

How to Listen to Other People

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There are two aspects to communication. One is the matter of output—the speaking and writing involving problems of rhetoric, composition, logical presentation, coherence, definition of terms, knowledge of the subject and the audience, and so on. Most of the preoccupation with communication is directed toward the improvement of the output, so that we find on every hand courses in composition, in effective speaking, in the arts of plain or fancy talk, and how to write more dynamic sales letters.

But the other aspect of communication, namely, the problem of intake—especially the problem of how to listen well—is relatively a neglected subject. It does not avail the speakers to have spoken well if we as listeners have failed to understand, or if we come away believing them to have said things they didn't say at all. If face-to-face meetings are to result in the exchange of ideas, we need to pay particular heed to our listening habits.

A common difficulty at conferences and meetings is what might be called the “terminological tangle,” in which discussion is stalemated by conflicting definitions of key terms. Let me discuss this problem using as examples the vocabulary of art criticism and the discussion of design. What do such terms as “romanticism,” “classicism,” “baroque,” “organic,” and “functionalism” *really* mean? Let us put this problem into the kind of context in which it is likely to occur. For example, a speaker may talk about “the romanticism so admirable exemplified by the Robie House by Frank Lloyd Wright.” Let us imagine in the audience an individual to whom the Robie House exemplifies many things, but *not* “romanticism.” His reaction may well be, “Good God, has he ever *seen* the Robie House?” And he may challenge the speaker to *define* “romanticism”—which is a way of asking, “What do *you* think ‘romanticism’ really is?” When the speaker has given his definition, it may well prove to the questioner that the speaker indeed doesn't know what he's talking about. But if the questioner counters with an alternative definition, it will prove to the speaker that the questioner doesn't know what *he* is talking about. At this point it will be just as well if the rest of the audience adjourns to the bar, because no further communication is going to take place.

How can this kind of terminological tangle be avoided? I believe it can be avoided if we understand at the outset that there is no ultimately correct and single meaning to words like “romanticism” and “functionalism” and “plastic form” and other items in the vocabulary of art and design criticism. The same is true, of course, of the vocabularies of literary criticism, of politics and social issues, and many other matters of everyday discussion. Within the strictly disciplined contexts of the languages of the sciences, exact or almost exact agreements about terminology can be established. When two physicists talk about “positrons” or when two chemists talk about “diethylene glycol,” they can be presumed to have enough of a common background of controlled experience in their fields to have few difficulties about understanding each other. But most of the words of artistic and other general discussion are not restricted to such specialized frames of reference. They are part of the language of everyday life—by which I mean that they are part of the language in which we do not hesitate to speak across occupational lines. The artist, dramatist, and poet do not hesitate to use the vocabularies of their calling in speaking to their audiences: nor would the physician, the lawyer, the accountant, and the clothing merchant hesitate to use these words to one another if they got into a discussion of any of the arts.

In short, the words most commonly used in conference, like the vocabulary of other educated, general discussion, are public property—which is to say that they mean many things to many people. This is a fact neither to be applauded nor regretted; it is simply a fact to be taken into account. They are words, therefore, which either have to be defined anew each time they are seriously used—or, better still, they must be used in such a way, and with sufficient illustrative examples, that their specific meaning in any given discourse emerges from their context.

Hence it is of great importance in a conference to listen to one another's statements and speeches and terminology without unreasonable demands. And the specific unreasonable demand I am thinking of now is the demand that everybody else *should* mean by such words as "romanticism" what I would mean if I were using them. If, therefore, the expression, "the romanticism of the Frank Lloyd Wright Robie House" is one which, at first encounter, makes little sense to us, we should at once be alerted to special attentiveness. The speaker, by classifying the Robie House as "romantic," is making an unfamiliar classification—a sure sign not that he is ill-informed, but that he has a way of classifying his data that is different from our own. And his organization of his data may be one from which we can learn a new and instructive way of looking at the Robie House, or at "romanticism," or at whatever else the speaker may be talking about.

Since a major purpose of conferences is to provide ample opportunity for conversational give-and-take, perhaps it would be wise to consider the adoption, formally or informally, of one basic conversational traffic rule which I have found to be invaluable in ensuring the maximum flow of information and ideas from one person to another and in avoiding the waste of time resulting from verbal traffic snarls. The rule is easy to lay down, but not always easy to follow: it is that we **refrain from agreement or disagreement with a speaker, to refrain from praise or censure of his views, until we are sure what those views are.**

Of course, the first way to discover a speaker's views is to listen to him. But few people, other than psychiatrists and women, have had much training in listening. The training of most oververbalized professional intellectuals is in the opposite direction. Living in a competitive culture, most of us are most of the time chiefly concerned with getting our own views across, and we tend to find other people's speeches a tedious interruption of the flow of our own ideas. Hence, it is necessary to emphasize that **listening does not mean simply maintaining a polite silence while you are rehearsing in your mind the speech you are going to make the next time you can grab a conversational opening.** Nor does listening mean waiting alertly for the flaws in the other fellow's arguments so that later you can mow him down. **Listening means trying to see the problem the way the speaker sees it**—which means not sympathy, which is *feeling for* him, but empathy; which is *experiencing with* him. Listening requires entering actively and imaginatively into the other fellow's situation and trying to understand a frame of reference different from your own. This is not always an easy task.

But **a good listener does not merely remain silent. He asks questions.** However, these questions must avoid all implications (whether in tone of voice or in wording) of skepticism or challenge or hostility. They must clearly be motivated by curiosity about the speaker's views. Such questions, which may be

called **“questions for clarification”** usually take the form. **“Would you expand on that point about . . . ?”** **“Would you mind restating that argument about . . . ?”** **“What exactly is your recommendation again?”** Perhaps the most useful kind of question at this stage is something like, “I am going to restate in my words what I think you mean. Then would you mind telling me if I’ve understood you correctly?”

The late Dr. Irving J. Lee of Northwestern University has suggested another form of questioning which he describes as “the request for information concerning the uniqueness of the particular characteristics of the condition or proposal under consideration.” I shall simply call these questions “questions of uniqueness.” All too often, we tend to listen to a speaker or his speech in terms of a generalization: “Oh he’s just another of those progressive educators.” “Isn’t that just like a commercial designer?” “That’s the familiar Robsjohn-Gibbings approach.” “That’s the old Bauhaus pitch.” And so on. It is a curious and dangerous fact—dangerous to communication, that is—that once we classify a speech in this way, we stop listening, because as we say, “We’ve heard that stuff before.” But *this* speech by *this* individual at *this* time and place is a *particular* event, while the “that stuff” with which we are classifying this speech is a *generalization* from the past. Questions of uniqueness are designed to prevent what might be called the functional deafness that we induce in ourselves by reacting to speakers and their speeches in terms of the generalizations we apply to them. **Questions of uniqueness take such forms as these:** **“How large is the firm you work for and do they make more than one product?”** **“Exactly what kind of synthetic plastic did you use on that project?”**

Something else that needs to be watched is the habit of overgeneralizing from the speaker’s remarks. If a speaker is critical of, let us say, the way in which design is taught at a particular school, some persons in the audience seem automatically to assume that the speaker is saying that design shouldn’t be taught at all. When I speak on the neglected art of listening, as I have done on many occasions, I am often confronted with the question. “If everybody listened, who would do the talking?” This type of misunderstanding may be called the “pickling-in-brine fallacy,” after the senior Oliver Wendell Holmes’s famous remark, “Just because I say I like sea bathing, that doesn’t mean I want to be pickled in brine.” When Korzybski found himself being misunderstood in this way, he used to assert with special forcefulness, “I say what I say; I do not say what I do not say.” Questions of uniqueness, properly chosen, prevent not only the questioner but everyone else present from projecting into a speaker’s remarks meanings that were not intended.

All too often, the fact that misunderstanding exists is not apparent until deeper misunderstandings have already occurred because of the original one. We have all had the experience of being at meetings of at social gatherings at which Mr. X says something, and Mr. Y believes Mr. X to have said something quite different and argues against what he believes Mr. X to have said. Then Mr. X, not understanding Mr. Y’s objections (which may be legitimate objections to what Mr. X didn’t say), defends his original statement with further statements. These further statements, interpreted by Mr. Y in the light of mistaken assumptions, lead to further mistaken assumptions, which in turn induce in Mr. X mistaken assumptions about Mr. Y. In a matter of minutes, the discussion is a dozen miles away from the original topic. Thereafter it can take from twenty minutes to two hours to untangle the mess and restore the discussion to a consideration of Mr. X’s original point.

All this is not to say that I expect or wish conversations or conferences to avoid argument. But **let us argue about what has been said, and not about what has not been said. And let us discuss not for victory, but for clarification.** If we do so, we shall find, I believe, that ultimately agreement and disagreement, approval and disapproval, are not very important after all. The important thing is to come away from a meeting with a fund of information—information about what other people are doing and thinking and why. It is only as we fully understand opinions and attitudes different from our own and the reasons for them that we better understand our own place in the scheme of things. Which is but another way of saying that while the result of communications successfully imparted is self-satisfaction, the result of communications successfully received is self-insight.