SYMPOSIUM: OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Presented by Staff Members of Iowa State University

INTRODUCTION

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This topic -- "Overcoming Barriers to Cross-Cultural Communication"-- implies several things. For one, it implies that good intent (which you have as you discuss and plan for the development of home economics internationally) is in itself not sufficient. If it were, there would be no need to discuss communication barriers. The topic suggests also that imparting home economics knowledge or subject matter content doesn't automatically bring about acceptance and changed behavior -- and that you recognize this. If ideas and meanings and good intent flowed easily from person to person and across cultural lines, the world would long ago have solved most of its problems.

Obviously there is more involved than good intent and content -- although both are very much a part of any communication. We need to consider what communication itself is, what is encompasses and relate this to cross-cultural communication.

Our topic could also imply that there are ready answers on how to overcome communication barriers -- a sort of 1-2-3 formula to apply when communication bogs down. But we know you do not expect this.

Communication is a many-faceted subject. Because it is, it may be examined from different standpoints -- semantics, communication theory with particular focus on the individual as the receiver, and sociological theory with particular focus on the individual and his response in light of his social environment. A symposium, therefore, provides a good vehicle by which to probe this subject.

The following four papers endeavor to set forth a communication framework. The intent is to build a basis by which you can analyze and find solutions for cross-cultural communication problems involved in your work. This framework will be made up of interrelated concepts basic to communication. If barriers are to be overcome in cross cultural communication, we need to know what we're dealing with in the first place. This understanding is basic to the exchange that goes on between teacher and foreign student, between aid specialist and counterpart, between aid specialist and foreign government official, and so on.

When we speak of communication we are concerned with the process by which people try to get meanings across to each other. It is the phenomenon that is going on right now as I endeavor to impart the purpose and theme of this symposium to you and you endeavor to interpret and respond to what is said. No doubt part of your response at this moment is in the form of sub-vocal questions to yourself such as, Will this subject be useful to me? Will I be able to apply the ideas involved.

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In this symposium we do not discuss means of communication, such as demonstrations, audio-visual aids, radio, publications -- though these are important. Instead we focus on the communications act itself -- what goes on. We consider why, as so frequently happens, the other person doesn't respond as we anticipated or hoped he would.

Now that we're on common ground on the subject, let us raise some broad questions which reveal the dimensions of the topic at hand:

1. Is language really a barrier? If so, why?
2. How do the meanings of words and other symbols affect communication?
3. What is the source of these meanings?
4. Can communication motivate? For example, how do the norms of one's social group affect his response to a given message?
5. Considering the barriers involved, how can we get started communicating in a cross-cultural situation?

I mentioned earlier that communication is a many-faceted subject. It could lead us to talk at length about the communication problems related to helping people adapt the new to the culture they live by, to developing adequate leadership, to helping people recognize worthwhile goals and be motivated to work toward them. Each is a sizeable problem; each implies certain existing barriers between sender and receiver that must be recognized and dealt with in real working situations.

On the other hand, this subject could also lead us to examine what the behavioral sciences say about today's man. Here we would be challenged by such authorities as Milton Rokeach, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and others who stress that man has a need to know, to understand, and to be competent; that he is naturally a curious, exploratory person -- receptive to new ideas. From this vantage point, it would appear we should have no communication barriers at all.

It is evident that we must cut this subject down to a package we can handle. The following four papers attempt to do just that.

Dr. Feinberg opens up for us the intriguing world of words and gestures as symbols of meaning -- semantics.

Dr. Wells notes that meanings are not in words or things -- "meanings are in people." He sketches a simple model of a communication act involving two persons, communication mediated by such barriers as language, attitude, values, and culture.

Dr. Beal adds a third dimension, noting that behavior is the result of the social milieu that surrounds the individual. He observes that a behavioral response may not be due to communication failure but to the norms of the bureaucracy.

Professor Haroldsen, out of real life experience in Turkey, points out communications problems he found himself dealing with -- problems involving semantics, attitudes, and social pressures. He asserts the need of becoming emersed in the culture in which one is seeking to communicate.
Recently I heard three international translators discuss the problem of translating fiction and non-fiction from one language to another. Asked about the difficulty involved, one of them said, "Well, you get it out of one language and into the other as best you can."

This led me to wonder, if problems of translating meaning exist between two languages, how can a person really communicate from one culture to another? Are cultural barriers really insurmountable? In terms of the insights presented in the following four papers, I think one would have to answer, "No, not necessarily - but perhaps we too often treat them as though they were insurmountable. Indeed, communication is blocked where one fails to take cultural barriers into account and act accordingly."