

## The Meaning of Communication is the Response That You Get<sup>1</sup>

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### Mis-Communication – The Root of Knowledge Mis-Management?

Every so often a series of research papers emerge which change the business landscape forever. The recent special issue of the electronic journal *Information Research* [1] fits this mould. For the first time it demonstrates a strong link between knowledge management and neuro linguistic programming (NLP) both of which are core to the work of Creatifica Associates.

A key paper by F.J. Miller [2] brings a new dimension to the debate about the value of knowledge management and its theoretical foundation. He argues that the intrinsic value of information is precisely zero until it is effectively communicated.

Deriving value from communicated information requires the receiver to understand and make sense of it. A shared or overlapping interpretation is always necessary if communication is to be meaningful. This will always be context dependent and will always be filtered through the previous experiences of both the communicator and receiver. Hence the meaning of information can never be absolute and its intrinsic value is zero.

Miller's arguments fit well with our observations on the success of knowledge management in business. In our experience, paying attention to improving how individuals and teams communicate pays handsome dividends and is critical to any knowledge or change management programme.

#### On the Shoulders of Giants

On the one hand this is a radical perspective that drives a coach and horses through the current popular knowledge management practices. On the other hand, these

postulates are not really new. The NLP literature founded by Bandler and Grinder in 1975 [3] has a series of pre-suppositions – one of which is that “The meaning of communication is the response that you get”.

In the NLP philosophy, there is no such thing as an absolute meaning to any communication. Correct interpretation will always be dependent on whether the mental representational frameworks used by the communicator and receiver overlap. Where these differ, there can be no guarantee that the information shared will elicit the expected response or indeed generate the same meaning.

These ideas have big implications for knowledge management IT systems which purport to organise *explicit* knowledge in the absolute form of information and even more so for those systems that seek to capture *tacit* knowledge in the same way. Indeed Miller argues that:

“Knowledge (ie 'what we know') is only ever 'tacit' and can never be 'explicit'. It must never be thought of as a commodity to be captured, processed, stored, transmitted, managed etc. Only human beings can intelligently make sense of - and provide an appropriate context for - information.

Only human beings have the capacity to construct meaning from information and to sense 'meaning' evolving in themselves and in others. Only human beings can compare interpretations with a view to achieving a shared purpose. Information, no matter how elegantly processed and presented, is incapable - on its own - of achieving anything!”

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The popular language of explicit and tacit knowledge developed by Nonaka and Takeuchi [4] is a distortion of Polyani's original work in 1966 [5]. They explored this in great depth, especially the interaction between the tacit and explicit knowledge that they believed was necessary for creating new knowledge in organisations. Their thinking has spawned a whole industry of consultants and vendors chasing the holy grail of converting tacit to explicit knowledge to capture it in "corporate memory".

### Implicit Knowledge – The Missing Link?

In his own contribution to this special issue of Information Research, Tom Wilson [6] explores Nonaka and Takeuchi's distortion of Polyani's work in great depth and identifies that the real issue they were discussing was the importance of **implicit knowledge**. This is rarely discussed in the popular knowledge management literature. Tom defined this simply as:

"Implicit knowledge is that which we take for granted in our actions, and which may be shared by others through common experience or culture."

Essentially he was talking about the "way we do things around here" ... norms of behaviour that can be taught to newcomers. On a superficial level this involves understanding the intricacies of the various business processes in a firm, together with the culture that prevails and knowledge of the key opinion formers to influence. On a deeper level it also involves understanding the belief systems and values that prevail.

All of these have a profound effect on individual and team performance and are much more significant factors than the availability of explicit content or information relating to a task or problem.

### Breakthroughs in Knowledge Communication

For us the explicit/tacit axis has never really captured the issues in knowledge management and has never adequately explained the performance variations of individuals or teams in Corporania. Implicit knowledge is indeed the missing ingredient.

This concept was originally explored in the cognitive psychology literature and then explored by Bandler and Grinder as part of

defining the pre-suppositions and techniques of NLP. For them the implicit knowledge that drives behaviour is encoded in the internal representational frameworks used by individuals and the filters or programmes they use to process information.

### Modelling Excellence and Achieving Breakthrough Performance

At its core, NLP has a series of modelling tools that involve the mapping of implicit knowledge onto an explicit and transferable model that enables individuals to understand each other's frame of reference. At the heart of this modelling is an attempt to understand the values and belief systems of the individual as these have a profound effect on how they receive, process and interpret information. These tools have a very practical application in knowledge management. (The August issue of Insight will cover modelling in more detail.)<sup>2</sup>

In our work on knowledge sharing in teams, we find that surfacing this implicit knowledge and developing shared language or shared belief systems are the first steps to breakthrough performance. For many teams, the exercises and diagnostics we run are a revelation – effectively providing a window on a new dimension of more effective communication.

Barriers to the effective communication and sharing of deep knowledge rapidly disappear once you understand precisely how to communicate what you know or need to know. These changes impact on both spoken and written communications but much more subtly on the non-verbal communication systems that actually form the fabric of an organisation's culture.

### The Need for Resourceful States

Many teams we work with are initially uncomfortable with these radical ideas on communication and behavioural styles, believing that they can't adapt or that they are a step too far. In their view, knowledge and information are absolutes and should speak for themselves. Their reluctance to adapt, can then lead senior management to the conclusion that the teams don't have the skills and resources necessary for the future.

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<sup>2</sup> [Subscribe to Insight](#)

However, one of the other presuppositions of NLP is that there are no unresourceful people only unresourceful states. In our experience, these teams usually do have the knowledge and resources needed. It is their state or mindset that is currently unresourceful.

Information Centre and Finance teams are particularly challenging. They tend to work in a world they perceive to have absolute truths with intrinsically valuable information. Ambiguity can feel uncomfortable for them and flexibility often equals uncertainty in their world.

Their representational frameworks can lead them to collect large volumes of written evidence to support their position and influence opinions. This can lead to a very defensive state and they communicate accordingly. Unfortunately, their senior

management may work from a completely different representational framework interpreting a defensive stance as evidence of weakness. The result can then be completely the opposite of the teams' desired outcome.

Our role is to help these teams increase their flexibility, change their state, adjust their frameworks and learn a new set of communications styles that will allow their knowledge and expertise to surface and be valued – a very unusual knowledge management intervention, but one that works.

So there we have it - ***The meaning of communication is the response that you get.*** When knowledge isn't being shared effectively look first at the communications processes rather than the information systems - because the information itself has no intrinsic value – heresy indeed!

## References

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