QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY IRC

Are You in a Communication Rut? Shift the Pattern, Get Different Results

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Imagine that you are in a conversation when you suddenly realize that you have had this exact same disagreement with a co-worker, or a family member, many times before. In the moment, you can predict what you will say and do and what the other person will too. You feel compelled to act in a certain way, even when you know that what you will say or do next is unwise or unproductive. You cannot seem to help yourself. Or the other person! After the conversation has gone from bad to worse, you may find yourself attributing it to the other person's incompetence, character flaws, or bad motive. You end up feeling frustrated and angry about how you and the other person did it again. Furthermore, you may be oblivious to how your behavior contributed to the undesirable behavior of the other person. You've just had an URP moment.

It can feel embarrassing to admit that despite our best intentions, our communications with others do not go the way we intended and that we could make better choices in the moment. Leaders and managers can learn to address some of these unwanted, repetitive, and intractable dynamics and shift the pattern to what they want instead.

What is a URP?

Unwanted repetitive patterns, known as 'URPs' are difficult, stilted, strained, unproductive patterns of communication that occur over and over again. They have a deja-vu quality. URPs occur when people feel that they must act in certain ways because of what other people did or said to them, and what they interpret they should do next, no matter how distasteful their initial acts were, or how destructive the consequences might be (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979).

Sometimes we might experience these situations as cold and stony silence, or lava-like eruptions. We might describe URPs as "conversations-gone-bad" (Marrs, 2007), those conversations when we accuse and negate others, engage in passive-aggressive behaviour, complain about, or blame others, or make a promise only to later break that promise. Despite the fact that this pattern of communication results in anger, hurt and resentment, it continues to repeat itself.

Since these behaviours have a negative impact on the quality of our relationships, what can we do about them? While it can seem impossible to figure out how we can get ourselves out of these communication ruts, there are some practical steps we can take to get our communication with others back on track.

Step One: Go to the Balcony

A first step to get out of the rut is to step back from the situation and reflect on the conversational dynamics that contribute to these unwanted repetitive patterns.

"Going to the balcony" offers us a metaphor for getting some distance from a challenging situation so that we can reflect, manage our hot buttons, avoid reacting to the situation, and gain a broader perspective (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Searby & Tripses, 2011; Ury, 2007). If the balcony view can help you see and name a pattern, you then can own it, instead of the pattern owning you. You can move out of reactive mode, to being more proactive.

Step Two: Analyze the Situation and Discover the Pattern

It takes 'two to tango" applies to both dance, and our communication with others: Communication is co-constructed. Every pattern of communication enables some things and constrains others (Pearce, W. B., 2001). If we broaden our awareness from individual reactions to a systemic view, we are better equipped to appreciate the contextual nature of communication. Ask yourself: Am I willing to see and own the situation as part of my influence on the system?

Many of us are not trained to think about or notice these patterns and so they remain out of our awareness (Pearce, K. 2012). By analyzing the situation, and asking, *what are the stories behind the patterns of interaction?* we gain fresh insights into the pattern.

Visualize a set of five nested boxes: statements, episodes, identity story, relationships, and culture. Every statement we make sits inside the context of an episode. Every episode is nested within a relationship between the person performing the action, and others. Every relationship is nested within an identity story about the self. Every story about the self is nested within the roles we play in our organization, and our organization's culture. The organizational culture is the largest 'box' that contains all the other elements. By examining each element or 'box', we broaden our perspective, and can better understand "what's really going on here."

Christine Oliver (2005) illustrates these elements as a hierarchy of contexts with a story about a management meeting in which a staff member complains.

> *Statement:* The staff member makes a statement. The manager interprets this statement as a complaint. The manager responds with a remark that is interpreted as being dismissive of the staff member. The staff member concludes, "My voice is not heard."

Episode: Episode refers to the boundaries of the communication 'episode'. Think about an episode as consisting of a sequence: *something is said, something is heard, and boom! the next action unfolds* without awareness of the interpretation that is guiding our action. Just like our favourite sitcom, an episode consists of action-reaction-action.

Identity: The identity level considers the stories of who an individual is, can, and should be. In this example of the manager and the staff member, the manager sees him/herself as "the decision maker." The staff member sees him/herself as 'having no power."

Relational Context: The relational context describes the stories of who we are, can be and should be in relationship. The manager may believe that he/she can veto staff decisions. By doing so, and by discouraging any negatively-tinged comments from employees, employees may perceive the manager as authoritarian. *What gets made here?* Is it possible that what is created is a pattern of "power over" on the part of manager, which does not allow complaints? Repressed complaints—and other suggestions—may lead to a culture of compliance. Managers in turn, end up puzzled and frustrated as to why they cannot get their staff to contribute ideas and solutions to workplace problems.

Organizational Culture: At this level, we begin to appreciate that there are explicit and implicit stories about how things can and should be done. In this example, managers control decision-making, and are inconsistent in encouraging diverse perspectives. At this level we might inquire, what is the leadership discourse in this organization, and how does it contribute to this communication pattern?

Now we can see the pattern emerge. An irritated staff member makes a statement. The manager interprets the statement as a complaint, and says something in response. The staff member interprets the manager's response negatively and assumes that the manager said it to wield power, something the employee doesn't have. The staff member either complains even more vigorously to get heard, or shuts down. The manager experiences this as MORE obstructive behaviour, makes more negative responses, and thus acts in an increasingly authoritarian way. The URP cycle is reinforced.

The hierarchy of context helps identify a broader frame for thinking about a situation. When we broaden the context, patterns of behaviour may now make sense (Oliver, 2005).

Communication is a sequence of actions that create patterns over time. These patterns contribute to how we create our identities, our relationships, and our social worlds. As we step back and analyze this conversation using the 'nested boxes' or hierarchy of contexts, we can appreciate how the patterns of feeling, meaning, and action unfold.

Step Three: Change the Story, Take Different Action, and Shift the Pattern

When we can see the pattern, suddenly we have alternative interpretations and possibilities for action. When the staff member uttered the statement, what *other and more elevating interpretations could be available to the manager* that could lead to a better pattern? When the manager reacted to the staff statement, how could the staff member have a different interpretation of the feedback to his/her statement *rather than as a blanket assumption about the culture*? We have a choice: Choosing another story, and taking a different action, generates a different pattern and enables both parties to step out of the communication rut of the URP. When we can examine, understand, and challenge the fundamental assumptions that drive our typical behaviour, and deeper organizational cultures, we can create more productive paths that enable different thought and action.

Conversations are the "Stuff" of Social Life

Communication determines the nature, quality, and direction of our organizational lives. We inhabit a social world that is shaped by clusters of conversations. As deadlines punctuate our busy, everyday work life, we take these conversations for granted and forget we get what we make in communication. By understanding the context for our conversations, we can shift the pattern to create generative conversations that contribute to transformational change at work.

Communication is not just a tool for exchanging ideas and information. Leaders have a responsibility to create the organizational container that supports generative conversations. Once leaders can see the pattern, they can disrupt the URPSs that are having a negative impact on communication, and on relationships. Leaders who listen carefully can offer a more generous interpretation for what another person says or does.

Leaders and managers can learn to address some of these unwanted, repetitive, and intractable dynamics and shift the pattern to what they want instead.

The next time you sense a URP about to unfold, pause, and ask yourself: What is going on here? What *else could I choose* to create with this other person, instead of my first reactions? What could I say or do to create more openness, trust, or respect? How could I begin to create a different story, a different pattern, and a different kind of relationship with this other person? How could *we* create a more generative conversation?

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