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INTERPERSONAL OPENNESS AND
COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

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by

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ABSTRACT

This is an experimental investigation of interpersonal openness and communication effectiveness. Subjects were undergraduate students in organizational behavior and personnel management courses. The experimental design involved measurements of dyadic communication effectiveness before and after an interpersonal disclosure experience known as the Johari Window exercise. Measurements were also taken on a comparison group in which no disclosure experience was included.

The results indicated a significant increase in rated communication effectiveness for the experimental group, but none for the comparison group. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of management and organizational development efforts aimed at increasing communication effectiveness.

Blake and Mouton¹ have suggested in recent years that communication problems are a major factor contributing to breakdowns in organizational effectiveness. In their cross-cultural study of managers from Japan, Great Britain, and the United States, approximately 74 percent of the managers surveyed cited communication blocks as the single greatest barrier to corporate excellence.²

Tracing this phenomenon further, however, Blake and Mouton have noted a peculiarity of many organizations: effective managements characterized by sound relationships do not evidence communication problems. So-called communication difficulties seem to be associated only with organizations characterized by disturbances in functioning at a deeper, interpersonal level. Thus communication problems are viewed as symptomatic of a more fundamental problem wherein managers are resisting each other psychologically in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons.

The view that communication effectiveness emanates from the quality of relationships has been reinforced by other writers, also. Schutz notes that"communications difficulties are primarily the result of interpersonal difficulties; they are seldom themselves a primary cause of problems."³

¹R. Blake and J.S. Mouton, Corporate Excellence through Grid Organization Development (Houston, Tex.: Gulf Publishing Company, 1968).

²Ibid., p. 4.

³W.C. Schutz, "The Interpersonal Underworld," Harvard Business Review, July-August 1958, p. 124.

Carl Rogers has highlighted the essential interpersonal issue as it affects communication; his formulation of a general law of interpersonal relations suggests that understanding between persons will be most complete when each is congruent.⁴ By congruent, he means that the persons' experience, awareness, and communications all are the same. One level of incongruence is refusing to admit awareness of experiencing feelings because they are too threatening. This has been labeled defensiveness or denial and is largely an unconscious process. A second level of incongruence is the refusal to communicate accurately what one is aware of. This has been labeled deceit or the use of a facade and is largely conscious. If A and B are parties to a relationship, an additional and important aspect of this general law is that congruence on the part of A tends to stimulate similar congruence in B.

Another conceptualization of this phenomenon, and one that is central to the present study, is the Johari Awareness model, or the Johari Window as it is sometimes called. This model, developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham, represents a way of thinking about interpersonal functioning.⁵ It can be illustrated, as shown in Figure 1, by representing the information present in any relationship as a matrix of interpersonal awareness.

⁴C.R. Rogers, On Becoming a Person (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1961).

⁵J. Luft, Of Human Interaction. (Palo Alto, Calif.: National Press Books, 1969).

	Known to Self	Unknown to Self
Known to other	region 1 open arena (announced)	region 2 blind spots, denied (defensiveness)
Unknown to other	region 3 hidden concealed facade (deceit)	region 4 unknown (unconscious)

Fig. 1. The Johari Awareness Model.

Communication is believed to be most effective when relevant aspects of oneself are admitted to consciousness and are announced, whether this be by self disclosure from region 3 or feedback from others from region 2. In other words, the larger the open area for both parties to a relationship, the more effective the interpersonal functioning. On the other hand, concealment, denial, deceit, or defensiveness hinder effective understanding.

The unconscious region (region 4) is included in the model because it is assumed to contain important determinants of interpersonal functioning which derive from the individual's developmental history and early childhood. People are often able to discover aspects of themselves contained in region 4, and this is presumed to make their interpersonal lives more productive. In fact, a major goal of psychotherapy is simply to discover information contained in region 4 and move it into region 1.

Finally, it should be noted that relevant information for the Johari Awareness Model can be of many types: prejudices, motivations, feelings, desires, factual information, task skill data, assumptions, perceptions--in short, anything relevant to the relationship.

Some correlational studies indicate openness in management relationships is associated with positive outcomes. Burke and Wilcox studied supervisory-subordinate relations in a large public utility company and found greater openness of communications to be significantly related to subordinate satisfaction.⁶ In a study of the Johari Awareness Model as applied to managers, Hall found that managers classified as 9,9 on the Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid were characterized by significantly larger open arenas (area 1) than were other types of managers.⁷

On the other hand, there have been few, if any, experimental studies aimed at assessing whether increasing the degree of openness in a relationship brings about greater communication effectiveness. That, in effect, is the purpose of this study.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study were students enrolled in introductory level undergraduate organizational behavior and personnel management

⁶R. Burke and D. Wilcox, "Effects of Different Patterns and Degrees of Openness in Superior-Subordinate Communication on Subordinate Job Satisfaction," Academy of Management Journal 12, no. 3 (September 1969): 319-26.

⁷J. Hall, "Communications Revisited," California Management Review 15, no. 3 (Spring 1973): 56-67.

classes. (The organizational behavior course was a prerequisite for the personnel management class.) Of the twenty-four subjects in the experimental group, six were female and eighteen were male. The comparison group of fifteen contained five females and ten males.

Design

We used an XYX' experimental treatment design in which X represents a pre-listening exercise between participants A and B, Y represents a Johari Awareness experience (the "experimental treatment"), and X' represents a post-listening exercise. The subjects were alphabetically divided into groups of three; the members themselves decided who would be A (the speaker), B (the listener), and C (the observer). Each A was given 5 minutes to discuss a controversial subject during the X and X' periods and was told to include his or her personal views on the issue. After approximately every four or five of A's sentences, B was to signal A to stop speaking. At this point, B was to paraphrase, in his or her own words, everything A said. B was warned to eliminate his or her own personal views. C was to carefully observe the interaction between A and B. If at any time, B was not correctly paraphrasing A, C was to intervene until B was correct. A could proceed with the discussion only after both A and C were satisfied with everything B had said. B's task was, in effect, to demonstrate understanding of A by using Carl Roger's rule of reflective listening. At the end of X and again at the end of X' , each group member was given a 25 point semantic differential scale and asked to independently rate how well he or she felt A was understood by B. In addition, at the end of the entire experiment, each group member was asked to make independently an overall comparative judgment as to

whether B had understood A better during X or X'. If all group members were not in consensus, the data were not considered reliable and were not used in the final analysis. In other words, A, B, and C each had to agree independently whether B had understood A better before or after the Johari Awareness experience.

Half of the As were told to discuss abortion during X and euthanasia during X'. The other half were instructed to discuss the same topics in reverse order (euthanasia during X and abortion during X'). This was an attempt to randomize the effects of differences in knowledge of the two topics. These topics were picked purposely to be controversial and emotionally loaded. Thus, it would place demands on B to accurately listen and reflect back A's opinions.

Description of the Johari Awareness exercise⁸

During the Y stage, which took approximately one hour, subjects were told to first think about their own self-image. Without communicating with the other group members, each person was to list on a form responses to the following questions:

1. The first 5 or 6 words that come to mind regarding myself
2. An animal which describes me
3. A musical instrument which describes me
4. A food which describes me

⁸This exercise was taken from D. Kolb, I. Rubin, and J. McIntyre, Organizational Psychology: An Experimental Approach (2nd. ed.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp. 213-28.

Next, each subject was asked to think about the image they held of the other members of their small group and to respond for each member to the same 4 questions. Then together the group members were asked to pull out the key concepts in each person's cognitive map.

In order to further understand the discrepancies that existed in the way others perceived them, each subject was given the opportunity to tell the other members what influenced his or her perceptions. This was a process of disclosure and feedback which was aimed at pulling information from regions 2 and 3 and into region 1 on the Johari window. In other words, each subject was asked to construct his/her own Johari Window and share it with others. The intent was that this process would expand the open arenas for the parties involved and reduce the blind spots and concealed areas. The hypothesis under investigation was that the rated degree of understanding or communication effectiveness would increase during the post listening period, X', in comparison to the pre-period, X.

Comparison group

A comparison group was asked to replicate the same listening exercises and make the same ratings, but with no intervening Johari Awareness exercise. This was simply an X X' sequence to determine whether practice effects over the allotted time could lead to increased communication effectiveness.

Analysis and Results

In both the experimental and comparison groups, the ratings of communication effectiveness were not used unless A, B, and C achieved an

independent consensus as to whether A had been better understood during the first or second listening exercise. There were eight reliable groups in the experimental treatment, six of these were rated as more effective the second time, and two were rated as more effective the first time. (The normal expectation would be a preponderance of the experimental groups to be more effective the second time, however, two of the groups were not.) Thus, there was a total of twenty-four pre- and post-ratings for the experimental groups.

In the comparison group, five groups were reliable, two of which were rated more effective the second time, and three were rated more effective during the first trial. Thus the comparison group had a total of fifteen ratings for X and X'.

Ratings of communication effectiveness were made independently using semantic differential scales on which 1 represented "not understood at all" and 25 represented "understood completely." The means, standard deviations, and t tests are shown in Table 1. A repeated-measures t-ratio was used since the same subjects were making ratings during X and X'; thus any possible correlation resulting from this influence was subtracted from the standard error.

Table 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS FOR
EXPERIMENTAL AND COMPARISON GROUPS

	<u>Experimental Groups</u>		<u>Comparison Groups</u>	
	<u>X</u>	<u>X'</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X'</u>
Mean	17.7	21.1	19.0	18.1
Std. dev.	5.8	3.3	3.6	5.8
n	24	24	15	15
	t=2.52, p < .02		t=.58, N.S.	

As can be seen from Table.1, the experimental groups exhibited a significant increase in rated communication effectiveness relative to the comparison groups.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results suggest that increased openness can have an impact on interpersonal communication effectiveness, apart from the effects of practice or knowledge. In making this observation, however, it should be noted that a more ideal research design probably would have included a third comparison group of subjects who simply discussed together anything they wanted to during the hour between the two communication exercises. This would have controlled somewhat for subject familiarity since the comparison group in this study spent only approximately ten minutes between communication exercises. Prior subject familiarity should have been randomly distributed in this experiment since the groups were selected alphabetically.

The broader implications for improving organizational communications reside largely in training and development practices at the management and organization level. Many management development programs include the topic of communication, but they are not designed to accommodate the potential of the Johari Awareness Model. This is seen most distinctly in those organizations that send the manager, alone or with others from the parent organization all of whom will have only minimal contact upon return, outside the parent organization to a formal communications model program. To be most beneficial, the model must be used with persons who

have an ongoing relationship. (This is a common theme in management and organizational development, but is worthy of reinforcement here.)

If the organization is not interested in training entire, on-going work groups, then perhaps the content of such training could beneficially be designed around self awareness and how to deal with self-disclosure and feedback in organizational settings. The manager faces many dilemmas, however, since self-disclosure is not necessarily a safe practice in many organizations even though it may be linked theoretically and empirically to communication effectiveness.

On the other hand, the present result reinforces that school of thought on organization development that points to interpersonal functioning as the primary point of intervention for improving organizational effectiveness.

In conclusion, perhaps the most important implication is some evidence, humble as it may be, that the theoretical construct underlying the Johari Model has empirical validity. The authors are familiar with organizational development specialists who are currently designing communication training programs predicated on Johari Awareness concepts. Many of these specialists operate primarily on faith, as well as their own valuable clinical insights, under the assumption that their training in fact results in improved communications. This study would seem to indicate that their faith generally has been placed on solid ground.