

CREATING SHARED UNDERSTANDING

This model anchors our workshop on Creating Shared Understanding. The workshop gets people working together better to efficiently and effectively understand different perspectives on critical issues that are complex and emotional. With this training people can create a more accurate assessment of the situation, develop more innovative and creative alternative actions, and increase their ability to do the right things for the business.

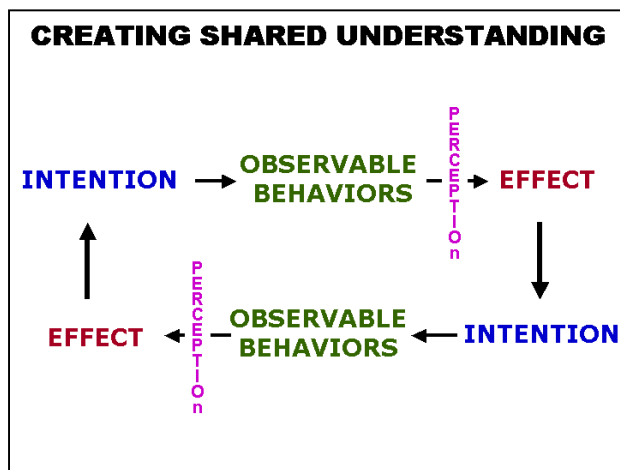
People are often confronted with critical issues that are complex, emotional and require quick action. In these situations there typically is a *range of perspectives* among key stakeholders in the issue on the nature of the situation and what must be done. Therefore the first step in taking action on critical issues is to get everyone on the same page by creating a shared understanding of everyone's perspective. The more people understand each other's perspectives, the better the chances of creating an accurate assessment of the situation, and the better the odds of coming up with the right thing to do.

Failure to create shared understanding on critical issues results in bad decisions, inaction, unproductive conflict, damaged relationships, blaming, and different views of "reality" – all of which reduce performance and delay resolution of the issue.

Creating shared understanding is a process with defined elements. Understanding this process we can assess our performance and intervene to improve our communications.

Intentions

The communication process starts when I form an intention – there is something I want to communicate. Our intentions can be very complex and difficult to communicate.



Therefore it often takes a good deal of time for us to organize our thoughts and clarify our intentions before we can communicate them clearly. This is why when we are under pressure, in the heat of the moment, to take quick action we often say and do things that we later regret.

Observable Behaviors

My intentions are not accessible to others until I turn them into an observable behavior – something the receiver can take in through one or

more of their five senses. The great majority of our communications on complex issues is accomplished through verbal and non-verbal behaviors – we write, we talk and we gesture.

Perception

Perception is the filter through which you receive the observable behavior I send. In a modern metaphor, think of perception as digitizing the observable behavior so that the receiver can select, organize and interpret the information that is captured. It is this process of selecting, organizing and interpreting observable behaviors that creates our “personal reality” of a situation.

This filter is a reflection of our personality, attitude, beliefs, values, experience, fears, desires, and all things that make us uniquely who we are. Not surprisingly, we develop very different filters. Even people within common groups develop different filters. At this most personal level there is a great deal of diversity in who we are and how we see the world. There may be something called reality, but because of these filters we are bound to see that reality somewhat differently.

Effect

Effect is the response you have to my intentions. Since you cannot access my intentions directly, your response is formed by how you perceive my observable behaviors. Therefore the effect of my intentions have on you has more to do with how you judge my behaviors, than what I actually intended. Said another way, the effect of a message often tells us more about the receiver, than what they sender intended. A hug to one person is sexual harassment to another.

Miss-communications

When the effect of my communications is different than what I intended, we have an interpersonal gap. *I know you think you heard what I said, but what you heard is not what I meant.* While the process of communication seems straight forward, there is a great deal of addition, deletion and distortion of my intention throughout this process that results in miss-communications.

The process often breaks down because when we are unclear about our intentions. It is hard to clearly communicate something you are unclear about. When we are unclear about our intentions our emotions tend to take over – causing us to often say and do things that we later regret upon further reflection.

Another problem in communications is the ambiguity of observable behaviors. In the communication process we are forced to translate complex and abstract thoughts into a limited number of observable behaviors. Touching, for example, can be used to communicate both affection and anger. Since you cannot directly know my intention (affection or anger) you have to make the call on what I really intended when I touched you on the arm.

There is a joke about three baseball umpires having a discussion after a game. One umpire said, “Some’s balls, and some’s strikes, but I call ‘em as I see ‘em”. The second umpire said, “Some’s balls and some’s strikes, but I call ‘em” as they are!” The third umpire said, “Some’s balls and some’s strikes, but they aren’t nothing tell I call them”. In the world of observable behaviors, they aren’t nothing until you call them.

Another major problem in communications is channel noise. Channel noise are things in the outside world that cause addition, deletion or distortion of the message. Static on a telephone, for example, often results in a great deal of the message being dropped or hard to understand.

Some channels create more distortion than others. Writing, for example, creates more distortion than face-to-face conversation. Seventy percent of the meaning in a message is on how the words are said, not the words themselves. Paralanguage - the inflection, rate, pitch, intensity, and emphasis we put on words - communicates more than the words themselves. Take the phrase – I love you! This can be said in a way that communicates either affection, or sarcasm. But when put in writing, we are limited to an explanation point to communicate both affection and anger – so how do we know what that exclamation point really means. Therefore, the channel of written communications deletes the majority of meaning in this message.

Probably the biggest problems in communications are the filters we use to perceive a message. How we select, organize and interpret observable behaviors is largely based on our life experiences. Somebody who has been sexually harassed will interpret a touch much differently than someone who has not. Someone who expects management to lie will interpret what his or her boss says differently than someone who expects the management to be truthful. Because we are different people, with different life experiences, we interpret the same situations much differently.

A final problem in the communication process is the tendency of the process to take on a life of its own. Say I want to communicate the importance of an issue so I speak slowly and emphasize every word. You interpret this not as importance but as arrogance and condescending, so you respond by ignoring what I said. This makes me a little angry so I say it again, only louder and with more emphasis. You see this as a personal attack and confront me on my behaviors. Suddenly a conversation meant to communicate the importance of an issue turns into an argument over how people are treated.

Communications is when two people realize they do not understand each other.

The communications process has been “one-way” up to the point where my message has an effect on the receiver. But the effect of my message on you is not directly accessible to me – I can’t read your mind. Therefore for me to understand you we must now switch roles – you clarify your intentions and express them in observable behaviors that I can perceive. But this is also a great deal of addition, deletion, and distortion in your communications to me.

At the point where your communication has an effect on me we have completed the first loop in the communications process – we have two-way communication. But that does not mean we understand each other. We will need several more “loops” to truly reach a shared understanding on a complex and emotional issues.

Definitions

Because of the tremendous level of variation within the communications process, creating shared understanding is typically the exception and not the rule. Therefore the following definitions should be kept in mind.

Miss-communications is when two people do not yet realize that they do not understand each other.

Communications is when two people realize they do not understand each other.

Communications is a two-way process of creating shared understanding. Good communications requires a great deal of work at each step in the process. The sender must clarify their intentions and send a clear message. The listener must take ownership for how they filter the message and for the effect it has on them. Together the listener and sender will have to loop through this process numerous times to create shared understanding on complex and emotional critical issues.

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