



FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION PART 1

ADVOCACY AND ENQUIRY

Advocacy and enquiry are both needed for functional communication. If either are absent, the tone and then the effectiveness of the communication will deteriorate. As a basic distinction, advocacy is telling, and enquiry is asking. More specifically, advocating involves proposing something whereas enquiry is concerned with finding something out. When you advocate you are giving voice to a view or opinion, and this is most clearly done when you explain why you are proposing what you are saying. The same is true of enquiry, where an explanation of why you are making your enquiry will help others understand what you are seeking.

It is worth clarifying the difference between asking questions and enquiry. Most questions embody an opinion and are advocacy rather than enquiry. “It’s a hot day, isn’t it?” is an example of advocacy through a question. Another is “You would not trust him, would you?”. The feel of such questions leads you to agree or disagree with the position advocated. Enquiry, on the other hand, leads you to pause and search for a response. This means searching internally for the response that may be most appropriate to the enquiry. A question that takes the form of enquiry is one where you do not know the answer beforehand, and you want to know the answer. Such a question leads to clarification or discovery. First-hand learning is a particularly valuable source of enquiry, as is apprenticeship, where you watch, listen and notice – generally without asking questions. Things can be learnt in this way that are more subtle than can be put into words. In comparison, enquiring by asking questions can be a lazy way of learning. Rather than watching and learning for yourself, a question may be an attempt at a short cut to get the answer without doing the thinking involved to get to that answer.

One could say that questioning prompts memory, whereas enquiry prompts thinking. You may be enquiring to find out for yourself, whilst in coaching the enquiry, and the questions asked, may be primarily intended to help another person discover things. In Dialogue enquiry is helpful when it reveals the different dispositions, views, and opinions of the participants. There may be a range of information, interpretation, and knowledge on any matter. A check-in is a simple example of this. One aim of a Dialogue is to fill out the picture sufficiently for people to hold a common meaning and a common story about things. That may involve asking about things that it would help you to know. Another is to allow new understanding to emerge through a flow of meaning between all the participants. This may lead us into new territory as we enquire into things you didn’t realise that you didn’t know.

The quality of good advocacy and good enquiry depends on the level of attention given. It is a matter of proprioceptive awareness. Listening to yourself speaking, when you do, and following the movements of your own thinking as well as the response in the room, deepens the experience significantly. In this way you become a part of the live flow - rather than separating yourself from others, who are then more like your audience listening to your past thoughts. In this spirit, good enquiry requires the curiosity to get behind the initial understanding, and the courage to reveal what is found. Good advocacy, on the other hand requires the wisdom to weigh up what lies behind a position, and the resilience to stand still to discover its value as it lands with others.





UNDERSTANDING AND CONFUSION: THREE LANGUAGES

In healthy communication, when an individual says something, other people understand what they mean. If the meaning is unclear, simple enquiry will clarify things. Sometimes, however, asking what was meant does not help and the confusion persists. It is as if people do not share the same vocabulary or are speaking different languages. David Kantor, a systemic family therapist, proposed a simple framework to help to reduce this kind of confusion. He noticed confusion can be caused by three distinctive ways that people express themselves, namely through *emotion*, *action*, or *intellect*. Others call this *heart*, *hands*, or *head*. He used the more provocative terms *affect*, *power* and *meaning* to highlight the confusion and potential attributions. If each of these three forms of expression is thought of as a different 'language', then it is more obvious that the confusion is caused by trying to translate from one to another.

The distinctions between the three forms of expression are not difficult to understand. It is when they are in use at the same time that the confusion is caused. When someone asks a question in meaning and is answered in affect it can seem to be at cross-purposes and confusing. Affect involves speaking from the emotions or the heart to explore what it feels like or might feel like. Power is about action and considering what we have done or could do. Meaning is the intellectual exploration of what was meant or what it might mean. If I am exploring what we could do (in power), and you are asking why we should do it (in meaning), or what it would feel like if we did (in affect), then it can be frustrating as we go around in circles. The facilitative art is to recognise when there is a cross-language confusion. This is obviously the case when a question that is raised in one language is responded to in another. Answering in the same language will be more easily understood, before then speaking in another language. In a larger grouping it may be best to sequence the considerations. Consider one, and then the next, before trying to bring them together.

Of course, these three languages fit together well. In any significant decision there are the obvious questions: What should we do? Why should we do it? What would it feel like if we did? In addressing a larger group of people to make a collective decision, all three are relevant and need to be considered. They all need resolution for an ease of participation. If it can be done, makes sense and feels right – then let's get on with it! So, for the Dialogue Practitioner it is not only a matter of recognising all three languages in use and naming how they are being used to raise everyone's awareness, but also becoming multi-lingual and being versatile enough to understand all three and speak all three.

UNDERSTANDING AND CONFUSION: THREE PARADIGMS

A further perspective on confusion in communication relates to the way people tend to organise things, in their thinking and in their work. It is part of a natural disposition that leads people to plan, prepare and order things in different ways. This is another level of David Kantor's work that he called Systems Paradigms. Practice models need to be simple if they are to be helpful in live situations hence just three paradigms, as there are three languages. He noticed that some people are concerned that everything or everyone is acknowledged or included. Others are less concerned about inclusion and more concerned with the structure, and everything having its defined place. The third, which is the least structured and





least inclusive paradigm, is ordered by the energy in the situation. He could have named them structured, inclusive and free form. But intentionally drawing attention to the confusion they can cause, and the attributions that can be made in that confusion, he called them 'open', 'closed' and 'random'. They will be evident in the way any individual, group, or organisational system functions.

Whilst talking together people will naturally use one or other of the paradigms to make sense of things and to determine how to proceed. Where people can be overwhelmed by the complexity, they tend towards a closed paradigm. They prefer to have set categories, clear boundaries, and defined steps. Hierarchy may provide just that clarity. You will recognise some people who tackle their work in this orderly way, and who may become disturbed if things are unclearly defined. From an open or random perspective, the pejorative comment about them may be that they are quite 'closed' thinkers, implying they are too single minded. Of course, that is also their strength and one that may be lacking in the other paradigms.

Those who prefer an open paradigm are more relaxed about sequence and definition, provided they can incorporate everything successfully. Their style is more adaptable and inclusive. From a closed and random perspective, they may be considered to be less rigorous and less focussed because they are so open to hearing all views before deciding anything. The acknowledgement of the relevance of all perspectives is part of their strength, however. If the open thinker is in a situation where everything cannot easily be included, they may feel disturbed – and to ensure everything is covered they may start to adopt a more closed approach by introducing a few rules.

The third paradigm is purposefully focussed on the energy in any situation. Here it may not be clear how things will work out, but there is trust that the energy inherent in the whole will organise things in its own way. This requires dynamic participation and changes of direction until an emergent organising process becomes evident. The closed and open attribution is one of 'randomness', implying they don't know what they are doing. That is how their thinking may be perceived by others. In fact, there are intent on loosening up the energy without controlling or ordering things, which is a particular skill that can open new possibilities not previously considered.

Once you become familiar with these paradigms you can see them being demonstrated vividly whenever people are looking to make decisions. All three are valid and effective, although some work better than others in different situations. Managing something that requires careful sequencing in a random way can lead to mishaps, just as managing a more developmental process with a closed mind can also lead to trouble. Versatility, and being adept in all three paradigms is the way to go. It enables adaptability and effectiveness. Managing the clashes between the paradigms by naming them and sequencing them will reduce confusion.

One could ask which is the best paradigm for Dialogue – open, closed, or random? Each facilitator or practitioner has their own preference, and this can lead to friction between them about what Dialogue 'really' is. With more experience it becomes clearer that Dialogue thrives on an open approach (to establish a common story that includes everyone), on a closed approach (to determine intricate resolutions), and on a random approach (to shift embedded patterns of behaviour and memory). They each have their strengths and contribution, and all three are needed.





FUNCTIONALITY AND DYSFUNCTIONALITY

The languages and paradigms are two simple frameworks to reduce confusion. Skilful use of them can save everyone's time and energy. There are many such frameworks to help people make sense of what is happening in the room as people talk and think together, so why choose these ones designed by David Kantor? There are two main reasons: they are simple and developmental. As I mentioned before, to be useful live, whilst things are happening, just three distinctions are easily manageable and very helpful. No doubt we could design a framework with 12 languages (and no doubt several already exist) but that would be more useful for analysis than live practice. Secondly, they are not pigeonhole models which are to help manage a situation rather than to develop. Knowing I am 'red' and can manage 'blue', 'green' and 'yellow' people better is a way of fixing my identity or personality. The languages and paradigms are different. I may have a propensity or inclination to one of the languages or the paradigms, but the invitation is to develop and understanding and skills with the others. This expands my repertoire and versatility as well as enabling better engagement with others and reducing confusion.

There are situations, perhaps when confusion has persisted over time, that things have become dysfunctional. Those involved are unable to deal with the situation and there are repetitive defective patterns that interfere with what people are trying to do. A change of language or paradigm is not enough in these circumstances. The Dialogic Actions may prove more helpful to address dysfunctionality. There are four actions, and the sequences in which they are used can address many forms of dysfunctionality, such as arguments, going around in circles, courteous compliance and the inability to make decisions. The Dialogic Actions are a skill rather than a framework, and there is a separate paper to introduce them.

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