Communication and conflict in organizations: revisiting the basics

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Coorientation can help organizations to reduce misunderstanding and conflict, thereby improving their performance.

Conflict is a persistent fact of organizational life. Situations of conflict in organizations are not always or even usually the dramatic confrontations that receive most attention and publicity – strikes, walkouts, firings. Nor is conflict usually bracketed into discrete public forums where negotiation and designated third parties officially participate in the resolution of differences. Rather, disputes are embedded in the interactions between members as they go about their daily round of activities.[1]

If communication is fundamental to an organization, then so is conflict. They have a symbiotic relationship – conflict cannot occur without communication and helps to broaden the context of communication. According to J.K. Galbraith, "The modern corporation is socially a theater of all the conflicts that might be expected when hundreds and thousands of highly charged, exceptionally self-motivated, and more than normally self-serving people work closely together."[2]

Factors that affect communication

Modern symbolic interactionists hold that at least three factors affect the meaning we attribute or ascribe to social objects – ongoing negotiations, background characteristics of the social objects, and external stimuli. But there are more factors involved: our world views, past experiences, aspirations and expectations also affect what and how we communicate and how we react to the communication reaching us. These factors are individually specific and almost always culturally based. They can be a major cause of differences in the interpretation of and reaction to communication content – differences that can lead to intraorganizational and/or interpersonal conflict. An example of how cultural orientation can affect communication within an organization is reflected by Sang Lee *et al*:
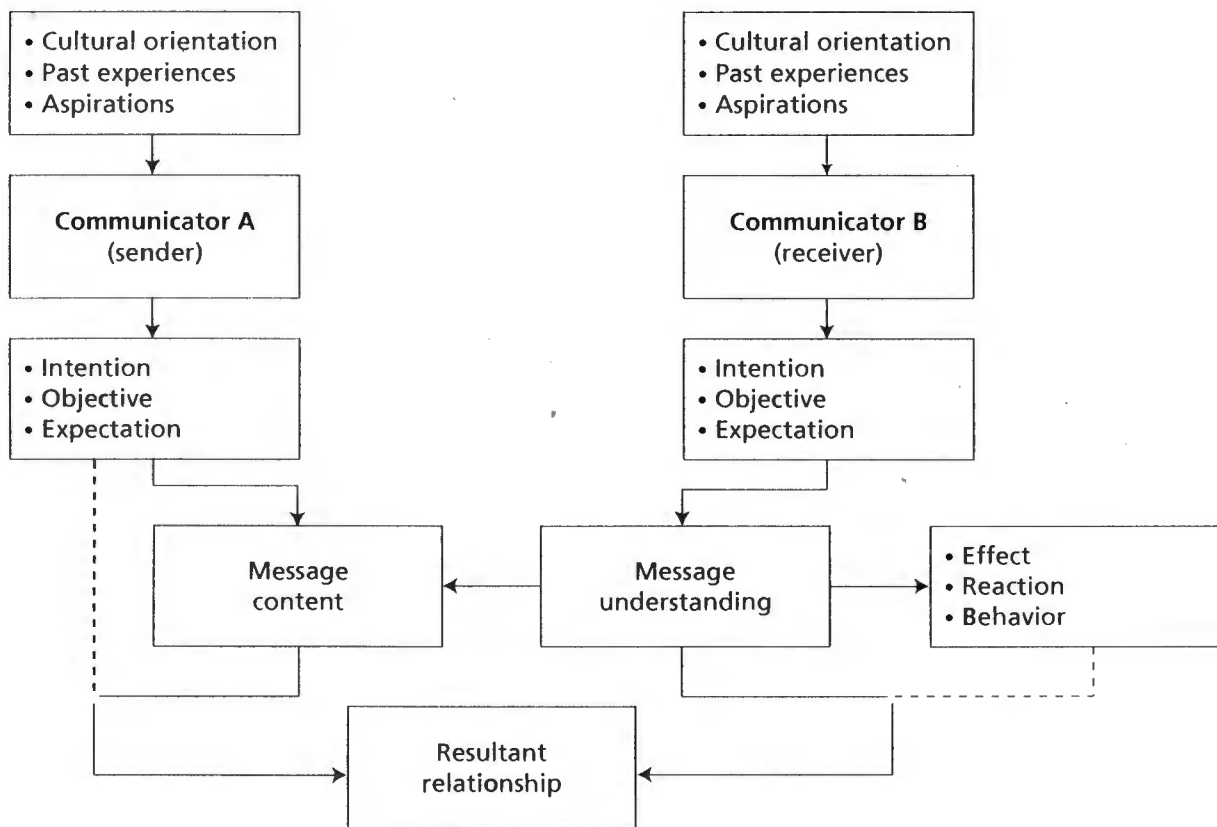
> The cultures of U.S. corporations find visual and symbolic expression in logos, slogans, and rituals. But such concrete manifestations have little meaning for Korean employees, whose cultural tradition is introspective and not necessarily explicit.[3]

Impact of communication

The communication impact model (Figure 1) shows how the communication content and its understanding create either positive or negative relationships between individuals and draws attention to the importance of

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FIGURE 1
Communication impact model

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┌─────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────┐
│ • Cultural orientation │        │ • Cultural orientation │
│ • Past experiences    │        │ • Past experiences    │
│ • Aspirations         │        │ • Aspirations         │
└─────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────┘
          │                                │
          ▼                                ▼
┌─────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────┐
│   Communicator A     │        │   Communicator B     │
│     (sender)         │        │     (receiver)       │
└─────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────┘
          │                                │
          ▼                                ▼
┌─────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────┐
│ • Intention          │        │ • Intention          │
│ • Objective          │        │ • Objective          │
│ • Expectation        │        │ • Expectation        │
└─────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────┘
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| Message content | ← | Message understanding | → | • Effect
 • Reaction
 • Behavior |

| Resultant relationship |

Source: Moemeka 1998.

Both communicators are affected by their individual backgrounds, as well as by their individual intentions, objectives and expectations. Communicator B has to deal with the effect of the message separately and react on the basis of her perception of its meaning and intention.

Built into the sender's message are:
- what he wants her reaction to be
- what he expects the reaction to lead to
- what the expected outcome of the message should be.

The receiver's understanding of the message will determine the effect of the message, her reaction and behavior toward, and ultimate relationship with, the sender.

The resultant relationship is determined mainly by the relationship between the *content* of the sender's message and the receiver's *understanding* of the message, and strengthened by the receiver's *reaction* to the message and *behavior* toward the sender.

"knowing the audience."[4] Knowledge of predispositions helps in constructing messages that fit well into the socio-cultural realities of the receiver's situation. A communicator who knows and understands these predispositions is more likely to succeed than a communicator who sends messages to audiences/persons whose predispositions are not

adequately known – the shot-in-the-dark approach to communication known as the information-dumping strategy.[5] It is a sure way of creating misunderstanding and souring relationships – of creating conflict situations.

Because organization members must interact and organizations need such interaction to be productive, several different models for reducing or even eliminating conflict have been proposed by theorists. But many of these models and "prescriptive formulations" seem ineffectual or irrelevant. In their study, *Hidden Conflict in Organizations*, Kolb and Bartunek observed that most of the concepts advanced in formal studies of conflict did not help them to make sense of what they found in their field research: ". . . it became clear to us that conflict was embedded in the routine and mundane activities of the work settings and that it was rarely officially acknowledged or managed in the ways most conflict models suggest."[6]

These models ignore or relegate to the background a fundamental of productive human relationship – understanding – which is invariably achieved through acquiring adequate knowledge of the predispositions of the communicating partners and forms the cornerstone of the informal tactics of conflict resolution that obtain among organization members. Creating mutual understanding is the fundamental role of communication. Its perspectives and contexts are explained by the coorientation theory, which can help organizations reduce the incidence of unnecessary and avoidable conflict and save time and energy for improved performance.[7]

The coorientation theory

The coorientation theory on conflict and communication in organizations has been all but forgotten, even though most of its constructs are used in every act of communication. Its basic tenet – mutual understanding – remains a key concept in effective communication. The relevance of coorientation to organizations trying to avoid/reduce unnecessary conflict in order to improve personnel as well as organizational performance is the basis of this article. "The greatest ability in business is to get along with others and influence their actions."[8]

Effective communication means achieving the purpose for which a communication content was constructed and sent. There are few more important requirements in organizations than effective communication, for the correct performance of activities, positive relationships between and among organization members, attainment of goals and overall improvement of organizational performance all depend on it. But effective communication is impossible to achieve unless there is mutual understanding of communication content and context – what is said, who said it, why, what is expected, by whom, where, when, how and with whom, etc. The communication content may be rejected or accepted and its demands carried out, but the reaction must be based on understanding of the content and demands of the communication.

Coorientation treats understanding rather than persuasion as the basis of communication. The theory asserts that in order to accept or reject a message, we must first understand the content and context of that message. It is only when we understand that we can react intelligently.

In a summary of the assumptions behind this approach to analyzing communication relationships, McLeod and Chaffee noted:

> The key assumption underlying this approach is that a person's behavior is not based simply upon his private cognitive construction of his world; it is also a function of his *perception* of the orientations held by others around him and of his orientation to them under conditions of interaction, the *actual* cognitions and perceptions of others will also affect his behavior . . .[9]

According to Cutlip *et al*, the coorientational measurement of an organization's communication climate involves four questions:

- How does management define and evaluate the issue at hand?

- How does management think workers/labour define and evaluate the issue?

- How do the workers/labour define and evaluate the issue?

- How do workers/labour think management defines and evaluates the issue?[10]

  A fifth question may be added:

- How similar or dissimilar is management's definition to the workers' definition?

This question deals with the extent of agreement between the two. (See Figure 3, a structural model for answering these questions and analyzing the answers.)

Few organizational communicators consciously use coorientation or even discuss it as a theory, yet it meets the three criteria – parsimony, accuracy and pervasiveness – that determine the superiority of one theory over another.

❏ Coorientation is parsimonious in structure and has very few specific and clearly directed related statements that summarize its perspective. It uses only four main concepts – congruency, incongruency, accuracy and inaccuracy.

❏ It explains effective communication phenomena more accurately than other theories; for example, if you do not understand, you cannot accurately and articulately respond.

❏ Its explanatory power is pervasive and can explain a variety of communication situations – workplace interactions; communication between friends and family members; and even international relations.

The importance of understanding

Every communication situation involves at least two parties. The content of any exchange of ideas (communication) between them is subject to individual examination to determine the precise meaning of the communication to each of them. The meaning that the parties attach to the message is conditioned mostly by past experiences, present conditions, expectations and aspirations. These factors are individually specific – what one person may mean by what s/he says may not be the meaning attached to that message or statement by the person receiving it. Our individual understanding of what has been said to us determines the meaning we attach to the communication situation and content.

The importance of understanding arises from the fact that it is a prerequisite to any communication: without it there can be no willing change of opinion, attitude or behavior. As already implied, understanding is almost always subjective: our assessment of a piece of information will almost certainly be affected by our cultural background, past experiences, relationships, aspirations, expectations and assumptions of the other person's intentions. Hence, behavior in general is based not only on what we think and feel, but also on our estimates of what those with whom we interact think and feel. This is why the coorientation model demonstrates our perception of the orientations of those around us as a very important variable in any communication situation. Consider this example:

> Len Williams, manager of the export parts order section of Tyler's North European division, was puzzled and troubled. Something had obviously gone sour, but what?

> Len had always prided himself on the relaxed, friendly atmosphere in the section. Good-natured bantering had been the order of the day and the men would frequently stop by his desk for an informal chat. Suddenly things were different. Len hadn't had a "visitor" for over a week and everyone seemed "too busy" with his own affairs for intra-office needling. With the men becoming more taciturn, Len felt himself growing progressively uneasy and unwilling to go out of his way to initiate conversation.

> The change had occurred shortly after young Paul Brock had joined the section. But how could there be a connection? Paul seemed eager to learn and gave every indication of wanting to be a good "team player" but the group had clearly not accepted him . . .

> The North European division's export parts section consisted of Williams and seven other interpreters. Their eight desks were arranged in a straight line. Williams's desk was at the head of the line and Brock's was second. This desk had been vacated by Lou Dewitt who had just been promoted to chief of another section. Williams assigned the desk to Brock because Paul was new to the corporation as well as to the section and would probably need considerable coaching. Moreover, Len confided to a friend, "I want to avoid that silly desk reshuffling the guys did two years ago when Jack Rosen was promoted out of the section." Coincidentally, Rosen had occupied the second desk.[11]

Obviously, Len Williams' subordinates reacted as they did not solely because they felt they had been denied the opportunity to move up the line physically, as the section's culture would seem to demand; they also perceived his decision as a deliberate attempt to single out the youngest and newest member of the section for promotion.

How we react to a message depends on our personal cognition or understanding and values, as well as on what we believe to be the cognition or understanding and values of those with whom we interact. This has led to the concept of dual cognition, which states that in

addition to Communicator A taking a stand about the meaning and possible effect of a message, s/he also takes a stand on what s/he thinks is Communicator B's stand on the meaning and the possible effect of the content of the message.

The coorientation perspective emphasizes the interpersonal nature of the communication process. For effective communication to occur, the participants should be simultaneously oriented to the same content, context and meaning. It is only when people are talking about the same thing in content, context and intent that understanding, and therefore communication, takes place. This emphasis on interaction means that coorientation places importance not on the individuals in a communication situation, but on the relationship between/among their orientations, attitudes, values and cognition vis-à-vis the communication situation or the object of the communication. The quality of communication between among the participants depends on the ability of each to sense what the other(s) already know. "An egocentric attitude – the inability to see readily from the viewpoint of others – is the biggest communication barrier."[12]

Underlying the interaction that forms the basis of understanding in the coorientation model are three factors:

❏ *Individual orientation*: the cognition/understanding and values regarding the communication situation/event – what the individual thinks or feels about the communication content and demands.

❏ *Common field*: the area of agreement between the communicators. This is the area of overlap in the cognition/understanding and values of the interacting individuals – the aspect of the situation/issue/event on which they agree.

❏ *Perception of the residue*: the individual's perception (estimate) of what is left in the orientation of the other communicator after isolating the area of agreement – what each communicator *thinks* that the other has in mind with regard to the aspect of the situation on which they are not in agreement.

Figure 2 shows the three areas that combine to give the five-element structure of the communicators' relationship to the communication situation. "*A*" is Communicator A's orientation, "*B*" is Communicator B's orientation, "*Z*" is the area of overlap between their orientations, "*a-1*" is the residue of

FIGURE 2
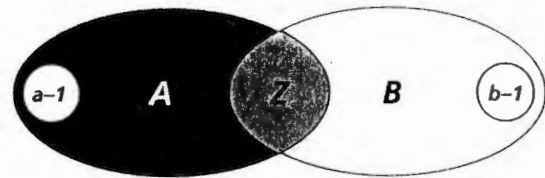
A's orientation and "*b-1*" is the residue of B's orientation. When the area of overlap (the level of agreement or the common field) is isolated, what is left in A's orientation is *a-1*; it is what is *believed* to differentiate A from B. What is left in B's orientation is *b-1*; it is what is *also* believed to differentiate A from B. Whether what constitutes a-1 and b-1 is similar or not is generally not immediately known.

In most interactions (whether cordial or conflictual), neither A nor B would know precisely the constituents of the other's residue unless previously told. In conflict situations, the combatants usually react on the basis of their individual perceptions rather than on the facts. "Although our perceptions of other people's motives or the causes of their behavior might not be true, nevertheless we are still likely to respond in terms of these perceptions."[13] This is a major reason why conflicts tend to be difficult to resolve or manage.

The similarity or dissimilarity of the communicators' residues determine the size of the common field or the extent of agreement between/among the communicators. The smaller the common field, the larger the area over which they will argue – imputing motives, trying to force out the facts, accusing each other. This can escalate or deflate the conflict, depending on how they interpret each other's statements. The larger the common field, the smaller the area over which they will argue. Extending the area of agreement, of building a larger common field, appears hopeful. The "problem" or "benefit" of the common field is illustrated by this simple statement by Andreas Fuglesang:

> Sometimes in everyday life we use the expression: "Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones do not speak the same language." This does not mean that Mr. Smith speaks German while Mr. Jones speaks English. Rather, it signals that Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones do not have much in *common* – either they do not share views or they do not communicate well.[14]

The constructs of coorientation

The four main constructs of the coorientational perspective are congruency and incongruency, which are intrapersonal in function; and accuracy and inaccuracy, which are interpersonal.
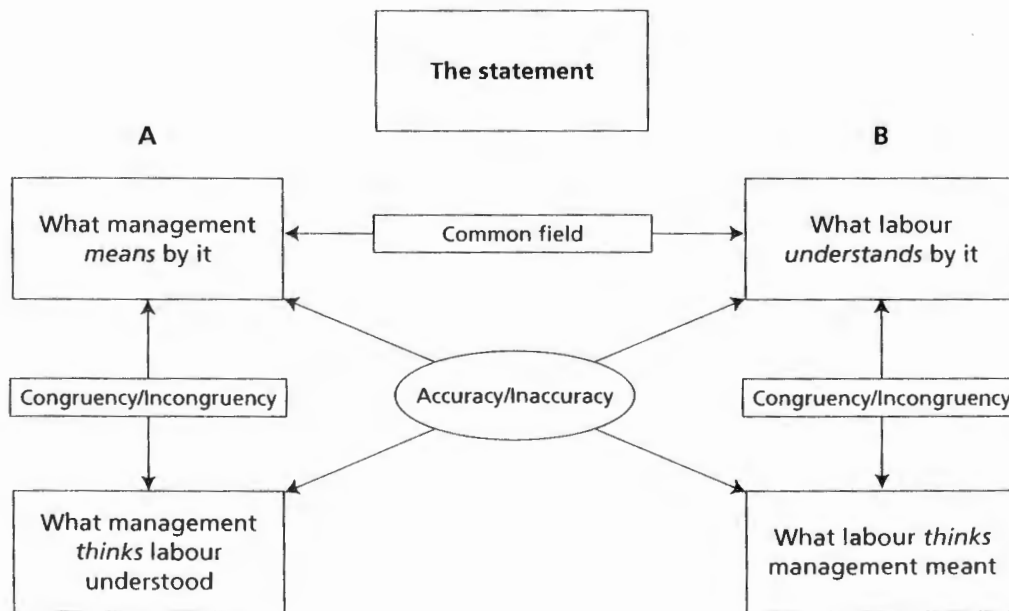
Congruency/incongruency

When what Communicator A *means* by a statement is exactly what he thinks that Communicator B *understands* by the statement, he achieves a congruent condition. In other words, congruency occurs when what Communicator A means and what he perceives Communicator B understands are the same or similar. When what is *meant* and what is *perceived* to be understood are different, incongruency occurs. The same is true when Communicator B examines her relationship to the statement. If what she *understands* by the statement is exactly what she thinks that Communicator A *means* by it, she achieves a congruent condition. When what is understood is *different* from the meaning that is intended, incongruency occurs. Congruent and incongruent conditions obtain *within* the individual communicators, but not *between* the communicators; therefore, they are *intrapersonal*. Congruency creates internal harmony in the individual; incongruency creates internal *dis*harmony.

These perceptions are based on what the individual *thinks* is the fact, not on an actual fact, as far as the communication situation is concerned. To determine the relevance of the congruent conditions to the communication situation, we must match what A *thinks* B understands against what B *actually* understands; and what B *thinks* A means against what A *actually* means. If A's perception of B's understanding is exactly what B understands, then an accurate condition is achieved and A has correctly interpreted B's understanding. If the perception is wrong, an inaccurate condition is created. The same happens on B's side. If B's perception of A's meaning is exactly what A means, an accurate condition is achieved – B has correctly interpreted A's thoughts and feelings. If the perception is wrong, an inaccurate condition is created.

FIGURE 3
The coorientation model

Congruency, which creates harmony in the individual, is a positive outcome, but it can create a false sense of effectiveness in communication. Because it occurs on the perceptual level, it cannot be held for a fact. Unfortunately, since it creates internal harmony and perception is generally reality until proven otherwise, it tends to make the communicator feel confident about the outcome of his/her communication. The following example deals not only with residue content speculation, but also with an attempt to create mutual understanding:

> A union leader says to his crew, "All right, who called the walkout?" Jones steps forward. "I did. It was that bum foreman Campbell again. That was the fifth time in two weeks he sent me out of our group as a replacement. He's got it in for me, and I'm tired of it. Why should I get all the dirty work?"
>
> Later the union leader confronts Campbell. "Why do you keep picking on Jones? He says you've put him on replacement detail five times in two weeks. What's going on?" Campbell replies. "I pick Jones because he's the best. I know I can trust him to keep things from fouling up in a group without its point person. I send him on replacement only when it's a key person missing . . . I never knew Jones objected. I thought he liked the responsibility."[15]

In the Jones-Campbell example above, Campbell, the foreman, felt confident that his intentions were completely understood by Jones (congruency on the left side of the model), while Jones convinced himself that his interpretation of Campbell's intentions was right (congruency on the right side of the model). The result was a lack of mutual understanding. The effect was interpersonal mistrust and distancing, which may have adversely affected individual performance and output, and certainly affected interpersonal and cooperative behavior. As Dubinskas notes:

> Conflicts emerge through a process of interaction and dialogue between groups (and between individuals), which includes a process of each group (individual) interpreting the other. The problem is that groups (individuals) use their own naturalized cultural standards to appraise the actions of the other, and these are not the standards by which the others guide themselves.[16]

Conversely, incongruency, which creates disharmony in the individual, is generally assumed to be a negative force; however, it almost always creates the urge to take a second look at the format, content and context of the message. It prompts a desire for confirmation of the communicator's perception through verification. Again using the Jones-Campbell example, it seems safe to conclude that Campbell's statement, "I never knew Jones objected,"

indicates a willingness to deal with the lack of mutual understanding. Incongruency can be a blessing in disguise if the opportunity it presents for asking questions and for verification is utilized.

Incongruency usually opens the door to the utilization of the accuracy/inaccuracy constructs of the coorientation theory and presents an opportunity for the provision of more facts and more exchange of ideas. It thus creates an increased need for the acquisition of information and its exploitation through effective communication, distribution and storage, leading to better management of organizational learning and performance. This is not to say that organization members should intentionally seek incongruency. It is how it is utilized that determines the outcome of its impact.

Incongruency is intrapersonal conflict and when handled judiciously and objectively, can produce the same effect:

- acts as a smoke detector or warning light that something must be done differently in order to assure confirmed congruency

- promotes creativity in organization members

- encourages interaction and involvement among organization members in discussing issues of concern

- promotes sharing of relevant information among organization members by encouraging them to voice their disparate ideas and by increasing the amount of relevant information available.

Sometimes an incongruent condition may be proved wrong, that there is no incongruency after all. But even that cannot be ascertained without verification. What is important is not whether incongruencies are confirmed or disproved, but that incongruent feelings, like inaccurate guesses, when utilized to advantage, promote interaction among organization members and thus make mutual understanding achievable. While congruency tends to ignore verification and to build on mere perceptions, unwittingly encouraging distrust, hurt feelings, low motivation and questionable commitment, incongruency treats verification as an essential part of the communication process and tends to forestall interpersonal conflicts and intraorganizational disruptions.

Accuracy/inaccuracy

Unlike congruency/incongruency conditions that obtain only *within* the individual communicators, accuracy/inaccuracy obtain *between* the communicators. Accuracy is an interpersonal construct that provides clear evidence that interacting communicators have reached mutual understanding, that each communicator knows "where the other is coming from," but not necessarily that they agree on the issue. The opposite construct – inaccuracy – is usually a sign of misunderstanding.

The impact of accuracy/inaccuracy on communication effectiveness in organizations is slightly different from that of congruency/incongruency. If what Communicator A *thinks* Communicator B understands is exactly what Communicator B *actually* understands, then the communication action is efficiently effected – it is received and understood as expected. The effectiveness of the communication is determined by the relationship between its content and Communicator B's disposition. Efficiently effected communication is a sure step toward mutual understanding, but it does not necessarily produce agreement.

If what Communicator A *thinks* Communicator B understands is not exactly what Communicator B *actually* understands, then the communication is either not effected at all, or is inefficiently effected. This may prompt a reconstruction of the message, a change in format and presentation, or, most importantly, a more detailed examination of Communicator B's orientation to determine the cause of the misunderstanding. This is when questioning, explanations, clarifications and verifications are needed most. Very few people act correctly without the necessary and relevant information. As Lamont noted, "A businessman's judgment is no better than his information."[17]

Accuracy implies mutual understanding and something more – the need to go beyond mutual understanding to mutual agreement. If I am certain that my message has been received and completely understood, I want to know if the demands of the message will be accepted and implemented. It is only when this is done that I can say for sure that my communication has been effective. Inaccuracy implies lack of mutual understanding and like incongruency, it prompts action to reverse the situation. If I am certain that I have been misunderstood, then I will feel the need to *make* myself understood. This requires readjustments to my position or better understanding of the other person's disposition, or both. While such readjustments and reexaminations are necessary in every case where there is misunderstanding, they are particularly important when the communicators are from different cultures, which is often the case in organizations today. Hence the warning by Austin:

> Many business opportunities have been lost or joint ventures crippled because of failure in understanding or in managing cultural diversity; getting the economics right may be futile if you've got the culture wrong.[18]

The immediate objective of taking dispassionate and judicious advantage of inaccuracy is to achieve mutual understanding; the ultimate objective is to reach agreement and achieve the relevant goal – effective communication.

Coorientation and mutual understanding

Even though mutual understanding does not mean agreement, it is a significant step toward resolving or managing conflict. When each conflicting communicator knows what the other has in mind, an opportunity is created for intelligent discussion and the possibility of a win-win settlement. A fundamental proposition in information theory is that information reduces uncertainty. Uncertainty breeds suspicion, which is not an element of a positive relationship. When the content of each communicator's residue is not known and therefore open to speculation, the chances of escalating the conflict are higher. The Tyler industry example provided earlier is a case in point, where reaction based on speculation on individual residues created a section-wide conflict that seriously affected the relationship between the workers and their manager. This could only have adversely affected motivation and commitment. The Jones/Campbell example may be an even better example of residue-content speculation.

"An important part of an individual's cognitive structure," says Heider, "is how and to what he attributes the causes of things that happen to him."[19] The attribution by itself does little or no harm; an attribution based solely on perception is what creates problems. Accusations and counter-accusations follow until explanations and clarifications are made to clear the air. These recriminations can be avoided by taking steps to understand the other person's situation and by providing the necessary and relevant

information. As Sherlock Holmes warned Dr. Watson in *A Study in Scarlet*, "It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all of the evidence."[20]

The importance of and necessity for explanations and clarifications of directives, goals, plans and procedures, and for verification of message content, intentions and expectations to create mutual understanding are what coorientation is all about.

Conclusion

Conflict is inevitable in any area of life and is sometimes necessary in organizations, since it can help them grow. But a distinction should be made between necessary and unnecessary conflict or inevitable and avoidable conflict. Inevitable or necessary conflict arises mostly because of inherent problems of incompatibility of goals or scarcity of resources. Avoidable or unnecessary conflict emanates from differences in cultural backgrounds, perspectives, understanding and so on, and from actions taken by individuals to create and maintain their version of reality. While this article mainly discusses avoidable and unnecessary conflict, it is worth noting that coorientation is as important to avoiding and resolving these types of conflict as it is to helping to maintain and resolve more substantial and objective conflict.

"Honest difference of views and honest debates," said Herbert Hoover, "are not disunity. They are the vital process of policy-making among free men."[21] To engage in such honest debates, relevant information and background knowledge are necessary. This information and knowledge come from asking questions, verifying statements and listening objectively. Commenting on the importance of information, John Locke stated: "I attribute the little I know to my not having been ashamed to ask for information."[22]

Most conflicts over change in organizations derive from individual ignorance, or from what has been termed "strategic withholding." While the former is a *consequence*

of lack of information, the latter is a *cause* of lack of information. Both create problems of misconception, misunderstanding, confusion and mistrust. But while withholding may sometimes prove to be strategically positive, ignorance is rarely bliss in an organizational context. As Handy has pointed out:

> Those who know why changes come waste less effort in protecting themselves or in fighting the inevitable. Those who realize where changes are heading are better able to use those changes to their own advantage.[23]

The goal of organizational communication is generally held to be the provision of a communication environment in which relevant and adequate information is available to whoever needs it in order to be fully productive and in which the communication flow is such that there is an adequate and satisfactory exchange of ideas and information. But organizations need much more than effected communication; they need *effective* communication.

In pursuit of effectiveness, most profit-based organizations tend to ignore or forget an important precondition for communication – effectedness. Their rationale seems to be that important though it is for a message to get to its destination and be completely understood (effectedness), it is faster, cheaper and more important for management to concentrate on getting the demands of the message accepted and implemented (effectiveness). But unless the communication content is received and understood, it cannot achieve the goals for which it was sent. Therein lies the importance of coorientation, which can in practical terms help organizations reduce the incidence of unnecessary and avoidable misunderstanding and conflict.

The application of coorientational tenets eliminates shot-in-the-dark communication and information; it reminds communicators of the importance of asking questions and of verifying the explanations and clarifications. All this helps to increase the level of mutual understanding (not necessarily agreement) among organization members and to reduce the incidence of interpersonal and group conflicts, leaving more time and energy for improving organizational performance. ●

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"I get the feeling, Gloria, that you wouldn't care to come in for some extra work on the long weekend!"