

# THE GEOMETRY OF DIALOGUE

## CHAPTER SIX

### FUNDAMENTAL FORMS OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

#### (DIMENSION 3)

##### **6.1. Introduction: Reflections on the question “What shall I do?”**

As Pearce points out, “...interpersonal communication deals primarily with the question of What should I *do*? rather than the question What do I *know*?”<sup>113</sup> (author’s italics) To which I would only add that while the two questions can be separated in one’s mind, in the process of living they are never very far apart. In fact, this chapter combines them by exploring the question “What do I know about what I should do?”

The pragmatic point of view, which focuses on life as a stream of action, takes “What shall I do?” and “How shall I do it?” to be the most significant questions that people can ask themselves. In keeping with the complementarity I have already noted between the pragmatic and realistic points of view, these two pragmatic questions just cited immediately give rise to a whole range of more realistic ones. For example, “What am I capable of?” and “What actions are available to me in this particular situation?”

In envisioning Dimension Three of the Six Dimensions model, I am trying to provide preliminary, and provocative, and evocative answers to these questions. (Literally pro-vocative, hopefully stimulating people to speak, to find a new voice.)

In this chapter I am going to try to answer these questions by presenting a summary of the fundamental forms of communicative action, as understood by two scholars in the field. In the next chapter I will explore various ways of understanding conversational style, the “How shall I do it?” question.

**Why make this inquiry?** As the philosopher Martin Heidegger observed, we

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<sup>113</sup>Pearce, *Interpersonal Communication*, 13.

attend primarily to the breakdowns in the flow of everyday life.<sup>114</sup> Facts assumed to be understood by everyone are left unsaid, and processes functioning normally become part of the taken-for-granted background of daily living. Thus, if everyone were communicating happily by following the tacit traditions of their family and culture, it is not likely that anyone would bother to analyze the forms of communicative action and interaction. (In exploring the evolution of metacognition, Andrew Lock notes that communication failure is one of the main ways that we become aware of the communication process itself.<sup>115</sup>) And, of course, we are bound to encounter people from other families and, more and more, people of other cultures. The difficulties of these encounters can cause us to begin to pay conscious attention to our own heretofore-taken-for-granted ways of communicating.<sup>116</sup> It is also true that the tacit traditions within both families and cultures break down all the time and often produce an unacceptable amount of suffering. Thus, we may find ourselves drawn (sometimes pushed!) to ask basic questions about what else might be possible in our interactions with others.

## **6.2. Psychotherapy and everyday life.**

In trying to map the action possibilities in everyday conversation, I rely heavily on the work of psychotherapists. Why is that appropriate? From the point of view just described, of consciousness attending to the “breakdowns,” the distinction we make between psychotherapy and everyday life is largely illusory. Everyday life includes large and continual elements of solving problems, dealing with loss and disappointment, repairing damaged relationships, finding the strength to assert oneself in threatening situations, etc. These are the central themes of friendship, parenting, living together, working together and supervising. And these same topics make up a large part of the practice of psychotherapy and social work. Although the communication and nurturing skills learned by professionals can be thought of (and are often are thought of) as the trade secrets of a licensed elite, I believe that most of these skills are what everyone would

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<sup>114</sup>As explained by Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores in *Understanding Computers and Cognition* (New York, Addison-Wesley, 1987), 36.

<sup>115</sup>Andrew Lock, “Metaphenomena and change,” in *Mental Mirrors: Metacognition in Social Knowledge and Communication*, eds. Charles Antaki and Alan Lewis (London: Sage, 1986), 113.

know (or would want to know) in a more people-oriented culture. There is considerable evidence to suggest that much of the emotional support that psychotherapists provide to their clients, we could all provide to one another if we made sustaining the emotional well-being of others more of a priority in our lives.<sup>117</sup> Thus we can all benefit from the many decades of careful thought that psychotherapists have devoted to understanding good therapist-client communication, because (according to Carl Rogers<sup>118</sup>) the central features of good therapist-client communication are the central features of good communication between any two persons.

Discussion of this topic is made more difficult by virtue of the fact that psychotherapists and social workers, in order to justify their status as paid professionals, tend to surround whatever they do with an aura of medical and technical expertise, even if a large part of what they do is simply to provide friendship to people in stressful situations.<sup>119</sup> Providing friendship to people in stressful situations is a good and necessary activity, but it is also something that many, if not most, people can do (or could do with appropriate encouragement).

### **6.3. Two “mappers” of categories in the field of interpersonal communication**

The information in this chapter on the forms of communicative action comes primarily from the work of two psychologists who both advocate what one might call a universal communicative literacy. Their books are intended to provide the “appropriate encouragement” just mentioned and to empower everyone to be more of a “helper,” a

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<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

<sup>117</sup>This was a popular theme in the 1960s and 1970s. For a current re-statement of this position, with references to the earlier research, see Jacquelyn Small, *Becoming Naturally Therapeutic* (New York: Bantam, 1990).

<sup>118</sup>Carl Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 45.

<sup>119</sup>Unfortunately, there are economic class issues at work here. I believe that the emergence of psychotherapy and social work as state-licensed professions, while empowering a few people to be better care-givers, has inadvertently disempowered everyone else, casting everyone else into the lesser roles of “untrained lay person” or patient/client, and creating strong economic incentives for keeping them there. For a discussion of various aspects of this topic see Jay S. Efran, Michael D Lukens and Robert J. Lukens, *Language, Structure and Change: Frameworks of Meaning in Psychotherapy* (New York: Norton, 1990), chap 1; Robyn M Dawes, *House of Cards: Psychology and Psychotherapy Built on Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1994), chap5.; and Kenneth J. Gergen, *Realities and Relationships*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), chap. 6.

more skilled and nurturing companion in the face of people's inevitable life difficulties, and a more skilled, fulfilled and compassionate participant in all relationships.

In *The Helping Relationship*,<sup>120</sup> Lawrence Brammer makes a strong case for transporting helping skills out of the restricted world of licensed psychotherapists and into an expanded world of trained laypersons that includes volunteers, friends, family members and peer support persons. "It is striking to realize," Brammer notes, "that formalized helping relationships in the form of counseling, treatment, ministering or psychotherapy have characteristics in common with all human relating."<sup>121</sup>

In *The Talk Book*, Gerald Goodman organizes wide ranging information from communication and psychological research into six basic categories of communicative action and uses these categories as the outline for a course of instruction in communication skills intended for everyone.<sup>122</sup>

Two aspects of these books make them relevant to the Six Dimensions project. First, each presents a structured outline of what the author sees as the most fundamental possibilities in interpersonal communication from the point of view of the participants.<sup>123</sup> Second, each sees himself as summarizing a wide range of research in the field. I have drawn primarily on these two sources in order to try to include in the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model the best currently available information about communicative action.

#### **6.4. Arguments for and against menus of possible actions.**

As John Steinbruner points out in his work on decision-making,<sup>124</sup> people generally do not organize their behavior by a rational evaluation of all the possibilities that are open to them; there are simply too many. (Instead, he argues, people adjust their behavior by paying attention to how well they are doing in relation to a few key goals or

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<sup>120</sup> Lawrence M. Brammer, *The Helping Relationship: Processes and Skills*, 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>122</sup> Goodman, *The Talk Book*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>123</sup> One could argue that the most fundamental categories of interpersonal communication consist of neuron firings or movements in the throat or ear canal, and I would take that to be an interesting argument, but not one made from the point of view of the conscious participants in a conversation.

<sup>124</sup> John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 50.

indicators of success.) At first glance this would seem to argue against the usefulness of providing people with “ranges” or “palettes” of possible actions. In defense of “providing a palette” I would say that ordinary behavior is quite habitual, and it is when people want to change their habits that a “palette” of as yet untried possibilities can be helpful. What is at issue here, as I see it, is not primarily how people organize their behavior, but how they might reorganize and improve it. Reorganizing and improving will often involve consciously looking at what was previously done without a thought, and including new actions and organizing themes in one’s repertoire of action. The distinction I am making here between “organize” and “reorganize” is an adaptation of the one that Thomas Kuhn<sup>125</sup> makes between “normal science” and periods of “paradigm shift.” And just as the dynamics of normal science do not adequately represent or explain paradigm shifts, I would like to argue that the dynamics of ordinary behavior will not necessarily help us to understand the dynamics of change.

As I noted in my introduction to this study, the renown family therapist Salvador Minuchin summed up the heart of psychotherapy as, “I am always saying to people, in one way or another, “There are more possibilities in you than you think. Let us find a way to help you become less narrow.” ”<sup>126</sup>

## **6.5. Goodman’s six “talk tools”**

In order to make the path to new possibilities more understandable, Goodman describes what he sees as the six “talk tools” of more satisfying conversations (thus implicitly adopting a “toolkit” metaphor). In my preferred metaphor, he offers his readers a menu of six conversational possibilities. He describes these as follows.

**6.5.1. Disclosures**, which can be viewed as arranged across a spectrum of emotional risk. In making “risky” disclosures, which Goodman advocates, we allow others to see us as less than ideal, but we also allow others to actually come to know us. Revealing our distresses, disappointments and failures to others can make us “vulnerable to being viewed as less of a person” but it also opens us to receive the empathy and

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<sup>125</sup>Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

<sup>126</sup>Richard Simon, “It’s More Complicated Than That: An Interview with Salvador Minuchin,” *Family Therapy Networker* 20, no. 6 (November/December 1996): 55.

support of others, and to build intimate relationships based on mutual acceptance. The alternative, according to Goodman, is an emotional isolation that makes for mental illness. (While I agree with Goodman in relation to American and perhaps European cultures, it is not clear to me that this is a universal truth. Asian and Native American cultures place great value on emotional reserve.)

**6.5.2. Reflections** are expressions from a listener that summarize a speaker's expressed experience, *as experienced from the speaker's point of view*. In reflecting, the listener acknowledges the speaker's experience as the speaker experienced it, rather than as the listener would have experienced it or as some ideal person might or ought to have experienced it. Reflections are the polar complement of disclosures, in that they are the response generally needed in order to allow someone making a disclosure to feel that their disclosure has been understood by the listener.

**6.5.3. Interpretations**, as described by Goodman, are, like reflections, a response to another person's experience. But instead of the listener trying to express from the speaker's point of view what the speaker is experiencing, the listener expresses what the speaker's experience means *to the listener, according to the listener's perspective and values*, and perhaps what the listener thinks the speaker's experience *ought* to mean to the speaker. "... [T]here are two ways of giving personal interpretations: classifying (naming, diagnosing and pigeonholing); and analyzing (explaining, dissecting or reordering)."<sup>127</sup> General interpretations involve seeing a person's experience as an example of a widespread pattern or a well-known proverb. Interpreting usually means that the responding listener *does not* join with the speaker in the speaker's experience.

**Advisements** for Goodman cover an entire range of conversational interactions that are intended to influence the behavior of others and that vary in their degree of assertiveness. Although advisements can create conflict and Goodman has a lot of warnings and advice to give us about them, he reminds us that we cannot live and work closely with other people without trying to influence their actions. "A bald fact of human relations is that getting close forces us into a continuing series of adjustments. To keep

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<sup>127</sup>Goodman, *The Talk Book*, 73.

life balanced, we work at shaping others into adjustments [sic] with us.”<sup>128</sup> In order of ascending forcefulness, five typical forms of influencing others are:

- ◆ Advising questions of the form “Don’t you think it would be a good idea if we...” These are the most tentative because they explicitly invite correction or contradiction.
- ◆ Me-too advisements respond to the other person’s situation with a personal story that expresses or implies a recommended course of action.
- ◆ Suggestions, by containing an explicit label of “suggestion,” usually signal the recipient that they are free to accept or reject the advice.
- ◆ Soft commands, such as “Don’t touch handrail - wet paint,” provide a rationale for compliance that sends a meta-message of respect to the recipient.
- ◆ Hard commands of the “Keep off the grass.” or “Kiss me!” sort do not invite or anticipate dialogue or refusal. They can imply either authority or great intimacy

Goodman acknowledges that “advisement” is not an entirely satisfactory label for this group of conversational transactions in which one person is trying to influence another. Under that general heading I would certainly want to add making requests, which, for reasons not stated, is not mentioned anywhere in this text but is a central theme in books on assertiveness training.

**6.5.5. Questions.** “The spoken question is used for a wider range of motives than any other talk tool.”<sup>129</sup> And the key to understanding questions is to understand that much of the time questions are not requests for information.

(One problem I see in Goodman’s exposition is that although he introduces us to the rich interweave of intentions that motivate us to communicate with one another, he does not give us any overview of intentions in the same way that he gives us an overview of talk tools. Since intentions are acknowledged as a crucial part of the process, I would have liked to have seen a more explicit discussion of the varieties of intention in relation to all the six talk tools.)

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<sup>128</sup>Goodman, *The Talk Book*, 111.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

Goodman divides the overall territory of questioning into several overlapping zones:

- ◆ Loaded questions of the “Why don’t you slow down and take three deep breaths” variety soften the effect of giving advice or offering and interpretation.
- ◆ “Semi-innocent” questions contain some degree of actual request for information mixed with a large amount of another conversational intention. For example:

Complaining: “How come you never...”

Requesting approval: “Wasn’t I great...”

Resisting demands: “Why don’t we wait until...”

Softening surprise: “Would you believe...”

Initiating flirtation: “Do you shop here often?”

Bragging: “Have you seen the new exhibit at the Getty?”

Demonstrating a common bond:

“So you like turtles, too, huh?”

Reducing anxiety: “Pretty scary, huh?”

Softening persuasion:

“How comfortable would you be if we...”

- ◆ Closed questions for short answers constrain the recipient to reply in the terms given by the questioner, often simply “yes” or “no,” as when a sales person says “Are you ready to buy this?” Closed questions are often “semi-innocent” because of the way they constrain the recipient. They can also have multiple options as in “Would you like the green model with blue stripes, the blue model with green stripes, or the beige model with pink sparkles?” This latter form is significant because it appears to be offering a wide range of choices when it may actually be leaving out important choices such as “I don’t want to buy any of those.” or “I would like to do some more shopping around before I make a purchase.” Multiple choice questions can have positive uses, though, as when a person tries to clarify a confusing situation and says “I’m confused. Are we talking about...(A or B or C)?”

- ◆ Open questions for longer answers give recipients permission to reply in their own terms and at length if they so choose. Open ended questions can still contain an element of suggestion. The question, “How do you feel about seeing *Gone With the Wind* tonight?”, implies that I would like to see it, but allows you to decline the invitation without losing face.
- ◆ Rhetorical questions soften the effect of interpretation or advice offered by one person to another. For example, I can say, “What kind of living hell are we creating by selling land mines to third-world countries?”, instead of saying, “We are we creating a living hell by selling land mines to third-world countries.” In the former version I invite my listener to agree with me, but the question form gives listeners some sense of permission to think for themselves. In the latter version I constrain my listener to accept my point of view or start an argument.
- ◆ Disclosing questions reveal the condition of the questioner as much as or more than they request information. They reveal feelings that the questioner would be embarrassed to state directly. For example, the question, “How do you feel about seeing *Gone With the Wind* tonight?”, asked of someone I did not know very well, would be an indirect way of asking for a date, a way that would allow the recipient to decline my invitation by simply expressing lack of interest in that particular movie.

**6.5.6. “Silences”** is the term that Goodman uses to label a cluster of related activities that includes conversational waiting, paying attention, turn-taking, crowding, interrupting and “overtalking.”

Receiving the attention of others is a fundamental psychological need, so the patterns of waiting or rushing that emerge in conversations have a large impact on how people feel about themselves, their conversation partners and their relationships with their conversation partners.

The roots of attention-seeking go back to the infant’s early experience of being attended to and cared for. Love and attention are so deeply intertwined in early life that as adults many people experience compassionate attentiveness as a powerfully healing (although impersonal) form of love. As babies, we find our voice by engaging in a responsive interplay with our mothers, (or other primary caregivers). According to the Object Relationists (whom Goodman cites) the baby interiorizes this responsive interplay

and it becomes the structure of the young child's emerging personality. A great deal of clinical and developmental data supports Goodman's advocacy of slowing down in conversations and learning to wait, that is, learning to let other people take the time they need to express whatever it is they are trying to say.

**6.5.7. Critique of Goodman's approach.** While I like the "tools in a toolkit" metaphor because it is reassuringly informal and suggests a variety of possible actions that are available to everyone, there are several ways in which this metaphor is awkward and misleading. First, the six activities have been nominalized (turned into thing-like nouns), which sets them somewhat at a distance from the reader and leaves readers with the task of re-imagining the six tools as the reader's own activities of disclosing, reflecting, etc. Second, once imagined as separate tools, it does not follow naturally to imagine weaving communicative actions together or stringing them together into a sequence, both of which are necessary in conversations. Third, one learns quickly that there are really more than six actions to take in conversation. The six talk tools turn out to be less like separate tools and more like the first six major branchings of a tree trunk. The tree actually has many, many branches. In the course of his exposition, Goodman introduces his reader to an illuminating array of distinctions, categories and possibilities. I like the material but I wonder to what degree readers will turn away in disappointment when they discover that "the intimate science of communicating in close relationships" is much more complicated than the list of six actions that Goodman presents at first. This is not an easy issue to resolve. One might say that one virtue of *The Talk Book* is that it starts out simply enough to get people engaged in learning that the topic is complex.

Another virtue of Goodman's book is that he shows his reader the six talk tools in action in long transcripts of actual conversations, interspersed with his comments pointing out how particular actions evoke particular responses in conversation.

### **6.8. Brammer's outline of helping skills**

Although Brammer's outline of communication skills is more elaborate than Goodman's, Brammer's goal, to identify and describe the fundamental skills that helpers need to learn, is narrower than Goodman's goal, which is to identify and describe the fundamental skills that everyone needs to learn. I find both these lists illuminating because the authors are trying to define, as fully as is reasonably possible, the

fundamental spectrum or universe of action possibilities in conversation (which I am trying to summarize for communication-skill students in the Six Dimensions model). Faced with the fact that “there is no standard classification of helping skills,” Brammer created a classification based on his experience of “what categories are most meaningful in training helpers.”<sup>130</sup> (Although he does not discuss the issue, this is a significant example of practice shaping theory.) His list of helping skills is shown in Table 6.1, below.

Table 6.1. Brammer’s outline of helping skills.

FOR UNDERSTANDING	FOR SUPPORT AND CRISIS INTERVENTION	FOR POSITIVE ACTION
1. Listening	1. Supporting	1. Problem solving and decision making
1.1 Attending	1.1 Contacting	1.1 Identifying problems
1.2 Paraphrasing	1.2 Reassuring	1.2 Changing problems to goals
1.3 Clarifying	1.3 Relaxing	1.3 Analyzing problems
1.4 Perception checking	2. Crisis Intervention	1.4 Exploring alternatives and implications
2. Leading	2.1 Building hope	1.5 Planning a course of action
2.1 Indirect leading	2.2 Consoling	1.6 Generalizing to new problems
2.2 Direct leading	2.3 Controlling	2. Behavior changing
2.3 Focusing	2.4 Developing alternatives	2.1 Modeling
2.4 Questioning	3. Centering	2.2 Rewarding
3. Reflecting	3.1 Identifying strengths	2.3 Extinguishing
3.1 Feeling	3.2 Reviewing growth experiences	2.4 Desensitizing
3.2 Content	3.3 Recalling peak experiences	2.5 Shaping
3.3 Experience	4. Referring a person to other sources of help	
4. Summarizing		
4.1 Feeling		
4.2 Content		
4.3 Experience		
5. Confronting		
5.1 Describing feelings		
5.2 Expressing feelings		
5.3 Feeding back		
5.4 Self-confrontation		
5.5 Repeating		
5.6 Associating		
6. Interpreting		
6.1 Explaining		
6.2 Questioning		
6.3 Fantasizing		
7. Informing		
7.1 Giving information		
7.2 Giving advice		
7.3 Suggesting		

Source: Lawrence M. Brammer, *The Helping Relationship: Processes and Skills*, 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993), 22.

<sup>130</sup>Brammer, *The Helping Relationship*, 22.

As I count them there are forty-eight distinct actions in Table 6.1. To me, this fact by itself raises some interesting questions. For example, how is a person supposed to keep forty-eight action possibilities continuously “in view,” as it were, in the course of a supportive conversation? Brammer is clearly proposing a meta-vocabulary of communicative action that will make severe cognitive demands on would-be helpers. In studying the explanations of these various actions, it seems to me that there is an unresolved tension between Brammer’s implicit goal of presenting an accurate, detailed palette of action possibilities and his desire for many people at all levels of society to become helpers. Those many people may find themselves, in Robert Kegan’s terms, “in over their heads.”<sup>131</sup> At the very least, a way of connecting all these diverse actions would be very helpful.

To Brammer’s credit, he does suggest an overall plot line to the series of conversations in which these specific communicative actions would take place. The helping relationship begins with an emphasis on understanding and empathizing and gradually shifts to an emphasis on support for decision making and action. In the process, “helpees” get support to pay attention to their feelings and to weigh the pros and cons of various courses of action. Within this organizing scenario, helpers improvise based on their sense of what feels appropriate, while trying to embody the genuineness, caring and actively expressed empathic understanding that are known to be generally helpful.

Brammer’s outline calls to mind the “how long is the coastline of Britain?” riddle discussed in the introduction to this study. The closer one looks, the more there is to see. (This is true of Goodman’s book as well.) So a truly comprehensive list of conversational transactions may be so long, and hence so demanding, that it would not be of much use to anyone in organizing their behavior.

I think Brammer’s list becomes more helpful if one uses the relative distinction I described in the last chapter between conversational intentions and fundamental speech actions such as speaking and listening. These two levels are mixed together in the list. By adopting a two-level view one can see how a particular conversational intention might be accomplished by a sequence and interplay of a limited number of speech actions. The

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<sup>131</sup>Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard

intention/speech action distinction is a relative one because, given that interpersonal communication is goal-oriented and context-bound, there is never a speech action that does not carry forward some guiding intention. But for the purpose of modeling the moment-to-moment action choices that are available to people, I believe that it helps to separate conversational intentions from speech actions. I challenge my students to become aware of how they use various speech actions to carry forward specific intentions. What follows is my working synthesis of Goodman's and Brammer's categories as developed in my teaching practice.

### **6.10. A menu of conversational actions**

The construction of category schemes always involves value judgments about what is most important for people to pay attention to. What facets of a process should be highlighted and what facets should be lumped together in a category called "Other" or "For later study"? In my efforts to teach Goodman's,<sup>132</sup> Brammer's<sup>133</sup> and Rosenberg's<sup>134</sup> material the following list of most important speech actions has evolved. The purpose of this list is to introduce students to the basic conversational tools they need to fulfill all conversational intentions. So these speech actions are described as distinct from both conversational intentions, which are described at length in chapter 5 of this study, and conversational styles, which are described at length in chapter 7. (For clarity I have described some of these actions using "I," "you" and other personal pronouns.)

**1. Listening: paying focused attention to you and giving small signals that I am following what you are saying.** It is important for speakers to know that listeners are receiving the message or following the story. This happens continuously by the listener giving the speaker what Goodman calls "minimal encouragements," including repeated nodding and repeatedly saying "uh-huh" or "yes" while the speaker is talking. These minimal encouragements keep the conversational focus entirely on the speaker.

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University Press, 1994).

<sup>132</sup>Goodman, *The Talk Book*.

<sup>133</sup>Brammer, *The Helping Relationship*.

<sup>134</sup>Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*.

**2. Reflecting back: expressing in words the essence of what you have just said.** This is what Carl Rogers called active or empathic listening. The idea is to say back to the speaker the essence of what has just been said, to reassure the speaker that she or he has been understood. The focus of the conversation shifts briefly to the listener, to allow the listener to express what has been heard. The need to be recognized and understood by another person is a deep one, going back, according to Winnicott<sup>135</sup> and Kohut,<sup>136</sup> to the evolution of the self in the mother-infant dialogue.

**3. Talking: expressing my experience, needs, and requests, giving information, interpretations, directions or advice, and story-telling and banter.** Expressing oneself has been the traditional focus of communication studies and rhetoric, so it is the paradigmatic speech action about which we have the most information. (I find it telling that a history of communication theory from the ancient Greeks to 1900 has no entry for “listen” or “listening” in the index.<sup>137</sup>) Most typically, for men in Western societies, the focus is external: on opinions, projects, sports, objects such as cars, and competing for status and attention. According to Deborah Tannen,<sup>138</sup> men’s talking is shaped by their experience of growing up in competitive, hierarchical groups. Women’s socialization toward cooperation leaves them more inclined to discuss their web of social relationships and use talk to build alliances of mutual support. It is only in recent decades, with the advent of humanistic psychology and the publication of books such as Sydney Jourard’s *The Transparent Self*,<sup>139</sup> that men have been encouraged to express their feelings and experiences. Men tend to act out the feelings they have not the skill or permission to express in words and this plays a large role in the problem of domestic violence. (See the Workshop Workbook example at the end of chapter 4 for an example of how I present expressing one’s experience in my classes.)

<sup>135</sup>Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Tavistock/Methuen, 1982), 111-118.

<sup>136</sup>Crayton E. Rowe, Jr. and David S. Mac Isaac, *Empathic Attunement* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1991), 41.

<sup>137</sup>Nancy Harper, *Human Communication Theory: The History of a Paradigm* (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Co., 1979), 317-321.

<sup>138</sup>Deborah Tannen, *That’s Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), 125-144.

<sup>139</sup>Sydney M. Jourard, *The Transparent Self*, rev. ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971).

**4. Pausing/waiting/being silent. Giving you (or me) time to think.** Waiting and its opposites, rushing and interrupting, play important roles in the process of directing attention in conversation. It usually takes a moment for a person to work out the implications and significance of what another person has said. In many cultures, if we begin responding the very instant that another person stops talking, we indicate that we are not really considering what they have said. Also, we may be cutting off a process of exploratory self-disclosure, in that the speaker may need an occasional pause in which to formulate the next part of their statement. The pace of crowding and interrupting in a conversation can indicate how anxious or how confident people are about getting their turn and being heard, in a particular conversation and in life in general. Anxiety about being heard can become self-perpetuating, if the anxious person loses conversation partners because of interrupting or rushing to respond.

**5. Summarizing a significant segment of what I or you (or we both) have said.** Summaries are related to and overlap with reflecting back, but they refer to larger chunks of conversation. If, after listening for half an hour to you talk about apartment hunting, I say “So you’ve been out there looking at every listing you could find,” I am creating an opportunity for you to say more on that topic or change the subject. Reflecting is often focused on a particular incident or experience, whereas summarizing appears to recognize the overall intent of an entire conversation or a large part of a conversation. Summaries are like intersections: they allow the conversation to go in new directions.

**6. Asking questions, especially open-ended questions, to move the conversation forward.** As Goodman’s analysis of questions, presented earlier in this chapter, makes clear, people use the question form to accomplish many purposes other than requesting information or explanation. So much so that I believe real question-asking can get lost in a sea of pseudo-questions. What I want to call a “real” question signals an openness to learn on the part of the person asking. And the tone of voice with which the question is asked usually indicates how wide a range of possible answers will be tolerated by the asker. Certain psychologists emphasize that telling the truth about

one's thoughts, feelings and experiences is the central task of becoming a person.<sup>140</sup> The absolutely essential complement of telling the truth about one's own life is the willingness to hear the truths of another person's life. Open ended questions, of the "How do you feel about the possibility of our moving to New York if I get a job offer there?" variety, can signal a genuine openness to receive the truth of another person's experience, whatever it may be. (At the end of this chapter I include a section on asking open-ended questions from my workshop workbook.)

**7. Turn-taking: changing the focus of attention in the conversation by my taking a turn or encouraging you to take a turn.** The way people take turns in a conversation shows how power is shared and attention is distributed in their relationship. Because we all need attention, it is tempting to conclude that the ideal human relationship is one in which all participants get to express themselves approximately the same amount. Such relationships are my personal preference and my political commitment, but human cultures are so different in the way they organize social interaction that I hesitate to say that one pattern is best for everyone. Interrupting and talking at the same time as another person can have very different significance in different cultures.<sup>141</sup> Extremes of domination, as in suicidal religious cults, are clearly dysfunctional. But extremes of egalitarianism, as I have experienced in various political groups, can lead to an inability to make decisions and commitments. My experience has been that many people appear to be caught in less-than-satisfying turn-taking patterns simply because no one ever helped them develop new ones. Without being fanatic about it, my goal is to help people move their conversational turn-taking in the directions of greater awareness, mutuality, respect, consent and satisfaction. By presenting turn-taking as one of a wide range of conversational actions, I hope to encourage people to develop their turn-taking skill without becoming obsessed with the process.

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<sup>140</sup>Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, Blanton, *Radical Honesty*, and J. & M. Paul, *Do I Have To Give Up Me To Be Loved By You*.

<sup>141</sup>It was thought until recently that men interrupt women much more than women interrupt men, suggesting the imbalance of power between women and men in society. A recent, extensive review of this topic suggests that the process of interrupting is more complex than previously assumed, has different meanings in different social and cultural circumstances, and the evidence documenting the process is more varied and ambiguous. Interruption can be an act of domination or disrespect in some circumstances. See Deborah James and Sandra Clarke, "Women, Men and Interruptions: A Critical Review," in *Gender and Conversational Interaction*, ed. Deborah Tannen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 231-280.

**8. Declaring conversational intent and inviting consent.** As I discussed at length in chapter 5, briefly negotiating with another person about what kind of conversation to have can be a crucial part of a conversation. And the more important or demanding the conversation is going to be, the more important it is to declare one's intent and invite the consent of one's prospective conversation partner. Deborah Tannen describes a related process that she calls this "naming the frame," helping a conversation along by giving it a label that allows both participants to have the same expectations.<sup>142</sup> By including this kind of "meta-communication" in my list of fundamental communication activities, I am taking the position that even beginning students of communication skills should be challenged to include meta-communication in their picture of what happens between people. (See the Workshop Workbook example at the end of chapter 5 for an example of how I present this topic in my classes.)

**9. Using body language to express our overall involvement in, and emotional reaction to, the interaction in which we are participating; and observing the body language of others.** Body language includes posture, eye contact, direction of gaze, tone of voice, adjustment of distance between conversants and body movements (as in moving one's hands to express more of the feeling of what one is talking about). Because body language has so many psychological and cultural aspects, I have many questions about trying to teach people to alter their body language. To the degree that our body language is faithfully expressing our feelings, I believe we may be better off just learning from our body language rather than trying to change it. For example, some doctors in hospitals sit next to their patients when they visit them; other doctors stand at the foot of the bed when they visit and appear to be more interested in the disease than in the patient.<sup>143</sup> One approach to this situation would be to encourage all doctors to sit next to their patients, which might be a good idea, but I think it would be important for such behavior change to be accompanied by some self-exploration on the part of the doctors, so that the underlying attitude that is causing the "body language" message might change. In this case, and I think in many cases, the body language is not the problem. But it is an

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<sup>142</sup>Tannen, *That's Not What I Meant!*, 176.

important window through which we can catch glimpses of our own attitudes and feelings, especially attitudes and feelings we might prefer not to face or not to have. Also, learning to pay attention to the body language of the people around us, especially the feelings that are being conveyed by tone of voice, can deepen our listening. Of the fundamental speech actions listed here, using and observing body language is the most challenging and the most open-ended. I include it in this list for the sake of completeness, but, I regret to say, the coaching of body language awareness is beyond the scope of this study.

### **6.11 Summary and Workshop Workbook examples**

There are many way in which one might map the actions of people in conversation. To recapitulate, here is my working list of fundamental communicative actions, compiled from the perspective of facilitating new self-awareness and action:

1. *Listening*: paying focused attention to you and giving small signals that I am following what you are saying.
2. *Reflecting back*: expressing in words the essence of what you have just said.
3. *Talking*: expressing my experience, needs, and requests, giving information, interpretations, directions or advice, and story-telling and banter.
4. *Pausing/waiting/being silent*. Giving you (or me, or both of us) time to think.
5. *Summarizing* a significant segment of what I or you (or we both) have said.
6. *Asking questions*, especially open-ended questions, to move the conversation forward.
7. *Turn-taking*: changing the focus of attention in the conversation by my taking a turn or encouraging you to take a turn.
8. *Declaring conversational intent and inviting consent*. (Meta-conversation)
9. *Using body language* (including tone of voice) to express our overall involvement in, and emotional contribution to/reaction to, the interaction in which we are participating; and observing the body language of others.

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<sup>143</sup>This example is from the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, quoted in Ronald B. Adler and George Rodman, *Understanding Human Communication* (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988), 121. The analysis that follows the example is my own.

Because of the way intention and action are woven together in communication, this list of fundamental speech actions is only meaningful in partnership with the extensive list of conversational intentions presented in the last chapter. In my experience, the interaction of these two lists reveals more about what is happening in conversation than either Brammer's or Goodman's single list approach.

As examples of how people might learn to listen more responsively and ask more open-ended questions , I have included below several pages on these topics from my workshop training manual.

[Postscript 2002: Since 1997 when the following exercises were developed, they have been expanded to become Chapters One and Five of *The Seven Challenges: A Workbook and Reader About Communicating More Cooperatively*. The *Workbook* is available by contribution or of charge on the Internet at [www.coopcomm.org/workbook](http://www.coopcomm.org/workbook)]



***Listening responsively:*** Listen first and acknowledge what you hear, even if you don't agree with it, before expressing your experience or point of view. In order to get more of your conversation partner's attention in tense situations, pay attention first: listen and reflect back what you hear (especially feelings) before you express your own position. This step separates acknowledging and approving/agreeing. Acknowledging another person's thoughts and feelings **does not have to mean** that you **approve of** or **agree with** that person's actions or way of experiencing, or that you will do whatever they ask.

When people are upset about something and want to get it "off their chests," their capacity to listen is greatly diminished. Blocking the expression of someone's feelings by trying to get your point across will usually cause the other person to try even harder to get their feelings recognized. Once people feel that their messages and feelings have been heard, they start to relax and they have more free attention to listen.

Example (in a hospital). Nurse, after listening to patient:

**"I hear that you are very uncomfortable right now, Susan, and you would really like to get out of that bed and move around. But your doctor says your bones won't heal unless you stay put for another week"**

Although you might think that most people just want sympathy from their listeners, people actually want a whole range of responses from each other in conversation. There are two groups of responses that are especially important in conflict situations:

**(1) Recognition and acknowledgment**

**(2) Agreement and approval**

One recurring problem in conflict situations is that many people don't separate these two groups. They are stuck together in people's minds like a "package deal." The effect of this combining is that Person A feels that any acknowledgment of Person B's experience implies agreement and approval, therefore Person A will not acknowledge any of Person B's experience. Each side tries harder to get heard and each side tries harder to not hear the other. Of course, this is a recipe for stalemate (if not disaster).

In fact, most people really want to be recognized and acknowledged, separate and apart from the issue of whether you approve of their experience or agree with their position. With practice, you can learn to separate these two groups of responses. As you do this, you may find that, figuratively speaking, you can give your conversation partners half of what they want, even if you can't give them all of what

*acknowledgment and agreement are often 'glued together' in people's minds*

*you can learn to separate acknowledgment and agreement*

they want. In many conflict situations that will be giant step forward. Your conversation partners will also be more likely to acknowledge your position and experience, even if they don't sympathize. This mutual acknowledgment can create an emotional atmosphere in which it is easier to work toward agreement or more gracefully accommodate disagreements.

Here are some examples of acknowledgments that do not imply agreement:

A counselor to a drug abuse client: **"I hear that you are feeling terrible right now and that you really want some drugs. And I want you to know that I'm still concerned this stuff you're taking is going to kill you."**

A mother to a five-year-old: **"I know that you want some more cake and ice cream, Jimmy, because it tastes yummy, but you've already had three pieces and I'm really worried that you'll get an upset tummy. That's why I don't want you to have any more."**

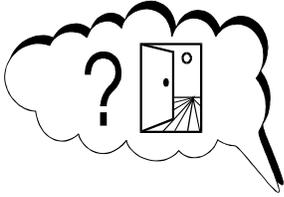
Union representative to company owner's representative: **"I understand from your presentation that you see XYZ company as short of cash, threatened by foreign competition and not in a position to agree to any wage increases. Now I would like us to explore contract arrangements that would allow my union members to get a wage increase and XYZ Company to advance its organizational goals."**

In each case a person's listening to and acknowledgment of their conversation partner's experience or position increases the chance that the conversation partner will be willing to listen in turn. The examples given above are all a bit long and include a declaration of the listener's position or decision. In many conversations you may simply want to reassure your conversation partner with a word or two that you have heard and understood whatever they are experiencing. For example, saying, "You sound really happy about that.", etc.

This type of compassionate listening is a powerful resource for navigating through life, but it is also quite demanding. We have to remember our position while we state someone else's position. That takes practice. We also have to be able to hear other people's criticism without losing our sense of self-esteem. That requires cultivating a deeper sense of self-esteem, which is no small project. In spite of these difficulties, the results can be so rewarding that I have found this listening practice to be worth all the effort required.

*it's hard work  
but it's worth it*





*Open-ended questions invite discussion.*

*Asking questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” may keep you from getting information you need.*

***Asking more open-ended questions.*** *In order to get more information and interaction from your conversation partner, ask questions that allow for a wide range of responses and avoid asking questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”*

Consider the difference between two versions of the same question, as each might occur in a conversation between two people in a close relationship:

**“Well, honey, would you like to go ahead and take that apartment we saw yesterday?”**

and

**“Well, honey, how do you feel about us taking that apartment we saw yesterday?”**

The first version suggests a “yes” or “no” answer, favors “yes” and does not invite much discussion. A person hearing such a question may feel pressured to reach a decision, and may not make the best decision.

Both versions imply a suggestion to take the apartment, but the second question is much more inviting of a wide range of responses. Even if our goal is to persuade someone, we can’t do a good job of that unless we address their concerns, and we won’t find out their concerns unless we ask questions that invite discussion.

When you are under time pressure, it is tempting to push people to make “yes-no” decisions. But pressing forward without addressing people’s concerns has played a key role in many on-the-job accidents and catastrophes (such as the Challenger space shuttle explosion).

Here are a variety of open-ended questions that could be helpful in trying to solve problems in a way that meets more of everyone’s needs, and could also be useful in just creating richer and more satisfying conversations:

**“How comfortable are you with Plan B?”**

**“How could I modify this proposal to meet more of your requirements?”**

**“What kind of information do you need in order to go forward?”**

**“How did you like that movie?”**

**“What do you think about ... moving the office to Boston?”**

(rather than “Is it OK with you if we...?”)

**How are you feeling about all of this?**

**“How ready are you to ... ?”**

(rather than “Are you ready to ...?”)

Exercise: Translate each of the following “yes-no” questions into an open-ended one. What problems can you imagine arising from each of the “yes-no” versions.

On seeing a person who looks disappointed: “So you didn’t like that, huh?”

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A pilot to a new co-pilot: “D’you know how to fly this thing?”

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A nurse to a patient: “Have you been taking your medication?”

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Parent to teen: “Don’t you think it would be better if you did your homework first?”

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Exercise 4B: Take each of the examples at the bottom of the Page 15 and write an open-ended question that would fit a situation in your life.

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