

# A FALLACY CALLED COMMUNICATION

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Guess what is the most vicious weapon of mass destruction? The skill that has the maximum impact on human lives? An activity that can decimate hopes, relationships, careers, communities?

COMMUNICATION.

The most violent characteristic of human lives and sometimes the most deceitful, is communication. Language and our interaction using language can have a profound impact on people. According to Neuroscience research, Negative communication, has more influence on us than positive especially when the message is unusual, about the usual. As you are probably experiencing right now, with the first few lines of this essay.

Decades ago psychologist **Lev Vyogotsky** proposed that, as a child, the language we receive from our more knowledgeable others and our environs gives us the first means of thinking, self-talk and ability to communicate with others. As we grow up and as our beliefs firm up, we also develop our styles of communication. Together our language and our styles form a potent combination that is unmistakably us, and when unleashed unconsciously, sometimes can be noxious to our fellow human beings.

Ubiquitous as communication is, a lot has been written about communication. Ironically though, with our ever burgeoning understanding of communication, can enough be ever written? Because of the pervasive role of communication in our lives, often the greatest, common myth that resides in all of us is ***the myth that***

**communication has happened.** In all likelihood, what really would have occurred is that words have left the initiators mouth and landed on the ears of the receiver, without passing through the brains of either or impacting the hearts of both!

A lot of this, almost Teflon like non-stick properties of communication has not emerged recently. It has been around for a while. It has nothing to do with the VUCA world or the Internet of Things. Although the digital world has played a significant role in the many distractions, the primary nemesis of communication resides, within all of us.

According to Evolutionary Biology, we evolved and survived because of the way our brains physically shaped up and developed the processes for making sense of the external environment. Today we know from Neuroscience research that our brains, through our senses receives billions of signals from the external environment every living moment. Obviously given the finite size of our brain (although it has several billion neurons) and the limited energy we can produce to power our brains, we have a limitation in processing all of them, with equal priority. So a specific region in our brain called the Amygdala processes these signals and quickly chooses which ones to focus on. This mechanism of prioritising is not error free. It is influenced by a lot of factors. Including our upbringing. A mechanism which is central to our survival, soon also evolved in to a mechanism for interpretations, selective prioritisation, bias.... And these operationalise into what we experience everyday as ineffective listening, fruitless speaking .....and the fallacy of communication comes alive!

Now add the various distractions we consciously or unconsciously succumb to. Like mentally replaying a vivid incident from the past when someone is speaking to us, making our interpretations of the words that we are listening to, partially listening to what is being said because of physical constraints like noise or being absent by diverting our attention to our phones and the social media embedded in them (phubbing) and we have an effective recipe for communication disasters of epic scales every moment. The fallacy called communication!

Scientists have been describing many of these fallacies since decades. Author **Jerry B. Harvey** in his article "The Abilene Paradox: The Management of Agreement" describes one of them. In the Abilene paradox, a group of people collectively decide on a course of action that is counter to the preferences of many or all of the individuals in the group. It involves a common breakdown of **group communication** in which each member mistakenly believes that their own preferences are counter to the group's and, therefore, does not raise objections. In the story, members of a family unwillingly agree to have a dinner, at Abilene a long, hot, dusty exhausting drive away. A common phrase relating to the Abilene paradox is a desire not to "rock the boat".

Another fallacy was described by Author **Albert Mehrabian**. Although a lot of what Mehrabian said about communication is misinterpreted (irony! another fallacy even though it was about – guess what communication!) here is what he really studied and explained as per communication expert Nick Morgan....Mehrabian had an experimenter read words to an audience of college students, single words like ‘love’, in different tones and with different expressions. Then, he asked the audience how it knew *what the speaker really meant*. Where did the audience get the clues for the real intent behind the words? He wasn’t asking about the words at all, but rather the speaker’s intent. When asked that, the audience responded that it decoded the intent behind the speaker’s words from visual clues 55 % of the time, and from tone of voice 38 % of the time. Only 7 % of the time did the audience go to the actual words.

What was the point of all this? Mehrabian’s work was all about what he called the ‘silent messages’ – how people communicate implicitly their emotions and attitudes. His big insight was that when words and non-verbal messages were in conflict, people believe the non-verbal every time. Mehrabian’s message: we get most of our clues of the emotional intent behind people’s words from non-verbal sources. And when the two are in conflict, we believe the non-verbal every time. Scientific evidence, now, also suggests that when there is an absence of trust, Language is ruled out because the best way humans prefer to guard against being deceived is to ignore all signals except those that are instantly verifiable. Words automatically fail this test. Words are easy to fake. Should they turn out to be lies, listeners will adapt by ignoring them in favor of hard-to-fake indices or cues. Like non verbal signals. Prior experiences. Interpretations! Remember the Amygdala?

When we combine what Harvey and Mehrabian proposed with the Neuroscience of our brain we realise that we have a big problem on our hands.

We are emotional beings. Our emotions are being fired up every time as we communicate and others are making interpretations quickly. We are reading clues from our fellow human beings rapidly, unconsciously and making erroneous meanings out of them. The fallacy of communication lives on!

The scientific debate continues around the exact dates when we evolved into modern humans, from our biological ancestors. Science has not narrowed down on an exact date when language may have come to being. But the general understanding is that we evolved into modern humans several millions of years ago and language may have fully evolved only about a hundred thousand years ago.

So how did we go about executing tasks in a group or survive as communities for so many eons? It may be safe to assume we did co operate and live together as groups somehow. And at the root of all that, individuals would have shared their ideas and

needs. Other individuals would have responded. Most of it would have led to cooperation, else we would not be around to read this essay or write it! Would we?

So even without the evolved nuances of language today, ancient human beings did communicate effectively, they survived and perhaps thrived. Possibly they were more direct in expressing their needs, they acknowledged that they did not know enough, maybe they were not looking for safety and political correctness in what they expressed. Possibly they did not disrespect the needs of their fellow human beings, imaginably they were not distracted from meaningful interactions and were focussed on collective survival. Maybe they listened to the incoherent sounds of their fellow living beings with the intent to understand and not with the intent to reply or score a point. We may not know, how. But we certainly know, that they did.

What will be our message for future generations? Will they receive our communication or will the fallacy of communication, live on?

*(All views expressed here are the views of the essayist and does not represent the official standpoints of any organisation the essayist is associated with)*