The Importance of Interpersonal Relations and Communication

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The history of management science might well be told as a history of the study of role conflict between the individual and the institution, the person and the organization. Down through the years, different terminologies have been employed to describe this phenomenon and to the leadership style or styles related to it; perhaps the most common of the terms *nomothetic*, which means "institution oriented" or *idiographic*, which means "individual oriented."

Respectively, the styles have been identified as effectiveness or efficiency, producing a product or distributing satisfiers, authority or control, initiating structure or consideration, task achievement or individual need meeting, and a host of others. The point is that no matter what the various writers call them and whatever names they construct, they are essentially talking about nomothetic and idiographic styles and orientation; and it all boils down to one question: How can we keep the organization producing and achieving while at the same time keeping its workers satisfied and self-actualized? Well, here's where the role of interpersonal relations and interpersonal communication comes in. Somehow, leaders must coordinate roles and responsibilities of people in a work group. Somehow, we must work together, have relationships with each other and their individual and collective relationships to the organization; and just when the leader expects people to be consistent, logical, and perfect, they turn out to be inconsistent, illogical, and imperfect.

In the church, the problem is both alleviated and compounded. It's alleviated, of course, by the oil of the Holy Spirit, which produces and provides a supernatural lubricant not available to secular organizations. When properly lubricated, the machinery will work very well toward the achieving of both individual goals and the total purposes of the organization. To this extent, the church is an organism before it is an organization. Our problems come, as I have repeatedly said and written, when we try to think only

in terms of organism—the supernatural and invisible union of the body—forgetting that the church is also organization, or perhaps when we think only of organization and forget the importance of organism.

If the Christian organization, particularly the church, operates in accordance with Scripture, it will be the most exquisite demonstration of the principles of interpersonal relations that the world has ever seen. The spirit of *koinonia* and unity can literally permeate the body and radiate from it to all of its surrounding environments.

Now, as we make our way through this first study, let me try to identify the major headings and outline groupings. Though I'll not try to do that for each subheading, you can follow along in the outline, I think, without any difficulty.

But we attack now a brief review of foundational sociology, which for some of you will be just a repeat and for others may contain some very new material.

Studies of both interpersonal relations and communication are part of the broader perspective of the social sciences and, more specifically, the field of sociology. When studied as a part of management science, these subfields bring together what we call a social psychology. Within the church and other Christian organizations, we deal with the integration of faith and learning, making it necessary for us to review aspects of sociology within the light of Scripture. But even more elementary, we need to retune our thinking to the field itself.

Sociology is a scientific study of the processes and products of human interaction. It pays us to remember in interpersonal relations—I may sometimes refer to that as IPR (interpersonal relations)—it pays us to remember that all human conduct involves a plurality of actors. The central assumption of sociology asserts that human beings develop their human abilities in social interaction. All that is human may be said to be embodied in language in some way. The word *culture* describes the way of life of people or of a people essentially made up of prominent social institutions like family, religion, government, recreation, economy, education, and welfare. Within the categories, IPR goes on continuously among friends, groups, clubs, churches, and other forms of people gatherings. Human beings live in a constant plurality relationship. Sociousness is produced by interaction

and follows given patterns; our study of IPR and interpersonal communication (IPC) must presuppose collectivity.

Now, for example, let's just take a mythical 35-year-old man named Brian. Brian's day begins in a small collectivity called household or family. When he leaves that group, his path leads almost immediately to another small group at work. Meanwhile, his children are at school and his wife is at a club or maybe a Bible study. But even on his way between these primary groups, Brian stops at other small groups such as his carpool, people he may meet for coffee just before work begins, or as many other human gatherings as your imagination can contrive. And when work ends, Brian may stop at a fitness center interacting with a completely different group. Meanwhile, of course, his children are at basketball and cheerleading practice and his wife is shopping. Shortly after he regathers with the family group, they all head out to some school activity such as a musical program or an athletic event. In an ordinary day, most individuals move in and out of at least five or six other small-group settings.

Now this may be a bit early in our study to narrow our thinking on dialogue. The interpersonal episode, however, between two people provides the foundation for all interpersonal communication. When many interpersonal dialogues take place, social activity is produced and culture is created, but only when people believe and act upon a shared concept does it become significant to the interpersonal relationship between them—more on that later.

One general exception to all of this is what sociologists call "audience behavior." Think about that exception in relationship to large classrooms, church services, political rallies, or even television viewing. We know that audience behavior is not significant in the creation of behavioral change in people. We also know that large organizations are composed of many small groups. So several practical implications seem to immediately emerge:

1. A study of interpersonal relations and interpersonal communication must focus on dialogue and small groups, not on organizations and institutions.

2. Interpersonal communication is essential for interpersonal relations.

3. Interpersonal communication and interper-

sonal relations provide the context for social maturity and spiritual growth.

4. Our audience-behavior society does not generally lend itself to the advancement of strong interpersonal   communication/interpersonal relations.

Now it's important for us to understand human groups while we're reviewing sociological theory. One classic work on the subject, *The Human Group* by George Homans, develops a conceptual scheme focusing on three elements of human behavior which determine group outcomes: activity, interaction, and sentiment. Homans places a good deal of importance on interaction but also emphasizes a number of other elements that must be taken into account in the study of human behavior. One of the major hypotheses of the book states that, "an increase of interaction between persons is accompanied by an increase of sentiments or friendliness between them." Now here are three key words you'll hear repeatedly throughout this study: *mutuality, presentality,* and *simultaneity.*

When we think about those group members we've been mentioning interacting and communicating, these words surface, and they come from the writings of sociologists and particularly that branch of sociology known as symbolic interactionism: mutuality, presentality, simultaneity.

Let's purge ourselves immediately of the view that communication always implies media and hardware. That's a form of communication, but it's not the dimension we'll study. You want to distinguish also between communication theory and information theory. Information theory deals with words like *sender, receiver, message, encoding, decoding,* and *feedback.* It forms the basis from which media communication has developed, but our concern in this study centers in interpersonal communication, which deals exclusively with people and words; well, maybe I should say exclusively with people and primarily with words, but let's get back to our three code words.

Mutuality deals with what happens in communication when all the parties recognize that they are responsible for message and meaning. To put it another way, interpersonal communications and interpersonal relations are always mutual, they are never singular. It is always dialogue, it is never monologue.

The word *presentality* reminds us that communication must be explained in terms of the here and now. Let's get back to Brian. Two weeks ago Brian may have felt very warm about his job, very confident, very secure in his future. Then the company announced layoffs and cutbacks, and a possible relocation in another state. Details will still be forthcoming; but you can be sure that as Brian goes to work after that kind of announcement, presentality, not how the company may have related to him in the past, is the issue.

The idea of *simultaneity* argues that communication is not a Ping-Pong game in which messages are batted back and forth. Unlike the philosophical psychology of behaviorism, communication cannot be viewed as stimulus-response. Both figures, maybe I should say all figures, act simultaneously. Let us go to another example, this time catching Brian at home.

Well, something went wrong at the basketball game. On the way home Brian found himself in an argument with his junior-high son, Terry, who is aged 13. In the heat of the discussion, Brian may be tempted to use a common expression of our culture: "You make me mad," but that would be inaccurate. It's a denial of mutuality. An exact rendering of what happened between back seat and front seat during the 40-minute drive home would have to emphasize that Brian and Terry did it together. I'm told it takes two to tango. It also takes two to tangle or to create and carry on an argument.

Barriers to communication are really difficulties with the communication process. Sociologists refer to this concept as the "generalized other." When our generalized others are "with us" in the communication flow, meaning and message are positive. Theoretically, if people at all times could be in such a state of openness and vulnerability and transparency without hiding mechanisms, insecurities, and defensiveness, each would be able to say what the other is saying as he is saying it or at least ask for and completely understand an explanation. That's why sometimes husbands and wives who have lived together for many years and have a good relationship actually do repeat each other's words sometimes before the sentence is finished. I'm sure you've heard that many times.

Parallel to the generalized other, however, is the "significant other." We develop and share ideas in the presence of people significant to us. We anticipate and act upon ideas in ways we believe these significant others see us. We then build this by

reputation and habituate the process. This helps explain why sons or daughters often act the same way in the presence of a mother or father that they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago or, to illustrate from the church, it explains why deacon-pastor conflicts tend to be so difficult to solve, even after long periods of time.

Husbands and wives tend to think they know each other well, and that may largely be true. They might be amazed in some cases, however, to really know how the other thinks and acts in unseen or different situations. Social theorists argue any person can change in any direction at any time if he could change significant others, generalized others, and his handling of language. Now, stay with us for just a minute. Social theorists argue all you need to do to change in any direction in your life is to change significant others, generalized others, and your handling of language. Get away from the people that you've known, people around you, and make some changes.

Now, our emphasis in this study has nothing to do with changing significant others or generalized others; in fact, I reject that notion. From that kind of view comes divorce and running away from home and quitting a job you don't like and stomping out of church meetings, and so on. Changing language, however, that's a different story; understanding the process of interpersonal relations and interpersonal communication. Now, we're talking about possibility and that's what the study is all about. We'll come back to all of these as our study proceeds.

But let's come now to the nature of communication. Communication does not occur in isolation. It does not have to be verbal. The process of socialization within groups takes place primarily through interpersonal communication even when it results in hostility rather than agreement. Effective leaders learn to participate in the communication process in such a positive way that their involvement bolsters the unity of the group and enhances the quality of interpersonal relationships.

Now how can we define communication very simply for our purposes? This is not only simple, it's almost simplistic. Communication is meaning exchange, not word exchange. Communication is meaning exchange, not word exchange. As someone once remarked, "I'm sure you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard was not what I really meant." Such is the problem we tackle in this study.

Keep in mind the context of our studies—group leadership and Christian organizations. To be sure, we have to focus first on interpersonal communications and interpersonal relations as a dialogue between two people. In the broader applicational sense, however, it has to reach out to the organization: church, mission, parachurch ministry, publishing house, whatever other setting you envision. Bormann and associates speak primarily from an information-processing point of view but pick up the difficulty of transferring the communication process into the wider context. I want to offer you several quotes from this book by Ernest Bormann and associates. The book is entitled *Interpersonal Communication in the Modern Organization*, and, of course, it's in your bibliography. Here are several quotes:

"Each of the hierarchical structures of an organization has an important effect upon the communication in the organization by influencing the expectations that people have of who should communicate to whom about what and in what manner. Communication problems are intensified by the fact that persons in an organization are in a continual state of flux. Staff additions and replacements may be hired. New policies and procedures are continually modifying the hierarchical structures."

"All other things being equal, people will communicate most frequently with the people geographically closest to them."

"All other things being equal, people will communicate most frequently with the people closest to their own status within the organization," and,

"All other things being equal, people will communicate most frequently with the people in their own units."

Now we haven't said much about the climate or context of communication but, of course, that's crucial in all the adequate models of interpersonal relations. For example, sensitivity, one's skill and ability to perceive and interpret with empathy, is crucial to the process. Self-disclosure deals with revealing the truth about oneself, including desires and needs and goals, and doing that honestly and doing it candidly. Trust is the foundation for self-disclosure—the phenomenon in the process that gives us permission, as it were, to disclose ourselves to others. And let's not forget risk—the willingness to accept adverse outcomes that may result from trusting other people in the relationship/communication milieu.

I like the way Wilson puts it in his book *Interpersonal Growth Through Communication.* He writes, "Feedback, sensitivity, self-disclosure, trust, and risk are all interrelated. The ability to interact in a game-free exchange—one in which the participants are open to each other; one in which they grow—depends on these interpersonal events." This is the goal of interpersonal growth through communication. Now obviously that's where we want to go: Personal growth, how you and I can grow effectively in our spiritual lives and our professional lives through learning about handling communication and conflict, and then, of course, how we can help the organization grow because of our leadership roles. Right now, let's move on to a study of human groups and organizational growth.

If we were to review the history of organizational structure, we might agree with Amitai Etzioni that the 20th century has contained essentially three eras: classical theory and scientific management, the human relations era, and the structuralist approach which, more or less, synthesized the first two. One senses, however, that we are in a change mode now, moving from structuralism toward a cybernetic-systems approach appropriate for the knowledge explosion at the end of this century. You may remember, if you've done any study in management science, the Hawthorne experiments and the ensuing human relations era and how it moved management away from its obsession with formal organizations, rational behavior, and maximal production, toward the view that the most satisfying or rewarding organization would be most efficient as well. But, as you recall, the pendulum swung too far, failing to deal with the balance.

So now we're in the latter days of the synthetic period of structuralism in which goal achievement and the meeting of human needs have been recognized as constant, ever-present competing forces; and in any and every organization you have precisely these kinds of things happening.

To be sure, most organizations still err in the direction of goal achievement rather than interpersonal communication and need meeting and, of course, that includes churches and colleges and seminaries as well. I mentioned Etzioni a moment ago. Years ago he wrote, "The ultimate source of the organizational dilemmas reviewed up to this point is the incomplete matching of the personalities of the participants with their organizational roles. If personalities could be shaped to fit specific organizational roles, or organizational roles could fit specific personalities, many

of the pressures to displace goals, much of the need to control performance, and a good part of the alienation would disappear." That's an interesting observation especially in view of the carelessness with which we sometimes select people for various ministry posts.

Now when I first read that paragraph by Etzioni, my eyes began to sparkle, and my mind moved forward in anticipation, only to find this noted authority suggesting that such personality shaping and role matching is virtually impossible. Oh, to be sure, a great deal of research has been done since the publication of that work more than 30 years ago, but the problems have not changed, nor have they in many cases been significantly alleviated. If they had, it would hardly be necessary to conduct this series of studies on interpersonal relations and communication, which many church leaders believe may be the single-most dominant problem Christian organizations face at the end of the 20th century.

Part of the problem may simply arise from the cyclical pattern of an organization. Dissatisfaction with existing structures tends to produce incipient organization, which gives way then to formal organization through the rise of visionary leadership. The organization moves toward maximal efficiency during which rational organizational structure, bureaucracy if you have it, replaces the initial charismatic leadership. First generation leaders die off, and administration comes to be viewed as a means and not an end.

Then the program of the institution becomes all-important, and what was communication process now becomes information process. Now no one in the organization can doubt he or she exists to serve it, whether or not it serves them at all. Ever worked in a place like this? I guess you have. Ultimately, overinstitutionalization ensues, and death comes in one form or another. Please note, death may not be extinction but merely spiritual, moral, and social stagnation of the ministry or organization or the church. Now if you apply that formula to any organization you know—church, Christian college, seminary, mission board, or even a family—you will discern, to a greater or lesser extent, how each of those various phases fit.

Let's talk a bit about philosophy of ministry and leadership. Philosophy of ministry sometimes gets worked to death in terms of terminology, but not necessarily in practical application. My friend Eugene Habecker says one of the reasons for leadership "is

that the primary makeup of organizations is people." He puts it this way in his book *The Other Side of Leadership:*

> Scripture well illustrates the point that people change and leaders change. The Israelites were a different people under the leadership of Moses or Joshua than they were under subsequent leaders. The apostles performed differently after Jesus rose from the dead and returned to heaven than they did while He was still on earth. In the context of our families, our priorities as parents are different when the children are all under age ten than when all of them are in their teens. People change, leaders change, and organizations change. Leaders must be sensitive to these kinds of changes and respond accordingly.

A great deal of literature has been forthcoming under the, I should say, forthcoming recently, maybe during the decade of the 80s is what I have in mind here. Now on the subject of leadership, perhaps the general social vacuum created such a need that some felt constrained to attack the problem directly. Klopfenstein has provided a masterful review of that literature with special focus on the models used to illustrate what he calls "some Christian concerns of leading." Like many before him, Klopfenstein ends up with an emphasis on Bennis and Nanus and their book, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge.* Now let's be sure that I'm quite clear here. I'm talking primarily about literature that has come out of the secular domain. There have also been very good books on Christian leadership that have come out in the last decade, but Jossey-Bass publishers in San Francisco, which formerly more or less specialized in books on higher education, has recently taken up the banner of general leadership in management literature and produced a lot of very interesting stuff.

Anyhow, I was coming back to Klopfenstein and his quote from Bennis and Nanus, or actually a quote about Bennis and Nanus: "These new leaders," he writes, "are identified by four strategies: vision, communication, trust, and empowerment. While these strategies may be qualities of Christian ministry and leadership, the authors were in fact describing business executives. To the Christian leader, these social science data are most helpful in shaping our questions in inquiry, refining our methods of research and teaching, building our models of ministry, and contributing to the field of leadership."

So what kind of philosophy of ministry creates a climate in which interpersonal communications and interpersonal relations can flourish, not only as a means but also as a biblical end? I offer only my opinion here, an opinion which has been developed in greater detail in a recent book entitled *Feeding and Leading*. It will be a ministry, in my view, which is not centralized and has nothing to do with autocratic leadership except in the most unique and demanding situations. It will be a ministry in which the body functions together, providing a wide variety of need-meeting instructive experiences.

We extract these principles of ministry by generalizing the way the disciples understood the teaching of Jesus and applied that teaching in the book of Acts and in the preparation of New Testament Epistles. Teaching and preaching may be essential, but they are carried out within a climate of caring and nurture which not only makes possible interpersonal communication and interpersonal relations but elevates them to a major goal within the organization—people-centered ministry, which provides congregations with the privilege and responsibility to think and strategize about ministry without having everything so absolutized and programmed that people merely serve the bureaucracy.

Perhaps I can close this first study by referring to the words of Drucker, widely viewed as the father of modern management. At Claremont Graduate School where Drucker teaches, the curriculum of Peter F. Drucker Graduate Management Center centers in the belief that management is not just a set of quantitative skills, but a profoundly human activity. The classes do not emphasize specialization but integration, and Drucker himself acknowledges, and I quote, "Management always lives, works, and practices in and for an institution. An institution is a human community held together by a bond that, next to the tie of family, is the most powerful human bond: the work bond.

If leaders are to win and develop people, they must know them—their spiritual condition, their personal abilities and limitations, their weaknesses and strengths, and their needs. And that knowledge presupposes a highly developed, indeed, a spiritually sophisticated network of interpersonal relations and interpersonal communication—a goal toward which this series is dedicated.

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