

## **Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication: A Model that Works Across Cultures<sup>i</sup>**

by

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### **Introduction**

When I was twelve years old I was a member of a swim team and considered myself a fairly strong swimmer. But always wanting to improve my strength and skills in swimming, I sometimes would swim in the ocean. In doing that I recall an occasion when I ventured too far into the ocean on a day when the waves were high enough to be over my head and the currents were strong. Once I identified my error, I began to swim toward the shore. However, my return to dry land was difficult as the waves kept both trying to push me under and drag me farther out to sea. I could have easily panicked and drowned, but instead I trusted and relied on the training I had received. The first point was not to allow myself to be overtaken by fear. The second was just too literally consider and focus on one stroke at a time. So when wave after wave would come crashing down on my head, I simply took a breath and swam under the surface, resurfacing again to take another breath and repeated the process until I was safely on shore.

The process of communication can be as dangerous sometimes as swimming too far out into the ocean. People do get into communications that are sometimes far over their heads. And they sometimes drown in an ocean of emotions during the communications. In general, they drown because individuals make the mistake of thinking that because they are able to speak with some alacrity and clarity, they are able to communicate. But just as swimming in the ocean involves having skills and tools to fall back upon when you find yourself in dangerous waters, individuals also need skills and tools to help them get through some of the dangers lurking in the waters of the process of communication.

And what are some of those dangers? One danger is misunderstanding. It is basically common knowledge that most everyday misunderstandings derive from ill delivered communications. That in turn leads to conflict. Each of us is easily able to recall a time, when we have verbally fought with a colleague, or coworker, or a significant friend, due to a communication misunderstanding. And often when the disagreement or argument has concluded, and usually not on the best of terms, neither party has the skills or tools to repair the damage done to the relationship.

Other dangers in the waters of interpersonal communication include such things as poor listening, an inability or refusal to empathize, defensiveness, sarcasm, inappropriate criticism, and the like. The list of dangers in those waters is almost endless and far too many individuals fool themselves into thinking they are quite capable of going through those dangerous waters with the limited skills and tools they have used all their lives. They refuse to acknowledge the complexity of interpersonal communications or the skill needed to have success in that area. So, they often drown in damaged interpersonal relationships: at work; at home; and at play.

One useful skill that helps to simplify the complexities of interpersonal communication is an understanding of a model called The Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication. The five levels in order of interpersonal depth are *ritual*, *extended ritual*, *surface*, *feelings (about self in relation to content)* and *feelings (about us and our relationship)*.

To explore and expand the model and add to the ease of understanding it, the ocean is again used as a metaphor. Picture the first level, *ritual*, as a high flying bird: a sea gull circling far above the water, ducking in and out of low hanging clouds. The *extended ritual*, or the second level of communication in the model, is also above the water. However, it is not quite as high as the birds flying at level one, but rather level two might be described as the top mast of a tall sailing ship. The third level *surface*, is just that: the surface of the water. It is the level on which birds, boats and people float or swim on top of the water. Levels four and five, *feelings*, are below the surface. Level five of course is deeper than level four. However, neither level four or five can be explored, seen, or felt until an individual is willing to take a risk and leave his or her safe place on the surface of the water, and dive headlong underneath. Going beneath the surface anytime, especially for the first time, is akin to the novice scuba diver going underneath the ocean waters. That can be both very scary and very fascinating and a beautiful area of self discovery.

### Understanding the Five Levels

Level One: Ritual. Eric Berne (1964)<sup>ii</sup> introduced the concept of “Rituals” in his best seller about the psychology of human relationships: Games People Play. Berne defines “rituals” as a simple form of social activity. As defined in this model of interpersonal communication, ritual is the most simple form or level of communication. It is a basic level of communication. Though ritual is the starting point for deepening interpersonal relationships, some interpersonal relationships may never go beyond the simple ritual. Consider the following:

Person A is a security guard at a high tech company. He has worked for the company in the same position for three years. Person B is a software engineer who has also worked for the company for three years. For the last three years when B has walked passed A’s station, A has acknowledged B by saying, “good morning, how are you?” B has always replied “fine,” smiled, nodded and walked on. Neither A nor B has ever bothered to extend their communication beyond their ritual.

The example above is a classic level one communication. It is communication that simply allows two people to acknowledge each other as human beings and to acknowledge that each works for the same company. Moreover level one communication allows each participant to feel a sense of safety, security, and well-being. As noted, although level one communication is the foundation for deepening interpersonal relationships, person A and person B may never deepen their communications and continue level one communication for another three years and beyond.

Level Two: Extended Ritual. As the name implies, level two communication is an extension of level one communication. Expanding upon the first example, a level two communication, might sound somewhat like the following:

Person A to B as B approaches A's station: Good morning, how are you?  
 B (nodding and responding with a smile): Fine  
 Person A (as B continues to walk): That's great. Yes, that is great and looks like we're going to have a great day weather-wise.  
 Person B (pausing to respond): Yeah, you probably right about that. Too bad we have to spend it indoors.  
 Person A: Yeah too bad, but have a great day of work.  
 Person B: Thanks, you have one too.

The difference between *ritual* and *extended ritual* is that *extended ritual* unlike *ritual* may change from day to day. As a rule, a ritual does not change. The following demonstrates how A and B's extended ritual may appear a day later:

Person A: Good morning, how are you doing today.  
 Person B: (again nodding and responding with a smile) Not bad.  
 Person A: Good to hear that; and I hope it continues.  
 Person B: Thanks a lot and I hope you are doing all right today.  
 Person A: Oh I'm doing just fine.  
 Person B: Great, see you tomorrow (and B walks on).

While there is more depth to the level of communication in *extended ritual* than in *ritual*, it is nevertheless a very safe level of communication. On those two levels of communication, Person A and Person B can engage each other without fear of emotionally hurting the other. Additionally, on those levels there is no commitment or danger of misinterpreted communication. These two levels enable us to keep a safe distance from others; so safe, that we do not need to know the other person name to communicate on those level. Indeed, level one and two communication can be carried on between complete strangers. And most communications with unfamiliar persons are level one and two communications.

Though level one and two communications are at most very superficial, they are necessary and needed as they do serve as a foundation to build trust and safety in interpersonal relationships. In doing that, they serve to assist individuals to be able to move into the deeper levels of communication.

Level Three: Surface. Along with level two, level three is the level that in a given day individuals operate on the most; especially in their place of work. Level three or *surface* communications involve giving and receiving information; analyzing projects in meetings; problem solving about office procedures; sharing and talking about tasks; sharing information about self and self accomplishments (self disclosure) on a safe level; making statements regarding favorite hobbies or sports teams; talking about cute things your children have done; taking political stands and the like. Again, using the previous examples of Person A and B, a level three communication might be as follows:

Person A to B as B approaches A's station: Good morning, how are you?  
 B (nodding and responding with a smile): Fine.  
 Person A: That's great. By the way we've been saying hi to each other for about three years, and I'm sorry to say, I don't know your name or the area in which you work?  
 Person B while extending his hand to shake A's: Why I'm Jim Robinson and I work in engineering.  
 Person A: Please to meet you Jim. My name is David Mann and of course you already know that I work for security.  
 Jim: Well it is good to finally know the name behind the face I've seen for the past three years. See you tomorrow David.

Notice, however, that Jim and David still do not really know each other. They know the other's name only. And though they have made a personal connection and no doubt feel safer in their relationship, it still has very little if any depth. It is also important to note that although Jim and David reached a level three communication by sharing information (content concerning their names and work areas), they could easily return to a level one or two communication the next day. For example:

David: Good morning Jim how are you doing?  
 Jim: Fine, David, and you?  
 David: Just fine.  
 Jim: Well have a good day (he walks on).

Regressing back to the previous level of communication may happen when one or both parties feel uncomfortable with the new level. In the above example, the only way to keep communication from reverting to a level of less depth would be for either Jim or David or both to keep pressing for more information about the other. Gaining information such as what specific duties the other does for the company; where he lives; is he married; does he have children; and the like will not only continue level three communication, but set the foundation for moving into the deeper levels.

Level Four: Feelings about self (in relation to content). Level four communication is below the level of surface communication and it is a level of risk taking. It occurs when the information provided on level three becomes more personal and has depth. It is more than Jim conveying to David that he works in engineering. It is Jim taking a risk after the relationship has developed between he and David, to let David know of his real feelings concerning the engineering division and his work there. A level four communication might be as follows:

David: Good morning Jim, how are you doing?  
 Jim: Well to be honest Dave, not too good. I feel just awful.  
 David: What's up?  
 Jim: To tell you the truth, I'm am so upset about the way my performance

appraisal went yesterday. I was put down and eaten alive...(pausing and shaking his head) . . . that didn't and still doesn't feel too good. I don't know what to do.

In the above communication, Jim takes the risk to share his true feelings of the moment with David. He also reveals to David that he as has a certain despair as he says "I don't know what to do?." If you were David how would you respond? Do you respond on level four and stay beneath the surface with Jim? Or would you feel so overcome with fear and have the need to come up above the surface for air that you'd give a level three or two response. Before exploring those questions, the fifth level of the communication model is reviewed.

Level Five: Feelings (about us and our relationship). Level five is the deepest of the five levels of communication. It is the level that involves the greatest risks. It is the level of giving and receiving honest feedback; listening to another individual without getting defensive when hard messages are communicated; responding to another's communication in ways that helps the other to clarify his or her message; and reflecting the feelings of the other. In general it is the level of being able to talk to a person or confidant in an honest and straight forward way about your feelings concerning the relationship between the two of you. Continuing the example of the level four communication from where Jim tells David "I don't know what to do," a level five communication might be:

David: Are you asking me what to do Jim?

Jim: I guess in a way I am, but I know you can't tell me. It's something I need to figure out for myself. But thanks for your support. And something else Dave, I'm glad we connected. Even though it's only been for about a couple of months. You're a good person and friend Dave. I'm only sorry we wasted three years.

David: Thanks, for the feedback Jim. I appreciate your saying that. I too value our relationship. As for helping you on this performance appraisal thing, Why don't we have lunch later today and talk some more. I'm not an engineer or an H-R person, but I know that sometimes, just talking things through helps. And I am willing to listen.

In the last example both Jim and David acknowledge the value of their relationship. It is a "here and now" communication in which they consider a number of issues (most unspoken) current in their relationship. Trust, the value of a close friendship, and honest straight forward communication are but a few of the ingredients that hallmark level four and five communications.

Level four and five forms of communication always focus on the "here and now" rather than the "there and then." "There and then" communications focus on things outside of the immediate relationship and are generally more shallow than "here and now" communications. "There and then" communications can readily be found on levels two and three.

## **Successfully Navigating the Levels**

In order to gain the skill of successfully navigating through each of the levels, it is first important to understand and note, there are no wrong levels. Each level has a legitimate and proper function within the communication process. Additionally, we all have at one time or another, depending upon the circumstance, engaged and used all five levels.

Levels one through three are safe and build a foundation for deepening our interpersonal relationships. It is difficult if not virtually impossible to achieve level four and five without first building a solid communication foundation using levels one through three. Moreover, it should come as no surprise that levels one through three are the levels on which individuals feel the most comfort and therefore are used the most.

Additionally, most individuals work hard to avoid level four and five communications, because they know those levels are difficult and require certain skills in order to safely navigate them. They are also often seen as scary and among some individuals and organizations, level four and five communications are given the derogatory labels such as “touchy-feely” or “real soft.” Those labels reinforce the fact that communications on level four and five are not only to be avoided, but they are generally not worth the time and effort spent on them. Through the non-verbal norm of avoidance, organizations as well as families teach people to stay away from level four and five communications. For example, most managers would rather harshly scold an employee who is consistently late for meetings and work (a level three communication), than give that person honest feedback about his or her behavior (a level four or five communication). They would rather do the scolding, because it is easier and the feedback method may lead to unearthing the real reasons for the tardiness. And that in turn might lead to additional level four and five communications.

## **Culture and the Five Levels**

The model of *Five levels of Communication* is also consistent across and within cultures. For example, it is not only mainstream white American culture that discourages the use of or stays away from level four and five communication. Most cultures avoid those levels of communication and few cultures in both their formal and informal socialization processes teach individuals the benefits of level four and five communication. Rather in most cultures, just as in the dominant culture in the United States, these two levels, when and if used are only used sporadically in families or with close or intimate partners.

Understanding and utilizing level four and five communication increases the potential for gain in the area of cross cultural communication. The gain is especially true for organizations that desire to improve cultural relationships throughout all of their organizational levels. Moreover, the gain can be extended to society in general as we use those levels to work on solving the long established difficulties involving racial differences.

The need for advancement in the area of cross cultural communication is never more apparent than today. Current sociological research indicates one of the most salient problems we have in our society today, is that of race relations. Why else would the President of our country establish a national commission on race to look into that issue? Additionally, survey after survey shows there is a polarization of races in this country; especially between the black and white races. That polarization in large part is due to years of miscommunications and misinterpretations of communications by both sides. Real communication, both sides hearing, understanding, and emphasizing with the other, will not occur until trust, cohesion, and openness are established. In order to do that, risks must be taken to go beyond level one through three communications. To date that has not happened and it does not appear there are systems on the horizon to soon bring it about. So as a society, unless we are willing to risk level four and five communications, which often involve taking personal ownership for miscommunications, we may be doomed to grapple with the problem of strained relationships between the races ad nauseam.

### **Effectively Using the Model**

The Five Levels of Communication is indeed a very useful model for understanding the complexities of the process of communication. Through knowledge of it, individuals are able to not only diagnosis the effectiveness or efficacy of communication, but they are able to instantly use the information to make an informed choice about how the communication can proceed. To effectively do that, or use the model, an individual must engage in self assessment. The self assessment begins with the individual asking and answering the following questions:

- At what level of communication do I operate the most?
- Do I operate at safe levels (one through three) all of the time?  
If so, why?
- Do I allow myself to be open to levels four and five? If so, why?  
If not, why not?
- Do I block or interfere with another's level four or five communication by redirecting the communication to content subject matter, telling a joke or being sarcastic?
- Do I scare others away from me by jumping too fast into level four or five communication?

The next step in the assessment process is for the individual to determine whether he or she posses the interpersonal tools to safely navigate through all five levels of the model. Tools such as listening actively, making "I" statements, giving and receiving feedback, being able to appropriately self-disclose, and responding empathetically are all helpful and needed. Moreover, understanding and practicing with a model such as the Johari Window<sup>iii</sup> helps in acquiring the tools. Such practice can readily, and is encouraged to, take place in a T-group. One purpose of the T-group is to help individuals learn to sustain their capacity to communicate at levels four and five without the fear of drowning in a sea of emotion. Additionally, individuals who have never been in a T-

group or do have access to one, can always enlist the aid of close friends and intimate partners to provide feedback about their use of the interpersonal tools.

Based upon the above ongoing assessment, individuals are able to both know the current level on which they are communicating and are then able to decide whether to remain on that level, or move to another. The decision to change levels or remain on the same level of course is based upon the assessment and whether the communication or interaction is effective.

### **Conclusion**

Safely on shore, I turned and looked at the waters of the ocean. If not for the tools and skills I acquired through learning and practice, I surely would have drowned. I have always had respect for anything that is so overwhelming and overpowering as the ocean. As a twelve year old, I thought nothing could come close to the ocean in terms of magnitude. However, as I grew older, I discovered that the process of communicating within interpersonal relationships can be just as overwhelming and overpowering as ocean currents. It too demands respect as well as knowledge of tools and skills to keep one safely swimming within its ever changing and complex waters.

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<sup>i</sup> First published in the *Reading Book for Human Relations Training (8<sup>th</sup> edition)* published by the NTL Institution for Applied Behavioral Science. 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> Berne, E. *Games People Play*. (Reissue edition) Ballantine Books, New York. 1996

<sup>iii</sup> Luft, J.; Ingham, H. The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness. *Proceedings of the western training laboratory in group development*. Los Angeles, University of California, LA. 1955