or the other, or even both. *Many* people were waiting in line for the movie. How *many* people were in line? I saw *several* movies during my vacation. How *many* movies did you see? Some might think your viewing of 10 movies last summer as *many*, but avid movie goers might think 10 movies over a 3 month period are just *several*, or just *a few*. The list of these words and terms can go on and on.

Discussion

Employees throughout an organization need to understand and make concerted efforts to avoid the phenomenon of Perceiving Disagreement. Policies, rules, procedures, flow charts, benefits packages, work reports all need to be presented in an objective as possible manner. This can help to avoid, to the greatest extent possible, the undesired consequences of Perceiving Disagreement of those documents on the part of the many stakeholders who will read those documents or listen to a presentation. Subsequent actions based on interpretations of those communications affect many colleagues and organizational stakeholders, those in other organizations, and those in other cultures.

In organizations, people take actions on the outcomes of votes, or qualitative data, or even statements that have no exact meaning. A new policy that passes with a 60% level of support will face a tougher implementation experience than one that passes with a 90% level of support. Similarly, if a customer is told a shipment is due to arrive at her/his warehouse in the *near future* and expects that shipment within 5 working days, there will be certain customer dissatisfaction with your shipping service if the items arrive in 10 days – your concept of the near future. Being told of two different recovery outcomes – by your physician and the attending nurse – is another example of conflict and customer dissatisfaction resulting from Perceiving Disagreement.

There must be common expectations for decisions and actions. Using numbers instead of subjective words to discuss data or metrics is one way to improve bilateral or multilateral communications. Another way is to question the receiver as to what your communication means to her/him. Both the sender and receiver need to have complete understanding and common expectations in order to ensure successful outcomes.

4. Recommendations and Conclusions

Just as new employees are provided orientation activities to become better integrated into the organization, providing new staff with opportunities to understand Perceiving Disagreement strengthens their communications skills and

they become better colleagues and communicators. Such an orientation and training program can reduce the conflicts caused by Perceiving Disagreement and promote better teamwork and collaboration, and improved operational efficiencies.

Imprecise communications can lead to negative outcomes when a common understanding is missing between the sender and the receiver of a message. Using subjective terms in communications, without feedback from the receiver to the sender for verification of the content of the message, can lead to poor coordination and performance, inappropriate follow-up behavior and even serious conflict within an organization. These negative results define the outcomes of Perceiving Disagreement. Awareness of that phenomenon puts us on alert to improve communications strategies.

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