

# 1

## The nature of human communication

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### This chapter looks at:

- How we communicate
- How communication issues affect all of us.



Is it not wonderful to be a communicator? Do you not think that human communication is a brilliant thing to take part in, or to watch other people doing? Do you like 'people watching'? Most of us find watching other people's communications to be fascinating don't we?

Think about all the things you do in life that you enjoy. Yes, there are many. But is it not true that the best thing for nearly all of us is just being with other people and chit-chatting? Most of us do plenty of it, every day.

This is a brief introductory chapter about communication in general. Before thinking specifically about communication issues for some people with special communication needs, let us spend a little time thinking about communication issues that affect all of us.

We human beings communicate in a rich and sophisticated way that sets us apart from all other species on our planet. No other animals can communicate like we can. Human beings communicate with incredible detail using language, but we are also probably more detailed *visual* communicators than other animals.

You will often see the phrase 'communication channels', being used. We will use it from time to time in this book; it is useful. Humankind communicates through these channels:



Communication is first and foremost enjoyable



Eye contacts, facial expressions, body language and gesture are as important as speech

*Sound.* Speech and language, vocalisations such as grunts, then a range of other noises can be communicative – lip-smacking, clapping hands, foot-tapping, and so on.

*Vision.* Reading each others' signals – facial expressions, eye contacts, gesture, body language, uncontrolled non-conscious visual information coming out of a person.



Most human communications are enjoyable 'chit-chat', but in all communications we visually 'read' each other minutely

*Touch, physical contact.* Handshakes, hugs, strokes, pats, taps, kissing, caressing, intimate skin to skin contact, and so on.

*Smell.* We do pick up *olfactory* information from one another, for example, from pheromones, usually on a non-conscious level. We *are* mammals.

Of course, it is the development of language that is the most obvious difference between us and other animals. As said, we can communicate with language in very detailed ways – mostly with speech, but sign language users demonstrate similar complexity and detail.

In fact, all of us who are not sign language users, nonetheless exchange a great deal of visual information, indeed some visual language. During interactions we are watching each other minutely to pick up visual information from the other person(s). This information will be within their:

- facial expressions
- eye contacts and adjustments in eye contact (much of it non-conscious)
- body language and posture (both deliberate and non-conscious)
- gesture (both deliberate and non-conscious)
- proximity and presence and the way in which people physically orientate to each other.

In fact, the scientists who study these things will usually make the observation that human communication is visual communication first and foremost. They will estimate that our communications are around 90 per cent visual. The speech therefore, accounts for the other 8–10 per cent. The speech sort of puts on the 'gloss' of detailed meanings to the communication.

You will notice that in the list above, the phrase 'non-conscious' is used. In studies on human communication, there is increasing awareness of how wonderful our abilities are within face-to-face communication. Try to think for a moment about the process you are experiencing when having a conversation.

During conversation, there is turn-taking with speech of course. But in order to synchronise that turn-taking and be 'in harmony' with each other, it is necessary to 'cue' each other with visual signals and 'tune-in' and read those signals successfully. Otherwise, the conversation is a mess.

More than that, people communicating achieve a sort of psychological and emotional 'tuned-inness' with each other. Each person scans the other person's face minutely second by second in order to pick up tiny bits of visual information that lets you know some general understandings about what the other person is thinking and feeling. You are listening to them with your ears, but also 'listening' with your eyes.

The quality of the eye contact is crucial (we usually find it uncomfortable not to receive any). However, it is also crucial not to make eye contact for too long (extended, rigid eye contact is usually interpreted as a signal of likely aggression by mammals). In British culture, eye contact during conversation is usually in bursts of a few seconds, with eyes moving away and coming back. However, if one person is making a prolonged speech, it can be acceptable to look at them in a sustained way.

This ability to visually 'read' each other takes place at high speed. Some of it, but only a little, is a conscious operation. Most of it is dealt with by cognitions at a non-conscious level – the brain's processing power for this large quantity of information seems to operate better non-consciously. Conclusions from the information are then rapidly fed back into one's consciousness as what feels like intuitive insights into the other person's state of being. This has been called 'automatic cognitive processes'. If you've never thought about this before, human communication turns out to be even more complicated than you thought, does it not?

However, all this probably provides one explanation for why we all like people watching so much. Since we are so visually expert, we can effortlessly pick up interesting titbits of information from people, just by looking at them.

The extent to which people use physical contact communication varies according to a range of factors. An important factor is the nature of the relationship and how well the people know each other. Another factor is culture. There are many studies that observe the differences in physical contact communication between people of different cultures. We must all have personal experiences of this. It is generally observed that traditional, white British society is one where touch communication is not used so frequently or intensively as in many other cultures and countries. These issues are described and analysed in the books by Argyle, Montagu and Field (see Further reading).

However, we all know that plenty of beautiful, warm, physical contact is absolutely critical to the development and well-being of babies. In fact, that seems to be the case for people at early levels of development of whatever age – communication and relationship with touch is extremely important to them. Use of physical contact

within interaction is a theme of this book. Intensive Interaction activities can positively employ this channel. The sense in which physical contact issues may be seen as a 'difficulty' in our work is discussed in Chapter 10.

But, back to spoken language. Speech communication is, of course, incredibly important. It has enabled humankind to be different, to do things in complex ways. With speech and language we can talk, write books, have a society, culture, history, government, education, the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, cities, cars, space rockets and so on.

But, there is some thinking that the ability for doing these things is not really the purpose nor the main function of human communication. Communication is seen as satisfying all these needs (from Adler and Rodman, 2006):

#### Physical needs

'Communication is so important that it is necessary for physical health. In fact, evidence suggests that an absence of satisfying communications can even jeopardize life itself ... personal communication is essential for our well-being.'

#### Identity needs

'Communication does more than enable us to survive. It is the way, indeed the *only* way – we learn who we are ... our sense of identity comes from the way we interact with other people.'

#### Social needs

These include 'pleasure', 'affection', 'inclusion', 'escape', 'relaxation' and 'control'. Furthermore, 'imagine how empty your life would be if these needs weren't satisfied'.

#### Practical needs

'everyday important functions ... the tool that lets us tell the hair stylist to take just a little off the sides, direct the doctor to where it hurts ... ' etc.

In an interesting book, Robin Dunbar (see Further reading section) proposes that the first function of human communication is social gossip. The human equivalent of chimpanzees and gorillas socialising by grooming each others' fur. His researches indicated that 65 per cent or more of speaking time is taken up with social topics of one sort or another.

In fact, please think about your own communications every day. How many of them are important in the sense that they have a concrete product or outcome? Many do of course, and some of those outcomes are very important to achieve. Even successfully communicating 'two sugars please', is pretty important.

However, most of our communications with each other do not have a concrete product or outcome. Most of them are apparently purposeless, the 'hot air' of companionship:

- 'Brightened up again hasn't it?'
- 'Did you see it last night?'

- ‘No, I didn’t vote for him, didn’t like his Tango.’
- ‘I’m just off to the loo.’
- ‘Have you heard what Irene did?’
- ‘We went to the Safari Park at the weekend.’
- ‘How’s it going?’

Why do we say these things to each other? Because the first human need is just to be social, for the sake of being social. When we do this, communication is meeting those deep human needs listed above.

Intensive Interaction helps the person to develop all these communication abilities. First, the basic human need of communicating and being social for the sake of it, in order to fulfil deep human needs. Then for some, they will develop and progress to more concrete communications, including the development of speech and language. The amount of progress that each person can make, will vary greatly from person to person.

Let us conclude this introductory chapter by reminding ourselves again, about a theme that will run throughout this book. Communication fulfils all sorts of functions, some of which we have highlighted here. But the first is that it is enjoyable, interesting, wonderful, and that is the main reason for being a communicator.

### Further reading

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