BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

by George M. Beal*

As a sociologist, I recognize the excellent points made by the two previous speakers.

Obviously, but in a very crucial sense, it must be realized that what a person is, how he thinks, how he acts, his beliefs and sentiments, his value-attitude structure is a result of his innate ability and his past experience world. Some of the experiences can be generalized in terms of cultures and subcultures.

I would add to the points already made the important concepts of analyzing the sender and the receiver in their social system context. Take this social context into account in understanding oneself and the receiver.

To understand a person -- and the possibility of communicating with him -- but more important to my point, his behavior resulting from a communication, one must not only ask "what" questions but "why" questions as well.

The key frame of reference for my point is the judgment of effective communication on the basis of desired behavior change invoked by the communication.

One of the clearest -- and usually highly relevant communication situations to most of us -- is communicating with people in a formal bureaucracy -- government agency, university, private agency, etc. This problem related to communication has been mentioned many times in your discussions. If we have trouble obtaining desired behavior as a result of communication, the fault may be in the communication. But it may be equally possible that the fault is not in the communication process per se but in the social system context within which the communication was received and within which the receiver must act -- for example, the norms, restraints, negative sanctions or reward system of a bureaucracy.

May I give an oversimplified and dramatized example to make the point? The example can be duplicated in many cultures. The problem -- expediting loans to village cultivators in India. These applications for loans made by the cultivators have to be cleared by civil service clerks at the multi-village level. You talk to the clerks and apparently you communicate to them the importance of rapid clearance of applications so that cultivators can secure loans for improved seed, fertilizer, and chemicals. The clerks appear to understand the purpose of the loans, the need for the loans, and the need for speed. But do they behave this way? No! Why?

*Dr. Beal is professor of economics and sociology at Iowa State University.
Here are some possible explanations in terms of the social system in which the clerk works. (I did enough interviewing informally to know that there is a lot of truth in the things I am going to say.) The civil service is overstaffed -- it is one way to employ many people in a country of unemployment and under-employment. The way the civil service employee proves his job is needed is to keep busy; one way he can keep busy is to find mistakes in applications and return them to the cultivators. His status-ranking in the system appear to be based on rewards attached to the number of mistakes he finds -- the number of loan applications he returns to the cultivator. Finding mistakes is judged as doing a good job.

From a social psychological point of view, being able to turn down loan applications is one way the civil servant has of proving to himself, his peers, his subordinates and his superiors that he is somebody. He has authority; people must come to him; his signature (sign off) is important, and he can affect the lives of others.

It is important to note that this behavior is not only directed at cultivators but at others underneath the civil servant in the bureaucracy -- satisfaction seems to be gained equally well from finding mistakes in subordinates' work. This situation makes the system even more vicious -- and tougher on cultivators securing loans.

Thus, though your communication to the clerk may be perfect in one sense, it may not result in desired behavior because of the norms of the systems and the means available to the clerk to maximize his values within what he perceives to be the norms of the system.

Many other examples of apparent poor communication can be explained in the social system context in which the message is received and within which the receiver must act.

You may communicate perfectly to your counterpart at mid-level bureaucracy -- but note no basic change in behavior. In all cultures, including the U.S. culture, there are many instances where training has occurred and knowledge and skills been acquired but where no basic changes have occurred in behavior because superiors have not been trained. They deliver rewards for doing a good job in the traditional way -- not for innovations. Your counterpart may have this perception and never attempt the new method recommended.

Let's consider another example at the village level. On the surface it may appear very feasible to grow two crops during the year where one crop has been grown -- feasible in terms of land, fertility, growing season, water, labor, and production. You may carry on an intensive educational campaign. Certain farmers may see the logic of the two-crop program and through your communication effort acquire the attitudes, motivation, knowledge, and skills to try the two-crop system.
They may try it one year and drop it. Why? One basic reason is because of a community norm. This norm is that cattle must be kept in compounds or be herded by children during the normal growing season. After the crops are harvested the cattle may roam at will. There is no protection from the cattle during the growing and harvest season of the second crop season; the crop is destroyed.

When we attempt to communicate, do we really attempt to analyze not only the person or group to whom we attempt to communicate but the social context in which the receivers must act? Analyzing the social context tells us not only how to communicate, but with whom to communicate and what the content and intent of our communication should be. It helps us recognize that we must not only communicate with the men of an Indian village about the Japanese method of paddy (rice) culture -- but with the women as well. Why? The women do the planting of rice. Use of the Japanese methods means that seedlings have to be transplanted, a job which women do. Unless they know the probable outcomes of the Japanese method, they resist it because they know only it means more work for them. Similarly, a new variety of wheat may produce more and be disease resistant. But it is also harder for women to grind; so they don't act on the communication.

What does all of this mean in terms of effective communication?

First, we have said that we not only must ask ourself what and how questions but why questions.

For example, we must ask not only what a housewife does but what is behind her behavior. Every social action is logical in the social culture from which it is derived. We may not be sure of the reason, but there is a reason. Until we begin to ask the "why" questions, we will not begin to get at the feelings, sentiments, beliefs, and habits behind behavior change.

Second, we have suggested an analysis of the social system context that not only produced the individual(s) with whom we are attempting to communicate, but the social system context within which they must act on our communication.

This type of analysis should give us many additional insights into what to communicate, how to communicate, with whom to communicate and realistic expectations of behavior that may result from our communication.

Thus far we have looked mainly at the impact of the social system on the receiver -- we are looking at and attempting to understand the receiver. But, the receiver is also looking at us -- the sender. We tend to think in terms of me as an individual communicating with you as an individual. Basically, this is a false assumption. If I am a member of the staff of A.I.D., or a U. S. university, or a faculty member from a Latin American University, I am perceived in terms of that social system. The receiver has some image, in varying degrees of clarity and distortion, of the social system we represent. The receiver imputes
motives, credibility, threat, give-away, etc., to the social system. The attention given, the receipt, the interpretation and the response to messages sent are based in part on the image they have of the system we represent. I am not just me, an individual, but an embodiment of a social system image.

Several weeks ago I worked with Don Bogues at the International Communication Workshop on Family Planning at the University of Chicago. A relatively high level official of one of the leading foundations spoke to the group. After he finished a gentleman from Egypt asked one of the first questions. His question essentially was, "What, really, does the foundation do in terms of specific programs? When I think of your foundation I think of a great big pile of money." The image of the foundation was definitely affecting the communication process.

Often representatives of many foreign governments, agencies or foundations are perceived as a threat to those with whom they attempt to communicate. You may get defensive or socially accepted feedback -- not an objective feedback. How many of us from developing countries have been guilty of defensive behavior -- such as, "I don't think I quite understand the problem in your country as you pose it. As I see it, you are talking about a problem similar to the one we have in our country (detail problem)." Then we give a solution in our terms to our problem. We, too, are defensive.

When we are attempting to communicate, do we take into account whom we represent, our motives, our ends -- why are we really trying to communicate? What do I want to communicate? What does the system I represent want to communicate? Are these objectives consistent? Do these inconsistencies "show through" in my communication? What image am I trying to project? Is it consistent with the system's desired image? Equally important, how would all these questions about me be answered by the person with whom I am attempting to communicate?

If I have sounded discouraging, I haven't meant to be. Communication is complex but not insurmountable. The degree to which we approach perfect communication will be highly dependent on how well we understand and are able to articulate our understanding of the factors involved in communication such as:

The semantics of communication
The basic communication process
How man thinks and acts
Why man thinks and acts the way he does
The value, attitude, and knowledge structure from which man thinks and acts
The social system context in which the sender sends and the receiver receives
And my major point, the social system context in which the sender and receiver perceives he must behave or act.

Just because we have "gotten by" communicating in our own culture is no indication we can communicate effectively in another culture. We must be willing to learn, understand, develop skills, and change in relation to our own communication behavior -- just as in fact we are attempting to get people in other cultures to do in relation to the subject matter that took us to a foreign culture. Is this asking too much?