

**ASPECTS OF THE COMMUNICATION REALITY IN
SOUTH AFRICA**

Communitas

ISSN 1023-0556

2002 7: 119-122

F.H. Terblanche*

It can be accepted that any person who, in the year 2002, aims to make a contribution to a better understanding of integrated communication in the South African context, will necessarily take the South African communication reality as his/her point of departure. As reference will, of course, only be made to specific aspects of the communication reality in the various papers at the Conference, it seems to make sense to call attention to a few general characteristics of the communication situation in South Africa by way of orientation.

From both the mass media as well as personal conversations, it appears that the quality of various forms of communication, such as provision of information, persuasion and advertising at dyadic, small-group, public, organisational and mass communication level, is increasingly becoming a cause for concern. In spite of all the trendy developments and the provision of training opportunities in the field of communication, the modern human being has still not learned to communicate efficiently with his/her fellow human beings. Only consider the quality of the communication employed nowadays in the areas of, for example, opposing political convictions, religious differences, language issues, sporting events, aids and inflation.

Probably the most important reason why the quality of communication in South Africa, but also worldwide, has become a cause for concern is related to the fact that communication is, in many respects, inextricably linked to culture, while contemporary societies in many parts of the world are increasingly characterised by a multicultural population composition.

* Professor Terry Terblanche is Head of the Department of Communication and Information Studies at the University of the Free State. This was his opening address at the National Communication Conference held in Bloemfontein in October 2002.

The reason why multiculturalism hampers communication between human beings is obviously linked to the fact that, although cultures show similarities with regard to many aspects of communication, every culture, to a large extent, has its own perspective on communication. When all is said and done, factors such as the characteristics of the cultural milieu, orientation in respect of time, values, norms and numerous other aspects of culture, such as traditional knowledge and the customs of the society, influence the nature and outcome of all communication transactions. Although an understanding of cultural rules does not guarantee successful communication, i.e. does not necessarily result in mutual understanding, it can make a significant contribution to the potential efficiency of communication.

It is important to bear in mind at all times that meaningful communication in a multicultural context is only possible if, on the one hand, the participants take commonalities into account and, on the other hand, show mutual understanding for, e.g., the way in which their culturally determined ways of thinking and communication patterns differ from one another. They must also develop a heartfelt desire to appreciate differences in all their facets, and to take such differences deliberately and scientifically into account regarding their causes, incidence and implications with a view to the sharing of meaning. It is self-evident that knowledge of the demands culture makes on communicative behaviour cannot be regarded as an academic luxury. In fact, the time has come for the academic world and communication practice to join forces in this regard. It is, for example, a cause for concern that, in contrast to the situation in the USA, almost no research information is available in South Africa with regard to intercultural as well as interethnic communication.

In these days of open conversations, infighting, sensitive discussions, closed sessions, negotiations, deliberations ("bosberade"), summits and marriage counselling, it is a fairly common phenomenon to reduce many of the problems that manifest themselves in the form of communication to so-called "communication problems". If the rand depreciates, the incidence of divorce increases, businesses go insolvent and institutions lose some of their loyal members, the cause is immediately ascribed to communication failure, while the real reasons are probably related to, for example, economic factors, irreconcilable personalities or poor service.

The incorrect use of the so-called "body language", in particular, is often singled out as the reason for problems in an exaggerated manner. In an extremely unscientific report recently published in the business section of a well-known newspaper, it was incorrectly and in detail explained to the reader how inefficient non-verbal communication can cost a business enterprise a fortune. It is remarkable how in the mass media nonverbal communication is often incorrectly described as that form of human behaviour by means of which easily interpretable messages are "conveyed", and on the basis of which the person's thoughts, feelings of guilt, political aspirations, personality and loyalty to the South African community can be read like a book.

Sometimes it is accepted that specific problems within an organisation are not directly related to communication, but are caused by underlying issues. However, it is then sometimes presupposed that communication is a wonder cure for the solving of such complex problems. Seen thus, that is if it is accepted that communication is an easy contemporary recipe for the solving of all human problems, it does not really matter what the real causes of the problem are, as effective communication can rectify it, conjure it away or patch it up. Fact is: communication is not a panacea for the solving of problems. It is a way in which meaning is shared.

It is remarkable how often people in South African society proceed from the supposition that it is only the receivers of messages that are responsible for the communication problems. Consequently it is argued, for example, that it is because of the lack of involvement and motivation of learners at pre-primary, primary and secondary level that the teachers' purposeful and genuine efforts are unsuccessful, or that it is the inability of learners at tertiary level to think scientifically that results in their failing to understand the structured lecture contents offered in an outcomes-based manner. And when politicians or the heads of business enterprises are called upon to account for all the misunderstandings that arise on a daily basis, it is argued that the members of society or the employees of an organisation are simply not yet ripe for or able to cope with the total message of change, for example at the level of transformation. To this may also be added that one often hears that it is the insignificance, imperfection and sinfulness of human beings that result in church messages not claiming the attention of church members efficiently. In the

mentioned cases it is clear that the communicator/speaker does not want to accept co-responsibility for the outcome of communication.

In a typical sender-dominant "culture", that is a culture in which it is only the receiver of the message that is the villain of the story, as is often the case nowadays, it is therefore not at all strange that people are uncertain and confused before, during and after elections, that patients are more dissatisfied with the manner in which messages are conveyed to them than with any other aspect of medical care, or that employees in organisations are sometimes bitterly unhappy about the way in which things are communicated to them. Likewise it is also not an unknown phenomenon that many people are very worried about the fact that, although large numbers of people can speak and write, handle the computer with confidence and use a camera robot to explore the secrets of the pyramids, they yet cannot share simple forms of meaning in an understandable manner.

In this age of the great communicators/senders it is remarkable to what extent the receivers of messages are sometimes without more ado typified as uninterested, headstrong, without vision, unapproachable and stupid. Meanwhile numerous high-ranking communicators and opinion-shapers as well as so-called professional communicators in various societal relationships such as the state, church, educational institutions and the private sector often get away with communication murder. All of this, while it is a known fact that senders as well as receivers of messages play a role in determining the success of communication.

Even if all the members of the South African society, or at least the most important opinion-makers and role-players in it, were to possess relatively effective communication skills, various forms of conflict would naturally continue to exist. It would, however, be conflict arising from, for example, fundamental differences on political, social, economic or cultural matters, or conflict related to complex choices between alternative possibilities. It would therefore not be the type of conflict which, as is often the case in contemporary society, has its origin in the inability of one or more of the participants in communication to convey and understand messages within the context of a specific communication reality.