Navigating the Communication Tapestry: How Communication Shapes Order in a Fragmented World

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- Communication is more than the exchange of words; it is the transmission of meaning.
- Communication narrative enforces strategic imperatives, including, if required, by resorting to imaginative, exaggerated and alarmist falsehoods.
- Effective communication requires clarity and an absence of ambiguity, failing which serious misunderstandings may occur.
- Diplomatic signals, like ambiguous statements over territorial claims or alliances, have historically led to escalation.

We are communicating all the time, either through our words or our actions and behaviour. The survival of social communities depends on effective communication because it is used to convey our thoughts, so that the other person may see our point of view, and hopefully, we arrive at a meeting of minds. This leads to social cohesion and makes communication a critical social activity.

Communication is more than the exchange of words; it is the transmission of meaning. Across geopolitics, diplomacy, business, peacekeeping, and everyday relationships, communication theories offer a lens to understand how messages influence decisions, perceptions, and outcomes. Yet every message carries the potential to become miscommunication – reshaping events in unintended ways.

Unfortunately, often, we are confronted by communication failure leading to disastrous consequences, including deviant behaviour that causes chaos, confrontation, and uncertainty. How we communicate then becomes as important as what we communicate.

It starts at an early age and continues throughout our lives. Our parents, peer groups, the school, and the social environment we are part of constantly engage with us through verbal and non-verbal communication. They teach us values, norms and mores, so that we might conform to social expectations. Deviance attracts punishment and occurs when communication breaks down. Social upheavals, coups, revolutions, and protests occur when one objective or way of thinking is rejected and replaced by another. All governments and institutions, consequently, recognise the importance of ensuring that communication achieves its desired objectives and thus is a core influencer in the survival of the existing social order.

Constructivist Theory in international relations argues that reality is shaped by shared meanings. The Cold War, for instance, was as much about perceptions and narratives as it was about ideology. Nations respond not only to actions but to interpretations of intent.

Similarly, **Framing Theory** shows how states package information. A military action labelled "pre-emptive defence" vs. "aggression" can shape international support. The 2003 Iraq War

illustrates this: the frame of "Weapons of Mass Destruction" mobilised global opinion – until conflicting evidence reframed the narrative entirely. A similar strategy is used by governments

and corporations to debunk action on climate change and global warming, or to justify the end of cultural diversity and the need for non-inclusive immigration policies, or to justify regime change and economic sanctions against deviant governments, for example. Communication narrative, in other words, enforces strategic imperatives, including, if required, by resorting to imaginative, exaggerated and alarmist falsehoods.

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Ideologically Driven Communication

This means that communication is ideologically driven. For instance, in a rapidly evolving geopolitical and geostrategic landscape, the rise of China and the Asian giants is perceived as an adversarial and combative threat to the existing global order, which is dominated by Western powers since the Second World War. Recognising the threat to their hegemony, the communication narrative of the United States and Western powers portrays competing and challenging forces as inimical to global welfare, translating into an us-versus-them strategy. But here miscommunication abounds. Diplomatic signals, like ambiguous statements over territorial claims or alliances, have historically led to escalation. The First World War famously ignited from misread intentions between European powers.

While the objective of communication is to be understood and imbibed, it is often misinterpreted. Consider the slaying of the master-archer Dronacharya in the battle of Kurukshetra as depicted in the Mahabharata. Krishna knew that it would be difficult to vanquish Dronacharya, other than through deception. Knowing how attached Dronacharya was to his son, a plan was hatched to falsely announce that his son had been killed in battle. When Dronacharya heard of his son's death, he was grief-stricken and laid down his weapons. He lost the will to battle and sat in deep meditation and in prayer. It was at that vulnerable moment that he was killed. Miscommunication was used as a strategy to deceive and achieve the desired outcome. The specious justification for the unilateral introduction of tariffs threatening a rule-based multilateral trading system, or the arguments advanced against the replacement of fossil fuels by renewables, are examples of miscommunication, coupled with arm-twisting, to advance national interests, even when they run counter to global good.

Effective communication requires clarity and an absence of ambiguity, failing which, serious misunderstandings may occur. Consider the murder of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, for instance. While he and King Henry II were close friends, after Becket's elevation as Archbishop, he advocated a clear separation of the rights of the church vis-à-vis the authority of the state. The king saw this as a personal affront. In a moment of extreme frustration, he angrily cried out that none in his kingdom could rid him of the troublesome priest. Four knights, hearing this, misinterpreted it as a royal command to kill Becket, which they promptly did. The king had

no intention of instructing that his friend be murdered, and yet, his outburst was misinterpreted as a directive to do so. Communication failure occurs through ambiguity.

Communication & the Military

The multiple effects of global communication are perhaps most visible in the military arena. Military technologies have become increasingly information- and communication-intensive. Most communication technologies have immensely benefited from military investments in their research and development phase, but their introduction has often led to rapidly diffused civilian applications. Without reliable command, communication, and control, power centres cannot effectively manage their peripheries. However, every communication system also empowers the peripheries. As military technologies have augmented their hit/kill ratios and communication technologies have improved their powers of surveillance, conditions of permanent insecurity seem to have become more prevalent at the centres as well as at the peripheries of power.

Communication in Business & Economics

In the armed forces, communication occurs through the issuance of orders. Soldiers are commanded to execute an order. Their duty is to obey. They are expected to do so without question. This style is often replicated by senior managers in businesses. However, the manager-as-dictator is a bad management strategy and can lead to corporate failure. It is invariably a reflection of deep-seated insecurity.

The collapse of Eastman Kodak from a household name to one of the greatest corporate blunders is a fair example of this. Photography and Kodak were synonymous. The crass approach of senior management in Kodak, refusing to acknowledge that technological advances were shifting photography from film to digital, led to its collapse and demise, even though Kodak had invented the world's first digital camera. This happened because Kodak management was not attuned to technology and feared they might be rendered obsolete and lose their jobs to younger and more tech-savvy employees. A sense of insecurity led them to protect their interests and destroy the company. This was a communication failure driven entirely by an inept and diabolical management style that disallowed employees from proactively contributing to the success of the company. In their view, management ran the company, whereas the employees were there to do what they were told. A communication strategy that refuses to listen is doomed to failure.

Communication – A Tool for Persuasion

Persuasion Theory, especially Aristotle's ethos, pathos, and logos, lays an undeniably strong foundation for communication. Campaigns that evoke emotion or build credibility thrive, while poorly targeted messages risk backlash. Communication is effective only when it is persuasive. This is achieved by drawing the other person or intended audience into the conversation and engaging directly to arrive at a common meeting ground. When that happens, there is joint

Ownership of the project. Communication is, then, a two-way process, where both sides are collectively and collaboratively invested in the success of the project.

Persuasive communication is, consequently, not aimed at scoring points and humiliating the other side. It is the distinction between a monologue and a dialogue. In other words, it is especially about listening, rather than dominating the conversation.

This is a common failure in several institutions where the sole objective of communication appears to be to put the other person down. **Lee Iacocca** of **Chrysler** did precisely that. After a massive success story with Chrysler, he thought of himself as bigger than Chrysler. He began to promote himself rather than the company. He alienated management colleagues and employees. Before long, Chrysler, which had climbed back from the bottom of the ladder to a success story, collapsed and became bankrupt. Soon, it was reduced to a case study of a bad communication strategy and a management failure. The ego had led to a colossal downfall.

The general view is that since communication is part of our daily life and biography, it is a routine activity. It is not. Indeed, successful communication is persuasive communication. This comes about through clarity of thought. However, before its enunciation, it requires a clear understanding of the other side's point of view and especially, what their Lakshman Rekha or red lines are, lines that they would not cross, and learning to negotiate within those boundaries. Communication is, therefore, part of a negotiating strategy. One can very clearly see this in global communication, which seems to have generated three new types of diplomacy that may be labelled public, people, and virtual diplomacy.

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Effective communication is not rigid and uncompromising. Indeed, if we are to learn to accommodate the other person's point of view, we need to learn when to give in and yet find the best possible outcome to what we have set out to achieve. The perfect negotiating strategy is not a zero-sum game but a win-win. Unless there is focus on the end objective and a desire to collaboratively achieve results, communication failures inevitably occur.

Arrogance and bullying are sworn enemies of a persuasive communication strategy. Yet, we fall victim to this so often. The way President Trump handled his first meeting with President Zelensky, humiliating and rubbishing him in public, is a good example of bad communication. At the personal level, **Social Penetration Theory of Communication** (how relationships deepen through gradual self-disclosure) highlights the delicate art of timing and trust in the micro tapestry of communication.

This means that the DNA of persuasive communication lies in humility and thus, in empathy. Understanding the other side and negotiating with a view to getting the best outcome is critical to a successful communication strategy. Navigating the complex communication tapestry is certainly possible and comes about only when we believe in what we are aiming to achieve.

Present-Day Channels: Speed, Scale, and Distortion

The digital age has rewoven the tapestry with new threads:

- **Social media** accelerates information flow but also spreads misinformation at viral speed.
- **AI-driven communication** personalises messages, yet risks creating echo chambers that strengthen biases.
- **24/7 news cycles** demand instant reactions, often sacrificing nuance.
- **Encrypted messaging apps** foster private, rapid coordination—but also hide harmful narratives.
- **Short-form content** influences public opinion more through emotion than depth.

These channels amplify both clarity and confusion. A single tweet can avert panic—or spark geopolitical tension. A misinterpreted WhatsApp message can incite local unrest. In organisations, remote communication tools blur cues like tone and body language, making misunderstandings more likely.

Weaving Meaning with Care

Across Scales – between nations, institutions, communities, and individuals – communication remains the thread that binds decisions, perceptions, and relationships. Theories help us understand how messages shape reality, but mindful practice determines what reality becomes. In a world overflowing with channels and noise, clarity, context, and empathy are not just virtues; they are strategic necessities. The difference between communication and miscommunication can alter diplomatic outcomes, corporate strategies, peace processes, and personal bonds alike. As George Bernard Shaw famously observed, **"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."** To navigate today's communication tapestry, not only do we adopt win-win communication, but we must ensure that it is truly understood in letter and spirit.