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## INVISIBLE BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION (PART 1: THE PROBLEM)

### **DISRUPTIONS OF COMMUNICATION UP, DOWN OR ACROSS A HIERARCHY ARE COMMON.**

**Scenario 1, disruption up:** A manager feels overloaded with too many priorities. She makes decisions all the time about where to put her energies but is not sure what she should emphasize. She has thoughts of talking to her supervisor but he is overloaded too. Often their meetings are cancelled. Somehow, she never brings this up and he doesn't ask.

**Scenario 2, disruption down and up:** In regular meetings with his managers, a division director verbally dominates discussions to the point of interrupting others especially if they have questions or concerns. His managers talk about him behind his back and complain they can't do their jobs because he won't listen.

**Scenario 3, disruption across:** In a team meeting of eight people, all at the same level, three people dominate discussions, forcefully arguing their ideas. Decisions are stalled.

### **COMMUNICATION DISRUPTIONS PUT RESULTS AT RISK.**

In these scenarios, people either remain silent about concerns and feedback or they push ideas without listening to others.

Tendencies toward extremes of passivity and silence or rigid advocacy and polarization are typical of communication disruption in organizations. In addition, people tend not to freely submit their views to analysis. Also, there is a proclivity to fall into blame and victimization.

Such behaviors endanger results because such they raise the risk of breakdowns in agreements, partnerships, creative problem solving, role understandings, clarity of authority or performance of key tasks.

### **BUT, THE PROBLEM MAY NOT BE LACK OF SKILLS, PERSONALITY PROBLEMS OR CULTURE.**

The three scenarios could indicate individual or organizational problems. A boss might be rigidly oriented to using power in an intimidating way. Or, a colleague might not have the skills or desire to listen to others. Such behavior might also indicate a difficult organizational culture.

But, it is important to always consider that what appear to be very specific personal and cultural causes may actually be minor contributing factors or even have little to do with the difficulty of a situation. In fact, there may be more actual level of skill and motivation underlying a situation than is apparent. Disruptions of communication could be completely or partially evoked by the *inherent* dynamics of organizational life.

### **RESEARCH POINTS TO BUILT-IN TENDENCIES IN SYSTEMS FOR COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS.**

Dynamics inherent to groups and power produce a constant pull away from good

communication. The curious nature of organizational life is that even leaders and staff who are skilled communicators and who value relationships are at risk for such communication problems. This may occur outside of awareness making these dynamics nearly invisible.

### **Selected research**

- **Evolutionarily ancient parts of the brain** protect us from danger through activating flight (e.g. silence) or fight (e.g. arguing). These systems have been shown to bypass higher, rational brain functions so we may not recognize what we are doing.<sup>1,2</sup>
- **Just being in groups** of people results in tendencies toward unhelpful silence. This is due to pressure for unanimity and a need to avoid disagreements, negative information or potential loss of status. This occurs even in groups with equal power and rank.<sup>3</sup>
- **Through more than 10,000 interviews**, Argyris reports a commonplace tendency for people in organizations to communicate in ways which inhibit learning when learning is most needed--e.g. in difficult or stressful situations. People espouse the value of openness and trust while remaining silent, inflexibly advocating ideas without reference to supporting data, or blaming others or the system.<sup>4</sup>
- **Power appears to lead to a psychological state** which makes it less likely to take into account others' perspectives. Power also tends to blind people to this behavior.<sup>5</sup>
- **Power leads people to be more verbally dominant** and assert their own ideas rather than explore others' ideas, unrelated to personality or predisposition.<sup>6,7</sup>
- **Power differentials create a tendency in followers** to remain silent about concerns. Followers overestimate the chances of retribution from those in power. This was demonstrated through comparing followers' descriptions to actual behavior of bosses. The underlying cause appears to be automatic "implicit beliefs."<sup>8</sup>
- **In simulations of organizational life** behavior appears strongly shaped not so much by individual personality as by *position*--whether a person is on top, in the middle or the bottom of a hierarchy. Those on top get caught up in communication with each other. Those on the bottom feel locked out of information and victimized. Those in the middle feel caught between conflicting demands. Everyone can get caught in protecting their turf. As a result, partnerships and creative collaboration suffer.<sup>7,9,10</sup>

### **ALWAYS CONSIDER THE SYSTEM AS A POSSIBLE CAUSE OF COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS.**

Causes of communication breakdowns could be specific to individuals and/or organizational culture. But, causes inherent to organizational life could also be operating. If causes inherent to organizations are predominant, scenarios like those at the beginning of the article have the potential to resolve more quickly--perhaps with help raising awareness and in problem solving.

The lesson is how powerful the influence of group and power dynamics can be in pulling anyone out of their usual level of communication skills. For everyone, there are situations which lead to actions inconsistent with personal values.

Because group and power dynamics may be so difficult to see, awareness is crucial to counter their risks. The next article (Part II) will address the paradox that groups and power can also be leveraged as a resource to limit the frequency and intensity of disruptions of communication.

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