COGNITIVE TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS IN PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

About two years ago, in The Systemist, I proposed a model of interpersonal communication which incorporated elements of learning theory and cognitive psychology. It originated from my consultancy work as a set of visual aids that assisted me when facilitating problem-solving groups.

The model is essentially a framework to assist the analysis and design of communication between two people, groups or systems. Its main effect is to help clarify the space under discussion. It does this by making explicit the logical levels of focus and process perspective being used to model the given topic. When these aspects have been identified and named, conversations about the topic are far less prone to the failures of communication that arise when speakers fail to realise that they are viewing the topic from mismatched perspectives.

The model was called Cognitive Transactional Analysis (CTA) and it highlighted some key requirements to ensure that two people are on the same wavelength when they seek to communicate with each other. It was suggested that CTA was relevant whether the exchange was face-to-face, written, or in the sphere of human-computer interaction.

This paper is intended to show how, since the original paper was published, contributions from clients have enriched the use and theory of CTA.

THE STARTING POINT

To show how the theory has developed it is necessary to give a brief outline of it as it was originally stated. The full description is given in Sutton (1987), but its form can be summarised by repeating the axioms stated in that paper:

Axiom 1 - Cognition is a Cyclic Process
Axiom 2 - Mental Constructs are Related Hierarchically
Axiom 3 - Human Information Processing is a Cyclic and Hierarchical Process
Axiom 4 - Effective Communication Transactions only take place between Corresponding Cognitive Levels and Cyclic Stages.
a) A Standard TA diagram
Showing a 'Crossed' transaction

Fig. 1. The transactional aspect of CTA.

b) A Cognitive TA (CTA) diagram
Showing an 'Incongruent' transaction with mismatched Levels of Focus

Fig. 2. The cognitive aspect of CTA, as originally presented.

The key assertion of the model, at that time, was that, for effective communication of information, the two participants had to be discussing the topic at the same cognitive level of perspective. This drew on the works of Ackoff and Emery (1972); Kolb and Fry (1975); Lewin (1951); Pask (1975); and Shannon and Waver (1962). The way chosen to depict the synthesis was to draw on Berne's (1968) imagery of Transactional Analysis. The framework was thus described as a Cognitive Transactional Analysis (CTA) and the two main strands were illustrated in the forms shown in Figs. 1 and 2.

Many authors have been found to have evolved models which can be viewed as specific instances of the more general CTA framework. For example, in the fields of: human-computer interaction - Card, Moran and Newell (1983); knowledge-worker processes - Englebart (1963); fighter pilot behaviour - Hess (1987); and managerial problem solving - Beer (1966).

CTA AT PRESENT

In use, the framework and its theoretical foundations have been enriched through having to explain it to clients, through using it with clients, and, most satisfying of all, through seeing it taken, adapted and used by clients.

The experience gained has led to more rigorous and extended statements of CTA, which are given in Sutton (1988a, b). The development of CTA can, however, be summarised in a set of assertions which enrich the basic CTA axioms in more operational terms. The assertions are as follows:

Assertion 1

About any Topic, any Subject has, at any one Time:
A Broadest Cognitive Horizon,
A Finest Cognitive Horizon,
A limited set of Cognitive Levels of Focus between these horizons.