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INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: OPEN AND CLOSED

This paper briefly describes two communication patterns: open and closed. I will point out some of the most important features of both, I will say a little about how to work for improved interpersonal communication, and I will give some reading suggestions about improving interpersonal communication and relationships.

Any group-family, institution, classroom - may be termed a communication system. The word 'system' implied definite patterns about who communicated to whom, and when. Basically, a closed system is one where the leader(s) attempt to maintain law and order through the use of actual or implied force--both physical and psychological. A closed family system, for example, is one where the people in power (usually parents, or one parent) try to prevent changes from taking place within the family and also resist outside influence. A classroom which is characterized as a closed system is one where most of the explicit communication is one-way--from teacher to pupils, and one where there are definite rules about who may speak, when, to whom, and about what. Many topics are usually forbidden.

An open family system is one in which change and growth is encouraged, one in which choices (and their consequences) are offered, and one where members try to deal directly with actual interactions rather than relying on law and power to resolve problems and conflicts. In open systems, the members share those decisions which are important to them, whereas in closed families there is always some one person who knows best. In closed systems what counts is power and doing what is right. In open systems what counts is the self-worth or value of each individual system member.

My experience as a psychologist and therapist tells me that there are a great many closed systems and most of them have major interpersonal conflict problems. There are also many systems which are in between--closed in some areas, more open in others. In my view, many classrooms are in this category. There are few really open systems. I believe that the individual has the greatest value and that the fullest development of the individual occurs in 'more open' rather than 'more closed' systems. Therefore, I try, by example, in my teaching, and in counselling, to bring about openness--within families, within schools, within classrooms and within other groups.

In diagram 1 on the following page which I have adapted in part from Virginia Satir's Peoplemaking, some important features of closed and open communication systems are indicated.

Diagram 1. COMPARISON OF OPEN AND CLOSED COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

SYSTEM ELEMENT	CLOSED SYSTEM	OPEN SYSTEM
<u>SELF-WORTH</u> of system members (positive feelings about who one is and what one does)	Low	High
<u>COMMUNICATION</u>	evasive, ambiguous, muddled, unclear non-specific, double-binding	direct, honest, clear, specific, congruent messages
<u>COMMUNICATION ROLES (SKILLS)</u>	placates, blames, generalizes, distracts, closes out, Impersonalizes ("we", "they", "one"), Detached/cools, Demanding, Defensive/aggressive, Rejecting	clarifies, empathizes, shares, rewards/supports, sustains, extends, waits, Personalizes ("I"), warm/firm, Negotiating/mutualizing
<u>SYSTEM RULES ABOUT WHO MAY DO WHAT AND WHEN</u>	Fixed, based on authority, Often out-of-date, Not open for discussion, Frequently hidden, unstated.	Open for discussion, stated, discussed, changed as need arises, freedom to comment on any topic.
<u>OUTCOMES</u>	Resentment, retaliation, chaos, sabotage, accidental, rebellion, submission, apathy, boredom	Constructive, appropriate re-direction, cooperation involvement, mutuality, related to reality
<u>FEEDBACK RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS</u>	Compulsive talking or apathetic silence, non-listening, generally critical reaction to others' ideas and behaviors, high defense level, dependent or counter dependent, threatens and pleads, shirks responsibility, capricious and suspicious.	Interested in sharing ideas, listens and responds, meaningful exchange of feelings, low defense level, secure and calm, responsible, interdependent, mutualizing, reliable, trusting.

I will say something about the "effective" communicator, keeping in mind the classroom. To begin with, the effective teacher/communicator has a healthy self-respect--for himself, and for others. He believes in his own ability and he believes in the capacity of others (including children) to grow, make decisions, become independent and live a unique life. In short he believes that people are important!

In his communication he is honest. He tells it like it is. He doesn't speak honestly just to win his way, rather he has learned that in the long run (as well as the short) honesty is reality. He accepts that living is both pleasure and pain, and doesn't "stretch" the truth or keep secrets or to avoid pain. He makes sense and doesn't confuse himself or others. When you talk to him he responds specifically to you rather than generalizing or "beating around the bush". When he doesn't know, he says "I don't know". He doesn't say "I don't know", however, just to avoid talking about something. The effective communicator does not speak out of both sides of his mouth at once. What he says is believable. You don't get the feeling that you are being "conned", or lied to, or played with, or put in a double bind. His actions match his words. When he has feelings, he expresses them. When you have feelings and express them he listens and is able to receive your feelings without making you feel "little", "stupid", or "no-good". In other words, he is congruent: His words, feelings and actions all fit each other.

The effective communicator tries to understand rather than "win" or come out on top. In order to understand he often tries to clarify what he hears, what other people are trying to say. He avoids ridicule and is willing to take seriously what is serious to another person. He doesn't treat everything as unimportant or as a joke. He is a genuine listener. By careful listening the communicative teacher can both demonstrate that he understands and also give 'feedback' to students.

With an effective communicator, anything can be brought up for discussion, no matter how personal, distasteful, how strange, or how painful it is. He will try to listen and try to help the other person (and himself) understand. He never retreats into such dodges as "now, you mustn't say that", or "let's be objective and keep personalities out of this", or "children are to be seen and not heard", and so on. This does not mean that he will agree, or disagree--it does mean that he will do his best to listen, share, discuss, and trade opinions on whatever is important to the people around him.

He definitely avoids four destructive (although frequent) communication patterns: placating, blaming, generalizing, distracting, and closing-out. A placater says things so another person won't get mad. A blamer gives all the responsibility and the faults to other people. A computer gives long-winded, intellectual explanations which further confuse whatever is being talked about. A distracter pretends nothing is the matter, usually by changing the topic. Consider one example of A bumping B's arm: Placating: "Forgive me, I'm so clumsy"; Blaming: "Get your stupid arm out of the way"; Computing: "Given the time and space dimensions of this room, a minor arm to arm contact seemed unavoidable"; Distracting: "Does that sound like the phone ringing?". In place of these four patterns, the effective communicator utilizes one pattern: He clearly and specifically responds and listens to what is actually being communicated. We might say he "levels".

As for helpful reading on interpersonal communication, I sincerely believe that any system in which the members communicate with each other and relate to each other along the lines suggested in the books listed below will have few, major communication problems.

- Gordon, Thomas. Parent Effectiveness Training. New York:
Peter H. Wyden, publisher, 1970. Also Teacher Effectiveness Training.
- Ginnott, Haim. Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and
Teachers. New York: MacMillan & Co., 1972.
- Satir, Virginia. Peoplemaking. Palo Alto, Calif.: Science
and Behavior Books, 1972.