

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION: THE IDEAS OF JOHN WALLEN

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Abstract

This paper presents the major conceptualization of John Wallen, as they relate to interpersonal relations. Wallen advises us to be aware of three basic conditions of human existence: (1) Individual experience is private; (2) Each person is different; (3) People are interdependent social beings. Ignorance or denial of these conditions can produce a large interpersonal gap, which is a state characterized by inaccurate communication. Four skills are outlined which help bridge the interpersonal gap, thereby increasing communication effectiveness. The four communication skills are: paraphrasing, behaviour description, description of feelings, and perception checking. Included is a list of John Wallen's unpublished papers.

Résumé

Cet article présente les principales lignes de pensée de John Wallen en ce qui a trait aux relations interpersonnelles. Wallen nous rappelle de tenir bien en évidence trois conditions fondamentales de l'existence humaine: (1) l'expérience individuelle est privée; (2) chaque personne est différente; (3) les personnes sont des êtres sociaux interdépendants. Ignorer ou nier ces conditions peut conduire à un écart interpersonnel considérable caractérisé par une communication imprécise. On esquisse quatre habiletés qui peuvent servir à rompre cet écart et ainsi augmenter l'efficacité de la communication. Ces quatre habiletés sont: la paraphrase, la description de comportements, la description de sentiments et la vérification de perceptions. Pour terminer, on présente une bibliographie des articles non-publiés de Wallen.

INTRODUCTION

Many people who conduct interpersonal relations laboratories have been influenced by the ideas of John Wallen, a social psychologist from Portland, Oregon. He has written a number of papers which identify the sources of difficulty in communication. In these writings, Wallen focuses on the process of communication, not the underlying motives, drives, traits, attitudes, or personality characteristics of the individual. Wallen's ideas are easily understandable to laymen and professional alike.

The Twentieth Century is the age of communication. We are told that the medium is the message (McLuhan, 1965), that the "generation gap" is really a breakdown of communication (Ginott, 1969), and that schizophrenics are the product of disturbed parent-child communication (Jackson, 1960). Everything from job dissatisfaction to sexual dysfunction has been analyzed, dissected, and reduced to a "failure to communicate". Communication is in!

Unfortunately, this communication overkill can blind us to the evidence that some interpersonal problems do stem from ineffective interpersonal skills and that developing such skills increases communication effectiveness (Patton & Giffin, 1974, p. 435-452).

One of the leaders in the study of the nature and process of communication is John Wallen. Wallen has integrated the work of many scholars including Allport (1949), Hayakawa (1964), Heider (1958), Korzybski (1958), Lewin (1926, 1948, 1951), and Rank (1941, 1968) into a systematic theory of communication. It is the purpose of this paper to present Wallen's major conceptualizations about human interaction.

Since John Wallen has been conducting communications workshops, he has not published any of the many "handouts" that he uses in his groups. Wallen believes that if his ideas are useful, they will spread through personalized channels of communication. Unfortunately, for those who wish to acknowledge his work and to properly

reference his contributions, no formal publication lists Wallen's papers. In an attempt to overcome this deficit, this article not only describes Wallen's concepts but also lists his papers for reference purposes.

POSTULATES

Wallen (1964) contends that many of our difficulties with other people result from ignorance or denial of three basic attributes of human beings:

1. *Individual experience is private*

Each person's experience is known directly only to himself. Other people's thoughts and feelings can only be inferred; even if a person states his experience it cannot be known with certainty by another since the report is not the experience itself. Symbols such as words can only be representative of the experience.

2. *Each person is different*

Since each person is unique with different goals, different styles, different information, different opinions, and a different background, misunderstanding and disagreement are to be expected — not because of an aggressive nature or malicious intentions, but due to this basic *human difference*. Each individual sees a situation colored by his own perceptions, each has his own style of responding to or initiating behaviour. This fact of human difference means that *conflict is inevitable*. What appears to be right and reasonable for one person may not appear to be so for another.

3. *Humans are functionally interdependent social beings*

A person's behaviour both affects and is affected by other people's behaviour, thereby forming an interaction system. Since each individual's experience is private and unique, the interaction cannot be fully understood without sharing how each individual in the interaction was affected. That is, people need each other to supply information about the consequences of their behaviour in the social context. Without this social feedback it cannot be determined if the effect upon the other person was what was meant.

These three postulates form the foundation for the following insights into interpersonal communication.

CONFLICT

Our language reflects the assumption that difference is bad and disruptive while similarity is to be valued. One meaning of the word "differ" is "to quarrel". The inference is often made that some people choose to be different rather than

that they just *are* different. Wallen (1964) maintains that although conflict is inevitable, conflict per se is neither desirable nor undesirable; it is how the conflict is dealt with that is either constructive or destructive. Differences can be utilized to strengthen rather than destroy a relationship.

Two common strategies for dealing with conflict are the win-lose approach or the approach in which the conflict is just ignored (Wallen, 1967c). In the win-lose approach one attempts to overcome the opponent through elimination. This elimination may be in the form of divorce, banishment, firing, excommunicating, or ultimately killing. Usually the elimination of the other side is so highly undesirable that an attempt to dominate the opponent is more likely to ensue. By getting "one up" on the opponent the opponent can be forced to submit. In the win-lose approach energies are directed against the other person. An attempt is made to show the other that he is wrong. One side wins, the other side loses.

Wallen (1967c) proposes another approach to conflict situations which he calls the *Method of Joint Inquiry*. A similar statement has been popularized by Thomas Gordon (1970) and called *The No-Lose Method*. In this approach energies are directed toward understanding the problem in order to create an alternative which satisfies all parties involved. In the spirit of joint inquiry, the persons in conflict present all their points of view, that is, all their differences, to ensure that the total problem is understood, not just one part of it. The different sides in the conflict pool knowledge to determine what is best for all. For Wallen, not only is disagreement viewed as being essential to good communication, it is seen as being indicative of a difference in viewpoint. If this difference is ignored, a major problem could develop.

CONFLICT AND EMOTION

Conflict situations are commonly avoided because conflict may lead to anger, distrust, or other strong emotions. Wallen (1967b) contends that emotions per se are not a source of difficulty in interpersonal relations. People often are not aware that their emotions affect their behaviour. Whereas the child readily expresses delight upon seeing his father arrive home from work, the father may appear to be calm and cool as he has learned to control, not necessarily the feelings, but the way in which the feelings are displayed. Feelings do influence behaviour: joy, hunger, boredom, pain, pleasure, surprise, impatience, hurt, contentment, fatigue, confusion, anger all manifest themselves physiologically and behaviourally. It is our failure to recognize and to deal with the manner in which these emotions interfere with interpersonal relations that is the

source of difficulty, not the existence of the emotions.

Wallen (1967b) observes that emotions are not voluntarily controlled in the same way as thoughts and actions. One can choose to think of skiing or to go skiing in the mountains, but one cannot plan to feel a certain emotion. If one is feeling hurt one cannot just turn the hurt off and feel happy. The individual may, however, be able to mask his hurt. Once an emotion is stirred, there is little control over it.

At times other persons appear to have control over our emotions — “You made me angry”. Of course, other people do not really have “control” over our emotions as has been reported by various investigators, such as Ellis (1962, 1971) and Raimy (1975). Certainly if one believes that the other person made him angry then that person appears to control the emotion. And if one does indeed hold the other person responsible for that anger he will expect the other to stop the behaviour which arouses the anger. But, says Wallen, (1976b) if the anger can be understood it can provide information about the expectations, silent assumptions, information, and values of both people.

So the emotional aspect cannot be ignored for a truly meaningful relationship to develop, but . . .

To interact with another is to risk having feelings aroused by him and to risk arousing feelings in him. You and he cannot turn on and off your feelings toward each other merely by wishing or deciding to. Unless you avoid each other totally and forever, you must share some of yourself with the other. To feel something toward another — whether anger, distrust, fear, interest, enjoyment — is to become related, interdependent with another and is to lose some control over your own life. Feelings, thus, seem to threaten our voluntary, playful control over our own affairs. (Wallen, 1967b, p. 3).

If disagreement is essential to good communication, risk is important in developing a good relationship. Wallen has referred to the “landmines” in a relationship; everytime we avoid talking about a touchy or emotional area in the relationship, we are planting landmines which close down the interreaction. All relationships are dynamic; the interreaction is either being opened or closed. To defuse the landmines which have been planted in a relationship, thereby opening the interaction, involves risk-taking behaviour.

The greater the mutual openness in a relationship, the greater the trust. The process is never static: trust is always being built or lost. Trust is reduced if open behaviour is not desired or is misinterpreted. Due to fear of conflict and resulting emotions, it is often difficult to take risks. Every time one avoids dealing with a potentially touchy area in a relationship, a landmine is planted. The landmine is therefore an important issue in the relationship. It takes a great

deal of energy to avoid the landmines and after many landmines are planted a great risk is needed to discuss the avoided issues. Sometimes the risk is so great that it detonates the landmines and the relationship as well. If the risk is not taken, the relationship flounders in avoidance of all touchy areas and often silence and lack of communication result. It is Wallen’s (1967b) contention that to reverse the cycle of closedness and mistrust, the landmines must be defused via *constructive* openness. This involves the communication skills and principles to be discussed in the remainder of this paper.

Wallen (1965) considers it risky to make an effort to understand another person by listening carefully. The risk is that by understanding another, one opens oneself to changing one’s own opinions and behaviours. Another form of risk taking is to delegate responsibility, thereby taking the chance that another person will fail on a particular task which you wish to be done. To report one’s own feelings is also risky because it makes one vulnerable to another person. When feelings are disclosed, one must have trust that the other person would not misuse the information. One takes high risks only when one desires to improve a relationship in the hope of establishing close emotional contact.

SOCIAL FEEDBACK

Man is a functionally interdependent being, i.e., the social consequences of his behaviours can, for the most part, be known only through others. Without knowledge of his social consequences, man lives in a state of non-growth, ignorance and knowledge of what another thinks or feels which cannot be accurately inferred without feedback.

Social feedback is an aid to self-perception. By knowing the effects of our behaviour on others a great degree of congruence between intention and effect can be reached. Wallen (1967a) refers to the lack of congruence between intention and effect as the *Interpersonal Gap*. “If the effect is what was intended, the gap has been bridged. If the effect is opposite of what was intended, the gap has become greater” (Wallen, 1967a, p. 1).

In Wallen’s (1967a) notion of the communication gap between human beings, three key essential aspects of an interaction can be considered. These aspects are “intentions”, “actions”, and “effects”. Because each of us is unique and because our intentions — the wishes, wants, fears, desires — are private and known only to us, we see situations differently from one another. Miscommunication may occur when the intentions of the sender are transformed (encoded) into actions and when actions are transformed by the receiver (decoded) into interpretations because each of us uses a somewhat different code.

The interpersonal gap is illustrated in Figure 1.

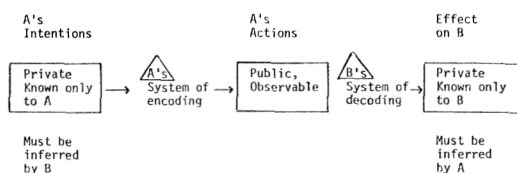


Figure 1.

THE INTERPERSONAL GAP

The interpersonal gap refers to the lack of congruence between A's intentions and the effect on B. If the intentions match the effect there is no interpersonal gap.

It is important to focus on individual differences in the encoding and decoding operations as well as on the underlying associated feelings. If man is aware of how his feelings influence his actions and the way he encodes his feelings he can accurately describe how he acts when he feels angry, affectionate, uneasy and so on. If he is aware of how he decodes the feelings and actions of others the probability of being able to accurately describe distortions is increased. The gap in communication is bridged when each person sees the interaction as the other does.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Pervading Wallen's numerous papers are four communication skills which can be learned by professionals and laymen alike. These communication skills contribute to bridging the interpersonal gap. The assumption behind using these skills is that one wishes to develop a relationship with another person and desires to enhance either increased intimacy and understanding or to reverse the cycle of closedness and mistrust.

Whereas such communication skills as paraphrasing and perception checking helps one to understand the other as a person, behaviour description and description of our feelings helps others to understand us. An elaboration of these communication skills (Wallen, 1968a, 1968b, 1970) follow:

1. Paraphrasing

A difficulty in communication occurs when the listener is assumed to have the same inferences as the speaker. One way to reduce the interpersonal gap is by letting the other person know how you have interpreted what he has said. Not only are you testing your understanding but you are letting the other person know that you are interested in him as well as clarifying ideas for him.

2. Behaviour description

The purpose of the behaviour description is to attempt to express what is seen so that others can agree or disagree with the perception, therefore it

is basic and non-evaluative — a report of specific, observable behaviours rather than inferences about motives, feelings, attitudes or personality traits. "You stepped on my toes," rather than "You clumsy ox."

3. Description of Feelings

Different feelings are often expressed in the same way. For example, joy, anger and hurt are often accompanied by tears; in this case, others may misinterpret the feeling. One must therefore be explicit as possible when trying to communicate, or describe feelings.

Wallen suggests that feelings can be conveyed by the use of similes, "I feel like a bull in a china shop," or by the use of figures of speech, "I hit an iceberg," or by reporting action-urges like, "I'd like to hug you."

4. Perception checking

Often one is not certain how others feel. The only way one can be certain is to say what he thinks the other is feeling, that is, to make a perception check. By conveying an inference of the other's internal feeling state, he can be helped to be aware of what he is feeling. An example of a perception check is "I get the feeling you are angry. Are you?" It is then up to the other person to either confirm, deny, or modify the inference.

The skills discussed above enhance the accuracy of communication by decreasing the interpersonal gap. They can be used by anyone and their judicious use will foster a climate of honesty, openness, and trust.

CONCLUSION

John Wallen's ideas have influenced a number of human relations practitioners. The communication skills are especially valuable in that they are easily demonstrated and readily learned by almost anyone. The effects of using the skills are quickly apparent. For these reasons, the concepts presented here can be of great value to teachers, counsellors, parents, spouses, and friends.

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