

COMMUNICATION OR CONFLICT

roads to better understanding between nurses, patient, health team and public

by

MAGDA KELBER

AT this stage in our Congress, not one of us can have failed to become painfully aware of the difficulties we have in understanding each other and making ourselves understood—in other words; the difficulties of communication. This term “Communication” has ceased to be the property of the engineer denoting telephones and telegraphs or of the linguist who enquires into the speech process or of the social scientist who uses it to describe human interaction. It has become a common tool indicating—as new words often do—a problem that has acquired new and special urgency.

Not that the phenomenon itself is of recent origin. Communication is as ancient as mankind itself. For us, human beings, it is one of the basic necessities of life. Helen Keller speaks eloquently for all those unable to express themselves when she describes the feelings of impotent rage she experienced because she was not able to make herself understood and, then the sudden illumination that lit up her darkness when for the first time she became aware of the existence and meaning of the word “water”. Our organism is in constant communication with itself and its environment. Human growth is, among other things, the development of the capacity for communication. We learn to observe the world and people around us, to react to them and to attract their attention. We interpret, evaluate and select the signals pressing in upon us from all sides. On the other hand, we affect our environment, create our own life-space and our individual pattern. Amidst this continuous process we change and retain our identity all the same. By communication with parents, family, peers and elders, we

Dr. Magda Kelber, Germany—social economist, writer, teacher and, until recently, Director of Haus Schwalbach—leadership training centre—Wiesbaden.

Dr. Kelber has studied at the universities of Erlangen, Vienna, Konigsberg and Munich. She left Germany in 1933 to work in England in the field of adult education until, in 1946, she returned to Germany with the Friends Relief Service. She has worked in various countries with nurses of many nationalities, in conferences, leadership courses or in planning reorganisation. She is the author of a number of books, including language textbooks.

learn to live with our fellows in a cultural pattern which, at first, we believe to be universally valid. Social order is created by parts interacting in many directions as in a football team the members create the whole by which they again are directed and through which they direct each other.

If, then, communication is such a natural and, indeed, indispensable part of human living, why should it have become the main topic for this Congress? Is it just a fashion to look on it as a problem?

Let us examine our theme again: communication or conflict. Does it imply that communication will automatically eliminate conflict, and that conflict should be eliminated? Clearly, the former goes against all experience. How often has not communication aggravated anger, sharpened fear and anxiety, increased hostility, and deepened hatred. Our time is full of bitter and threatening conflicts—among individual people in families and working life, among groups in society representing conflicting interests, among nations, ideologies, and religions.

As yet, we have learnt little about non-violent ways of resolving them. Aggression is countered by aggression, threat by threat, and force by force, and the vicious cycle

is perpetuated. Nor can we hope to eliminate conflict by trying to wean the human race from aggressiveness. There is good reason to believe that aggressiveness is as necessary to life as is friendship. Indeed, as Konrad Lorenz¹ has shown, it seems that, without aggressiveness, there cannot be any personal bonds either. There is a creative energy in conflict that we eliminate at our peril. For it to be constructive it should, however, be freed from selfish motivations which consider every controversy as a struggle for power and always find good arguments to rationalise obstinacy and fanaticism.

In this Congress, too, there have been and will be conflicting points of view, and it cannot be the object of communication to gloss over the differences. That would stifle progress. There is, however, a world of difference between destructive strife and provocative controversy. Discussion should serve to clarify our disagreements, to analyse the reasons for them, to sift real from only apparent controversy, and to help us recognise our hidden and often unconscious motivations.

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Communication should turn enemies into opponents, opponents into competitors, and competitors into partners in a common cause, in the interest of which they can welcome diversity as a wholesome stimulus to ever renewed effort. Diversity and polarity can lead to synthesis richer than the original elements added together.

Our subject, then, can be restated to run: How can we communicate so as to turn destructive conflict into constructive controversy?

First of all, we need to look into the reasons why communication has become so much more difficult nowadays.

There is, to begin with, the problem of sheer numbers. Gone are the days when people lived in a stable world amidst a limited number of lasting relationships. We modern people move from one post to another, and in each new post, we make new contacts without necessarily cutting off old ones. In our profession, we have to keep in touch with a great many people. Patients come and go, and each one of them expects real understanding. We belong to a variety of groups, all of which demand and offer communication of some sort: families, friends, professional organisations, hobby groups, political parties, social action associations and others which challenge us. There may easily come a saturation point at which communication breaks down. At this Congress, too, the enormity of numbers tends to silence us. We are trying to counteract it by offering opportunities for smaller groups to do things together in professional visits, during social occasions, various trips, coffee breaks and meal times and, of course, to-morrow morning's discussion meetings. Also, the colour spots on your tags structure the total membership into several language communities who should be able to find and understand each other more easily that way.

However, here we come up against the second major difficulty: our basic differences in cultural background and languages. The confusion of so many languages can be had enough in itself. You walk up to someone with the red spot on her label because that indicates the

language you are able to understand and to speak although it is not your own. And then you realise that your colleague is speaking her own tongue with ease and rapidity whilst you have to grapple with words and have to limit yourself to what you can say instead of what you want to say. Thereupon the other person becomes exceedingly kind and speaks slowly and raises her voice a little and uses one-syllable words, and that causes you to stop talking. You know very well that you would not seem naive to her if only you could use your own language. The unavoidable limitations of conference languages create privileged and under-privileged conference members at all international gatherings.

But, of course, the difficulty goes much deeper. Languages are the result and expression of our cultural background in every sense. Even among those of us who share a language, understanding is not always easy. The English and the Americans are, as Bernard Shaw remarked, separated by a common language. Within a nation, different regions, professions, social strata, and generations develop their own special dialects which serve as a kind of shorthand and exclude the non-initiated from communication. The outsider, however, all too easily becomes the stranger and, before long, the enemy. In these days of ideological conflict many of us go through the painful experience of using our common native language and yet speaking to each other in a foreign tongue.

Added to the enormous diversity of people we have to communicate with, there is the immensity and complexity of the messages to be transmitted and received. News reaches us from all over the globe and it touches on all spheres of life. The mail can hardly be coped with, and the telephone makes us accessible day and night. Professional literature in every conceivable field grows at such a rate that nobody except computers can hope to keep up with it. At the same time, specialisation leads to ever increasing difficulties in interdisciplinary communication as terminology has to be created to serve rapidly developing concepts. And yet, citizens need to be informed

about developments in the sciences, in economics, politics, and international affairs if they are to form intelligent judgments and come to responsible decisions. There is a need for translating technical languages of various disciplines into communication that can be understood by ordinary citizens. Too many people need to communicate too much to too many—that is the modern communication problem in a nutshell.

That, alas, is not the end of the problem. There are snags in the communication process itself which need to be closely watched, snags located within its several agents.

There is, first of all, the communicator—that is, for instance, you at this Congress trying to talk to your colleagues. Behind and apart from the language problem already touched upon, we all have our personal idiosyncracies and difficulties. The strangeness of the situation causes most of us to be a little anxious and self-conscious. And, as we know, anxiety makes for a low I.Q. with all of us! True enough, the cautious politeness of the beginning phase has given way to more ease and confidence. We find words more readily, understand their meanings better, and we do not mind making mistakes so much. But there are other possible snags. Some of us have said the same things so many times that we get tired of saying them over again, ignoring the fact that there are always newcomers to whom those very things are fresh, exciting and of vital importance. Sometimes, we do not want to part with information for fear it might be used against us or make us redundant. And when we do communicate we frequently speak not so much to real person as to a preconceived stereotype of 'the' American, 'the' young student nurse, or 'the' medical doctor. We do not reach them because we are projecting images on to them which are derived from our own emotional biases and do not correspond to reality.

Unfortunately, we cannot solve the problem by deciding not to yield to prejudice any more. Preconceived notions are the stuff we live on. We must need live in a world of images, interpretations of reality on which we have agreed in

order to be able to use the symbols of language at all. How would I know what you meant by the word 'malaria'? Surely, it will mean something different to the patient or to the doctor, to the patient's family or to the medical research person, to the manufacturer of DDT or the biologist trying to solve the problem of poisonous insecticides, to the minister of health of a country still struggling with the disease or to us Central Europeans who know it almost only by hearsay. How easy it is to misunderstand one another because we take it for granted that we all mean the same thing. But we simply cannot examine all our preconceived ideas for their validity, and we have to take the greater part of our notions on trust. In a society allowing for and believing in, diverse views and value systems, there are many groups competing for our support and exploiting our weakness towards prejudice.

Mutual understanding is threatened when groups shut themselves off and begin to see the 'others' through the spectacles of group prejudices. Human growth is a constant effort to escape from some of the illusions about the world, about one's fellow human beings, and above all, about oneself, and to acquire notions approaching reality more closely. Pre-judgments should become preliminary judgments always open to revision in the light of better knowledge. When we begin to see our partner as he is we can 'speak' to his condition. In doing so, we also accept ourselves as we are. Seeing the other side also implies seeing that it is the other side.

Even then we come up against insurmountable barriers to understanding. Our deepest experiences defy words. Frequently, they lie below the threshold of being articulated or of being clearly conceived. Poetry, painting, music, dance and mime sometimes approach them. But who among your patients can really express in so many words the turmoil of emotions assailing him after he has been told a threatening diagnosis? Fundamentally, we have no access to another person's inner world. Even in very close relationships, we can only guess, surmise and get intuitive

glimpses. Words, glances and gestures remain inadequate tools of communication.

Yet, the medium we use does affect the communication process in its own right. Face-to-face communication makes possible immediate responses, interaction, clarification, joint thinking and a mutual learning process. It protects us from taking too final a stand too soon from which we cannot retract. The spoken word, however, should not be contradicted by our body language. Amicable words are invalidated by a coldly scrutinising or evasive look, by leaning backwards or being distracted, and the tone of your voice can make or mar your message. Emotions are more eloquent than words. 'What you are speaking so loud that I cannot hear what you say.' Written messages, on the other hand, give you the opportunity for systematic presentation, careful wording, and considered statements anticipating all possible challenges. In vital instructions, writing is often the only safeguard against error. But the written word does entail the danger of our becoming rigid and finding it difficult to modify our position without losing face. Controversies conducted by letters and publications are the high road to personal hostility. The same people may discover in face-to-face conversation that their disagreements were derived from different data and or from unspoken assumptions and that clarification of such causes can help both of them to deeper insights.

It is exactly at this point that another link in the chain of communication becomes significant: the mediator. His roles are described by a variety of terms. He can be a mere messenger going from office to office. He can have the difficult assignment of interpreting from one language to another. We are realising the intricacies of this role at this very moment. Good interpretation demands, in addition to expert knowledge, an awareness of one's own preferences and biases and the strength of mind to prevent them from interfering with objectivity. But interpretation at its best meets with final barriers where words are used in irreconcilable meanings in the struggle between

opposing ideologies.

Our discussion leaders at tomorrow morning's discussion group and at the plenary sessions will also be mediators. Their main function will be to facilitate communication among us. They will help us by defining issues, structuring interchange, clarifying agreements and disagreements, and by creating an atmosphere of what has aptly been called 'free-floating security' in which the less articulate can be encouraged and the all-too-articulate gently restrained.

We saw another variation of mediation during last week's meetings of the Grand Council. The President acted in her role as moderator, conducting the decision-making process and working towards synthesis. Such meetings require leadership of a different kind although it is based on the same fundamental attitude wanting to enable members to interact creatively so as to arrive at the best possible decisions. Parliamentary procedures as we see them used have been devised to protect minorities and ensure their contributions being heard. At the same time, they allow the majority view to be ascertained and made effective. Parliamentary procedures of this sort are necessary, but they can stifle creative communication and need to be supplemented by opportunities for less formal communication. The difficulties of achieving understanding in the absence of a mediator is shown in negotiations between interested groups who frequently have to call in the help of arbitration in order to arrive at agreements.

Finally, there is the recipient of communication—all of us at the receiving end of this Congress. Surely, we must all have been aware of the important part we play in making communication effective. There have no doubt been times when we have been too tired or too saturated to take in anything more; times when we were unable to really understand the words used and their full meanings; times when we were discouraged, anxious, or resistant to challenges suggesting changes and new approaches threatening our security; times when we did not want to be talked to, when we

wanted to be by ourselves. Such reactions are completely natural and we should be sufficiently generous towards ourselves and to others to allow them to happen.

At the same time, we must realise that communication simply breaks down when there is no response. The communication cycle remains incomplete unless there is an answer, a reaction, feed-back of some sort, be it only a nod, a gesture, a smile, or a glance. Verbal responses, however, are of special significance for the total communication process. They are effective in various ways:

First of all, feed-back enables us to correct misunderstandings and distortions. Often, there is good reason for having people repeat vital messages; sometimes, messages need to be repeated and interpreted by the recipient in his own words to ensure real understanding. That means that in such cases, the cycle is not complete until the communicator has acknowledged the recipient's response. When we have carried out an instruction or completed an assignment we want to know how well we have done. Uncorrected papers and unrecognised efforts are frustrating and deprive us of the opportunity of evaluating our own stature and growth.

Secondly, feed-back establishes personal contact and helps to build relationships. When communication can get beyond the intellectual level and makes the patient feel that he is understood, emotional obstacles can be overcome which are otherwise all too easily rationalised into very convincing arguments for being unreceptive and unco-operative. Here, too, verbal response must express real feelings if it is to produce affinity. Communication at the feeling level works largely outside the control and influence of our rational intentions.

Feed-back is furthermore valuable in making possible learning experience. We simply cannot make other people's ideas, experiences, insights and skills our own unless and until we react to them actively. Passive receptiveness may lead us to memorise what we hear but that does not mean that we have integrated it into what we

have known before. That is one of the reasons why, at the Congress, too, we have tried to introduce opportunities for discussion. There will be discussion groups tomorrow morning, and in the course of them, you will probably get a chance to converse with each other in very small groups for some time. In plenary sessions, we will be using a number of different techniques up here on the platform which will allow all of us to experience continued discussion by proxy. There will be panels and role-play in various forms. Also, we shall invite you to contribute from the floor, although all of us realise the difficulty of discussion in such a large gathering. Still, it will enable us to profit from some further comments from you. The basic assumption underlying our choice of such methods is our being convinced of the effectiveness of communication—a conviction which has been underpinned by research and experience.

Feed-back also teaches us skills we had perhaps not thought ourselves capable of. We learn to think quickly and to be articulate, to overcome anxiety and inhibitions which beset all of us at times, possibly to summarise and report faithfully and so objectively a group's thinking.

Finally, feed-back helps us to recognise our place within a community. The way in which our contributions are received soon indicates to us our position in the communication network. The group leader who observes the communication process in her group gets significant information on the status structure prevailing: who is listened to? Who readily agrees with whom? Who is contradicted by whom? Whose suggestions are ignored? Communication feed-back thus serves us as a helpful diagnostic tool.

Thus far, we have dealt with the snags that beset the communication cycle at different stages: snags arising with the communicator, the medium used, the mediator, and lastly, with the recipient. We have also indicated at various points how we can try to counteract them.

Now, we want to examine briefly how communication differs in

different professional settings. Content, style, and communication channels vary a great deal depending on whether we move in staff relationships, in nursing itself, or in the framework of a professional organisation.

In an administrative hierarchy as in a hospital or a local authority, there are established communication patterns, and we have to observe prescribed channels. They determine who communicates with whom about what and who doesn't. Frequently, channels are open only from the top down and do not permit response or initiative from the bottom up or horizontally to left and right. Staff meetings then only serve to give out instructions, and contact between wards are frowned upon. We all know the difficulties of co-operation in such systems. But also in organisations that allow contacts in all directions, some rules are indispensable. Those who find themselves in central positions in such a communication network acquire a great deal of useful information, and information leads to power, influence and a chance of leadership. The goal in such settings is efficiency, in other words: the best possible service to the patient, and good preventive work with the community. The satisfaction staff members derive from their work becomes a secondary goal and, at the same time, an instrument for improving results. This is one of the rare cases when the postulates of mutual respect and consideration do not contradict the demand for efficiency but support it.

The problem confronting all administrators is not so much whether they should communicate with their staff members at all. In most cases, the need for more than one-sided communication is recognised. The question is rather when they should discuss what with whom. Leadership responsibility consists among other things largely in this preliminary judgment which determines at what stage which staff members are to be invited to what degree in the decision-making process. Alex Bavelas² has shown that giving orders without allowing any reaction produces inefficiency; merely allowing the 'yes' or 'no' response makes efficiency possible

but arouses feelings of antagonism and hostility towards the chief. Freedom to communicate leads to efficiency as well as good morale.

Communication in a helping relationship as in social work, education, and nursing assumes an entirely different hue. It needs to be professional, not private; but 'professional' communication is by no means impersonal communication. It makes the patient feel that the nurse is ready to listen, to be wholly attentive, to understand his feelings as well as his words, to feel with him without feeling like him; to give of herself without expecting to receive; to establish a personal relationship which is at the same time transferable, limited in time and detached from her private interests. Such communication must be learnt, for it demands a high measure of self-denial and objectivity, the ability to accept the other person and to respect him, to strengthen his ego and to enable him to arrive at decisions of his own and to help himself as far as possible. For such demands to be met, we have to preserve a world of our own in which our own personal needs for communication on a level of friendship and genuine give-and-take can be fulfilled. Unless they are satisfied they entail the risk of our professional communication being interfered with by unconscious motivations.

In the professional organisation, structure and communication channels are the exact opposite of those in an administrative hierarchy. Here it is the members who determine policy decisions, and the 'top' group—Board of Directors, President and committees—are, in the final analysis, executive organs. They are elected by the members, derive their authority and sanction for action from them and are accountable to them. We know that the ideal becomes hard to realise when membership grows to be very large and geographically diffuse. Communication channels become even more complex when an organisation like the ICN consists not of individual members but of member organisations based on individual membership. Yet, however complicated and cumbersome the machinery, the basic principle remains valid. Leadership functions in the Executive Board or the Board of Directors of the ICN are no less onerous than those

of a hospital board or of an industrial concern, but they are different in kind. You expect your leaders to take the initiative, to make suggestions and work out proposals, to give you adequate and correct information at the right time and help in applying useful procedures. But you, the members, though your organisations determine policy, you are the final authority.

The age in which we live and the profession you serve are in dire need of people who understand the art of communication if the conflicts threatening us from all sides are to be dealt with constructively. In professional education, this needs to be considered, and the different roles you may be expected to play in your professional lives should be prepared for. Many of you will remain bed-side nurses which, after all, is what you chose the profession for. Others work as public health visitors, others as teachers; yet others are administrators. Some serve on committees of your professional organisations or in the community at large, and some function as chairmen and presidents of organisations inside and outside the profession. The style, the content, and the technique of communication vary with the role and the addressee.

Yet, there are a few basic elements which are common to all communication and which can be taught and acquired.

First, there are the simple and yet so important techniques of speaking and writing, be it in the face-to-face interview, in a discussion, in teaching, in conferences, on the telephone, and, nowadays, on the radio and on television. Have we learnt to control our voice, to speak with or without notes, to use a microphone without being afraid? Are we really wholly present when we speak to others? Can we write clearly and intelligibly, using plain language without becoming condescending? Can we present our thoughts clearly, logically, and convincingly? Do we look for the suitable peg on each occasion? Do we use pictures and visual aids to support our efforts?

Secondly, have we mastered the art of listening, of being completely aware of the here and now, so as to take in what is being communicated to us? Are we observant to notice and interpret the language of the body and sub-verbal sounds—

an uneasy posture, a restless look, an expressive 'Ah' and 'Oh'—the kind of thing that makes underlying feelings transparent. Do we realise how important it is that we respond and acknowledge what is being said lest we cause our partner to stop talking?

Basically, however, good communication is not a matter of technique, although good techniques help to make effective what lies behind: an attitude of respect and acceptance, of sincerity, sensibility and the courage of one's convictions. Surely, we cannot silence our own reactions of like and dislike. Realising and acknowledging them helps us to control them. We can then begin to adjust ourselves to the other person's wavelength, and our own reactions are not so likely to interfere with communication without our even knowing it. Leaders bear a special responsibility in this respect, because the patterns they establish are copied down the line. The director of nursing uses a certain style of communication, and it can be seen in action on all levels—in the department, in the ward, and in the school.

Attitudes cannot be stimulated. They spring from a constant effort at good communication within oneself. All of us need time to ourselves to develop true tolerance towards our own selves and towards others. We must learn to live with ourselves and to try to grow step by step in a critical and independent attitude towards life and people. We must learn to become aware of our emotional drives and to use them constructively. We must try to regain the individual mind—the great privilege of children. Such oneness with our own selves rests on communication with the ground of our being, whatever name we attach to it. This is the point at which communication becomes communion. 'The end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter.' (Issac Pennington).

Reference

1. Konard Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse. Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression*. Vienna 1963.
2. Alex Bavelas in *Communication or Conflict*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1960, p. 129 f.