"DON'T YOU THINK THAT . . . ?": AN EXPERIENTIAL LECTURE ON INDIRECT AND DIRECT COMMUNICATION

J. William Pfeiffer and John E. Jones

EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES

This article attempts to set forth certain theoretical concepts concerning indirect and direct communication. In order to integrate theory with practice, six activities are interspersed throughout this article. These activities are designed to add the dimension of experiential learning to the theoretical concepts discussed.

Each of the six activities described is inserted at the exact point in the lecture at which the activity is designed to occur. Activity 1, for example, should take place before any theoretical concepts are introduced. The activities can accommodate an unlimited number of participants.

Activity 1

1. The participants form subgroups of four. No talking is allowed.
2. Each person in each subgroup writes down the first two things that he or she would communicate to each of the other people in the subgroup. Again, no talking is allowed.
3. The facilitator gathers and publishes information concerning how many of the twenty-four items generated in each subgroup are questions.
4. Participants are directed to "discard" the items they have generated; they will be asked to "communicate" later.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

One basic focus of the human relations movement is on the effective use of communication. Many people fear taking risks in interpersonal relationships; yet as they

Originally published in *The 1974 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators* by John E. Jones and J. William Pfeiffer (Eds.), San Diego, CA: Pfeiffer & Company.

need to feel that they are articulate and adept at "communication," they often engage in what we can call "pseudo communication."

In reality, they try to direct the risk of interpersonal communication away from themselves. They are afraid to present their own opinions, ideas, feelings, and desires.

The individual who fears taking risks may want to manipulate others into fulfilling his or her own desires or expectations. Thus, this person would be saved from being rejected or from exposing his or her vulnerability to others. The person's motive may also be to control others without apparently assuming authority.

This article attempts to illustrate several common varieties of indirect, pseudo communication and to suggest some alternatives to these misdirected patterns of communication.

NONCOMMUNICATION

One way that people engage in noncommunicative discourse is by speaking as if they represented other people, in an attempt to get illegitimate support for their personal points of view. For example, a person who prefaces his or her remarks by saying, "I agree with Fred when he says . . ." or "I think I speak for the group when I say . . ." is not communicating. Instead, that person is simply attempting to borrow legitimacy.

PSEUDO QUESTIONS

Perhaps the most frequently misused communication pattern is the question. In fact, most questions are pseudo questions. The questioner is not really seeking information or an answer to the "question." Rather, he or she is offering an opinion—a statement. But because the person does not want to risk having the idea rejected, he or she frames it as a question, hoping to force the other person to agree.

With few exceptions, we could eliminate *all* questions from our communications with others. As most questions are *indirect* forms of communication, they could be recast as statements, or direct communications. By replacing pseudo questions with genuine statements, we would come much closer to actual communication with one another.

Before we can achieve the aim of *direct* communication, however, we must be able to identify the varieties of pseudo questions that people tend to use. There are eight basic types of pseudo questions. Specific examples of each of these types of *indirect* communication are noted.

Co-optive Question

This pseudo question attempts to narrow or limit the possible responses of the other person. "Don't you think that . . . ?" is a classic example of this type. Other examples are "Isn't it true that . . . ?"; "Wouldn't you rather . . . ?"; "Don't you want to . . . ?"; and "You wouldn't want that, would you?"

The questioner is attempting to elicit the response that he or she wants by building certain restrictions into the question.

Punitive Question

When the questioner uses a punitive question, he or she really wants to expose the other individual without appearing to do so directly. For example, a person may be proposing a new theoretical model in training; the listener, knowing that the theory has not been properly researched, may ask what the experimental evidence indicates. The purpose of the questioner is not to obtain information but to punish the speaker by putting him or her on the spot.

Hypothetical Question

In asking a hypothetical question, a person again resorts to a pseudo question: "If you were in charge of the meeting, wouldn't you handle it differently?" This person does not actually want to know how the individual being questioned would handle it. Instead, the person may wish to criticize the meeting or may be indirectly probing for an answer to a question that he or she is afraid or reluctant to ask. Hypothetical questions typically begin with "If," "What if," or "How about."

Imperative Question

Another type of pseudo question is the one that actually makes a demand. A question such as "Have you done anything about . . . ?" or "When are you going to . . . ?" is not asking for information. Rather it implies a command: "Do what you said you were going to do and do it soon."

The questioner wants to impress the other person with the urgency or importance of his or her request (command).

Activity 2

1. The facilitator assigns one category of pseudo questions to each member of each subgroup. The subgroup is given five minutes to "communicate." with each person restricted to initiating his or her assigned category of pseudo questions.
2. No processing time is allowed at this point.

Screened Question

The screened question is a very common variety of pseudo question. The questioner, afraid of simply stating a choice or preference, asks the other person what he or she likes or wants to do, hoping the choice will be what the questioner secretly wants.

For example, two acquaintances decide to go out to dinner together. One individual, afraid to take the risk of making a suggestion that he or she is not sure will be accepted, resorts to a screened question: "What kind of food do you prefer?" Secretly he or she hopes the other person will name the questioner's favorite food, say Chinese. Or he or she frames the question in another way: "Would you like to have Chinese food?" Both questions screen an actual statement or choice, which the questioner fears to make: "I would like to have Chinese food."

One result of the screened question is that the questioner may get information that he or she is not seeking. If the other person misinterprets the question about food, for example, he or she may tell the questioner about exotic varieties of food experienced in his or her travels—not what the questioner wanted to know at all.

On the other hand, the screened question may sorely frustrate the person being questioned, who is not sure how to give the "correct" response and feels under pressure to "guess" what that response might be.

The questioner, too, may find the results of a screened question frustrating. If the other person takes the question at face value, the questioner may be trapped into a choice (Italian food, for example) that he or she does not like but cannot escape. Worse, both individuals may be unable to "risk" a suggestion and end up eating Greek food, which neither likes.

In marriage, the screened question may be used by one partner to punish or control the other. One individual may seem generously to offer the other "first choice," while he or she actually poses the question in such a way that the partner's suggestions can be rejected and countered with a "compromise" consisting of what he or she wanted all along. Thus, the partner who offers the "compromise" gets what he or she wants by manipulating the other partner into the position of offering all the "wrong" choices.

Set-Up Question

This pseudo question maneuvers the other person into a vulnerable position, ready for the axe to fall. One example of the setup question is "Is it fair to say that you . . . ?" If the person being questioned agrees that it is fair, the questioner has him or her "set up" for the kill. Another way that set-up questions are introduced is by the phrase "Would you agree that . . . ?" The questioner is "leading the witness" in much the same way a skillful lawyer sets up a line of response in court.

Rhetorical Question

One of the simplest types of the pseudo question is the rhetorical question, which comes in many forms. The speaker may make a statement and immediately follow it with a positive phrase that assumes approval in advance: "Right?" or "O.K.?" or "You see?" or "You know?" He or she is not asking the other person to respond; indeed, he or she wishes to forestall a response because it may not be favorable. Often, an insecure person may acquire the habit of ending almost all statements with "Right?" as an attempted guarantee of agreement.

Or the questioner may precede his or her statements or requests with such negative phrases as "Don't you think . . . ?" or "Isn't it true that . . . ?" or "Wouldn't you like . . . ?" In either case, the person who fears risking his or her own opinion is trying to eliminate all alternatives by framing the "question" so that it elicits the response that he or she wants.

A supervisor may say to a staff member, "Don't you think it would be a good idea to finish the report tonight and have it out of the way?" He or she phrases the question so as to make it appear that the decision to work late was a joint one. The staff member may not approve of the suggestion, but he or she has little or no alternative but to agree.

"Got'cha" Question

A "got'cha" question is derived from Eric Berne's Games People Play (1964): "Now I got'cha, you so-and-so." Related to the set-up question, a "got'cha" question might run something like this: "Weren't you the one who . . . ?" or "Didn't you say that . . . ?" or "Didn't I see you . . . ?" The questioner's joy in trapping the other person is nearly palpable. He or she is digging a pit for the respondent to fall into rather than inviting an answer to the "question."

Activity 3

1. The process used with the first four types of pseudo questions is repeated with the second four types.
2. Five minutes is allowed to process the experience.
3. The facilitator has the participants infer the statements that lie behind the questions asked; participants test the accuracy of their inferences and then react to them.

CLICHÉS

Pseudo questions are one method of indirect communication; clichés are another. When people use clichés, they really do not want to communicate with another person—or they want to feel that they are "communicating" without sharing anything of significance. Thus, they resort to routinized, pat, standardized, stylized ways of responding to one another.

Examples of clichés abound in English, as in other languages: "You could hear a pin drop." "If you've seen one, you've seen them all." "He hit the nail on the head." "He took the bull by the horns." "He has us over a barrel." "We got our bid in just under the wire." "It's an open-and-shut case." "He left no stone unturned in his search." "Better late than never." "The early bird gets the worm." "He can't see the forest for the trees." "I've been racking my brains over the problem." "His kind of person is few and far between." "He is always up at the crack of dawn." "Let's get it over and done with." "His mind is as sharp as a tack." "Better safe than sorry." "She's as cute as a button."

Activity 4

1. Participants write down as many clichés as they can in three minutes.
2. The facilitator has participants form pairs by moving to new partners.
3. The partners "communicate" with each other using only clichés.
4. Five minutes of processing time follows in groups of six (three pairs).

No one can avoid using clichés occasionally. But the frequent use of tired, worn-out phrases diminishes the effectiveness of communication.

EFFECTS OF INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

If, then, we have established that clichés and pseudo questions are forms of indirect (and, therefore, ineffective) communication, it is important to know some of the effects that such indirect communication has on dealings between people. We can note five major effects generated by indirect communication: guesswork, inaccuracy, inference of motives, game-playing behavior, and defensiveness.

Guesswork

Indirect communication encourages each person to make guesses about the other. Without direct, open patterns of communication, people cannot get to know each other successfully; if they do not know something, they will make guesses about it. Such "guessing games" further inhibit or obstruct true communication.

Inaccuracy

If one person is forced to guess about another, the guess may often be wrong. Yet the person who engaged in the guesswork communicates with the other person on the basis of an assumption, the accuracy of which he or she is unable to check. Obviously, communication based on inaccurate assumptions is not clear or direct.

Inference of Motives

Indirect communication also increases the probability that people will be forced to infer each other's motives. They will try to determine each other's motives: Why is he or she doing that? What is the intention behind that comment? By communicating through clichés and pseudo questions, we hide our true motivations.

Game-Playing Behavior

Indirect communication encourages people to "play games" with each other: to deceive, to be dishonest, not to be open or straightforward. Clearly, such behavior leads away

from the basic aims of human relations training. When the questioner is playing a "got'cha" game, for example, his or her behavior may be contagious.

Defensiveness

One of the surest effects of indirect communication is defensiveness. As there is an implied threat behind a great deal of indirect communication, people tend to become wary when faced with it. Their need to defend themselves only widens the gap of effective communication even further.

Defensiveness can be recognized in several different postures, all characteristic results of indirect communication: *displacement, denial, projection, attribution,* and *deflection.*

Activity 5

1. Participants form new subgroups of three.
2. The members of each subgroup communicate with one another for ten minutes without using questions or clichés.
3. Five minutes of processing time follows.

DIRECT (EFFECTIVE) COMMUNICATION

In contrast to indirect (ineffective) communication, direct (effective) communication is marked by the capacity for taking certain risks in order to understand and be understood.

Characteristics

Communication is effective when it has certain characteristics:

1. *It is two-way communication.* Ideas, opinions, values, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings flow freely from one person to another.
2. *It is marked by active listening.* People take responsibility for what they hear—accepting, clarifying, and checking the meaning, content, and intent of what the other person says.
3. *It utilizes effective feedback.* Each person not only listens actively, but also responds to the other person by telling that person what he or she is hearing. The process of feedback tests whether what was heard is what was intended.
4. *It is not stressful.* Communication is not effective if people are concerned that they are not communicating; when this happens, it is a key that the communication is not functioning properly.
5. *It is clear and unencumbered by mixed or contradictory messages*. Such messages, whether verbal, nonverbal, or symbolic, serve to confuse the content

of the communication. In other words, communication is effective when it is direct.

Any communication always carries two kinds of meanings: the content message and the relationship message. We hear not only *what* other people say to us, but also implications about our mutual relationship. If we are so preoccupied with detecting cues about the latter, we may distort the content message severely or lose it altogether. When communication is effective, both messages are clearly discernible; one does not confuse or distract the other.

Approaches

Five major approaches can foster direct communication:

1. *Confrontation*. Each person can learn to confront the other in a declarative rather than an interrogative manner. We can attempt to eliminate almost all our pseudo questions by formulating them into direct statements.
2. *Active listening.* This is a powerful antidote to indirect communication. We can learn to paraphrase, empathize, reflect feelings, test the accuracy of our inferences, and check our assumptions in order to produce clearer, more straightforward communication with others.
3. *Owning.* If people can learn to accept their legitimate feelings, data, attitudes, behavior, responsibility, and so on, then they can learn to reveal themselves more directly to others. Owning what we *are,* what we are *feeling,* and what *belongs* to us is a first step toward communicating more effectively.
4. *Locating.* This is a way of finding the context of a question. Some questions we cannot answer because we do not know their "environment," so to speak. We need to learn to locate these questions before we can respond to them. Questions are usually more effective if they are preceded by an explanation of their contextual origins.
5. *Sharing* is the final, and perhaps most important, approach to direct communication. All communication is a sharing process: In attempting to communicate with others, we are sharing our views, beliefs, thoughts, values, observations, intentions, doubts, wants, interests, assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses.

For any of these five approaches to be useful, we must, as indicated earlier, be ready to take risks and to work toward a genuine sharing of a common meaning with the other person. If we are not prepared to risk, we will not attain successful, effective, and direct communication.