Introduction: Forget Everything You Learned About Communication at Work

Almost four hundred years ago the seminal philosophers John Locke and David Hume implicitly defined “communication” as a tool for the transmission of pure ideas, meaning ideas themselves are what matter, not the way they are expressed and exchanged. This perspective not only took hold, but it has survived until this day as the dominant way of defining communication. Now known as the transmission model, this approach to communication is the foundation of many academic courses in communication theory and practice, and it is embedded in most business literature and education programs that address subjects related to workplace communication, organization behavior and culture, leadership, conflict resolution, and more.

But what if this accepted model of communication was incomplete? And what if, instead of providing insight for improving the way we communicate at work, its legacy was a distraction from the real story about what works with effective communication at work?

Re-Making Communication at Work argues that the transmission model needs to be replaced by a new approach to communication. The book challenges the status quo by exposing the most common myths that inaccurately define effective communication at work, and it replaces these misperceptions with a set of core principles that deliver a clear mandate for re-making communication at work. By upending these myths, the book not only provides the theoretical foundation for this new approach (derived from the groundbreaking communication theory CMM—coordinated management of meaning), but it uses straightforward models and visually appealing exercises that demonstrate how students, employees, and leaders can powerfully improve the quality and outcomes of their working lives.

It should be noted that while the theoretical progression of new forms of organizational communication has advanced well past the roots of the
transmission model—from the classical perspectives, to human relations and resources, to systems theory, to cultural perspectives, and to critical theory—the dissemination of those conceptual changes into the world of work has not occurred at scale. For example, while academic scholars may know that the transmission model, the transactional model, and the conduit model (advances in theory that refer to updated versions of the same basic framework) insufficiently capture the dynamic nature of communication, people in the trenches of everyday working life do not have the updated concepts and flexible tools for addressing their everyday communication challenges. This book fills that critical gap between knowledge and useful application.

Communication Is the Problem, Communication Is the Solution

Exploring issues of effective communication at work is often based on the goal of identifying ways to make it better. In this pursuit, communication can be seen as both the cause of and solution to the same problem. Here are a few stories that illustrate this duality in the words of three leaders who diagnosed their own organizational challenges. These were the messages they shared with their teams and the reasons they gave for requesting consulting services from a workplace communication expert:

“We are in this mess because we failed to keep the lines of communication open and valuable information was missed. As a result, we made a bad strategic move and now we have to clean up our mess. Moving forward, we will be meeting weekly to ensure effective communication and to make sure this never happens again.”

“You two have to find a way to work together; it isn’t an option to keep butting heads like this. Your communication styles are like oil and water, but you still have to find a way to talk through it. I need you both on the same page.”

“Right now our company is not innovating at the pace that will keep us competitive in the future. I think we have so much more intelligence in these walls, but it is not being communicated well. We have to start sharing what we know and using our new developments to spur innovation across our core divisions.”

In these vignettes you can see how various aspects of communication are confirmed as both the problem and the solution to the unmet priorities. In each situation, the identification of the problem was accurate at a basic level (communication was the source of the problem), however, you can also infer that the simple diagnostics that led each leader to ask for solutions such as “more meetings for open communication,” “talking through it,” and “sharing what we know for better innovation” were decidedly incomplete. For nonroutine, hard-to-define, complex problems, simply stating the need for “more