

Barriers and Gateways to Communication



by Carl R. Rogers and F. J. Roethlisberger

Part I: Carl R. Rogers

It may seem curious that someone like me, a psychotherapist, should be interested in problems of communication. But, in fact, the whole task of psychotherapy is to deal with a failure in communication. In emotionally maladjusted people, communication within themselves has broken down, and as a result, their communication with others has been damaged. To put it another way, their unconscious, repressed, or denied desires have created distortions in the way they communicate with others. Thus

they suffer both within themselves and in their interpersonal relationships.

The late Carl R. Rogers was a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago when he wrote this article. His many books include the groundbreaking Client-Centered Therapy (Houghton Mifflin, 1951). The late F.J. Roethlisberger was the Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Human Relations at the Harvard Business School. He is the author of Man-in-Organization (Harvard University Press, 1968) and other books and articles. This article originally appeared in HBR July-August 1952.

The goal of psychotherapy is to help an individual achieve, through a special relationship with a therapist, good communication within himself or herself. Once this is achieved, that person can communicate more freely and effectively with others. So we may say that psychotherapy is good communication within and between people. We can turn that statement around and it will still be true. Good communication, or free communication, within or between people is always therapeutic.

Through my experience in counseling and psychotherapy, I've found that there is one main obstacle to communication: people's tendency to *evaluate*. Fortunately, I've also discovered that if people can learn to *listen* with understanding, they can mitigate their evaluative impulses and greatly improve their communication with others.

Barrier: The Tendency to Evaluate

We all have a natural urge to judge, evaluate, and approve (or disapprove) another person's statement. Suppose someone, commenting on what I've just stated, says, "I didn't like what that man said." How will you respond? Almost invariably your reply will be either approval or disapproval of the attitude expressed. Either you respond, "I didn't either; I thought it was terrible," or else you say, "Oh, I thought it was really good." In other words, your first reaction is to evaluate it from *your* point of view.

Or suppose I say with some feeling, "I think the Democrats are showing a lot of good sound sense these days." What is your first reaction? Most likely, it will be evaluative. You will find yourself agreeing or disagreeing, perhaps making some judgment about me such as, "He must be a liberal," or "He seems solid in his thinking."

Although making evaluations is common in almost all conversation, this reaction is heightened in situations where feelings and emotions are deeply involved. So the stronger the feelings, the less likely it is that there will be a mutual element in the communication. There will be just two ideas, two feelings, or two judgments missing each other in psychological space.

If you've ever been a bystander at a heated discussion—one in which you were not emotionally involved—you've probably gone away thinking, "Well, they actually weren't talking about the same thing." And because it was heated, you were probably right. Each person was making a judgment, an evaluation, from a personal frame of reference. There was nothing that could be called communication in any real

sense. And this impulse to evaluate any emotionally meaningful statement from our own viewpoint is what blocks interpersonal communication.

Gateway: Listening with Understanding

We can achieve real communication and avoid this evaluative tendency when we listen with understanding. This means seeing the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, sensing how it feels to the person, achieving his or her frame of reference about the subject being discussed.

This may sound absurdly simple, but it is not. In fact, it is an extremely potent approach in psychotherapy. It is the most effective way we've found to alter a person's basic personality structure and to improve the person's relationships and communications with others. If I can listen to what a person can tell me and really understand how she hates her father or hates the company or hates conservatives, or if I can catch the essence of her fear of insanity or fear of nuclear bombs, I will be better able to help her alter those hatreds and fears and establish realistic and harmonious relationships with the people and situations that roused such emotions. We know from research that such empathic understanding—understanding *with* a person, not *about* her—is so effective that it can bring about significant changes in personality.

If you think that you listen well and yet have never seen such results, your listening probably has not been of the type I am describing. Here's one way to test the quality of your understanding. The next time you get into an argument with your spouse, friend, or small group of friends, stop the discussion for a moment and suggest this rule: "Before each person speaks up, he or she must *first* restate the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately and to that speaker's satisfaction."

You see what this would mean. Before presenting your own point of view, you would first have to achieve the other speaker's frame of reference. Sounds simple, doesn't it? But if you try it, you will find it one of the most difficult things you have ever attempted to do. And even when you have been able to do it, your comments will have to be drastically revised. But you will also find that the emotion is dissipating—the differences are reduced, and those that remain are rational and understandable.

Can you imagine what this kind of approach could accomplish in larger arenas? What would happen to a labor-management dispute if labor, without necessarily conceding agreement, could accurately

state management's point of view in a way that management could accept; and if management, without approving labor's stand, could state labor's case so that labor agreed it was accurate? It would mean that real communication was established and that some reasonable solution almost surely would be reached.

So why is this "listening" approach not more widely used? There are several reasons.

Lack of Courage. Listening with understanding means taking a very real risk. If you really understand another person in this way, if you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, without any attempt to make evaluative judgments, you run the risk of being changed yourself. You might see things his way; you might find that he has influenced your attitudes or your personality.

Most of us are afraid to take that risk. So instead we *cannot listen*; we find ourselves compelled to *evaluate* because listening seems too dangerous.

Heightened Emotions. In heated discussions, emotions are strongest, so it is especially hard to achieve the frame of reference of another person or group. Yet it is precisely then that good listening is required if communication is to be established.

One solution is to use a third party, who is able to lay aside her own feelings and evaluations, to listen with understanding to each person or group and then clarify the views and attitudes each holds.

This has been effective in small groups in which contradictory or antagonistic attitudes exist. When the parties to a dispute realize they are being understood, that someone sees how the situation seems to them, the statements grow less exaggerated and less

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defensive, and it is no longer necessary to maintain the attitude, "I am 100% right, and you are 100% wrong."

The influence of such an understanding catalyst in the group permits the members to come closer to seeing the objective truth of the situation. This leads to improved communication, to greater acceptance of each other, and to attitudes that are more positive and more problem-solving in nature. There is a decrease in defensiveness, in exaggerated statements, in evaluative and critical behavior. Mutual communication is established, and some type of agreement becomes much more possible.

Too Large a Group. Thus far, psychotherapists have been able to observe only small, face-to-face groups that are working to resolve religious, racial, or industrial tensions—or the personal tensions that are present in many therapy groups. What about trying to achieve understanding between larger groups that are geographically remote, for example, or between face-to-face groups that are speaking not for themselves but simply as representatives of others? Frankly, we do not know the answer. Based on our limited knowledge, however, there are some steps that even large groups can take to increase the amount of listening *with* and decrease the amount of evaluation *about*.

To be imaginative for a moment, suppose that a therapeutically oriented international group went to each of two countries involved in a dispute and said, "We want to achieve a genuine understanding of your views and, even more important, of your attitudes and feelings toward X country. We will summarize and resummarize these views and feelings if necessary, until you agree that our description represents the situation as it seems to you."

If they then widely distributed descriptions of these two views, might not the effect be very great? It would not guarantee the type of understanding I have been describing, but it would make it much more possible. We can understand the feelings of people who hate us much more readily when their attitudes are accurately described to us by a neutral third party than we can when they are shaking their fists at us.

Communication through a moderator who listens nonevaluatively and with understanding has proven effective, even when feelings run high. This procedure can be initiated by one party, without waiting for the other to be ready. It can even be initiated by a neutral third person, provided the person can gain a minimum of cooperation from one of the parties. The moderator can deal with the insincerities, the defensive exaggerations, the lies, and the "false fronts" that characterize almost every failure in communication. These defensive distortions drop away with astonishing speed as people find that the person's intention is to understand, not to judge. And when one party begins to drop its defenses, the other usually responds in kind, and together they begin to uncover the facts of a situation.

Gradually, mutual communication grows. It leads to a situation in which I see how the problem appears to you as well as to me, and you see how it appears to me as well as to you. Thus accurately and realistically defined, the problem is almost certain to yield to intelligent attack; or if it is in part insoluble, it will be comfortably accepted as such.

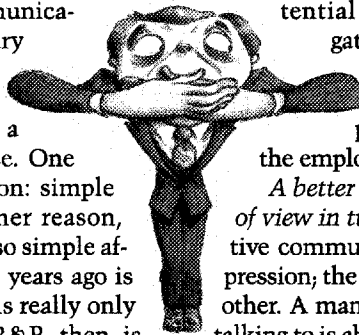
Retrospective Commentary

Reading "Barriers and Gateways" today, it is hard to understand the stir the article created when it was first published. But in 1952, Rogers's and Roethlisberger's ideas about the importance of listening were indeed radical. Not only did they stake out new territory that was anathema to the gray flannel ethic—namely, the idea that people's feelings mattered. But they also challenged the sanctity of hierarchical relationships by suggesting that managers take their subordinates' thoughts and feelings seriously.

Today, however, these insights are so basic as to be obvious, which shows how much impact their ideas have had and how far management communication has come. Or has it? Contemporary managers do have a better grasp of how important listening is to good communication. Nonetheless, most still have a hard time putting this lesson into practice. One reason could be their own sophistication: simple lessons can be easily forgotten. Another reason, however, could be that this lesson is not so simple after all, that what the authors told us 40 years ago is more difficult to do than it appears and is really only half the story. The benefit of revisiting R&R, then, is both to remind ourselves of still-relevant, indeed powerful, insights and to find, from the vantage point of 40 years later, what R&R may have overlooked.

What speaks loudest to business today are three insights that in fact transcend institutional and social boundaries: they are the communication barriers and gateways that, as the authors show, can occur between two nations as well as between two individuals. These insights have endured because they are basic truths about human interaction.

The greatest barrier to effective communication is the tendency to evaluate what another person is saying and therefore to misunderstand or to not really "hear." The Bill and Smith scenario, which vividly illustrates this process, rings true today because such communication breakdowns still happen routinely. In fact, in today's arguably more complex business environment, they may be more likely to happen.



Greater work force diversity, for example, can complicate communication, as a common language of shared assumptions and experiences becomes harder to establish. Indeed, if in 1952 Roethlisberger thought it "extraordinary" that any two people could communicate, given their "differences in background, experience, and motivation," he would surely have thought it a miracle today.

Checking the natural tendency to judge yields a better understanding of the person with whom you are communicating. Of course, greater diversity also makes disciplined listening all the more important—because the potential for misunderstanding is greater. This gateway, then, is more vital than ever. By suspending assumptions and judgments, a manager can get to the heart of an employee's feelings, a better signpost to what the employee is saying than his or her words alone.

A better understanding of the other person's point of view in turn helps you communicate better. Effective communication is equal parts listening and expression; the clarity of one depends on the clarity of another. A manager with a clearer picture of whom he's talking to is able to express himself more accurately.

These insights have been the impetus behind a number of progressive practices—corporate efforts to empower employees, for example. When a manager shows a willingness to listen to an employee, she is more likely to engender trust and thus honesty. And by encouraging the employee to talk straight, without fear of reprisal, she boosts his self-confidence because he sees that the organization values his input. What's more, the manager stays tapped into a vital information source—the front lines.

Or consider the technique of "active listening," developed in the 1970s and still widely used in many management- and sales-training programs. A salesperson applying active listening, for example, reacts non-judgmentally to what a prospect is saying, rephrasing it to make sure he truly understands the customer's point of view. The benefits are twofold. First, this process minimizes the likelihood that the salesperson is lay-

Part II: F. J. Roethlisberger

When we think about the many barriers to personal communication, particularly those due to differences in background, experience, and motivation, it seems extraordinary that any two people can ever understand each other. The potential for problems seems especially heightened in the context of a boss-subordinate relationship. How is communication

possible when people do not see and assume the same things or share the same values?

On this question, there are two schools of thought. One school assumes that communication between A and B has failed when B does not accept what A has to say as being factual, true, or valid; and that the goal of communication is to get B to agree with A's opinions, ideas, facts, or information.

ing his biases on the customer's needs. Second, the prospect feels listened to and understood.

Ultimately, though, R&R may have had too much faith in nonevaluative listening. Researchers doing work in this field, and, for that matter, managers trying to apply these lessons, now realize how overly optimistic the authors were. First, a fundamental but unarticulated premise is that understanding equals resolution, but this is not the case. While understanding can improve the negotiation process—as various research, from Richard Walton's work in labor relations to Roger Fisher's in international negotiations, has shown—it cannot by itself resolve conflict.

Second, the process of establishing trust is not as one-dimensional as R&R imply. Jones would probably not be able to secure Bill's trust merely by showing a commitment to nonevaluative listening. Bill will assess many other aspects of Jones's behavior and character in deciding whether to talk openly with her: her motives, her discretion, the consistency of her behavior, even her managerial competence. Only if this assessment is positive will Bill respond candidly to Jones's overtures. Thus, as a rule, a minimum baseline of confidence is needed to evoke the kind of trust that honest communication requires. This is especially true where there is a power imbalance, which tends to foster greater initial distrust. (This dynamic works both ways: an employee may distrust her manager for fear of reprisal; but a manager may distrust his employee for fear that she'll say only what he wants to hear.)

Finally, managers today come up against a few more communication barriers than R&R envisioned. One is the pressure of time. Listening carefully takes time, and managers have little of that to spare. In today's business culture especially, with its emphasis on speed (overnight mail, faster computers, time-based competition), already pressed managers may give short shrift to the slower art of one-on-one communication.

Another barrier in this era of mergers, acquisitions, and delayering is insecurity and the fear that it breeds.

When downsizing and layoffs loom, both the Bills and the Joneses of this world have good reason for not opening up, especially when people believe that their true feelings or beliefs may get them fired.

Even so, these limitations don't entirely explain why, some 40 years later, a salesperson can win over clients with active listening but a manager fails to have the slightest idea what makes his employees tick. This is because managers face still another, more significant, barrier, one I call the managerial paradox: while it is crucial that managers be able to listen nonjudgmentally (to understand other points of view and get valid information), the essence of management is to do just

the opposite—to make judgments. Managers are called on daily to evaluate product lines, mar-

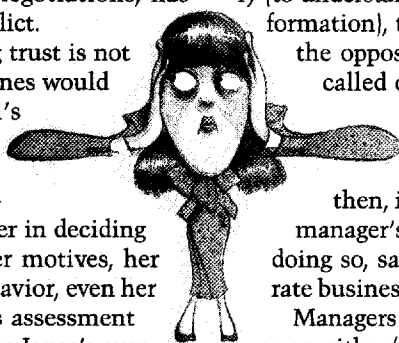
kets, numbers, and, of course, people. And in turn, they are evaluated

on how well they do this. The danger,

then, is that this bias for judging will subvert a manager's inclination to listen carefully and, in doing so, sabotage his or her ability to make accurate business and people judgments.

Managers may be tempted to resolve this paradox as an either/or. And for good reason: rarely in their training have the two mind-sets been reconciled. Business schools, for the most part, still reinforce evaluative listening; they teach students to defend their own positions while scoring points against others'. And those behavioral experts who do focus on nonevaluative listening tend to focus almost exclusively on the importance of empathy. But if one thing has made itself clear in the past 40 years, it is that managers must have the capacity to do both. They must recognize that to make judgments, you must suspend judgment.

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The other school of thought is quite different. It assumes that communication has failed when B does not feel free to express his feelings to A because B fears they will not be accepted by A. Communication is facilitated when A or B or both are willing to express and accept differences.

To illustrate, suppose Bill, an employee, is in his boss's office. The boss says, "I think, Bill, that this is

the best way to do your job." And to that, Bill says, "Oh yeah?"

According to the first school of thought, this reply would be a sign of poor communication. Bill does not understand the best way of doing his work. To improve communication, therefore, it is up to the boss to explain to Bill why the boss's, not Bill's, way is the best.

From the second school's point of view, Bill's reply is a sign of neither good nor bad communication; it is indeterminate. But the boss can take the opportunity to find out what Bill means. Let us assume that this is what she chooses to do. So this boss tries to get Bill to talk more about his job.

We'll call the boss representing the first school of thought "Smith" and the boss subscribing to the second school "Jones." Given identical situations, each behaves differently. Smith chooses to *explain*; Jones chooses to *listen*. In my experience, Jones's response works better than Smith's, because Jones is making a more proper evaluation of what is taking place between her and Bill than Smith is.

"Oh Yeah?"

Smith assumes that he understands what Bill means when Bill says, "Oh yeah?" so there is no need to find out. Smith is sure that Bill does not understand why this is the best way to do his job, so Smith has to tell him.

In this process, let us assume Smith is logical, lucid, and clear. He presents his facts and evidence well. But, alas, Bill remains unconvinced. What does Smith do? Operating under the assumption that what is taking place between him and Bill is something essentially logical, Smith can draw only one of two conclusions: either (1) he has not been clear enough or (2) Bill is too stupid to understand. So he has to either "spell out" his case in words of fewer and fewer syllables or give up. Smith is reluctant to give up, so he continues to explain. What happens?

The more Smith cannot get Bill to understand him, the more frustrated and emotional Smith becomes—and the more Smith's ability to reason logically is diminished. Since Smith sees himself as a reasonable, logical chap, this is a difficult thing for him to accept. It is much easier to perceive Bill as uncooperative or stupid. This perception will affect what Smith says and does.

Under these pressures, Smith evaluates Bill more and more in terms of his own values and tends to treat Bill's as unimportant, essentially denying Bill's uniqueness and difference. He treats Bill as if he had little capacity for self-direction.

Let us be clear. Smith does not see that he is doing these things. When he is feverishly scratching hieroglyphics on the back of an envelope, trying to explain to Bill why this is the best way to do his job,

Author's Note: In shaping the concepts presented here, I am greatly indebted to some very interesting conversations I have had with my friend, Irving Lee. — F.J.R.

Smith is trying to be helpful. He is a man of goodwill, and he wants to set Bill straight. This is the way Smith sees himself and his behavior. But it is for this very reason that Bill's "Oh yeah?" is getting under Smith's skin.

"How dumb can a guy be?" is Smith's attitude, and unfortunately Bill will hear that more than Smith's good intentions. Bill will feel misunderstood. He will not see Smith as a man of goodwill trying to be helpful. Rather he will perceive him as a threat to his self-esteem and personal integrity. Against this threat Bill will feel the need to defend himself at all cost. Not being so logically articulate as Smith, Bill expresses this need by saying, again, "Oh yeah?"

Let us leave this sad scene between Smith and Bill, which I fear is going to end with Bill either leaving in a huff or being kicked out of Smith's office. Let us turn for a moment to Jones and see how she is interacting with Bill.

Jones, remember, does not assume that she knows what Bill means when he says, "Oh yeah?" so she has to find out. Moreover, she assumes that when Bill said this, he had not exhausted his vocabulary or his feelings. Bill may mean not just one thing but several different things. So Jones decides to listen.

In this process, Jones is not under any illusion that what will happen will be a purely logical exchange. Rather she is assuming that what happens will be primarily an interaction of feelings. Therefore, she cannot ignore Bill's feelings, the effect of Bill's feelings on her, or the effect of her feelings on Bill. In other words, she cannot ignore her relationship to Bill; she cannot assume that it will make no difference to what Bill will hear or accept.

When Bill says "Oh yeah?"
Smith hears "huh?" and starts
to explain...

Therefore, Jones will be paying strict attention to all of the things Smith has ignored. She will be addressing herself to Bill's feelings, her own feelings, and the interaction between them.

Jones will therefore realize that she has ruffled Bill's feelings with her comment, "I think, Bill, this is the best way to do your job." So instead of trying to get Bill to understand her, she decides to try to understand Bill. She does this by encouraging Bill to speak. Instead of telling Bill how he should feel or think, she asks Bill such questions as, "Is this what you feel?" "Is this what you see?" "Is this what you assume?" Instead of ignoring Bill's evaluations as ir-

relevant, not valid, inconsequential, or false, she tries to understand Bill's reality as he feels it, perceives it, and assumes it to be. As Bill begins to open up, Jones's curiosity is piqued by this process.

"Bill isn't so dumb; he's quite an interesting guy" becomes Jones's attitude. And that is what Bill hears. Therefore Bill feels understood and accepted as a person. He becomes less defensive. He is in a better frame of mind to explore and reexamine his perceptions, feelings, and assumptions. Bill feels free to express his differences. In this process, he sees Jones as a source of help and feels that Jones respects his capacity for self-direction. These positive feelings toward Jones make Bill more inclined to say, "Well, Jones, I don't quite agree with you that this is the best way to do my job, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll try to do it that way for a few days, and then I'll tell you what I think."

I grant that my two orientations do not work in practice quite so neatly as I have worked them out on paper. There are many other ways in which Bill could have responded to Smith in the first place. He might even have said, "OK, boss, I agree that your way of doing my job is better." But Smith still would not have known how Bill felt when he made this statement or whether Bill was actually going to do his job differently. Likewise, Bill could have responded to Jones differently. In spite of Jones's attitude, Bill might still have been reluctant to express himself freely to his boss.

Nevertheless, these examples give me something concrete to point to in making the following generalizations:

1. Smith represents a very common pattern of misunderstanding. The misunderstanding does not arise because Smith is not clear enough in expressing himself. Rather, Smith miscalculates what takes place when two people are talking together.

2. Smith's misunderstanding of the process of personal communication is based on common assumptions: (a) that what is taking place is something logical; (b) that words mean something in and of themselves, apart from the people speaking them; and (c) that the purpose of the interaction is to get Bill to see things from Smith's point of view.

3. These assumptions set off a chain reaction of perceptions and negative feelings, which blocks communication. By ignoring Bill's feelings and rationalizing his own, Smith ignores his relationship to Bill as an important determinant of their communication. As a result, Bill hears Smith's *attitude* more clearly than the logical content of Smith's words. Bill feels that his uniqueness is being denied. Since his personal integrity is at stake, he becomes

defensive and belligerent. And this frustrates Smith. He perceives Bill as stupid, so he says and does things that make Bill still more defensive.

4. Jones makes a different set of assumptions: (a) that what is taking place between her and Bill is

...Jones hears an opening and decides to ask Bill to explain.

an interaction of sentiments; (b) that Bill—not his words in themselves—means something; and (c) that the object of the interaction is to give Bill a chance to express himself.


5. Because of these assumptions, there is a psychological chain reaction of reinforcing feelings and perceptions that eases communication between Bill and Jones. When Jones addresses Bill's feelings and perceptions from Bill's point of view, Bill feels understood and accepted as a person; he feels free to express his differences. Bill sees Jones as a source of help; Jones sees Bill as an interesting person. Bill, in turn, becomes more cooperative.

If I have identified correctly these very common patterns of personal communication, then we can infer some interesting hypotheses:

Jones's method works better than Smith's not because of any magic but because Jones has a better map of the process of personal communication.

Jones's method, however, is not merely an intellectual exercise. It depends on Jones's capacity and willingness to see and accept points of view that are different from her own and to practice this orientation in a face-to-face relationship. This is an emotional and intellectual achievement. It depends in part on Jones's awareness of herself, in part on the practice of a skill.

Although universities try to get students to appreciate, at least intellectually, points of view different from their own, little is done to help them learn to apply this intellectual appreciation to simple, face-to-face relationships. Students are trained to be logical and clear—but no one helps them learn to *listen* skillfully. As a result, our educated world contains too many Smiths and too few Joneses.

The biggest block between two people is their inability to listen to each other intelligently, understandingly, and skillfully. This deficiency in the modern world is widespread and appalling. We need to make greater efforts to educate people in effective communication—which means, essentially, teaching people how to listen. 

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