

PSC Paper No. 20

COMMUNICATION AS A TWO-WAY PROCESS

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For an International Workshop on
"Communication for Social Development"
held at the University of Zambia, Lusaka
29th April - 10th May, 1974

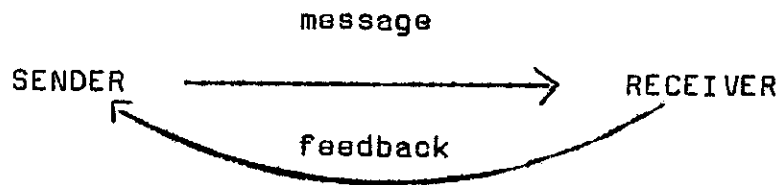
COMMUNICATION AS A TWO-WAY PROCESS

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Communication literally means a sharing of information or experience, and as such it ought to be a two-way process. This fact is sometimes lost sight of, to the detriment of communicators and audiences alike.

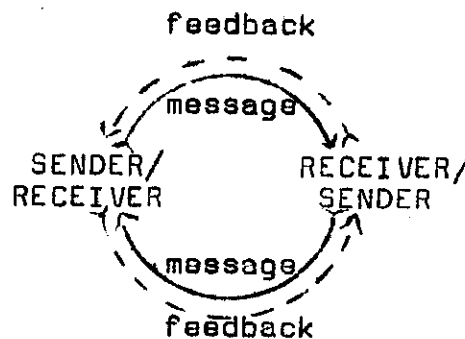
The following diagram is a very simple schematic model of the communications process, adapted from computer theory:



Feedback is a very popular term now. It is a reverse flow of information to enable the sender to modify his message by taking the receiver's reactions into account.

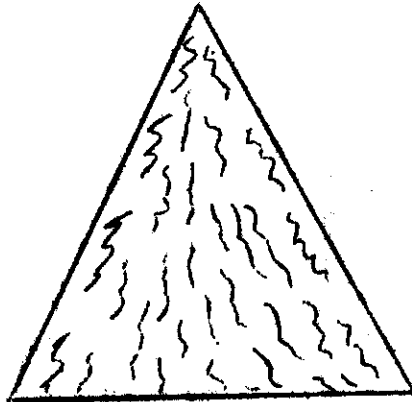
Most communicators today are aware of the necessity of feedback. Broadcasters spend a lot of money on listener surveys. Newspapers check their sales curves against the type of news printed. Politicians employ public opinion pollsters to tell them how their recent pronouncements have gone over.

The sender-message-receiver-feedback loop is not really the model I would propose to you; however, for it implies that the purpose of communication is to manipulate the receiver. We need a more democratic model in which the parties to the "communications contract", as it is sometimes called, function dually as senders and receivers. In other words we need a dialogue. Let's try a circular diagram:



This is what happens in a conversation between two friends. A talks to B. If A keeps it up for too long, he begins to get negative feedback from B — eyes wandering, a yawn — suggesting to A that he should modify his approach. Perhaps he tells a joke or begins to shout to keep B's attention. But sooner or later he'll have to shut up and give B a chance to reverse the message flow.

Now what we usually get in social development communications is neither a loop nor a circle, but a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid are the decision makers and administrators. Further down are the field staff who implement their decisions. At the bottom are the intended beneficiaries of whatever social development programmes the others are trying to carry out. Communication operates through a sort of trickle down effect. Messages are well diluted by the time they get to the bottom and, the force of social gravity being what it is, seldom trickle up. (Rumours, unfortunately, defy the law of gravity: not only spreading rapidly in a horizontal fashion but seeping up as well.)



TRICKLE DOWN
COMMUNICATION

I think we all know how the pyramid situation developed. In small, tribal principalities of a few thousand persons it was easy for the king or chief to see with his own eyes what was going on and how the people reacted. Today Governments are large affairs working perforce through complicated administrative hierarchies. Mass communications media have sharpened the sender-receiver dichotomy and have led us to think increasingly of communication as a one-way rather than a two-way process. After all, it is the editor who talks to his many readers, not the reverse, except for an occasional letter to the editor.

Establishing two-way communications in the context of a large-scale social development project is difficult. The first question we need to ask ourselves, I suppose, is whether it is really necessary.

I believe it is, for a variety of reasons. First of all, the administrators have to know what's going on among the people they are trying to help. Frequently the people at the top of the pyramid are relatively isolated. They come from a different social class than the project beneficiaries. They have little time to tour. They are immersed in paper work. It is easy for them to lose touch with what might be called "the real grassroots feel" of their own projects.

Second, the success of social development projects depends to a large extent on a factor usually described as "popular participation". To give people a sense of participation, their voices must be heard. If people feel alienated from their own society, if they feel that their opinions and desires have no effect on the mysterious decisions that govern their lives, their reactions will range from apathy to meaningless violence. Pick up any weekly newsmagazine with international coverage and you'll find plenty of examples of the latter, ranging from the most developed to the poorest countries.

Third, there is the matter of learning. In social development, people both at the top and at the bottom have to learn new things. Learning proceeds best if there is a good two-way flow of communications. No teacher would dream of giving classes without a question period. At least I hope not. But the question period is sadly lacking in some social communications schemes.

How does one go about devising a two-way communications scheme for a social development project? To be honest, I really don't know. There's no definitive model that I'm familiar with. Perhaps the best model is the old-fashioned city political machine that acquired such a bad name for itself in late 19th and early 20th century America. The machine acquired a bad name because of the immense amount of graft and corruption that it cloaked. Its strength lay in the fact that the machine drew its power from the masses of immigrant poor and that it responded to their wishes. The political boss and his henchmen kept in touch with their constituents through a vital network of ward leaders, district captains and neighbourhood political clubs. It was a communications system that worked rather well. The system ensured that "the word got around" when a decision was taken in City Hall.

It also worked the other way. The humblest citizen whose vote the machine could count on could turn to it for help or redress of grievances. In this case "the word went up" as high as it had to go for action to be taken.

I'm not seriously suggesting that the developing countries should turn for technical assistance to the ghost of Tammany Hall in New York. I do suggest, however, that political channels of one sort or another are good potential two-way communications channels. In countries that have an effective political party, the party apparatus extends from the highest government circles to the most remote areas. Party workers and leaders can play a vital role in social development communications, and they usually know how to communicate pretty well, too.

In the civil service hierarchy, extension workers occupy a strategic position to mediate between administrators and the people. Extension workers have the job of "getting the word around" and need all the help they can get in the way of audio-visual aids and back-up support from the mass media to do so. They should also be deliberately encouraged "to see the word gets up". It is my impression that the extension workers usually know a lot more about what's really going on than they tell their superiors, perhaps out of fear of disconcerting the latter. It is up to the people in the higher administrative ranks to give them the confidence to call a spade a spade in their reports. Workshops are useful in this connection because numbers lend courage. I have heard extension workers speak quite candidly when they are in a working group in which they outnumber the higher-ups.

I haven't brought in the communications specialist yet. I've deliberately saved him to the last, because two-way communications is a job for everybody to worry about in planning a project. But it's almost essential to have a good communications man attached to any social development project team. You need somebody whose prime responsibility is to worry about the communications needs of the project, and to see that they're properly taken into account at every stage of project development and implementation. Please don't call him the "project publicity officer". That implies that his job is to get favourable media coverage for the project. That's not his job; his job is to help make the project succeed. Favourable coverage will come if it's a good project.

The mass media may have sharpened the sender-receiver dichotomy, as I have suggested, but a communications specialist can suggest certain ways in which new communications tools can facilitate a two way flow of information.

The simplest is the portable tape recorder, used increasingly by broadcasters for field interviewing. The man-in-the-street interview has been a commonplace of radio broadcasting in many countries for a number of years. The equipment used to be rather cumbersome, with a lot of knobs to turn and a lot of dials to watch. It isn't cumbersome now. A good cassette recorder fitted with a high-quality microphone will produce tapes that meet the standards of AM broadcasting. With a little coaching in interviewing techniques, extension workers could make their own taped interviews. A selection of these tapes, played back to the people at the apex of the pyramid, could be most instructive.

The video-tape recorder or VTR is a more expensive and a trickier machine to handle. Portable models are now available, though they are not as simple to operate as the manufacturers suggest. A VTR consists of a small television camera, a special tape deck and a monitoring screen. You can record an interview on the VTR and play it back on the monitor any time you want to. It is potentially one of the most powerful tools for two-way communication ever invented.

Some media are simply not adaptable to two-way communication, and it is a mistake to rely on them too heavily in a social development project. The motion picture is a case in point. It's a one-way system, and that's it. Even altering a film to take into account audience reactions is a difficult, time-consuming and expensive procedure. Once it's in the can you're stuck with it.

Most of the classic audio-visual tools suffer from this same defect. These include posters, pamphlets, flip-charts, etc. If drafts, mock-ups and proofs of these are checked out with selected audience groups ahead of time, though, many pitfalls can be avoided.

Before concluding, I'd like to say a word about another direction in communication: horizontal or "sideways" communication. A sociologist would call this communication among peer groups. Is there anything we can do to promote the spread of positive ideas and innovations from one village to another or from one

neighbourhood to another, directly, without the information having to go up to the top by one pathway and then down to the bottom again by a different one? Horizontal communication channels exist: rumours travel rapidly along them as well as various other varieties of information and misinformation. I think I'll leave the question of horizontal communications to the group here to mull over. Some of the tentative suggestions I've made on the subject of two-way communications are applicable to horizontal communications as well, and with your collective experience I'm sure you'll be able to add suggestions that I would never have thought of.

A final word. No matter in what direction you're trying to communicate, down, up, or sideways, remember: your first problem is to gain and hold the attention of the receiver. Let me revert to our pyramid model for a moment. Messages need editing and interesting presentation to make their way to the people at the top as well as to the others. That's another job for your communication specialist or specialists. To reach the people at the top you've got to get past their in-trays, which are full of mimeographed documents and long-winded communications, all marked urgent. You're not going to do it effectively with just another lengthy, formal report full of notes and annexes. An attractively-packaged, crystal-clear summary — illustrated, if possible — is almost a must; and if you can gain a few minutes of these people's time, a good slide show is an excellent way to get things across to them too.

Thank you.



CF-RAI-USAA-PD-GEN-2007-000183

Expanded Number **CF-RAI-USAA-PD-GEN-2007-000183**

External ID

Title

**"Communication as a Two-Way Process" by John Balcomb, PSC Paper No 20.
Distributed at the UNICEF/PSC Workshop on Communication for Social Development,
University of Zambia, Lusaka, 29 April to 10 May 1974**

Date Created / From Date

4/1/1974

Date Registered

6/20/2007 at 12:14 PM

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Record Type **A01 PD-GEN ITEM**

Contained Records

Container **CF/RA/BX/PD/RP/LB/1987/T005: Africa: Social welfare, Nutrition, Sa**

Fd3: Doc Type - Format

Da1: Date First Published

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Document Details **Record has no document attached.**

Notes

**The author was Chief, Communications and Information Service, UNICEF, Nairobi.
The paper was discussed during Part II of the workshop, "General considerations in project support
communications."**

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