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PERCEPTION: A DETERMINANT FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Communication may be the process whereby a source encodes a message and sends it through a medium to a receiver. It may even involve the sending of a feedback by the receiver to the source; however, effective communication goes far beyond this level. It has been observed that the fact that a receiver receives the actual message does not guarantee that he interprets it in the way intended by the source. Any message received is interpreted in the light of the perception of the receiver. This study therefore examines the relevance and significance of perception to communication. It also examines what communication is, and how the process is mediated by the perceptual process. A Perceptual Communication Model is proposed in the study to explain the relationship between communication and perception. The study concludes by suggesting that communicators should design messages in terms of their receivers' perceptual inclination rather than focusing entirely on the elements of the communication.

Introduction

Gamble and Gamble (2005) describe communication as being located in the core of our "humanness." This can be considered to be an apt description since our lives truly depend on communication. Communication forms the centre of human existence because it is the means by which human beings relate with their environment. In fact, intra-personal communication, which is the communication that takes place within self, states that one communicates with himself. This is very significant because our self-identity is as a result of our communication about ourselves to ourselves.

The foregoing crystallizes the fact that communication cannot be divorced from human life; neither from one person to another, nor from a person to himself. Gamble and Gamble also assert that communication is our link and connection to our past, present and future. This clearly emphasizes the fact that the whole existence of man is encapsulated in a single on going process; communication.

As crucial and indispensable as communication is to life, however, it is not independent in its functions. The success and effectiveness of communication heavily depends on certain other factors, chief among which is the perceptual process. It is possible for a communicator to ensure that he has a clear message, send it through an appropriate medium, and even eliminate noise as much as possible. However, it is impossible for him to determine what the receiver thinks of the message, that is, the receiver may receive the actual message but think of it differently; this is the relevance of perception. Perception represents the process of making meaning out of experiences. This paper therefore examines the role and the significance of perception in the communication process, and how best the knowledge of it can be utilized for effective communication.

Literature review

What is communication?

Communication is a complex term that is widely used but scarcely understood. It is a process that encompasses more steps than most people pay attention to. Communication is one of the activities most engaged in by man because it is his way of surviving.

Communication is the most important human survival skill. It is how we stay in touch with the world. Communication is our only way of knowing the world outside our own skin. When we receive stimuli and interpret them, we have communicated with the source of the stimuli and with ourselves. Because people receive and interpret stimuli all the time, we describe communication as a process (Taylor et.al, 1986).

The process of communication has been subjected to critical study for many decades. According to Harold Lasswell (1948) as cited in Mcquail (2002), "Communication is the transmission of a message from a source to a receiver." He said that a convenient way to describe it is to answer these questions;

Who?

Says what?

Through which channel?

To whom?

With what effect?

From the above description, we can clearly identify three major entities involved in the communication process and they are the source, the medium and the receiver. The source is the originator and sender of the message or stimuli, the medium serves as a carrier of the message while the receiver is the final recipient of the message or the stimuli.

In an attempt to simplify the description of the process, Lasswell failed to take into cognizance other salient factors or conditions that must be satisfied for communication to take place. Communication, as described in the above definition is plagued with the assumption that the receiver automatically comprehends the message. In the words of Baren, "Unlike mere message-sending, communication requires the response of others. Therefore, there must be a sharing (or correspondence) of meaning for communication to take place" (Baran, 2002:5). There also must be a feedback from the receiver and this feedback is the receiver's response to the original message sent by the source, and it is sent back through the medium.

In a further study on the same subject, Wilbur Schramm, based on ideas originally developed by psychologist Charles E. Osgood, developed a graphical representation of the reciprocal nature of communication. He presented the process of communication as a cyclic process in which there is neither a beginning nor an end. The source encodes a message, sends it through a medium to a receiver who decodes the message, encodes his feedback and sends it through the medium back to the source. According to Schramm, it becomes impossible to differentiate the source from the receiver because there is a constant swap of roles (Baran, 2002).

When not properly engaged, communication can be a great threat to human relationship. It is even of greater consequence when the other party misinterprets the message. Hence the place of perception in communication is established. Perception plays a very significant role in the communication process because it determines how the message is interpreted, and whether the process ends up a success or a failure.

Perception

The idea of perception has been subjected to intellectual evaluation over the years. Among the thoughts that have emerged in this study is the work of Hume. According to Hume, a philosopher, the human thought is unbounded. He said that although the human body is confined to one planet, the mind can roam instantly into the most distant and far removed region of the universe (Stump & Fieser, 2003). He also said that the contents of the human mind can all be reduced to the materials that are given us by the senses and experience, and he called those materials perceptions.

According to Hume, the perceptions of the mind take two forms; impressions and ideas. These two forms of perception make up the total content of the mind. He said that the difference between impression and idea is only the degree of their vividness. He stated that the original perception is an impression, that is, when we hear, see, feel, love, hate, desire, or will. According to him, "these impressions are "lively" and clear, when we have them. When we reflect upon these impressions, we have ideas of them, and those ideas are less-lively versions of the original impressions" (Stump & Fieser, 2003: 269). The less lively versions are what he called ideas.

Merleau-Ponty, another philosopher, evolved what he referred to as the primacy of perception. His own perspective was in reaction against the views of those of the dualists, who say that the human mind is distinct from the body, and the realists who say that the world is received as it is. Merleau-Ponty strikes a middle ground by stating that the perceptual nature of the human body constructs and shapes sensory data. He said that the higher intellectual thought processes are grounded in the perceptual frame work of the human body (Stump & Fieser, 2003).

According to Perreault and McCarthy (2005), perception is how we gather and interpret information from the world around us. Since we constantly gather and interpret information from our environment, it is accurate to say therefore that perception is a process and not an action. Hawkins, Best and Coney (2004) describe perception as exposure, attention and interpretation. This explanation of perception makes an attempt to reduce it to a three-step process with each step requiring a deliberate action.

Jobber (2004: 123) goes further in his own definition of the perceptual process by making an attempt to identify the important elements in the process. According to him, "perception is the complex process by which people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful picture of the world." Though the previous definitions that we have considered also highlighted the importance of the people who do the selection or gathering and interpretation of the information,

Jobber's definition crystallizes the role played by the information itself which he described as the "external stimuli." By referring to the information gathered as stimuli, he emphasizes the role of the information as opposed to the passive role imposed on it by the other definitions. He also talked about creating picture of the world as a result of the interpretation of the sensory stimuli.

Another scholar who also referred to the information gathered as sensory information was Santrock (2003). He defines perception as "the process of organizing and interpreting sensory information to give meaning." Perception functions as means of representing information from the outside world internally. Hence, it is the personal creation of the particular individual who is involved in the process.

Perreault and McCarthy (2005) note that people are constantly bombarded by stimuli e.g. advertisements, products, stories- yet they may not hear or see anything. This they say happens because people apply the following selective processes:

1. **Selective exposure:** People's eyes and minds seek out and notice only information that interests them. It is possible to by Pass hundreds of information because they are of no specific significance to one and yet pay attention to a seemingly obscure one because it appeals to one's interest. According to Cohen et al (2001), what a person sees and hears tends to be selective and it involves to a large extent distortions shaped by the person's perception. In other words, a person perceives what he needs or expects to perceive.
2. **Selective attention:** This addition was made by Folarin (1998). According to him, selective attention refers to the brain choosing the information it interprets since it cannot interpret messages as fast as the eyes can see them. Therefore, a person selects the information he pays attention to.
3. **Selective perception:** At this stage of the perceptual process, people screen out or modify ideas, messages and information that conflict with previously learned attitudes and beliefs.
4. **Selective retention:** At this most important stage, people remember only what they choose or want to remember.

According to Luthans (2005: 33),

The key to understanding perception is to recognize that it is a unique interpretation of the situation, not an exact recording of it. In short, perception is a very complex cognitive process that yields a unique picture of the world, a picture that may be quite different from reality.

He goes further to explain that perception is largely learned and no one has the same learning experience. In fact, every individual possesses a unique filter, and the same situation/ stimuli may produce very different reactions and behaviors. In agreement with Luthans, Cohen et al (2001: 176) state that,

The extent to which people perceive events as threatening will depend on their past history with similar events. Because each of our histories has been uniquely different, it becomes difficult to anticipate just how someone else will react to a situation. In general, the more emotionally loaded an event is (for whatever reason) for an individual, the greater will be the tendency for perceptual distortion to occur.

One major idea crystallized in the definitions above is that perception is highly individualistic. Perception is formed by an individual as a result of the information he chooses to expose himself to, the way he chooses to interpret them, and for how long he chooses to retain them, all depending on his past history and previous exposure to similar information. The individualistic tendency of perception is what makes it difficult to predict the ability of another person to interpret one's message the way the one intends it.

Perception and the communication process

Having established what communication and perception are, it becomes obvious therefore that the communication process is highly reliant on the perceptual process. In fact, perception helps the receiver of the message to make meaning out of the message he receives. And since we have also established the fact that during the communication process, the sender and the receiver constantly exchange roles, it becomes clear then that the interpretation of messages through the perceptual "window" permeates the entire communication process.

In explaining the nature of communication, Michael & Michael (1978) as cited in Folarin (2005) say that there are five attributes of communication. According to them, communication is transactional, effective, personal, instrumental and consumatory in nature. Among all these attributes, the transactional attribute is one of the most prominent. According to Michael and Michael, communication is transactional in the sense that both the sender and the receiver are constantly having an impact on each other through symbolic behaviour. In transactional relationships, the belief of the parties involved is very important, and Scott & Brydon (1997) say that "perceiving is believing." This means that what you perceive is what you believe, and what you believe is as a result of what you perceive. If indeed communication is transactional in nature, and transactions are based on beliefs, and beliefs can be equated to perception, then communication and perception are directly related.

Scott and Brydon also propose the factors that influence perception in a communication process. According to them, the factors include the following:

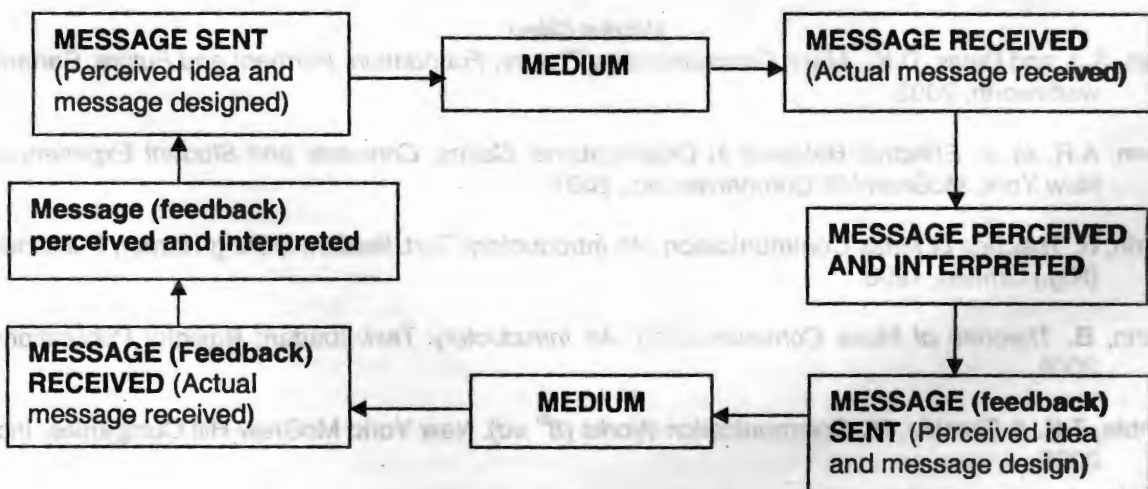
- 1) **Background:** this represents the underlining factors that are peculiar to the participants in the communication process. The way an individual interprets a message depends on his background, and past experiences as well as circumstances that surround his life.
- 2) **Intensity:** This refers to how loud or prominent the message is.
- 3) **Extensity:** This involves the attention drawing effect of the message. This can also be established through the contrast of size e.g. big versus small.
- 4) **Concreteness:** This refers to a message that is not ambiguous.
- 5) **Contrast and Velocity:** This refers to the degree to which communication messages and people appear striking, novel, etc.
- 6) **Impressivity:** This refers to the combination of all the above mentioned factors.

The above factors therefore show that some important conditions must be met for effective communication to take place. The participants must have appropriate background, the message must be prominent, it must easily attract attention, it must not be ambiguous, the message must be striking, and finally, there must be an enabling condition for the combination of all the aforementioned factors.

Achieving effective communication

In the course of this study, we have succeeded in crystallizing the relationship between communication and perception. But furthermore, we shall now attempt to locate perception in the context of communication by consideration a model proposed by this author. The **Perceptual Communication Model** is a model that shows the cognitive participation in communication rather than just the elemental participation. An elemental participation in the communication process represents the information contained in most communication models which only feature the key elements involved in the communication process; source, medium, and the receiver. The **Perceptual Communication Model** locates perception in a very prominent position in the whole process. This is best illustrated as follows:

The Perceptual Communication Model



The above model shows that before a source sends a message (**message sent**), he first designs it. This process reveals a deliberate mental activity through which a message is evolved. This message is based on the perceived idea of the source. He develops a message out of his perceived idea of a certain subject, and then sends it through a medium (**medium**) to the receiver. It is very important to note that even if the message is ambiguous, the source may not notice since the message emerges straight from his perceptive centre. This is why some people cannot understand why others do not understand them, while they insist that their message is clear.

Usually, the receiver receives the actual message sent by the source (**message received**). This is so because if, for instance, an article is published in the newspaper, the reader will actually receive the same text sent by the publisher (unless, of course, there is an error in the process of the sending). However, the complication comes in the interpretation of that message (**message perceived and interpreted**). Communicators or sources should target this stage of communication because this is the point at which the message actually fails or succeeds. Here, the receiver interprets the message based on his perception. This perception may be in terms of the source (credibility), the channel (appropriateness of the medium), or of past experience. Whatever be the case, it can not be over-emphasized that what the receiver perceives determines how he interprets the message. Based on the interpretation that the receiver gives the message as a result of his perception, he in turn designs a message (**message or feedback sent**). This feedback is loaded with his perception of the message he had received, which means that if he had got the wrong interpretation, he would send the same to the source. Note that the receiver has in turn become the source of the message.

The receiver (now the source) sends his message through the medium (**medium**) to the source, who now is on the receiving end. The source also receives the actual message sent by the receiver (**message or feedback received**), then he subjects it to his own perceptual evaluation (**message perceived and interpreted**). He measures this message by the original message he sent; if there is a correlation between them, the communication is considered to be an effective one. However, if there is disparity, the communication is considered to be ineffective.

Conclusion

The essence of this study is to crystallize the role of perception in the communication process. It also seeks to establish the fact that effective communication is determined by the perceptual process. Hence, to communicate effectively, the communicator must target the perceptual centre of the other party in the communication process, rather than just the need to design an appropriate message. True, it may be impossible to determine what the other party thinks of the message; nevertheless, the message can be designed with the other party in mind. This brings us to the need to emphasize the definition of communication giving by Baran (2002), which says that it is the process of creating shared meaning. Scott and Brydon (1997) also say that for communication to be effective, it should stimulate the meanings and images that either approximate those the communicator intends to pass across or that prompts further communication to stimulate the meaning and images intended. Hence, the source should always communicate in terms of the receiver. When the source puts perception into consideration, he will communicate with the receiver based on familiar signs and symbols.

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