

Communications Games

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Abstract

"People are often confronted with documents that are too difficult to read, understand, interpret, or use," a Document Design Center brochure says.

Communications Games

Don Nelson

“People are often confronted with documents that are too difficult to read, understand, interpret, or use,” a Document Design Center brochure* says. “Government agencies and the organizations that work with them complain about drowning in oceans of unintelligible paper,” the brochure continues.

The center is trying to improve the written communications (laws, forms, regulations, contracts, warranties, instructions) that link institutions with the public.

I wish the Design Center a lot of luck. But I am skeptical that they or anyone else, ACE members included, can or really want to rescue the public from its watery fate.

We are all awash in a sea of ambiguity and likely to stay adrift for reasons illustrated below.

Hal Hepler of Michigan State University first awakened my interest in ambiguous communications. He conducted the major portion of the ACE-USDA communications workshop in Washington in the spring of 1979. Intrigued by some of his discussion at the workshop, I wrote to him and he replied:

*The brochure was available at a meeting of the Council of Communications Societies; ACE is a member.

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Yes, and ambiguity is a useful management tool. We all want to achieve our objectives and sometimes our goals are not reached by being clear, in the usually accepted way. Lawyers do not achieve their goals by being 'clear' with their clients; doctors do not get high fees (if that is their goal) by being 'clear' and people who apply for grants from foundations and the government often do not achieve their goal (of getting the grant) by being clear.

From the management standpoint, it is often to the advantage of the manager to make his pronouncements ambiguous enough or global enough so that he can justify whatever he wants. It is difficult to get any manager to admit to this practice but it can be seen in statements like "We want all our supervisors to practice creative management." This is so fuzzy that it allows the manager to reward and punish based on criteria that are known only to him/her.

If ambiguity is a useful management tool, it can also be a useful communication tool.

One of the closing lines of the best-selling "transactional analysis" book, **Games People Play**, says, "Society frowns upon candidness, except in privacy; good sense knows it (candidness) can always be abused" (Berne, 1973, page 172).

We as communicators profess to goals of communicating candidly, clearly, concisely, and understandably—unambiguously, that is. But, we should be aware of communications games people play. Some examples follow. The actors are a source and a receiver of communications—a transaction. A communicator/facilitator may also be involved in the institutional communications process and may or may not know games are being played.

WHOPPER

Here the source disperses overt, vindictive and blatantly calculated misinformation. It's the kind of deliberate lying and cheating associated with Nazi Germany and Herr Hitler's mouthpiece Goebbels. A professional communicator would never knowingly make an untrue statement with the intent to deceive and should, moreover, rarely deal with a source doing it, either. Whopper is an ethic-less and dangerous game. Anyone playing it is a liar, slanderer, libeler, or worse and should be drummed out of the profession or indicted and prosecuted.

USED CAR

The person playing Whopper might stand in the middle of plumes of blue exhaust smoke, look you straight in the eye and cough: “Doesn’t use a drop of oil!” the person playing Used Car would be more subtle. This source might say: “Isn’t that a pretty hue of blue!” When the receiver rejoins innocently with: “But is it supposed to smoke so much?” the Source may come back with: “Yes, because this baby has got some engine!” What does that mean?—that it’s a great engine or that it’s about to quit working or that it’s “some engine” because it gets six miles to the gallon of gas and fifty to the quart of oil?

This is **equivocal** language—subject to two or more interpretations and usually meant to mislead or confuse. Probably, it is not outright lying. Here, the source knows the facts, but won’t volunteer them straight out. He/she deliberately equivocates—avoids committing himself/herself instead.

AMBIGUOUS GAMES

Ambiguous messages can also be understood in two or more possible senses. Ambiguous word or symbol games, however, are more benign than lying or equivocation. Ambiguity is potentially less damaging and does not necessarily involve deliberate deception. There are several circumstances that can give rise to ambiguous games.

I’m Gonna Tell You Anyway. Here the Source doesn’t know the answer to a receiver’s question, but is **expected** to know or the receiver keeps pestering the source for information. The honest source would throw up his hands and admit: “I don’t know.” Probably that kind of candid answer from a manager, scientist or extension specialist would work occasionally. But frequent “don’t knows” will eventually cause the receiver to abandon the source and seek information elsewhere. So, rather than admitting ignorance and risking abandonment, the source silently says: “I don’t know, but since you insist, I’m Gonna Tell You Anyway” (IGTYA). In other words, he plunges into a stream of ambiguity. If the receiver doesn’t see through it, the source may survive to dispense some information he **does** know on another day.

How Should I Know? This is the flip side of I’m Gonna Tell You Anyway. Not only does the source not know, the question is unfair. The source could risk alienating the receiver by blurting out: “Unfair question!” More likely he might mutter: “How should I know?” under his breath and pour out an

ambiguous torrent of "information" instead. Here, again, ambiguity may save the day, albeit at the cost of some source resentment toward the receiver and his dumb questions. As the converse of "IGTYA," repeated unfair questions will cause the source to finally desist pride-swallowing, quit the game, and tell the receiver to buzz off and take his stupid questions with him.

Take Two Aspirin. When the Source doesn't know now, but will probably have the requested information in the near future, he may resort to an ambiguous game of T2A and invite the Receiver to call him later. T2A will also suffice when the source doesn't think there's much of a problem. By swallowing the "aspirin" (ambiguous language), maybe the problem will go away of its own accord.

It's Nothing Serious. Here is an example of an ambiguous language game which could alleviate a volatile situation. You tell the "patient" it's nothing serious (ambiguously), knowing full well it is serious. But there are situations where the naked truth would hurt (contemplated divorce, for instance) or do more harm than good (suspicion of cancer, for example).

Expert Advice. Ambiguity may serve the "expert" well when he doesn't want to tell the receiver everything he knows or at least tell him in a simple, straight-forward way. This is probably a pretty common game. It may be played because if the source tells everything he knows, he'll no longer be the expert—or the boss.

DON'T ROCK THE BOAT. (Hidden message:) "I like things the way they are, but I can't come right out and say I don't want change. Therefore, I'll spew out some ambiguous stuff in this memo, so it will appear we're changing things, when really we're not."

LOOSE NAIL. (Hidden message:) "You're not going to get me to commit myself on that! I'll write/draw/say something ambiguous so that I may seem to commit myself, but later, if I choose, I can say: 'I didn't say/show/write that!'"

MUDDLE. Here is the case where the source is genuinely trying to communicate, but unknowingly only succeeds in ambiguity. Here the communicator/facilitator can, and probably does, do the most good—helping the muddled source get the word out clearly and understandably.

GAMES OF OMISSION. Handled adroitly, communications games-players may not have to resort to ambiguity, to
wit:

HOUSE FOR SALE. When I contacted a real estate agent (communicator) to help me sell the first house I owned, he was anxious to hear all the good things about the abode. But when I asked him if he wanted to hear about its faults (leaky basement, stuck windows, worn-out air conditioner, etc.), he said: "No, if I don't know I can honestly tell the prospect I don't know." The seller (source) and buyer (receiver) will also undoubtedly play a little omission game before the home is sold. Only the seller knows how little he will take and only the buyer knows how much he will offer—and neither tells the other. Yet, neither necessarily has to resort to ambiguous messages to close out the transaction.

SO WHAT?

The Document Design Center wants to eliminate the "fine print." Communicators want to communicate. But we should (and probably intuitively do) know that equivocal and ambiguous communications games are being played all the time by our sources and receivers. When, in the course of preparing communications, we sense that a game is on, we can establish that and act accordingly. We can play or refuse to play. Or, we can try to break up the game. Whatever the situation, we should probably more often try to quell our competitive instincts rather than exclaim: "May the best man win!"

Rather, we should more often call on our professional ethic and say to ourselves instead: "I'll try to make this a game-free communication."

Reference

Berne, Eric (1973). **Games People Play** (New York: Ballantine Books).

