

Negotiating Group Membership Through Communication

A Guest Lecture for Heather Harris' Communications Strategy (COM 9139) Class

Baruch College, March 19, 2003 6PM in VC 6-118

Outlined below is a set of ideas for this lecture. The approach is to couch these ideas within a set of stories (see II Examples), likely told in chronological order, which will serve as the carriers for the ideas.

- I) Introduction
 - A) I've been in the business world almost 40 years.
 - B) During that time I joined, left, and rejoined somewhere, I would guess, on the order of 200 groups, maybe more. Group affiliation has been short, long, happy, sad, and a bit of all the emotions in between.
 - C) What I propose to do is to tell you a couple of stories – one good, one bad – from my experiences. I then will summarize lessons I have learned regarding communications and groups.
 - D) My intent is to help you pack your survival kit for when you get out there where the cold wind blows.
 - E) Please feel free to interrupt me with questions and comments.
- II) Examples (the names will be changed to protect the...)
 - A) The Good
 - I) **An Australasian Railway**
 - (a) The initiating event
 - (i) Something like

”I'm the marketing rep in Australasia who has assumed responsibility for an Australasian railway. I think we have a major business opportunity with this customer, but I know nothing about railways. I need help.”
 - (b) Purpose
 - (i) The purpose of this involvement was to be a positive force in helping to move rail from a department of the government to publicly traded enterprise.
 - (ii) And, in the process, to make money for my company.
 - (c) Conditions
 - (i) In 1986 I was considered to be one of the most expert in my company in the rail business and the application of information technology to rail operations. The structure of this sentence is important as I considered myself a businessman first and a technologist second.
 - (ii) My immediate management had a great deal of confidence in my business judgment. I could decide to go to Australasia.
 - (iii) I don't think there was an overwhelming personal appeal, at least initially, in this situation. I'm curious by nature, I had never been to Australasia, and think that being asked to help is one of the greatest compliments that can be paid.
 - (iv) Strong support from my family.
 - (d) Groups
 - (i) Senior Management and the Board of Directors

- (ii) Functional Management (transportation, engineering, mechanical, finance, information technology, marketing)
 - (iii) The Hierarchy (Chairman to Guard)
 - (iv) My company (my own group in the US and local Australasia)
 - (v) Other rail customers around the world
- (e) Approach
- (i) Become known by the principals. Looking, listening, seeking to understand, an “easy” demonstrating of competence, telling the truth, discretion, learning to speak Australasian.
 - (ii) Become involved. Taking on and volunteering for assignments, doing good work all the time, keeping those informed who need to be informed.
 - (iii) Become appreciated. Invitations to become involved in social engagements and important meetings, people seeking me out, leading to seeking to be understood.
 - (iv) Become a leader. Provide unsolicited ideas for consideration, recommend objectives, and push the boundaries of my brief.

Pushing the boundaries of my brief is a bit of an interesting notion. There are two motivations for this. The first is an innate curiosity I have about things. I’m always poking around at the edges of interesting things, and at the edges for interesting things.

Second, I was looking for additional opportunities to make contributions to both the Australasian railway and my company.

- (f) Results
- (i) Started in August 1986; a principal advisor to three Managing Directors on the application of technology to the railway; regular participant in senior management meetings.
 - (ii) Organization successfully completed its transformation from department of the government to a publicly traded corporation in 1993.
 - (iii) From 1986 through 1999 I was involved in a half-dozen major projects in Australasia. Through this involvement I also was invited to assist other Australasian companies.
 - (iv) The Australasian railway becomes one of my company’s premier customers in Australasia.
 - (v) Completed my assignments in 1999.
 - (vi) This assignment was an example of where interesting, useful, and remunerative work all came together.
- (g) Critical Success Factors
- (i) There was a coming together of personalities in Australasian government that provided the basis for success.
 - (ii) The Australasian railway was an open-minded organization. It realized that the 125-year legacy would not take it forward into the future. There was the need to change.
 - (iii) Assumptions were minimized; goals and objectives clear; management was committed; change was welcomed.

- (iv) Points i-iii provide the basis for communications leading to inclusion in the groups and action that further cemented group membership.

B) The Bad

I) **A US Railway**

(a) Onset

- (i) One of my company's best customers wanted to undertake an advanced technology project focusing on the use of object-oriented technology for the development of a business system that would be adaptive to the needs of the corporation.

(b) Purpose

- (i) Sustainable competitive advantage comes from implementing management decision faster than the competition. It is equally important to be able back out inappropriate decisions. This needs to be supported by an adaptive business system. The customer wanted to build a prototype.
- (ii) My company saw this as an opportunity to develop a solution that could be used by other customers. Additional revenue opportunities seemed possible.

(c) Conditions

- (i) The Transportation Industry Marketing organization had been reestablished and I was the resident expert in rail plus I had management consulting experience.
- (ii) The director of the organization looked favorably on the combination of a leading customer and leading technology.
- (iii) I had a long relationship with this customer and with the my company's local office. I had successfully worked on projects with both before.
- (iv) There was personal appeal. A customer and a business I knew; the development of a solution which I instinctively reacted favorably to; an opportunity to work at the leading edge of technology

(d) Groups

- (i) Customer technology organization.
- (ii) My company's local office.
- (iii) Object-oriented technology support groups at my company.
- (iv) An independent contractor generally recognized as one of the world's best at developing these sorts of systems.
- (v) My own organization.

(e) Results

- (i) The prototype was developed on-time, on-budget. It was very cool.
- (ii) Unbeknownst to any of us on the team the customer was running a parallel project to solve the same problem.
- (iii) The customer and my company ended up dissatisfied with project.

The customer felt that there was little new and innovative that was introduced by my company. Yet, some of the ideas were exciting to groups in my company and even made the pages of the *Communications of the ACM*.

My company felt that the customer took advantage of, and claimed as his own,

those new and innovative ideas that were developed. The same person managed the two projects for the customer.

- (iv) My company did develop the basis for a solution to take to the marketplace. It never got beyond the planning stages.

Decision makers did not have an appreciation for the abstraction of the solution. The solution development team was unable to connect the solution to the agenda of the decision makers. A point I come to in III)F) below.

(f) Critical Success Factors

- (i) Membership in a group rests upon the prospect of mutual satisfaction that in turn rests upon mutual agendas.
- (ii) Trust is essential for maintaining mutuality. And trust comes from speaking the truth.
- (iii) Personal chemistry provides the basis for trust.
- (iv) Political acuity can be a paramount critical success factor.

III) Lessons Learned

A) Say what you mean, mean what you say

- 1) I am the first person I sense in the morning and the last person I sense at night. I need to be comfortable with who I am. Ethics versus ambition.
- 2) I have developed, over time, a sense of empathy that makes it easier for people to accept no and come back. The worst thing of all is when the conversation stops.
- 3) Sometimes its better to be quiet. Drogan's Third Law: Never put things in an e-mail you would not like to see read in court. Corollary to Drogan's Third Law: The spoken word can never to taken back.

B) You aren't the only person on the planet and you can learn from everyone.

- 1) The guard at the front desk in Australasia.
- 2) Be kind to people on the way up for you will meet them on the way down. You need help transiting in both directions.
- 3) One cannot discover important groups by being aloof. There is a great part of the movie *Chocolat* where the priest delivers a sermon that goodness is judged by what we include, not exclude.

Had I exposure to a larger number of groups at the US railway things may have turned out differently.

C) Know the answer to one more question than you think will be asked, but resist the temptation to show all you know. Personally, I think it aggravating, but perhaps more importantly, once someone knows all you know what is his or her incentive for an ongoing relationship? There is also the notion here of setting a trap for yourself by prompting for a question or an observation you may not be prepared to respond to. For example, the differing interpretations of Blix/Powell regarding intelligence from Iraq.

D) If you think the relationship is of value, always go away with a reason to keep the conversation going. Find something to do.

E) Recognize the roles of communications and the role in play at the moment. Don't play the wrong role at the wrong time.

- 1) Information – my role with you today.

- 2) Decision
- 3) Instruction – Professor Harris’ role with you during this course.
- F) Recognize the means of communication.
 - 1) The grammar and syntax of the messages being exchanged is easily understood, and
 - 2) the information communicated in the messages is relevant, and
 - 3) the medium of communication is acceptable.
- G) Seek to understand, then to be understood.
- H) Communication is a combination of actions: speaking, writing, personal appearance, body language, appearance of documents, listening, observing, and questioning.
- I) Perfect knowledge: know what you know, know what you don’t know, and know who knows what you don’t know.
 - 1) Importance of networks
- J) Absolute discretion
 - 1) It’s sometimes difficult to stay out of the name-dropping game.
- K) Be willing to terminate abusive relationships.