Incredible Difficulty of Communicating Simple Ideas

Objectives
- To demonstrate the difficulty of transmitting verbal descriptions accurately and reliably
- To show how important precision is for giving instructions and relaying information
- To learn how to understand the working assumptions of others when translating ideas from one person to another

Uses
The activity is helpful when problems have occurred from information being transferred inaccurately, when the situation calls for cooperation, or whenever miscommunications occur.

Audience
Any

Time
Thirty minutes

Handouts, Materials, and Equipment
- Two sheets of paper and a pencil for each participant

Procedure
1. Tell participants that the activity concerns miscommunication and instruct them to form pairs.
2. Hand out two sheets of paper and a pencil to each person; then ask each participant to draw a “picture” that contains three geometric shapes of any kind, size, or configuration, such as a circle, square, triangle, line, or point, without allowing anyone else to see it.
3. When everyone has finished, tell them that one member of each pair is to verbally describe his or her “picture” to the other person, who is to try to duplicate the image on his or her blank paper using the verbal description only.

4. When everyone has finished, have the other member of each pair describe his or her picture while the other person draws it.

5. Ask pairs to compare their results to see how close each came to the original and to note any differences for the large group discussion to follow.

Discussion

Lead a discussion of this activity as a graphic demonstration of the difficulties involved in communicating even simple, straightforward images and information to another person. Point out that the responsibility is often placed on the sender to understand the past experiences, thinking style, and aptitudes of the receiver, who must only be attentive. Guide the discussion with the following questions:

- What techniques did you use during the activity that helped or hindered the receiver’s understanding?
- Were any errors encoded in the transmission?
- Was any information distorted or misread by the receiver?
- What additional cues could have helped the receiver to duplicate the drawing?
- Are there similarities between relating a drawing and relating an idea? If so, what are they?
- What does the sender need to know about the receiver to ensure a better communication?
- What happens during the original encoding of the information, the transmission process, or the decoding process to produce a bad copy of a drawing or a total misunderstanding of an original idea?
- What contributes to successful sending and receiving of information?

Source
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