HOW TO TALK WITH PEOPLE

A Program for Preventing Troubles That Come When People Talk Together

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HOW TO TALK WITH PEOPLE

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To

David Alfred

Contents

FOREWORD ix

I. A Preview of the Problem 1
II. They Talk Past Each Other 11
III. On a Certain Sort of Disagreement 27
IV. Jon Stone and the Fools Across the Table 43
V. Getting Problem-Centered 60
VI. Experience and Innocence 72
VII. The Problem of the Partisan 81
VIII. Making Phrases at Each Other 93
IX. "A Shy, Socratic Approach" 103
X. When Angry Look Again! 113
XI. On a Certain Kind of Excitement and Wonder 121
XII. Tired Leaders 132
XIII. A Matter of Dollars and Cents 145
XIV. On Preserving Human Warmth 153
XV. The Reminder 162
XVI. The Image of Men Talking Together 169

INDEX 173

Foreword

This is a time of much talk.

It would be hard to estimate how helpful it is or how destructive. Of this we may be sure: without the means, the capacity, and the will to communicate, what we know as business, government, and community activities could not be. Indeed, even in 1952 men around the world wait nervously to see whether the East and West can find ways of talking together before the bombs fall.

That communication between men is a significant phenomenon need hardly be argued. It is more than a straw in the wind when the National Association of Manufacturers, the editors of *Fortune*, and professors of philosophy in the universities become explicit in their interest in language and communication. The mounting output of workers in the fields of speech, general semantics, group dynamics, and non-directive counseling is testimony that the phenomena of discussion are being studied now as never before.

From Talking At to Talking With

For fifteen years in public speaking classes I have been encouraging people to talk to others. In that time

I have listened to thousands of talks—describing, pleading, condemning. Sometimes the talk came from earnest reflection, sometimes from a digest magazine. In either case, the performance did something for the student. His perspiration paid off in the form of an achievement that both he and his audience could recognize. He learned to talk steadily in spite of his fearfulness. He caught the feeling of power that comes when one affects another. Every now and then someone moved to the rostrum with that eagerness which says, "Listen, this is *my* idea." Many were stirred by their own persuasion to study and think some more.

Even though there were values in those class exercises, I became aware that something was amiss.

The précis assignment was invariably troublesome. Each listener would be asked to write in his own words a fifty-word abstract or summary of what a speaker said. Only rarely would the speaker (after study of the abstracts) report that more than 25 percent of the class adequately "got it." They reported something but it was not "his idea as he gave it." If the audience heard they did not seem to listen. Or if they listened, it seemed with half an ear.

The open-forum question periods were often unsatisfactory, too. Listeners went off on tangents. They picked up incidental items and drew from them conclusions that could be warranted only if the speaker had not given the rest of his speech.

Then there were the crises when a dearly held be-

lief was dismissed with the implication that the holder was only one or two steps removed from idiocy. If these moments of drama turned on matters of religion and politics, the speaking took fire almost in inverse ratio to the thinness of the argumentative fuel. The problem then was to find ways of preventing everyone from talking all at once. But there was little in these exchanges which showed a desire to talk together. It was as if each felt that if only he had his say somehow everything would clear up.

After such rounds of high talk, we would try the "issues game." This was an attempt to have the issues and points of difference stated so that the contending parties might face them together. Over and over in these classes this was the beginning of a new ruckus. The very effort to describe what the argument was about set off new arguments. Each person "knew" what he was talking about and little did he care about the other fellow—except to point out that none was making the effort to hear *him* out.

It dawned on me ever so slowly that it was not enough merely to encourage people to talk *to* others. They needed to know how to talk *with* others, too. I am not saying that there is no place for the promotion of skill in partisan speech-making. I am saying that, along with it, people need the art of human communion with each other.

What happens to discussions in the little world of the classroom is hardly important. The same obstruc-

tionist attitudes in the talk situation outside, however, might waste time, cost money, and intensify confusion and conflict. When foremen and workers, physicians and patients, officers and enlisted men, sales managers and salesmen, management and union representatives, members of boards and committees talk together in ways which end in trouble, these attitudes make a difference.

But what actually happens in such groups and what can be done about it? Professor J. H. McBurney had offered his pioneering course at Northwestern University and with Professor K. G. Hance had written the ground-breaking textbook, *The Principles and Methods of Discussion*. I had been exposed to both. I had read much of what Lyman Bryson, Harrison S. Elliott, Mary Follett, Edward Lindeman, Alfred Dwight Sheffield, John W. Studebaker, Ordway Tead had written about the group process. I found the writings of Elton Mayo, C. I. Barnard, and F. J. Roethlisberger rewarding. But they all seemed to be on an instructional level once removed from what I wanted. They seemed to stop just short of the details I wanted to know more about. I began a catalogue of the varieties of communication breakdown in my classes. I found a perspective and hints of what to look for in Alfred Korzybski's formulations of general semantics. I began to take notes on things that happened in committee meetings I attended. There were recurring strains and themes. Would they be found beyond the campus?

Since 1942 I have listened to and taken notes on the deliberations of more than 200 groups. Some 150 of these were staff, board, and committee meetings in private businesses, military organizations, and community agencies. The remaining were in and around the university. These were not learning sessions but occasions where policies and plans had to be made and modes of action worked out. These were "real" situations.

The pages that follow describe some of the things I saw and heard and a number of the corrective measures that worked in varying degrees of success in some of the groups willing to experiment. I had help from many secretaries writing minutes, and from stenographers whose shorthand was better than mine. Occasionally a tape recorder was available and good use was made of it. One regrets that there weren't more such recordings. Only occasionally do I give illustrations from the meetings I attended. It seems to me that a visitor or participant has no license to make a public analysis of what he was privileged to see and hear. That is also the reason why the organizations remain anonymous and why fictitious names are used throughout. I regret this device because I should have liked to pay my public respects to those men and women who both permitted and suffered my presence and so generously endured my interviewing. And to those observers who didn't always think that they were spending their time usefully.

It seems necessary to say that what is presented here gives few final answers. Indeed, those given are given without the assurance that they will similarly apply elsewhere. The first person was permitted entry as a way of emphasizing the restricted character and scope of the findings, and not, it is hoped, as a means of giving the findings a privileged status.

There is much in the observational procedures which is less than rigorous. Checks on the reliability of the observations were only occasionally possible. What is said here may be considered the output of one making a time-and-motion study in a situation which could not be repeated. Perhaps the very lack of controls and precision in what is here presented may encourage others to fill in what is required.

I am glad to acknowledge the editorial assistance I received from Mr. Robert R. Hume of the Northwestern University Traffic Institute and the criticisms of Mr. Victor M. Ratner, vice-president of Macy's. I wish it had been possible for me to incorporate more of their suggestions.

I must record here my indebtedness to two men who died before the manuscript was completed. Both are involved in the letter and spirit of my writing. Dr. James M. Yard helped me immeasurably in the planning and arranging of the research. Alfred Korzybski's role in my preparation for this kind of study is equally immeasurable.

IRVING J. LEE

February, 1952

HOW TO TALK WITH PEOPLE

CHAPTER I

A Preview of the Problem

> Effective coöperation, then, is the problem we face in the middle period of the twentieth century. There is no "ism" that will help us to solution; we must be content to return to patient, pedestrian work at the wholly neglected problem of the determinants of spontaneous participation. —Elton Mayo, *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization,* Harvard University, Graduate School of Business Administration, 1945, p. xvi.

There are disasters we seem unable to do much about—earthquakes, tornadoes, the proliferation of cells in cancer.

There are calamities we seem to contribute to—fires, collisions, housing shortages.

And then there are troubles we seem to create—disagreements and conflicts which run the range from name-calling to war.

The terrors of nature are being fought with courage

and ingenuity. We approach those that are man-made with less assurance. Maybe the human problems are so big and so numerous that fumbling is inevitable. Maybe those interested in the improvement of human relations have been frightened by the magnitude of what they face. Whatever the reason, this is hardly the time for despair. Though we do not find solutions there may be value in our looking anew at the varieties of human disturbance. From that perspective we might find the courage to keep trying whatever means we have.

In this book I report an attempt to look at some human troubles—those that come when men and women talk together. The committee room is far from being the most important scene of human interaction. It is, however, convenient and confined. In it one can see on a reduced scale the way conflicts begin and go on.

Three questions interested me: (1) Do people make an effort to understand each other? (2) How do they respond when another talks? (3) How do they approach problems?

Many other questions were asked. But those were the ones I found some answers for. And in connection with the difficulties that were thus defined, we were able to try out some suggestions for analysis, prevention, and correction.

So as to indicate something of the scope and char-

acter of what is involved in this interest, the major findings and suggestions are here summarized.

1. Misunderstanding results when one man assumes that another uses words just as *he* does. People are so eager to reply that they rarely do enough inquiring. They believe so surely (and wrongly) that words have meaning in themselves that they hardly ever wonder what the speaker means when he uses them.

Suggestion: Committee members need exercises in listening. They must learn not how to define terms but how to ask others what they are intending to say. Our advice: Don't blame the speaker alone for the misunderstanding. The listener is involved, too. It takes two to make communication.

2. Trouble comes when somebody contradicts somebody else without seeing what the first man was talking about. The speaker says, "You can't trust the Abibs." The listener says, "Yes, you can." Then they go at it. When the speaker was asked to specify, he told about Samo and Har and Myri. And, of course, they were untrustworthy. When the listener specified, he told about Mil and Janx and Car. And without a doubt they could be trusted. If the contradictor had asked first, the contradictee might not have had his feelings hurt. And the committee might have come to conclusions without that waste of time. The trouble mounts when nobody bothers about specifying.

Suggestion: Both leaders and members need to learn how to spot temperature-raising contradictions. They must ask, ever so politely: Are you differing on the details or on the conclusion? Does your generalization refer to what his does?

3. The most frequently bothersome kind of disagreement arises when someone assumes this: "If his feeling about it is different from mine, he has no good reason for feeling so." It is then a short step to this: "If he doesn't see it my way, he is a fool." What is important here is not that men disagree, but that they become disagreeable about it.

Suggestion: What should a leader do about a person who is suspicious and impatient in the presence of those who differ with him? First, he must realize that his job is not to prevent differences in judgment but to get at the assumption that if-he-has-ideas-at-variance-with-mine-then-he-necessarily-doesn't-know-what-he-is-talking-about. Second, he might arrange for the group's consideration of the nature of the disagreement process as a way of creating a common front against the steam-roller tactics of the arrogant member.

4. Going off on tangents is assisted, partisanship is encouraged, and time is wasted when a group is more interested in prescribing for problems than in describing them. Too often members of a group are willing to fight about the answers even before they have explored the question.

Suggestion: The leader must be trained in the role of "prodder," so that he will do everything possible to keep the group problem-centered rather than solution-minded. He prods them with "What is it that has gone wrong?" even though they prefer "What should we do about it?"

5. To solve problems when everyone is of a like mind about the problems is hard enough. When a group is composed of some who look at problems as if they were just like those they solved before, and others who see the problems as if they were brand new and different—then one more difficulty is superimposed on the group.

Suggestion: Let the leader approach the business of the meeting in case fashion. No conclusions or recommendations are to be made until after the problem is presented in narrative form. The old-new controversy is thus kept in abeyance.

6. The deepest sort of conflict occurs when partisans meet head on, when each seeks to satisfy his or his organization's needs regardless of the needs of others. The leader's task is this: to see that each is satisfied without disrupting operations.

Suggestion: Someone should say something about the values of compromise. Too many well-meaning people have belittled this technique of settling disputes. But are stalemates and bitter battles to the end preferable? The leader may cleanse the atmosphere if he can be persuaded to affirm directly that there is decency in "giving a little" and intelligence in the desire "to work things out."

7. It is impossible to talk about men or ideas without naming them. But a name which has a stigmatizing effect can stop or deter sensible analysis. Stigma names hurt feelings and usually lead to more of the same.

Suggestion: The leader must not try to stop the name-calling. He should try to get participants to look beyond the limiting effects of the label. To keep the talk on the issue, not the name, he asks, "Is it that *only?* Does that name cover all of it?"

8. Conflict within a group is compounded when one person takes another's difference of opinion as a personal attack on himself. So many people seem not to realize that it is possible to quarrel on an issue without necessarily doubting another's sincerity or casting aspersions on his integrity.

Suggestion: To ward off the feeling of defensiveness which accompanies the "taking" of criticism, committee participants should be instructed in the use of a non-combative approach. This involves an effort on the part of a critic to soften the blow by disclaiming any attempt to manifest his superiority. He reassures his "opponent" that the issue alone is the objective.

9. A group faces a crisis the moment one person gets angry at another. Sometimes it blows over; sometimes it blows up. Angry men work against and not with each other.

Suggestion: What should a leader do then? Our advice: Do not try to deal with a man's emotional expression as such. Do not tell him to inhibit these responses. Do try to shift his attention to what it was that set him off. Do ask him to consider whether he is surmising as if he knew. Do urge him to take one more look at the object of his anger. The object is to realign his perception so that he will think and feel anew.

10. In sixteen groups we saw illustrations of men and women talking together, spontaneously, coöperatively, constructively. There was team-play and teamwork. We tried to isolate some of the factors we found there: (1) The leader did not try to tell the others what to do or how to think; he was thinking along with them. (2) No one presumed to know it all; one might be eager and vigorous in his manner of

talking, but he was amenable and attentive when others spoke. (3) The people thought of the accomplishments of the group rather than of their individual exploits.

Suggestion: To achieve some of this spontaneous togetherness, let a leader try the non-monitoring role. Then let a group take time off to talk about the values of the non-allness attitude and the non-solo sort of performance.

11. A leader sometimes gets so tired and discouraged when committee discussions drag on or bog down that he takes over the assignments himself. There is real trouble if he forgets that, instead of things adding up, they often pile up. It is then harder to talk to him. His assistants lose initiative. He becomes difficult to work with.

Suggestion: The chairman must be helped to face the fact that, if he does alone what a committee ought to help him with, he may not be adding to his burdens but disastrously complicating them. He needs to see that it may well be wise to give up rather than to take on responsibility. In addition, the group must be protected from overloading. "Analysis of the Agenda" might well be made the first order of business.

12. Under pressure to get things done a group is often willing to settle for some easy and inadequate solution. That means that the trouble is postponed, not dissolved. Often, too, a busy executive, seeing that meetings take the time of well-paid personnel, tries to cut costs by urging them to deal with problems according to the clock rather than the complexity. This is a false economy which leads to cutting down on communication as if it did not have its own productive values.

Suggestion: When men succumb to the pressures of temporal efficiency they need to be helped to see the difference between *time-wasted* and *time-spent*. Human intelligence and imagination are not readily geared to the demands of a timepiece. When problems are big a group may need comparably big amounts of time.

13. Too many leaders work on, rather than work with, their members. They want meetings to be as workmanlike as a belt line. Because they take a business-only attitude, they expect the same from everybody else. They forget that people like to get things off their chests almost as much as they like to solve problems. They forget that meetings ought to be pleasant as well as productive.

Suggestion: If people in a group want to interrupt serious discussion with some diversion or personal expression—let them. Then bring them back to the agenda. Committees work best when the talk swings between the personal and the purposeful.

14. We found very few leaders who could handle their many responsibilities with equal effectiveness. When a man or woman had to act as organizer, clarifier, pacifier, and contributor, he had too much to do. He needed help.

Suggestion: Find someone in the group to take over the job of "reminder." This involves assisting the chairman in noting and pointing out those time-wasting actions which busy participants miss. The reminder's role is that of an observer, not critic or adviser.

In the pages that follow, these findings and suggestions are presented in some detail. We explain how we went about our observations and how we tried to correct the difficulties that were uncovered.

CHAPTER II

They Talk Past Each Other

"It takes," says Thoreau, in the noblest and most useful passage I remember to have read in any modern author, "two to speak truth—one to speak and another to hear." —Robert Louis Stevenson, "Truth of Intercourse," *Virginibus Puerisque*, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1925, p. 32.

How Misunderstanding Happens

The one thing people tend to take for granted when talking to others is that they understand each other. It is rare, indeed, in a meeting to have someone hold up his own argument long enough to say, "I think you said. . . . Did you?" or "Was I right in thinking you meant . . . ?" We found people ever so eager to parry what a man says without ever wondering whether *that* is what the man said.

In the give-and-take of talk things go fast, and one is so busy organizing his reply that he doesn't take the time to make sure he knows what he is replying to.

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This is unfortunate because it often means that, instead of talking with others, people talk past or by-pass each other.

Note some by-passings.

1. The British Staff prepared a paper which they wished to raise as a matter of urgency, and informed their American colleagues that they wished to "table it." To the American staff "tabling" a paper meant putting it away in a drawer and forgetting it. A long and even acrimonious argument ensued before both parties realised that they were agreed on the merits and wanted the same thing.[1]

2. I remember a worrisome young man who, one day, came back from the X-ray room wringing his hands and trembling with fear. "It is all up with me," he said. "The X-ray man said I have a hopeless cancer of the stomach." Knowing that the roentgenologist would never have said such a thing, I asked, "Just what did he say?" and the answer was on dismissing him, the roentgenologist said to an assistant, "N. P." In Mayo clinic cipher this meant "no plates," and indicated that the X-ray man was so satisfied with the normal appearance of the stomach on the X-ray screen that he did not see any use in making films. But to the patient, watching in an agony of fear for some portent of disaster, it meant "nothing possible:" in other words that the situation was hopeless![2]

3. A foreman told a machine operator he was passing: "Better clean up around here." It was ten minutes later

[1] Winston Churchill, "The Second World War," Vol. III, Book II, *The New York Times*, February 28, 1950, p. 31.

[2] Walter C. Alvarez, *Nervousness, Indigestion and Pain*, Paul B. Hoeber, Inc., 1943, p. 74.

when the foreman's assistant phoned: "Say, boss, isn't that bearing Sipert is working on due up in engineering pronto?"

"You bet your sweet life it is. Why?"

"He says you told him to drop it and sweep the place up. I thought I'd better make sure."

"Listen," the foreman flared into the phone, "get him right back on that job. It's got to be ready in twenty minutes."

. . . What [the foreman] had in mind was for Sipert to gather up the oily waste, which was a fire and accident hazard. This would not have taken more than a couple of minutes, and there would have been plenty of time to finish the bearing. Sipert, of course, should have been able to figure this out for himself—except that something in the foreman's tone of voice, or in his own mental state at the time, made him misunderstand the foreman's intent. He wasn't geared to what the foreman had said.[3]

4. Lady recently ordered some writing paper at a department store and asked to have her initials engraved thereon. The salesgirl suggested placing them in the upper right-hand corner or the upper left-hand corner, but the customer said no, put them in the center. Well, the stationery has arrived, every sheet marked with her initials equidistant from right and left and from top and bottom.[4]

5. In a private conversation with Mr. Molotov, it became apparent that another difficult misunderstanding in

[3] *The Foreman's Letter*, National Foreman's Institute, Inc., February 8, 1950, p. 3.

[4] "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, January 28, 1950, p. 21. Reprinted by permission. Copyright, 1950, The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

language had arisen between ourselves and the Russians. At the San Francisco Conference when the question of establishing a trusteeship system within the United Nations was being considered, the Soviet delegation had asked Mr. Stettinius what the American attitude would be toward the assumption by the Soviet Union of a trusteeship. Mr. Stettinius replied in general terms, expressing the opinion that the Soviet Union was "eligible" to receive a territory for administration under trusteeship. Mr. Molotov took this to mean we would support a Soviet request for a trusteeship.[5]

In each case a word or phrase or sentence was used one way by the speaker and interpreted in another way by the listener. This is possible because words are versatile. Except for those intended for highly specialized purposes (like tetrasporangium, icosahedron, bisulfite), it is not unusual to find most words put to rather varied uses. A seventh-grade class in English was able to make up thirty sentences in which the word "set" was used differently each time. Even "word" is listed in sixteen different ways in *The American College Dictionary*.

The naïve speaker of a language usually has the feeling that, in general, words have a meaning, and he is seldom conscious of the great "area" of meaning for all except highly technical words. It is in this respect that the student's observation first needs widening and sharpening.

[5] James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, Harper & Brothers, 1947, p. 96.

Frequently we have tried to "build vocabularies" by adding more units or words. But to push first the addition of more vocabulary units in order to increase the number of words may interfere with, rather than help, effective mastery of language. This is the process that produces a Mrs. Malaprop. Most frequently the student needs first to know well the various areas of use of the units he is already familiar with; he needs to be made conscious of the great diversity of uses or meanings for commonly used words. He must be made aware, for example, that the statement "The children did not *count*" can mean that they did not *utter the words* for the numbers in a series, or that the children *were not considered*. Ordinarily we just don't believe without considerable careful examination that for the five hundred most used words in English (according to the Thorndike *Word Book*) the Oxford Dictionary records and illustrates from our literature 14,070 separate meanings.[6]

At different times the same words may be used differently.

When Francis Bacon referred to various people in the course of his *Essays* as *indifferent*, *obnoxious*, and *officious*, he was describing them as "impartial," "submissive," and "ready to serve." When King James II observed that the new St. Paul's Cathedral was *amusing*, *awful*, and *artificial*, he implied that Sir Christopher Wren's recent creation was "pleasing, awe-inspiring, and skilfully achieved." When Dr. Johnson averred that Milton's *Lyci-*

[6] Charles C. Fries, "Using the Dictionary," *Inside the ACD*, October, 1948, p. 1.

das was "easy, vulgar, and therefore *disgusting,*" he intended to say that it was "effortless, popular, and therefore not in good taste."[7]

The role of experience also affects the varieties of usage. Brander Matthews provided an example from a dinner-party conversation:

> The second topic . . . was a definition of the image called up in our several minds by the word *forest*. Until that evening I had never thought of forest as clothing itself in different colors and taking on different forms in the eyes of different men; but I then discovered that even the most innocent word may don strange disguises. To Hardy forest suggested the sturdy oaks to be assaulted by the woodlanders of Wessex; and to Du Maurier it evoked the trim and tidy avenues of the national domain of France. To Black the word naturally brought to mind the low scrub of the so-called deer-forests of Scotland; and to Gosse it summoned up a view of the green-clad mountains that towered up from the Scandinavian fiords. To Howells it recalled the thick woods that in his youth fringed the rivers of Ohio; and to me there came back swiftly the memory of the wild growths bristling up unrestrained by man, in the Chippewa Reservation which I had crossed fourteen years before in my canoe trip from Lake Superior to the Mississippi. Simple as the word seemed, it was interpreted by each of us in accord with his previous personal experience.[8]

[7] Simeon Potter, Our Language, Pelican Books, 1950, p. 116.
[8] Brander Matthews, *These Many Years: Recollections of a New Yorker*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917, pp. 287–288. Quoted from the essay by Allen Walker Read, "Linguistic Revision as a Requisite for the Increasing of Rigor in Scientific Method," read at the Third Congress on General Semantics, July 22, 1949.

This conclusion about the range and possible uses of a word is easily verified. When it is forgotten, a listener just as easily comes to believe that (1) there is but one way to use a word—his—and (2) the speaker is doing with his words what the listener would were the listener doing the talking.

Can you see these beliefs at work in the examples given above?

In short, what you understand by any word or statement may not be what someone else intends to say. In a way, this is so obvious that most of us feel no obligation to think more about it. However, when one is aware of the fact it does not necessarily follow that he will act in terms of it. And there is some evidence that, unless people can be made sensitive to the possibility of by-passing, they make only meager efforts to stop it.

It Takes Two to Make Communication

I have no wish here to give comfort to the bore who gets so much pleasure squelching discussions with his defiant "Define your terms." His maneuver results in shifting the burden in communication to the other fellow. Both must be brought into the act. We would have the listener work just a bit, too. So we urge him to state his notion of what was being said. Inciden-

tally, that bore may sometimes be routed with this: "What definition of my words have you in mind? Perhaps we are thinking together after all."

The "plain-talk" and "say-it-in-simple-words" teachers have been in vogue but they haven't been especially helpful. They, too, tend to put the emphasis on one side of the communication line. Putting the burden for understanding on the speaker is a kind of implied invitation to the listener to sit back and contentedly assume he has nothing to do but wait his turn. And besides, even the simple words have uses which too frequently vary between man and man.

We once observed eight meetings of a group of nine men, who functioned as a standing committee in a corporation having wide public responsibilities. Five had taken one or more courses and had studied some of the books on "talking plainly." One of the items checked had to do with "the assumption of understanding." Can men be differentiated according to their readiness to believe they know what the other fellow is referring to? We looked in their replies for such indications as *questions* for assurance that the asker is "with" the speaker, *qualifications* like "If I understand what you say" or "If I knew what you mean . . . ," *invitations* like "Correct me if I'm off the beam" or "Tell me whether I answered what you intended to say. . . ."

We were hardly prepared to find that four of the "plain-talk students" did the least amount of questioning, qualifying, inviting, etc. This may, of course, be an accident. Before a conclusion worth much can be drawn we should have a broader sampling of the population. And before a cause can be assigned with confidence much more investigation would be needed. Nevertheless, *these particular men*, knowing the ways to "plainness" and using them, tended to think they had done enough when they spoke so. They seemed to focus attention on *their* talking. They made no comparable effort to look to the character of what they heard.

I am not at all arguing that this finding in these particular cases means that training in plain talking makes for poor listening. I am trying to suggest only that training in the explicit effort at understanding may be a difficult sort of thing and may not automatically carry over from other training.

Cardinal Manning once said something relevant:

> I have no doubt that I will hear that I am talking of what I do not understand; but in my defence I think I may say, I am about to talk of what I do not understand for this reason: I cannot get those who talk about it to tell me what they mean. I know what I mean by it, but I am not at all sure that I know what they mean by it; and those who use the same words in different senses are like men that run up and down the two sides of a hedge, and so can never meet.

It is helpful to think of the radio in this. The performer in the studio can talk his heart out, but if the

man in the easy chair is tuned in elsewhere it really makes no difference what is being said. Unless the receiver is on the same wave length, the character of what is sent out hardly governs the communication process.[9]

This is not to imply that a speaker cannot help by putting what he has to say in clear, listenable language. Anything he does to define, simplify, amplify, illustrate, is all to the good. But it is only part of the process. The listener has a job to do, too. He must make the effort to come to terms with the speaker to keep from assuming that he inevitably knows what the speaker has in mind. At the very least he might temper his arrogance with a question now and then just to make sure.

It takes two to make communication.

Are You on His Communication Line?

The preceding pages of this chapter were mimeographed and given to three groups, one meeting for study of the Bible, one considering matters of policy in a business corporation, and one working on problems in the administration of a college fraternity. Every member of each group read a portion out loud. We then talked about the main point—it takes two to make communication. We agreed that this was rather

[9] This image is well developed in the article by Charles T. Estes, "Speech and Human Relations in Industry," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, April, 1946, pp. 160–169.

simple stuff and that we would try to talk with the possibility of by-passing in mind. We agreed, further, that no one of us would be insulted if asked to clarify or "talk some more" on any doubtful point. Nor would anyone feel hesitant about trying to get on the same wave length with anyone else. We gave each a small card with the inscription, "Are you on *his* communication line?"

What happened?

In each case the business of the meeting was slowed down. Only half as many items on the agenda could be covered. There was a certain amount of unfruitful wrangling about small points. Some members became tongue-tied in the face of so much freedom. Others became impatient with what seemed a waste of time, this trying to get to the speaker. The first sessions were always the worst. Most members felt comfortable only after the second or third.

And then we came upon something interesting. A man was being listened to. He found that others were actually waiting until he finished. He felt flattered in turn by the fact that another was trying to reach him rather than argue at him. He found himself trying to make his points so that his hearers would have less trouble with them. They were trying harder to read the cards he was putting on the table. The ornery member, normally so quick to doubt, stayed to question. The timid member found that the social pressure about the participation was all on his side.

We are inclined to think that the long-run results were worth the time and trouble.

The Purist's Dogma

In a number of experimental discussion groups generous enough to submit to such instruction there was a curious resistance to this seemingly obvious doctrine. I would be asked questions like these: Do you mean to say that a word doesn't have some definite, accurate meaning of its own regardless of the person who uses it? Isn't there a right or correct use for each word? If somebody fails to use a word exactly isn't he violating some rule in rhetoric or grammar?

How did these people come under the spell of the purist's dogma? Were they remembering some menacing drillmaster with a word list asking "What is *the* meaning of ———?" Or had they been badgered by vocabulary tests with entries like *glabrous heads: bald, over-sized, hairy, square, round; his stilted manner: irresolute, improper, cordial, stiffly formal* with instructions to circle the meaning? Or maybe they grew up when Alexander Woollcott was campaigning against certain current usage. He fought the use of "alibi" as a synonym for excuse; he wanted it saved for its "elsewhere" sense. He sneered when "flair" was used in the sense of knack or aptitude. He wanted it reserved for "capacity to detect." He and the traditional handbooks had a long list of such "reservations."

Or maybe they got their moorings from the pronouncements of Richard Grant White, who once said, "There is a misuse of words that can be justified by no authority, however great, and by no usage, however general." Or maybe they got no further in *Through the Looking Glass* than

". . . How old did you say you were?"

Alice made a short calculation, and said, "Seven years and six months."

"Wrong!" Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. "You never said a word like it!"

"I thought you meant 'How old are you?'" Alice explained.

"If I'd meant that, I'd have said it," said Humpty Dumpty.

Regardless of the source, they used this dogma as the basis for a theory of their own about the cause of misunderstanding. If a speaker didn't use a word correctly it was only natural if a listener who did know the exact meaning was misled. Just get people to use words in their right meaning and then everyone will understand everyone else.

Indeed, this might be a way—but how can we do it? Who has the authority to declare *the* correct use and who has the time to learn it? There are more than 600,000 words in the Merriam-Webster unabridged dictionary and perhaps half as many more in the technical vocabularies of medicine, engineering, law, etc. And when the dictionary gives several meanings, which is *the* one? And just how is anyone going to curb those

who, like Humpty Dumpty, would have their own ways with words:

"... Impenetrability! That's what I say!"

"Would you tell me please," said Alice, "what that means?"

"Now you talk like a reasonable child," said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. "I meant by 'impenetrability' that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life."

"That's a great deal to make one word mean," Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

"When I make a word do a lot of work like that," said Humpty Dumpty, "I always pay it extra."

And what is more crucial, why do we look at words alone? Are words not most often used with other words in phrases, clauses, sentences? May not the setting affect the word?

We tried to get around this ill-advised zeal for exactness by suggesting that a word might be compared with a tool which can be used in a variety of ways. Thus, a screwdriver might be designed to drive screws, but once available it can be used to stir paint, jimmy a tight window, or, lacking any other weapon, to defend oneself with. You might, if you wish, insist that the screw function is the "right" or "correct" one and that a pistol is a much more effective weapon. But your insistence will hardly stop me from using the

screwdriver in these other ways if I find it convenient or necessary to do so. A carpenter with a full rack of tools may have good reason for reserving each for but one use, but if some other purpose is served there is nothing in the nature of the tool which could prevent that other use. The desire for the restriction, then, is personal rather than functional.

Within limits, especially in technical disciplines, it is possible to standardize word usage. One is usually safe in assuming that the workers in specialized areas will conform to some established, stipulated word usages. In the military establishment and in legal affairs, for example, it is often possible as well as necessary to insist that particular words be used in particular ways.

Once outside the range of the specialist's interests, however, we are wise if we expect words to be used variously. A speaker's concern at any moment is not to use a word but to make a statement. In his eagerness to speak his piece he is more concerned with his continuous expression than with his total effect. If he happens to range outside his listeners' conventional usage, they will get nowhere lamenting his lexicographical heresy. And if they do not get to his usage they are likely to assume that he said what he never intended to.

We have come to see wisdom in this advice: Never mind what words mean. What did *he* mean?

It may take time to find out what a man means. It

may demand a patient listening and questioning. It may be an unexciting effort. But it should help to bring people into an area of awareness which they are too often on the outside of. Mr. Justice Jackson's experience in a situation more momentous than anything we were exposed to adds to our confidence in the advice:

> It was my experience with the Soviet lawyers at Nurnberg that the most important factor in collaboration with the Soviet was patiently and persistently to make sure, when a proposition is first advanced, that it is thoroughly understood and that both sides are using their words to express the same sense. When this was done, the Soviet lawyers kept their agreements with us quite as scrupulously as American lawyers would. They may or may not regard that as a compliment, but my intentions are good. But it was my experience that it took infinite patience with them, as they thought it took infinite patience with us, to get to a point where there was a real meeting of minds as distinguished from some textual abstract formula which both could accept only because concretely it meant nothing or meant different things to each. And I have sometimes wondered how much misunderstanding could have been avoided if arrangements between the two countries had not often been concluded so hurriedly, in the stress of events, that this time-consuming and dreary process of reducing generalities to concrete agreements was omitted.[10]

[10] Excerpt from address by Mr. Justice Robert H. Jackson at the Bar Dinner of the New York County Lawyers' Association, December 8, 1949.

CHAPTER III

On a Certain Sort of Disagreement

> To compel all men to employ the same collocation of words is impractical. The attempt has filled the world with controversy, and not brought us to the desired uniformity. I am so confident that nearly every general proposition is true, in the manner intended by the speaker, that I never contradict. —A. B. Johnson, *The Meaning of Words*, D. Appleton and Company, 1854, p. 182.

Would you like to make someone angry in discussion?

Call him a nasty name.

Tell him he sounds like a fugitive from an insane asylum.

Interrupt him just as he is making his big point.

Anticipate his argument by a counterargument.

Insist he is biased because he has a special interest in the case.

Or just contradict him.

In the course of post-discussion interviews with some 300 people, 70 percent of the participants said they felt few of the above activities more disturbing than a direct contradiction. As one woman put it, "When I say something and someone says, 'That's not so,' I feel just like screaming back, 'Yes, it certainly is so.' " A contradiction is an irritant, a kind of verbal jab in the face, an invitation to an angry answer. Even the thickest-skinned considered it distracting. The thin-skinned felt good only if they could retaliate.

Since so many people were bothered, we began to study this contradiction factor. After isolating several varieties, we concentrated on two and concluded that not much could be done by talking as such about this one:

when people were at odds on statements in which the items were indicated;

and that something had to be done about this one:

when people differed on statements in which the items referred to were not indicated.

Contradiction Involving Indicated Items

If I look at the clock and say that both hands point to 12 and if you look and say no, both hands point to 6, we have a clear-cut contradiction which can, perhaps, be resolved only by calling in other observers, an oculist, or a psychiatrist. There seems to be no way of preventing this sort of clash. Where it arises, the processes of majority decision usually govern.

Sometimes more looking helps. A group was shown a movie on soil conservation. In the discussion which followed, half the group insisted that the poorest land use was in the one-crop areas while the other half argued that the movie made no such conclusion possible. A rerun of the movie, along with an itemization (on which all agreed), revealed that neither group described the conditions accurately. Another time, a matron became rather violent in her denial of figures which permitted a man to say that the juvenile delinquency rate in her residential suburb was as great as in a poorer community nearby. She was shown the report prepared by the chief of police in her suburb. Even if the figures were hard to believe, at least the group was able to see what she was contradicting.

If there is no way to look again, or if after a second look the contradictory conclusions persist, maybe it would be best to take a vote—or just let the whole thing go.

Contradiction Involving Different Details

The specific item contradiction did not plague us as much as the one involving a difference in details. Just as a speaker may use a word in some restricted way, so he may make a statement which he intends to be applied to one particular set of details but which a hearer may take to apply to another set of details. So often when someone contradicts someone else, both are not talking about the same things. Man_1 has one set of

details in mind while Man_2 focuses on a different set. Again and again in the analysis of conflict situations we found people talking against each other when they were, in fact, talking away from each other.

What they do then very much resembles the two men who collide on the street because each looks in a different direction. This physical bumping is understandable and unpreventable. But when people collide in talking because they fail to realize that each talker is intent on matters not considered by the other, it is unfortunate and preventable. The more we studied this variety of collision, the more we came to believe that *people ought to stop contradicting each other—unless they are perfectly clear as to the items involved.*

How It Happens

1. A man has one or more experiences with (or he may have read or heard about) a certain kind of person or situation.

2. Instead of making an Item Statement he moves more widely to a Catch-All Statement in which he may unknowingly intimate more details than he intends. It is one of the peculiarities of a Catch-All Statement that a man may use it (a) when he has a few details in mind, (b) when he has many, or (c) when he wants it to refer to all the items. Thus, an unwary or uncritical listener may tend to assume that the speaker is using the Catch-All Statement in its

broadest possibilities (i.e., c) when that might not be the case.

3. A listener hears the Catch-All Statement. He uncritically assumes the broadest use. He notes that in his experience the items he knows do not fit—that, indeed, his items differ in both substance and detail.

4. The listener then moves to his own Catch-All Statement, which contradicts the speaker's.

The controversy is, of course, without a basis unless the speaker intended that his Catch-All statement should apply to particulars he had no concern with. If the statement merely gives the impression of broader application, should not the listener make sure that that was the intention *before* he creates an issue? And before he goes on to miss what was being asserted?

What Happens

In the course of a discussion on taxation, the talk turned to the effects of great wealth on people.

$Speaker_1$: The wealthy are certainly happier than most of us. Take the young woman who inherited the dime-store fortune. Isn't she a lucky person?

$Speaker_2$: Why, no, she isn't lucky at all. I think she is probably one of the unhappiest persons in the U.S.

Before they began trading something more than verbal punches, each was asked to indicate the items covered by her statement.

$Speaker_1$ considered these details: (1) that the heir-

ess did not have to worry about her income; (2) that if she wanted to buy something, the price was of little consequence.

Speaker$_2$ considered these details: (1) that the heiress had no settled home life; (2) that she couldn't walk downtown without a bodyguard.

These people were flagging trains on different tracks. Whatever the merit of the position taken by each it was at least a position which could only be dealt with in terms of the items which led to it. For one to contradict another without concern for these items is as relevant as the effort to judge the quality of fruit from the composition of the container.

X reports that Z hotel is excellent and its cooking first-class. On the strength of this Y goes to this hotel and is "very disappointed." His disappointment does not, however, lie in the hotel, but in his faith in abstractions. In the real world X was in room 29 and had a new spring mattress on his bed. But Y was in room 104 with an old mattress and where the horrid smell from the kitchen and the noise of an adjoining bathroom ruined his ease. Moreover, hotels do not cook—only humans do—and as the chef had meantime been sacked, and as his successor was a culinary pretender, the discomfiture of Y becomes understandable![1]

The man who said that "women can't be trusted" seemed to say "all" women or women "generally"—

[1] Thomas Robertson, *Human Ecology*, William Maclellan, 1948, p. 8.

but when he was quizzed he explained that his statement in fact referred to a series of specific situations in which certain females behaved deceitfully. The statement, in short, was about four cases.

Now, one might set out to contradict that man by a recital of four other cases in which certain trustworthy actions were demonstrated. But why act as if this denied the first assertion? If the man alludes to four particulars which lead to a Catch-All Statement, why is that statement scorned if it was not meant to apply to four other particulars? The man's statement applies to the cases it is used to refer to.

We are lost in controversy the moment a listener assumes that a speaker is referring to something different or something more than he could be found to refer to. If a listener chooses to conclude differently on the basis of a different set of cases, that certainly is his prerogative. But that difference must not be taken as the basis for a denial. Listeners must learn to "get to" the speakers. It is so easy to be content with the assumption that a Catch-All Statement necessarily means "all the cases." But that in turn means they misunderstand each other.

"I get no solace from religion," was the spark that set off a train of explosions one evening. "But, how absurd," another insisted. "Religion is the greatest source of solace in the world today." But the first man under questioning explained that the minister in his church was too newfangled, too eager to get people to

engage in social-action projects, too interested in having people do things. "Too hectic for me," was the way he summarized the items to which the "no solace" statement applied. And to nothing else, we discovered. Behind the insister's statement, however, were phenomena quite outside the scope of our despondent man. They were at odds because the second man had chosen to contradict without considering what circumstances were involved in the first man's statement.

The troublesome contradiction factor comes into play, then, the moment someone neglects the items involved. Listeners are so busy paying attention to Catch-All Statements that they have no time for the items the speakers might be referring to. If the statement did not specify details, it was automatically taken to apply generally. But a statement, no matter how unlimited it may seem or how widely it may seem to apply, must be studied not for what it might allude to but for what it actually does or for what the speaker makes it allude to.

At an afternoon tea in New England, attended by members of both sexes, a woman made a remark to the effect that the English public school system tended to make men brutal. All in the group took sides, some agreeing and some disagreeing. A heated and lengthy discussion followed in which the merits and demerits of the English public school system were thoroughly reviewed. In other words, the statement was taken at its face value and discussed at that level. No one seemingly paid attention to

the fact that the woman who made the statement had married an Englishman who had received an English public school education and that she was in the process of obtaining a divorce from him.[2]

The man who says "Labor leaders are racketeers" may be thinking of every labor leader, many labor leaders, 40 percent of the labor leaders, some labor leaders—or his statement may come from his reading in the morning paper of the imprisonment of two union men on a charge of embezzlement. Should not an adequate counterstatement take account of the cases the man had taken account of?

It is just possible that the maker of a Catch-All Statement believes it to have some universal application. But if he does, he ought not be disturbed if someone else finds items to which it does not apply. If he insists on the universal application, then the disagreement can be centered on the scope of the particulars and the conflict pinned to them rather than to the statement whose coverage was only to be inferred.

A man, after reading about premarital sexual relations among students in a high school in a midwestern city, asserts that "Parents no longer care about what happens to their children. If they did, they'd see to it that things like that didn't happen." He was immediately set upon by a half-dozen parents who proceeded to assert that "Present-day parents are no worse than

[2] F. J. Roethlisberger and W. J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker*, Harvard University Press, 1939, pp. 273–274.

their parents." On questioning, the man said that though his statement was prompted by the story he had read, it might apply all over.

We now have a choice. If he meant that there was a situation in one high school related to one set of parents, then someone might counter with what he knew of the situation in another high school, and the argument would be grounded on the difference. But if he meant that this did apply further and more widely, then the resolution of the matter would depend on investigation of more situations. In either case, the controversy without the clarification would surely have moved in the mists of verbalism far from the intentions of the participants.

What to Do

Our object is not the elimination of Catch-All or Broad Conclusion Statements.

We would try only to help people in discussion find the ground on which they contradict one another—whether on the items or on the statement.

Give us the items, the instances, the data to which you allude. Then, no matter how sweeping your statement or how grand your generalization, we will know what we must consider. If we look only to what your language implies, we may go beyond your intention. To keep within the framework of your meaning we must stay with your particulars. We may even have to ask you for them.

Justice Holmes once held, "I always say the chief

end of men is to form general propositions—adding that no general proposition is worth a damn."

The position we take here is somewhat different. It does not even say that speakers should hesitate about making general statements. It does say that when they do, listeners have no adequate ground for agreement or dissent. That can come when the items are brought out into the open. Nor is anyone justified in saying that another's Catch-All Statement is meaningless. Before coöperation with and clarification by the speaker a listener doesn't know what it means. Indeed, the statement may be so broadly meaningful that a listener may think something else is being referred to than what is.

The "philosophers" who make their grand generalizations can, in effect, be saying so much or so little that one had better hesitate before saying yes or no. It is much better to wait for the "for instances." For if they are the substance of his position, what looked like a matter for nay-saying may be something on which agreement is possible. If our "philosopher" is unwilling to indicate the particulars to which he refers, we had better forgo our 'tis-'tain'ts. If we have no way of getting on *his* line why do we presume to act as if we are on it?

Too Easy Agreement

The members of an Adult Study Group, which tried to take this habit-of-looking-to-the-items seriously, discovered for themselves the fact that occasionally when

no one is moved to question a Catch-All Statement it might be wise in the interests of intelligent understanding to do it deliberately. They learned that too quick agreement on the Catch-All Statement might be a mixed blessing if it concealed a disagreement which was sure to show up if the people stopped to ask about the items involved.

The discovery came about in this way. During "Brotherhood Week" in 1949 they had had a fine go on the necessity of building better human relations among all people. The twenty-one attending had heard a panel describe the unfortunate effects of prejudice and discrimination, ending in a plea for attitudes of neighborliness and good will.

Two weeks later one of the members interested in the establishment of a state-wide Fair Employment Practices Commission, designed to prevent discriminatory employment practices, tried to get signatures for a petition to the legislature. She found twelve of the participants in the discussion unwilling to sign. What aroused her was the fact that ten of the people prefaced their objections by statements like "Of course, I am in favor of eliminating discrimination but . . ." followed by a listing of reasons and details suggesting that the legislation was undesirable.

At the insistence of this member, the group met to spend an evening to talk about this phenomenon. There were few dull moments. Charges of hypocrisy, lip service to ideals, and un-Christian behavior were sandwiched between assertions of bureaucratic practices, the desirability of moving slowly, the need for more education, "You can't legislate people into goodness," etc. The note of aggressiveness by the nine willing to sign was matched by the defensiveness of the unwilling twelve. Just about the time the group tension was well marked the leader, with some hesitation, asked whether they might try to put the theory-about-the-statements to work. Is it not possible, he wondered, that people who saw eye to eye on the Catch-All Statement might honestly see quite differently on the Item Statements? Could people have notions about the one without appearing hypocritical when they had differing notions on the other? Both factions (when their excitement had eased) were able to take comfort from this formulation. It was, they saw, all too easy to assume that an agreement on the Catch-All meant agreement on the Items, that the trouble lay not in the honesty or dishonesty of the participants but in their acceptance of a statement which implied what was by no means inevitable.

The problem now is to move from feelings of disappointment about the "inconsistency of attitudes" or the "gap between belief and action" to an analysis of the Items. Maybe, when *they* are squarely faced, a new and deeper resolution of the difficulty can be obtained.

What to Do When the Contradiction Creates a Gulf

I must make an admission.

A number of radio forums and panel discussions are

interesting because (among other things) there is so much conflict. In a way the package of several speakers, a big subject, and little time encourages a clash of views because the speakers have to cover so much ground in their few minutes that they are moved to lash out indiscriminately at each other without having the time to discover whether they differ on the Big Statements or on the Items. Lest sponsors of these programs quarrel with me because I seem to imply this of all the programs I hasten to note that I have in mind at least twenty broadcasts of four different programs. I am not decrying the use of the discussion situation for its dramatic values. It may well be that the very sharpness of the give-and-take holds the attention of an audience who might turn off a program in which the participants sought deliberately to get an understanding of each other.

I readily admit that tackling the contradiction factor may be a dull business. I would, however, plead this: that our goal is a group facing of problems in an atmosphere of understanding rather than in one which neglects the understanding because of the need for dramatic effects.

What, in short, may be good for radio may not be so good around the bargaining table, in the committee room, or in the judge's chamber.

In these circumstances we used a little formula whenever a contradiction led to a heated rejoinder. The leader (or anyone else) would (1) ask the speakers to remake their statements; (2) ask each to give the items he was alluding to; (3) ask the other whether he was objecting to the Items or the impression that the Catch-All Statement alluded to some other or all the possible items.

Whenever there was a chance to prepare a group ahead of time against the disruptive effects of the contradiction factor, we found it useful to explain that many a friction point might be smoothed down faster (or might never develop) if each was able to locate the *point of trouble*.

It was helpful if it was realized that a statement could be about a number of possibilities.

1. One might refer explicitly to specific, itemized cases, particulars, or details.

2. One might talk in statements which seem to refer indefinitely, generally, in unlimited fashion to many cases, particulars, or details, when in fact the speaker is alluding to one or more specific ones. Here the items are not explicitly indicated in the statement, though they are in the speaker's awareness.

3. One might talk in statements which may seem to refer indefinitely, generally, in unlimited fashion to many items when in fact the speaker had reference to no clearly indicated ones or when his statements seem to be applying to some, many, or all the items involved. Here the items are neither explicitly indicated in the statement nor clearly defined in the speaker's mind.

In brief, then, a contradiction of an Item Statement might ultimately be resolved by further looking. Contradictions based on non-specifying statements are often dissolved when the items over which there is a difference are exposed. When the speaker could give no items it was rarely wise to take issue with him, because there was little on which such arguing could be based. Far better was it to stop and help him locate some.

In his *Discourse on Method* Descartes made a similar point: "The diversity in our opinions does not proceed from some men being more rational than others, but solely from the fact that our thoughts pass through diverse channels and the same objects are not considered by all."

CHAPTER IV

Jon Stone and the Fools Across the Table

> It is the mark of real self-assurance, the sign of inner strength, to be conciliatory and respectful and understanding of the neighbor's point of view. There is no uglier tendency in American nature than the quickness to moral indignation and to wild suspicions of bad faith which many of us display when other people do not think as we do. —From a speech, "The National Interest of the United States," by George F. Kennan at Northwestern University, January, 1951.

There is another great source of misunderstanding: not that men see different details, but that they see the same details differently. In this, there is no mistaking of word use or confusion of items, but a more fundamental divergence which seems rooted in the very patterns of perceiving.

What one man likes, another dislikes. What disturbs one leaves another cold. What frightens him

encourages her. What this man would discard, that man would save. What moves one to pity stirs the other to anger.

Something happens in a discussion when people thus disagree. The talk is spirited. There are more interruptions. More people want to say more. Dull moments are few. The battle front moves between the issues and the men. Speakers get assertive; their voices sharpen; they listen for the moment in the flow of talk when they may break in.

As the talk situation becomes more dramatic the conflict deepens. If the people see eye to eye it is only because they are glaring at each other.

What do you do then? The chairman may cry "peace" and he may get it—by adjourning the meeting. Once such disagreement is out it is not easy to stop it. You may stop the talk but not the human differing. That can, perhaps, only be understood.

Patterns of Disagreement

We set out to catalogue the expressions of dissent. Do disagree-ers face up to each other in the same way? Five patterns appeared most often.

1. *The inquiring-investigative attitude,* in which one states his position and shows that he is willing to listen some more. "No, I don't believe that, but will you explain why you do? . . . That's not how I see it; tell me why you don't see it my way. . . . I don't like it at all; now why do you favor it? . . ."

2. *The air of incredulity,* in which the speaker does not invite further explanation but in which he doesn't refuse it either. He is usually decent enough to let the other fellow contribute even though he'd prefer not to. He listens, though somewhat grudgingly. "I can't for the life of me understand why you think that. . . . When all our experience points the other way, it is certainly strange to see you disagree. . . . How did you ever get that idea? . . . Every now and then a man has to put up with an idea like that, but really now. . . ."
3. *The inclination to laughter,* in which one lets everybody know in a good-natured manner that what the other fellow proposes just doesn't deserve mature consideration. He creates the impression that even if he listens it won't do any good. He isn't impatient, just amused. He is gently derisive, not angry. "Now, I ask you, gentlemen, isn't that the silliest (funniest, craziest, most childish) thing you ever heard? . . . Well, that's what you get when you let a man have a hearing. . . . Let's not be too rough on Bill, he's been working too hard. . . ."
4. *The expression of suspicion and distrust,* in which we hear a note of resentment. The speaker comes out and (sometimes politely) accuses another of trying to take unfair advantage. He would really like to get away from the proposal but he is content to tell off the accused man. The feeling of bad faith asserted and understood is usually followed by a counter-imputation and a categorical denial. "That's just so you people will get all the benefits. . . . Where's the payoff? What's in it for you? . . . All this is covering up something. Why

aren't you honest with us? . . . That's a typical ——— (insert any stigma word) way of doing things. . . ."

5. *The mood of dismissal,* in which a man makes it clear that he wishes to go no farther, to talk no more about something which is to him impossible, unthinkable, wrong, unnecessary, or just plain out of the question. He has spoken and there is little use in trying to make him see otherwise. If he has his way there will be no more discussion on the matter. "It won't work and that's all there is to it. . . . I refuse to listen to any more of this nonsense. . . . Anybody who comes to such a conclusion has something wrong with him. . . . We've never worked that way before and we aren't going to start now. . . ."

There are other patterns of disagreement but we learned to spot evidence of these rather quickly. However, it wasn't until we met Jon Stone that what we were studying came into focus for us. He became the prototype of a very particular problem. (Jon Stone is no one person. He is a composite of many, a kind of vessel into which many details of a certain kind of intransigence were poured. I have, however, listened to some men and women who bore a disturbing resemblance to the character described here.)

Jon Stone was the treasurer of a company doing several million dollars' worth of business annually. He was, according to his associates, a good man—until he got into a conference. Then there was trouble; he was

impatient with anything outside the range of his preferences. So long as the issue was a friendly one he was helpful, shrewd. But when something was presented that he had reason to dislike, he became an inconsiderate, impatient, and caustic critic. He was never afraid of suggesting that those who analyzed things differently didn't know what they were talking about. He didn't imply that they were dishonest. They just showed poor judgment. They just didn't know. He rarely quit arguing when outvoted. He simply used the vote as an indication that a majority could be wrong, too. It was hard to talk with Jon around. Many had the feeling that when they stopped Jon would pounce.

Jon Stone was a kind of gentleman bully. His creed seemed to consist of this: If you believed something and if you kept insisting that you were right, sooner or later you would wear the others down and they might came around to your way of seeing things.

Jon was comfortable in his tight little world. He liked what he knew. He had fixed perspectives which were "right" to him. Any other way of looking at things was wrong. Jon was not ignorant. He knew much. He had been trained well, in school and on the job. But his training had incapacitated him for just one thing: the recognition that people could see details differently. "Facts are facts, aren't they?" "Both of us can't be right" were his clinchers.

What Jon Stone helped us to understand was this:

that we ought to look not only at the disagreement but also at the mood in which it was expressed. When someone disagreed in the inquiring mood, the other fellow was often encouraged to make efforts in accommodation. But let the note of suspiciousness or dismissal sound and overt hostility was its echo.

Jon Stone seemed unable to disagree without getting disagreeable. The longer we listened to him, the more we analyzed his statements, the clearer it seemed that he did not understand how another could in all reason come to conclusions different from his. He helped us to see that a disagreement could be creative or disruptive depending for the most part on the assumption which a disagree-er made about the character and capacity of those with whom he differed. When the disagree-er assumed that another was a fool to believe as he did the talk became a continuous growl. It was to characterize his way of thinking that La Rochefoucauld must have written: "We find scarcely any person of good sense save those who agree with us." It was clear that Jon Stone never had George Washington's insight: "And shall I arrogantly pronounce that whosoever differs from me, must discern the subject through a distorting medium or be influenced by some nefarious design? The mind is so formed in different persons as to contemplate the same object in different points of view. Hence originates the difference on questions of the greatest import, both human and divine."

This communication breakdown, in short, comes not from a misunderstanding of what was said but from a failure to understand how another could with good reason say that.

Can anything be done about it?

In the first place, the objectives must be clear. Do we want Jon Stone to agree with everything he hears? Do we want him willy-nilly to give up the views which grew out of his experience? Not at all. We want Jon Stone to do little more than reconsider his assumption that the people across the table are stupid just because they see things differently. This is not to say that anything goes, that any proposal, prediction, or conclusion is as good as any other. It is to suggest only that utterances which imply that if-he-has-ideas-at-variance-with-mine-then-he-is-a-fool do not lead to fruitful discussion between men. The automatic classification of those who do not agree with us as incompetent or stupid is a spark that sets off too many dialectical explosions.

This goal is, of course, a modest one. It falls far short of that deeper kind of rapport Dr. Harry Stack Sullivan described in his *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry:* "In dealing with students, with patients, or with any group or nation the first step is to see the world through their eyes, to enter into what they are trying to do, however strange their behavior seems. Genuine communication is impossible on any other basis."

But let not the very modesty of our goal becloud its importance.

Let me restate the goal. *It is to help the members of a group preserve some respect for each other. It is to make explicit the awareness that differences in judgment need not mean that those on one side are wise and those on the other foolish. It is to try to get each man to look at the image he has created of those around him.*

In the course of our studies we saw a number of individuals try to deal with the Jon Stones. Sometimes they quit in dismay, with a feeling of hopelessness. Some told us afterwards that nothing could be done so long as he was around. Sometimes they tried the soft answer as a way of dissolving the wrath. But more than once the Jon Stones took this as a sign of weakness. Sometimes they replied in kind, returning charge with countercharge. But this usually led to more of the same.

This experience led us to believe that if some of the unpleasant effects of men disagreeing disagreeably were to be eliminated we would need some scheme by which to take the burden away from individuals. We needed a way by which a group could deal with the disagreement situation, a problem as important as the issue itself. In short, if a group was faced with the disintegration that accompanies disagreement it had two problems rather than one to deal with.

By good fortune we were able to test this belief in

Jon Stone's office. He was a member of an executive committee deadlocked on the matter of the company's employee-promotion policies. The president of the company was distressed at the depth and character of the disagreement. Some refused to believe that changes in existing policy would be desirable; some wanted sharper definitions of the seniority provisions; others argued for more elaborate merit ratings. Jon Stone's recalcitrance had been matched around the room during each of several meetings.

Because it was apparent that such wrangling could have few useful outcomes, it was possible to persuade the president that a meeting or two might well be given over to talk about the group's purposes instead of the promotion issue. These questions should be considered: What do differences in judgment mean? What should be done about differences in judgment?

It was decided to approach the discussions through a memorandum on the origin and inevitability of differences in point of view. Consideration of this document was to be the only item of business the next meeting. The president sent it to each member of the committee along with a note asking each man to analyze and present comments on one of the items. The memorandum is produced herewith.

Why Men Disagree. Observers have written widely about the character of human disagreement. Here is a sampling:

1. When Enid tells Dr. Talley (in S. N. Behrman's

The Talley Method, Random House, 1941, p. 194) that she will not marry him, he says, "My God, you're not going to let a difference in point of view separate us!" She replies, "But that's all that ever does separate people."

2. When two fellows bump into each other on the street, it is either because they are not looking at all, or because they are looking at something else. Most of us have done that at one time or another. Differences of opinion are somewhat similar, in that they result, not from a collision because two chaps are both watching a pretty girl, but because each is seeing a different picture of events as they are and may become.

One man looks ahead to the right of the road and sees a shining green plain, with waving grass and browsing cattle. His companion looks ahead to the left of the road and sees it curving around a long smooth hill, with jagged peaks and cliffs showing in the distance. "Hold on," he cautions. "There are cliffs and rocks. We had better camp and wait for morning."

Each is telling the truth, each is seeing clearly—and each is looking at something entirely different. There is not much to choose between the logical reasoning of one man and that of another, nor between their general objectives. Sometimes they are looking in different directions, and sometimes they are wearing colored glasses that emphasize different sets of facts. —Royal F. Munger's column "Old Bill Suggests" in *The Chicago Daily News*, April 30, 1941.

3. Everyone knows that two persons belonging to different cultures may react in diametrically opposite ways if

there are different established norms relating to the situation at hand. Present freshly broiled pork chops to hungry men. One of our hungry men is a Mohammedan whose religion tells him that anything connected with pigs is disgusting—this is an established taboo, a norm. The other person is a Christian. He will seize the chops and eat them with gusto. The first person will not only not touch the chops, he will be filled with disgust both for them and for the person who eats such filthy things. This is one example, on a highly complicated level, of a very simple psychological fact, that there is no point-to-point correlation between external stimulation and the experience aroused by it, or the subsequent behavior. . . .

There is no point-to-point correlation between a physical stimulus and the experience and subsequent behavior it arouses; the experience and the behavior may be, to a large extent, a function of the state of the organism at the time. Take a cardboard of uniform orange color about two feet long and one foot wide. Cover half of the cardboard with a black paper and look at the uncovered orange part steadily for some minutes, and then remove the black cover. For some time the covered part will appear a different shade of orange from the other part. The same gray may look darker or brighter according to the white or black surroundings, or the general pattern in which, or beside which, it is found. The same tone may arouse different effects when alone and when preceded or followed by other tones in a melody. Similarly, within limits, a sound is judged high or low, a weight heavy or light, not only in accordance with its absolute physical value, but also in ac-

cordance with the background of sounds or weights that precede. —Muzafer Sherif in *The Psychology of Social Norms*, Harper & Brothers, 1936, pp. 28–29.

4. Some years ago I happened to be present at a Manlaslo, a gypsy tribal tribunal. They were judging a man for polygamy.

"But why?" I asked. "Your tribe is polygamous."

"Yes," the chief answered. "But his tribe isn't. He broke the laws of his tribe. We are judging him according to the rules of his tribe." —Konrad Bercovici in "The Wisdom of the Illiterate," *Golden Book Magazine*, May, 1934, p. 559.

5. When a psychiatrist is treating a patient, it sometimes happens that the patient is extremely insulting. In such circumstances the psychiatrist will restrain his natural impulse to punch the patient on the nose and will try to find out why the patient feels that way. The reason for this reaction is that the accumulated experience of the profession shows that when you punch patients on the nose you do little to advance the treatment. If such punches helped patients, they would be commonly practiced, since they would be much milder than some forms of treatment patients now undergo, for instance, electric shock. The experience is, however, that retaliation puts a stop to further treatment. There is cancellation of the physician's opportunity to help the patient improve his relations with people. On the other hand, when the physician learns why the patient has such an unfavorable impression and traces out some of the causes, he often finds he has arrived at the center of some of the patient's deepest conflicts and difficulties. Inquiry gives an opportunity for therapy and adjustment which involves successful changing of the patient's images and attitudes. . . .

False images of ourselves as a nation produce barriers to understanding our position in relation to other nations and the consequences, particularly the indirect consequences, of our acts. Thus, we may think we are being cooperative when actually we appear weak. Or, on the other hand, what seems to us a demonstration of reasonable firmness may strike another country as an overt act of hostility requiring immediate retaliation. What we suppose is a generous effort to give support may be angrily treated as an attempt at exploitation. We are confident that we will never, without provocation, attack any nation with atomic bombs and so we discount the threat element in our possession of the weapon, while other nations with a different view of us never forget it.

When difficulties arise, we have a tendency to write off the behavior of another country as unreasonable, as due to peculiarities of its innate nature, or as the product of evil leaders with evil intentions. Other countries in their turn do the same regarding our behavior. Such conclusions may, at times, be just in terms of certain premises, but the trouble with them is that, just or not, they are a dead end. They do not lead to solving the problem. They lead to giving up, or to one of the well-established patterns of hitting back. There is no blindness like the blindness of self-righteousness. Inquiry and cool thinking with adequate perspective habitually cease to function at the time they are most necessary. In their place comes back talk, heightened emotions, hair-trigger readiness, misinterpretations and the taking of positions from which pride makes retreat impos-

sible.—Taken from *Human Relations in a Changing World*, by Alexander H. Leighton, copyright, 1949, Alexander H. Leighton, published by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, pp. 104–106.

6. Different minds will take the same events in very different ways. A tribe of Congo negroes will react quite differently to (say) its first introduction to the story of Christ's passion, than did the equally untutored descendants of Norsemen, or the American Indians. Every society meets a new idea with its own concepts, its own tacit, fundamental way of seeing things; that is to say, *with its own questions*, its peculiar curiosity. —Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, Harvard University Press, 1942, p. 6.

What could be expected? Would the staff discuss the memorandum as some foolish notion? Would they see its relevance? Would they say, "Of course we know this. Now let's go about our business?" Would they take offense at this implied criticism of their difficulties?

The president opened the meeting with some carefully planned words about his interest in the company and his desire for the improvement of its operation. He was impressed, he continued, with the loyalty of the company officers and their interest in the company's welfare. He was distressed, however, with their difficulties in arriving harmoniously at solutions to their problems. He wondered whether it would be worth while to give some time to the reasons why people differed so. He hoped they would understand that this departure from their business was a temporary one. And might there be a discussion of each of the items in the memorandum. Might it begin with Bill. "Do you think S. N. Behrman was saying anything that is true and meaningful for us?" They spent an hour and ten minutes at that session and an hour and twenty-five minutes the next time before they had commented on all the items. At the next meeting they returned to the promotion problem.

What follows is a condensation of a stenographic report of the president's answer to this question raised two months later: What good did it do?

This thing is baffling. I can't put my finger on it. They were a little slow in opening up. I think they resisted because they weren't sure what I was up to but I kept at them. When Jon Stone said there were other things besides "a difference in point of view" that separated people they became interested in trying to pin him down. They had a good time trying to say that Munger's explanation was too simple. But they didn't show how. So far as I can see only one definite thing happened. They saw what we were driving at, that a different point of view on things was possible. When we met on the promotion-policy afterwards we didn't lick it. We're still at it. It is a very knotty problem, but, you know, there has been less of that meanness we had been having. We may not solve the promotion program to everybody's satisfaction but whatever we do there isn't going to be so much bloodshed. Maybe the talk about the doctor's punching the patient not helping

the treatment was a good thing because it gave our men a new slant. Maybe they became afraid to hit out at those who wouldn't agree with them, afraid someone would remind them of the doctor and the patient. I don't believe many of the men will be readily converted to each other's ideas, but I do think we're going to be able to discuss the problems without so much thinking the other fellow doesn't know what he's talking about. What will interest you is the fact that Harlow [one of the men who had said that nothing could be done so long as "he" was around] stood up to Jon Stone at one point and almost made him listen. I'm thinking now of asking you to do another memo for us on some more aspects of the disagreement matter which we can talk about 3 or 4 months from now.

The memorandum approach has been used with three other staffs. In general the effects have been about the same. These impressions have emerged from the reports of the chairmen:

1. This will not work unless the chairman is thoroughly coöperative and willing to take the time (at least two sessions) to make the reconditioning process operative.

2. There is no special excellence in the memorandum reproduced here. Any one which contains the germinal notions should work. This particular one had only the virtue of novelty.

3. The use of this tactic does not insure a solution for a tough problem.

4. This approach is valuable because it is so direct.

It provides some common ground for a group. When someone says something violent against another's view each man has the force of a common opinion justifying and supporting him should he choose to reply differently. Without that common opinion he is just one man making an argument. To say this another way: the disagreement theory evolved from discussion of the memorandum served as a judgment on higher ground to which anyone could appeal. Jon Stone no longer stood on the privileged ground. The objects of his wrath were now there.

5. The approach seemed to give individuals in a group a feeling of confidence that even though they were at odds it was possible to work things out because the disagreement was not necessarily based on the others' stupidity or irrationality.