**Communication is a Twelve-Way Street**

Communication is seemingly a never-ending crisis, be it personal or professional relationships. Our culture is riddled with remarks detailing an inability to arrive at shared meaning. From Cool Hand Luke’s “What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate,” to Churchill’s infamous assertion that “British and Americans are one people separated by a common language,” it is ingrained in our collective psyche how difficult it is to get a message across. But what exactly makes communication so challenging? And more importantly, can we do anything to make it easier? At Birkman, we think the answer is yes.

The Difficulty

At its core, communication relies on language—a shared symbolic system we use to convey thoughts. But even here, things get tricky. Words are imperfect stand-ins for ideas, filtered through our unique experiences, education, and perceptions. What’s said isn’t always what’s heard. And that’s only the beginning. Nonverbal cues—tone, facial expressions, gestures, posture, even room layout—carry immense weight, potentially accounting for up to 93% of a message’s impact. Communication is never just about words; it’s an intricate dance of meaning-making where countless variables affect what’s understood.

Birkman gives insight into yet another dimension at play in communication, specifically in terms of psychological noise. Psychological noise is the internal forces, including biases, expectations, or emotions, that can hinder the communication process. We can better understand these biases through Usual Behavior and Needs. Usual Behaviors create filters that our messages are communicated through. Needs, on the other hand, are the expectations we have as listeners. When these expectations are not met, it’s easy for distractions, frustrations, and discomfort to follow. Component-level data is a goldmine of the perceptions that can influence our listening. Differing perceptions of Emotional Energy, for example, can raise the psychological noise in a conversation all the way to eleven. Someone who expects communication to be unemotional may be very thrown off by another’s inclusion of intense emotions in their response. Instead of hearing the message, they think, “Why are they talking about their feelings right now? That’s not what we are supposed to be doing. This is inappropriate!” Certainly, the message is at least partially lost in all the perceptual differences. But this bias, if unchecked, will eventually lead to judgement. “This person is unprofessional. I can’t trust them to handle their work.” And now, what was “just” a communication issue has spread into an issue of trust, collaboration, and eventually even psychological safety.

The Solution

The good news? Birkman doesn’t just elucidate the perceptual differences. It’s a starting point for breaking down the psychological noise barriers and (with the help of a great Birkman coach or consultant) allows people to move past those barriers and get back to the content of the message.

The journey begins with awareness. Before even understanding their own style, participants must become cognizant that there is a style at all. For some, even this will be mind-blowing. At one event, a trainer demonstrated how to handle a meeting with a High Assertive style. After the example, a participant raised their hand and said, “So how else could you lead a meeting?” To them, it was hard to fathom that another style even existed.

Once a client or employee understands that there are other styles, explore theirs. Highlight their strengths but also begin to open their eyes to the strengths of the opposite style. Move them from awareness to appreciation. In terms of communication, the goal of building appreciation is to break down the judgement of the opposite style. Take the Emotional Energy example above. The person with low Emotional Energy doesn’t just experience frustration with an emotional conversation–it often leads to misinterpretation of intention. If we think of Low Emotional Energy Need as a communication “rule” that someone has for the world, then amid an emotional conversation, it’s easy for that person’s brain to lead them to “They must have wanted me to feel uncomfortable, because they know that’s not how to communicate.” The problem is the High Emotional Energy rule book is entirely different, but just as valid and well-intentioned. So beyond just being aware of another style is appreciating it as an equally valid interpretation of the world.

The ultimate goal is not just appreciation, but action. If we can coach our participants to rewire judgement into curiosity, we limit the amount of psychological noise that can enter future conversations. Even a replacement thought such as, “Why are they talking about their feelings right now? I wonder what has led to this reaction.” allows for space in the conversation to explore and find shared meaning. This is not an easy task. It takes time to move from old patterns to a new operating style. The outcome of this work, though, is deeper, more meaningful connections where teams are able to create something more than the sum of their parts.

A few steps you can encourage your clients take to operationalize this new mindset:

1. Summarize the Listening: Before reacting, coach your client or employee to check that they have arrived at shared meaning with the people in the conversation. Great sentence starters would be “What I’m hearing is...” or “I want to make sure that I’m understanding. Here’s how I would summarize what I heard...”.
2. Practice a Pause: Reacting to a message limits our ability to hear clearly. Ask your client or employee to become aware of the physical signs of provocation: muscle tension, fidgeting, blushing, and more. When they experience these feelings, ask them to pause and breathe deeply for ten seconds and remind themselves to stay open.
3. Review Birkman Usual and Needs for potential biases, particularly Emotional Energy, Assertiveness, and Self-Consciousness. Create phrases they can review or even write down as reminders to themselves when they are communicating with others. Someone with High Assertiveness Usual and Needs, for example, may need a post-it note in their next meeting with a reminder to “Illicit feedback from all parties. Some people need an invitation to share their opinion.”

Communication seems innate but is made up of many moving parts. Birkman gives us language to discover inherent biases that hinder communication as well as tools to move us to action, so that we begin to unpeel layers of misinterpretation and understand each other a little better.