

2.6 *Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication: A Model That Works Across Cultures*

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Introduction

When I was twelve I was a member of a swim team. I was a fairly strong swimmer. Sometimes I would swim in the ocean. On one occasion I ventured too far into the ocean on a day when the waves were high enough to be over my head and the currents were strong. When I realized my error, I began to swim toward the shore. However, my return to dry land was difficult as the waves kept trying to push me under and drag me farther out to sea. I could have easily panicked and drowned, but instead I trusted and relied on the training I had received—not to be overtaken by fear and to focus on one stroke at a time. So when wave after wave would come crashing down on my head, I simply took a breath and swam under the surface, resurfacing again to take another breath and repeating that process until I was safely on shore.

Sometimes, the process of communication can be as dangerous as swimming too far out into the ocean. People do get into communications that are sometimes far over their heads. People make the mistake of thinking that because they are able to talk, they are able to communicate. But just as swimming in the ocean involves skills and tools to fall back on when you find yourself in dangerous waters, people also need skills and tools to help them get through some of the dangers lurking in the waters of the process of communication.

What are some of the dangers? One is misunderstanding, and misunderstandings derive from ill-delivered communications. Other dangers in the waters of interpersonal communication include poor listening, an inability or refusal to empathize, defensiveness, sarcasm, inappropriate criticism, and the like. The list of dangers in those waters is almost endless; but most people pretend to themselves that they are quite capable of going through those dangers unscathed when, in reality, they do not have the tools or

skills to swim those waters; and they often drown in damaged interpersonal relationships.

A useful skill that helps to simplify the complexities of interpersonal communication is an understanding of a model called *The Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication*. The Five Levels in order of interpersonal depth are ritual, extended ritual, surface, feelings (about self in relation to content) and feelings (about us and our relationships).

To explore and expand the model and add to the ease of understanding it, the ocean is again used as a metaphor. Picture the First Level, *ritual*, as a high flying bird such as a sea gull circling far above the water ducking in and out of low hanging clouds. The *extended ritual*, or the Second Level of the model, is also above the water, but not quite as high as the birds flying at Level One. The Third Level, *surface*, is just that: the surface of the water. Levels Four and Five, *feelings*, are below the surface. Five, of course, is deeper than Four. However, neither Level Four nor Level Five can be explored, seen or felt until an individual is willing to take a risk and leave his or her safe place on the surface of the water and dive headlong underneath.

The Levels: An Overview

There are no wrong levels. Each level has a legitimate and proper function within the communication process. Additionally, we all have at one time or another, depending upon the circumstance, engaged and used all Five Levels.

Levels One through Three are safe and build a foundation for deepening our interpersonal relationships. It is difficult, if not virtually impossible, to achieve Levels Four and Five without first building a solid communication foundation using Levels One

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through Three. Moreover, it should come as no surprise that Levels One through Three are levels in which individuals feel the most comfort and therefore are used the most.

Levels Four and Five are difficult and require certain skills in order to navigate safely. They are also often seen as scary and among some individuals and organizations, Level Four and Five communications are given the derogatory label: "touch-feely." Through the non-verbal norms of avoidance, organizations, as a whole, teach their leaders to avoid Level Four and Five communications. For example, most managers harshly scold an employee for being late for a meeting (a Level Three communication) rather than give them open feedback in order to discover and to talk about the real reason for being late.

However, most avoidance behavior patterns around Level Four and Five communication are not learned from organizations. Organizations merely reinforce established patterns that are learned through early childhood experiences and carried into adolescence and then into adult life. Basically, we are trained not to engage in Level Four and Five communication.

Another avoidance behavior is the inappropriate stopping of levels. It is often used by people who have a difficult time dealing with feelings: their own and others. By constantly employing a Level One or Two communication style, these individuals manage to manipulate communication to keep them from becoming too deep. The individual in the office who tries to resolve conflicts or disagreements through jokes or changing the subject matter typifies someone who strives to avoid deeper levels of communications.

Level One: Ritual

In 1964, Eric Berne introduced the concept of "Rituals" in his best seller about the psychology of human relations titled, *Games People Play*. Berne defines "rituals" as a simple form of social activity. As defined in this model of interpersonal communication, ritual is the most simple form or level of communication. It is a basic level of communication. Though ritual is the starting point for deepening interpersonal relationships, some interpersonal relationships may never go beyond the simple ritual or Level One.

Consider the following:

Person A is a security guard at a high tech company. He has worked for the company in the

same position for three years. Person B is a software engineer who has also worked for the company for three years. For the last three years, when B has walked passed his station, A has acknowledged B by saying, "Good morning, how are you?" B has always replied, "Fine," smiled, nodded and walked off. Neither A nor B has ever bothered to extend their communication beyond their ritual.

The example above is a classic Level One communication. It is communication that simply allows two people to acknowledge each other as human beings and to acknowledge that each works for the same company. Moreover, Level One communication allows each participant to feel a sense of safety, security and well-being. As noted, although Level One communication is the foundation for deepening interpersonal relationships, Person A and Person B may never deepen their communications and instead continue Level One communication.

Level Two: Extended Ritual

Level Two communication is an extension of Level One. A Level Two communication might sound like the following:

Person A to B as B approaches A's station:
"Good morning, how are you?"

B (nodding and responding with a smile): "Fine."
Person A (as B continues to walk): "That's great. Looks like we're going to have a great day weather-wise."

Person B (pausing to respond): "Yeah, you're probably right about that. Too bad we have to spend it indoors."

Person A: "Yeah, too bad, but have a great day of work."

Person B: "Thanks, you have one too."

The difference between *ritual* and *extended ritual* is that *extended ritual* (unlike *ritual*) may change from day to day. As a rule a *ritual* does not change. The following demonstrates how the *extended ritual* may appear a day later:

Person A: "Good morning, how are you doing today?"

Person B (again nodding and responding with a smile): "Not bad."

Person A: "Good to hear that, and I hope it continues."

Person B: "Thanks a lot and I hope you are doing all right today."

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Person A: "Oh, I'm doing just fine."
Person B: "Great, see you tomorrow."

While there is more depth to the level of communication in *extended ritual* than in *ritual*, it is nevertheless a very safe level of communication. On those two levels, of communication, Person A and Person B can engage each other without fear of hurting the other. Additionally, on those levels there is no commitment or danger of misinterpreted communication. These two levels enable us to keep a safe distance from others; so safe that we do not need to know another person's name to communicate on those levels. Indeed, Level One and Two communication can be carried on with complete strangers. And most communications with an unfamiliar person are Level One and Two communications.

While Level One and Two communications are very superficial, they are necessary and needed because they serve as a foundation to build trust and safety in interpersonal relationships. In doing that, they serve to assist people to be able to move into the deeper levels of communication.

Level Three: Surface

Along with Level Two, Level Three is the level that most people operate on the most in a given day, especially in their place of work. Level Three or surface communications involve giving and receiving information; analyzing projects in meetings; problem-solving about office procedures; sharing and talking about tasks; sharing information about self and self-accomplishments (self-disclosure) on a safe level; making statements regarding favorite hobbies or sports teams; talking about cute things your children have done; taking political stands and the like. Again, using the previous examples of Person A and B, a Level Three communication might be as follows:

Person A to B as B approaches station: "Good morning, how are you?"

Person B (nodding and responding with a smile): "Fine."

Person A: "That's great. By the way, we've been saying hi to each other for three years, and I'm sorry to say, I don't know your name or the area in which you work."

Person B (while extending his hand to shake): "I'm Jim Robinson and I work in engineering."

Person A: "Pleased to meet you Jim. My name is David Mann and you already know that I work for security."

Jim: "Well it is good to finally know the name

behind the face I've seen for the past three years. See you tomorrow David."

Notice, however, that Jim and David still do not really *know* each other. They know the other's name only. And though they have made a personal connection and no doubt feel safer in their relationship, it still has very little, if any, depth. It is also important to note that although Jim and David reached a Level Three communication by sharing information (content concerning their names and work areas), they could easily return to a Level One or Two communication the next day. For example:

David: "Good morning, Jim, how are you doing?"

Jim: "Fine David, and you?"

David: "Just fine."

Jim: "Well, have a good day." (he walks on)

Regressing to the previous level of communication may happen when one or both parties feel uncomfortable with the new level. In the above example, the only way to keep communication from reverting to a level of less depth would be for either Jim or David or both to keep pressing for more information about the other: what he does for the company; where he lives; is he married; does he have children; etc.

Level Four: Feelings (About Self in Relation to Content)

Level Four is just below the surface. It involves risk-taking. It occurs when the information provided on Level Three becomes more personal and has depth. It is more than Jim conveying to David that he works in engineering. It is Jim taking a risk after the relationship has developed between the two of them, to let David know of his real feelings concerning the engineering division and his work there. A Level Four communication might be as follows:

David: "Good morning Jim. How are you doing?"

Jim: "Well to be honest, Dave, not too good. I feel just awful."

David: "What's up?"

Jim: "To tell you the truth, I'm upset about the way my performance appraisal went yesterday. I was put down and eaten alive . . . (pausing and shaking his head) it still doesn't feel too good. I don't know what to do."

Here, Jim takes the risk to share his true feelings of the moment with David. He also reveals to David that he

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has a certain despair as he says, "I don't know what to do." If you were David how would you respond? Do you respond on Level Four and stay beneath the surface with Jim? Or would you feel so overcome with fear and have the need to come up above the water for air that you'd give a Level Three or Two response? Before exploring those questions, the fifth level of communication model is reviewed.

Level Five: Feelings (About Us and Our Relationship)

Level Five is the deepest of the five levels of communication. It is the level that involves the greatest risks. It is the level of giving and receiving honest feedback; listening to another without getting defensive when hard messages are communicated; responding to another's communication in ways that helps the other to clarify his or her message; and reflecting the feelings of another. In general, it is the level of being able to talk to a person or confidant in an honest and straight forward way about your feelings concerning the relationship between the two of you. Continuing the example of the Level Four communication from where Jim tells David, "I don't know what to do." a Level Five communication might be:

David: "Are you asking me what to do, Jim?"

Jim: "I guess in a way I am, but I know you can't tell me. It's something I need to figure out for myself. But thanks for your support. And something else, Dave. I'm glad we connected. Even though it's only been for about a couple of months. You're a good person and friend. I'm only sorry we wasted three years."

Dave: "Thanks for the feedback, Jim. I appreciate your saying that. I too value our relationship. As for helping you on this performance appraisal thing, why don't we have lunch later today and talk some more. I'm not an engineer or a HR person, but I know that sometimes, just talking things through helps. And I am willing to listen."

In the last example, both Jim and David acknowledge the value of their relationship. It is a "here and now" communication in which they consider a number of issues (most unspoken) current in their relationship. Trust, the value of a close friendship, and honest straightforward communications are but a few of the ingredients that hallmark Level Four and Five communications.

Level Four and Five forms of communication stay focused on the "here and now" rather than the "there and then." The "there and then" communications focus on things outside of the immediate relationship and are generally more shallow than "here and now" communications. "There and then" communications can be found on Levels Two and Three.

Consider the following Level Four example:

David: "Good morning, Jim. How are you doing today?"

Jim: "Well, to be honest Dave, not too good. I feel just awful."

David: "Sorry to hear about that, but cheer up; it's a brand new day. Weather's nice and our basketball teams are in the playoffs." (Jim pauses)

Jim: "You're right, thanks a lot." (pause) "Well back to work for me, talk to you later."

David did not allow Jim to stay on the deeper communication level. Because of previous communications, Jim feels he can trust David enough to offer the opportunity for the two of them to communicate on Level Four or Five. David, for whatever reasons, rebuffs Jim's offer by taking the communication to somewhere between Level Two and Level Three. His "sorry to hear that but cheer up," statement is a good example of pseudo Level Four communication, in which the feeling statement is false. If David was truly sorry and empathetic and had concern about Jim's emotional state, he would have kept the communication at the level Jim approached him.

David's behavior indicates that he is not ready to engage on a deeper level of communication with Jim, for whatever reasons. What is of importance is that over a period, David and Jim established rules and norms for their relationship. In David's mind, the unwritten and unspoken rule was that Level Four or Five communications would be avoided.

Jim, on the other hand, may have had a different set of rules and norms in his head. He may have assumed that because David was so talkative and friendly that it was all right to share interpersonal feelings within their relationship. What Jim discovered was he was totally wrong and that David was not ready or unwilling to go to a deeper level of communication. Jim extended the invitation to go beneath the surface and David refused.

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Jim's effort to deepen the communication was appropriate. The two had engaged in a ritualistic communication for many years. They then moved to surface level communication, discovering each other's name, learning about areas of work, and probably making other surface connections around sports, hobbies and politics. So after several months of "there and then" communications, it was both appropriate and natural for Jim to test the waters to see if David would like to deepen their relationship. That testing could have been done consciously or unconsciously. In most instances individuals try to move from surface levels of communications to deeper levels unconsciously.

Because Jim was appropriate in the way in which he tried to deepen the communication (especially backing away from doing that when David indicated unwillingness), he left the door open for David to continue to exchange pleasantries and greetings on Levels One through Three. Moreover, if in the days or weeks to come, Jim receives behavioral or verbal data from David that indicates a change in attitude toward deeper communication, Jim may again try to deepen the relationship through to Level Four communication.

Inappropriate deepening of communication involves an abrupt stop across levels. Skipping across levels in either direction, such as taking a Level Two communication to Level Five or vice versa, causes miscommunications; leaves individuals feeling unheard; and plants the seeds for unnecessary future conflicts and confrontation. This example illustrates the point:

Person C is the new receptionist at the company.
Person D is a sales manager who is also new to the company.

Person C: "How are you today?" (Level One)

Person D: "I am so angry at the world because of the outcome of yesterday's sales meeting that I could skin a cat." (Level Four)

How does Person C respond? More than likely he or she would stay with a Level One or Two communication in order not to get caught in the dangers of the deep waters posed by Person D. Something such as, "Oh, well the weather's nice," might be heard from C. Both C and D are new to the company; they do not know each other and have no communication history other than ritualistic communication. The response of D to a ritualistic communication was very inappropriate. (It was the equivalent of the creature from the Black Lagoon

surfacing to drag an unsuspecting prey into the depths of his underwater cave.) Chances are the next time C observes D walking or coming into his or her area, he or she will make a hasty exit or bury themselves in "busy work" in order to go unnoticed. Another danger of skipping across communication levels is that doing such destroys a deeper relationship potential.

Again, there are no wrong levels of communication; there are various situations in which certain levels are inappropriate. Understanding the current situation and the context provides individuals with information for finding the appropriate level of communication. However, in general a carefully thought out Level Three communication can keep us safe and free from being misunderstood in most situations.

The Importance of Levels Four and Five (Communications for Organizations)

In many organizations, because of the informal norms, individuals feel that in order to get up the ladder of success, they must engage in all sorts of ritualistic behaviors. The following illustrates this:

Supervisor: "How are you doing today?"

New Employee: "Just great. I love it here and by the way, that was a great presentation you gave yesterday."

Individuals who work in companies in which the informal norms of the company only reinforce and foster ritualistic communication are soon locked into or stuck in unhealthy and unhelpful relationships. In the previous example, a supervisor might leave the encounter feeling flattered and believing the new employee is going to work out just fine. However, it may be that the new employee feels overwhelmed and confused by the job. What he's picked up from others, is the established norm of the organization—open and honest communication is not accepted. So, instead of communicating his feelings to his supervisor, he chooses to stay isolated in ritualistic communication. That behavior leads to a waste of time and energy for the new employee and the company.

Organizations and companies that encourage Level Four and Five communications have an unlimited capacity for growth and development. They have that capacity because they create an organizational culture that values not only the content of what one says, but feelings about the content. Such organizations foster a climate of trust and collaboration. These organizations, the research shows, do the best under any economic

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condition. In order to develop and maintain organizational culture that is collaborative, the members of the organization must be helped to communicate beyond ritualistic levels or new ideas and factors that contribute to company development will not flow.

Fostering Level Four and Five communications are equally important between individuals. These levels provide for the development of interpersonal relationships. When individuals in interpersonal relationships keep the communication process at ritualistic or surface levels, the relationship soon becomes very frustrated and dissatisfying because it lacks depth. Interpersonal relationships that lack depth quickly deteriorate.

However, relationships can not solely exist on Level Four and Five communications. Individuals need a break from them. Just as one can only stay under the surface of the water for a limited time before needing to resurface for air, the same is true of Level Four and Five communications. One needs to come up for air from them.

Additionally, communication on the deeper levels, though growth inducing, is tiresome work. People need to pace themselves when engaging in deeper levels of communication, paying close attention to the need to resurface. And when the need arises, they should use appropriate communication to move upward step-by-step through the levels.

The interaction below demonstrates how communication can move in and out of Levels Four and Five. And when one or both of the parties feel the need to appropriately come up for air, they acknowledge that and then smoothly move to Level Three.

New Employee: "I want to thank you for taking the time to really go over my performance appraisal. I now understand it clearly and can see the areas I need to improve. Let me tell you though, it was rough and hard to hear some of the comments, but they're helpful and I sincerely thank you."

Supervisor: "I want to thank you too, for receiving the feedback I gave in a nondefensive manner. I feel good about our process. I also know that when we hired you, we hired a person who not only has a lot to contribute to us, but an

individual I personally hope will stay with us for a long time."

New Employee: "That's good to hear, thanks."

Supervisor: "Anything else you want to discuss?"

New Employee: "No. I feel we've finished. This has been a fulfilling, but exhausting process, so let's call it a day." (they shake hands)

Supervisor: "I feel the same way. So, what have you planned for the weekend?"

New Employee: "I've made plans to play a little golf with my college roommate."

Supervisor: "Sounds good. I hope your game is better than mine."

Team Building and Communications

"Team building" is often used by companies to prepare individuals to work on and to contribute to system-wide projects. However, many teams are built on Level One through Three forms of communication. Because of the hard and often risky work that is posed by Level Four and Five communications, the companies side-step those levels. Companies and organizations that don't train people in how to use Level Four and Five communications pay a steep price later. The price they pay comes in the form of trying to motivate and get production from a dysfunctional team. Rarely, if ever, do teams built on Level One through Three communications come together in synergistic harmony. Those teams generally lack trust, cohesion and openness. Moreover, steady interactions and communications on Levels One through Three within a team build "competitiveness." Individuals choose to work only on their portion of the project, rather than understand its contribution to the whole team effort: "I can't trust the others because they don't know what they are doing," or "As long as I do well, I'll get the next promotion." Often these phrases echo in the minds of members of a dysfunctional team. As pointed out, a team becomes dysfunctional when members are not trained for, neglect to, or are just afraid to dive into the waters of Level Four and Five communications.

We experience a deeper sense of satisfaction when we communicate with others on Levels Four and Five. Communicating on those levels makes relationships have deeper meaning and bring on a sense of belonging, being cared for, being heard, being valued and being respected. Additionally, the potential for self-growth and development within relationships is always greater than deeper levels of communication are used.

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The Five Levels and Communicating Cross-Culturally

The model of *The Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication* is also consistent across and within cultures. Few cultures in their socialization process teach individuals the benefits of Level Four and Five communication. In most cultures, just as in the dominant culture in the United States, these two levels, when and if used, are generally used in close or intimate relationships.

Understanding and utilizing Level Four and Five communication increases the potential for gain in the area of cross-cultural communication. This is especially true for organizations that desire cultural diversity.

The need for advancement in the area of cross-cultural communication is never more apparent than today. The polarization between groups of people, in large part, is due to years of miscommunication and misinterpretation of the communications on both sides. Real communication, both sides hearing, understanding and empathizing with the other side, will not occur until trust, cohesion and openness are established. In order to do that, risks must be taken—to go beyond Level One through Three communications. Unless we are willing to risk Level Four and Five communications, we may be doomed to grapple with the problem of strained relationships between groups of people.

What that means on an organizational level, is that each side has had limited experiences with the other and has a tendency to judge future relationship experiences based on rumor, media sensationalism, third hand sources and the like. In essence, each group tries to keep a clear distance from the other, but with the absence of true deep level communication, something always happens that creates a rift to widen the gap between the parties. When a conflict begins to occur between individuals of different groups, rather than working on it using good communication skills because of the lack of trust, grievances usually result.

For example, there is no arguing that racism does, and will probably for a long time to come, exist in our society. But all conflicts and disagreements between Blacks and Whites need not always be seen through racist's lenses. Sometimes what is interpreted as racism is a communication style that stays on a

superficial level. How many times have Blacks in diversity workshops heard statements from Whites such as: "You're just too sensitive," or "Look, my ancestors didn't own any slaves, so don't blame me." or "Hey, you've got the same opportunities to succeed as I do, look at Michael Jordan or Oprah; they made it." Level One through Three comments, such as the previous, do nothing except to deflect what Black members of the work force try to deeply and sincerely communicate to their organizations: "Treat us equally." Such Level Three communications by Whites can come out of the frustration of not knowing how to communicate with Blacks. And the communications create further distrust.

How might Level Four and Five communication work between Blacks and Whites on an organizational level? The following example illustrates how a Level Four and Five communication might sound between a Black employee and a White supervisor:

Supervisor: "Let me begin by saying I know you've had a difficult time adjusting to our company, but I also want you to know that I, and many others in this organization, want you here. We value your contributions and we want you to succeed. So what I want to know is how can I help you do that?"

Employee: "To be honest, you've already helped me by just letting me know that my work has been valued. I've felt so isolated since I've been here that I thought that I was doing something wrong. Isolation is what has been difficult."

Moving into Deeper Levels

Many times, employees in organizations who are not members of the organization's dominant culture group feel isolated and alone. Though some companies have established "mentoring programs" to try and prevent feelings of loneliness and isolation, all too often mentors employ Level One through Three communications. By keeping the communication on Levels One through Three, the relationship between the mentor and the mentee never goes beyond a superficial surface level. And though the mentee may learn the rules and regulations of the company, she or he may feel isolated, unwanted and not part of the organization because the mentee is not invited to share who she or he is as a person. In the worse case scenario, because of the distance the mentee feels from the mentor, the mentee may soon come to the faulty conclusion that the organization is, for instance, racist or sexist.

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Obstacles to Deeper Levels

Fear of saying the wrong thing is but one obstacle that keep individuals from using deeper levels of communication. That fear is both intracultural and intercultural. Ironically, individuals need to understand when feelings on Level Four and Five communications are provided—at appropriate moments and in appropriate contexts—“wrong things” can not be said. Moreover, conflicts between individuals are generally never resolved until conflicting parties are able to communicate effectively on Levels Four and Five.

Fear of hurting the other person is another hindrance that interferes with people deepening their levels of communication. It is true that direct feedback, especially direct feedback that is critical in nature, can hurt. However, if the feedback is warranted, it is best that it be direct rather than indirect. Indirect feedback comes in through the back door. Indirect feedback hurts more and generally leads to extending a gap in communication or giving birth to an unneeded and destructive conflict. Additionally, it is important to note that many times when an individual says he or she cannot go to a deeper level of communication for fear of hurting the other person, the individual is generally saying on an unconscious level, “I’m afraid I won’t be able to handle the communication.” Unconsciously, the individual has determined that he or she is not strong enough or equipped enough to swim into the deeper levels of communication.

A third reason which stands in the way of people in organizations not working to obtain deeper levels of communication, is the belief that expressing feelings have absolutely no legitimacy in the work place. It can be agreed that a work environment that has a constant flow of Level Four and Five communication is not desirable. In such an environment, work would be slow in getting done, as individuals would be exhausted from their continuous forays into the depths of communication. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated in numerous examples above that Level Four and Five communications are necessary to organizational growth, to improve organizational climate and to strengthen organizational diversity.

The key to all of this is to understand *all* the levels of communication and to use the appropriate level for the appropriate situation.

The fourth hindrance to Level Four and Five communication is individuals assuming that when

presented with a personal issue or feelings of another, they must “fix” that person’s problem. We make the erroneous assumption they want us to fix their problem. In general, when an individual is presented with Level Four communication, the presenter of the communication is usually looking for a sympathetic ear, empathy for their situation and a response of Level Four and Five communication. However, what is generally given by the receiver to the presenter is an instant shift to a Level Three communication that revolves around problem-solving which comes in the form of, “Have you tried . . .” The quick shift to problem-solving creates an immediate distance between the communicating parties, because as noted, the presenter wants a deep level of communication, not an instant resolution to his or her issue.

Effectively Using the Model

The Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication is a very useful model for understanding the complexities of the process of communication. Through its use, people can diagnose the effectiveness or efficacy of communication and use the information to make an informed choice about how the communication can proceed. For example, if a high performance work team has a member who constantly jokes inappropriately to deflect feelings when other members want to get to a deeper level of communication, the team leader may talk to that member about the interruptive behaviors (Level Four). And yet with knowledge of how to use the model, especially understanding how it functions to deepen the communication process, any member of a team is capable of providing feedback to an individual about disruptive behavior that interferes with a team reaching its potential.

The process to understanding and using the model effectively is in itself, a five-step assessment process.

Step 1: Self-Analysis

Ask the following:

- At what level of communication do I operate the most?
- Do I operate at safe levels (One through Three) all the time? If so, why?
- Do I allow myself to be open to Levels Four and Five? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Do I block or interfere with another’s Level Four or Five communication by redirecting the

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communication to content subject matter, telling a joke or being sarcastic?

- Do I scare others away from me by jumping too fast into Level Four or Five communication?

Step 2: Self-Assessment

The second assessment step to effectively using the model is another self-analysis. In this self-assessment, the individual determines whether he or she possess the interpersonal tools to safely navigate through all five levels of communication. Tools such as listening actively, providing “I” statements, giving and receiving feedback, being able to appropriately self-disclose and responding empathetically are all helpful and needed. Moreover, understanding and practicing with a model such as the Johari Window (*see appropriate articles in this book*) helps in acquiring the tools. Such practice can readily and is encouraged to take place in a T Group. One purpose of the T Group is to help individuals to learn to sustain their capacity to communicate at Levels Four and Five without the fear of drowning in a sea of emotion. Additionally, individuals who have never been in a T Group or no longer have access to one can always enlist the aid of close friends and intimate partners to help with practice and providing feedback about their use of the tools.

Step 3: Determining Communication Level

Specifically, in the third step of the process, the individual gains an understanding of the current communication level during the interpersonal interaction. The individual simply asks him or herself, “On what communication level are we within in this relationship?” Additionally, the individual determines if he or she is a major contributor to keeping the communication on the particular level.

Step 4: Adjusting the Level

For step four of the assessment process, the individual considers the following: “Are we (within

this relationship) doing what we are supposed to be doing? If not, perhaps I need to suggest or just overly change the communication level so that we can do what we have contracted to do.” For example, a group of workers after completing a major task agree to go out after work to a local pub. At the pub they engage in Level Three and Four conversations about the work. Is this unwinding or relaxing? For some perhaps, but a group member may want to ask aloud to other members the question of step four. This is a Level Four communication that asks other group members to let go of work and just have fun and relax (Level One through Three communication).

Step 5: Setting the Goal

The last step in the assessment process is similar to step four. The difference is that using information that has been gathered in steps three and four, the individual again determines whether the communication level is leading to the group’s agreed upon goals. Based upon that assessment, the individual decides without articulating it, whether there is need to push for another level. If the data indicate there is, then he or she makes appropriate statements to move toward that level.

Conclusion

Returning to my opening story, safely on shore, I turned and looked at the waters of the ocean. If not for my tools and skills, I surely would have drowned. I have always had respect for anything that is as overwhelming and overpowering as the ocean. As a twelve year old, I thought nothing could come close to the ocean in terms of magnitude. However, as I grew older, I discovered that the process of communicating within interpersonal relationships could be just as overwhelming and overpowering as ocean currents. It too demands respect as well as a knowledge of tools and skills to keep afloat.