# Communication Tools for Trouble-Shooting Problems
# NAG 2-1-2006

# OVERVIEW

This is the third in a three-part "Tools for Trouble-shooting Problems" series (*NAG 9-21-2005*, *1-18-2006, and 2-1-2006*). In this NAG, we will practice using communication tools to promote collaborative problem-solving. If you have a sticky work situation which you would be willing to share, I encourage you to raise your hand and offer it, when we reach that point, near the end of the session, and I'll demonstrate these techniques by role-playing a response.

## Practice

I find this stuff hard. I've been practicing communication tools in a conscious way for a handful of years now, starting in 1999 with books and tapes, adding seminars in 2000, and joining an every-other-week 'practice group' in 2001. I don't claim to be 'good' at this stuff yet … merely cognizant of how hard it is. If this stuff fires you up, consider subscribing to the giraffe-talk list (http://lists.fhcrc.org); I will be using this forum to organize a weekly practice series: we will meet regularly to practice communication exercises. Additionally, consider attending one of the workshops listed at http://www.psncc.org -- this is one of many local outfits promulgating communication training.

## Background

The material I presented in the first seminar was, I claim, mainstream -- material which you can read yourself in any of literally hundreds of books or hear from literally hundreds of other instructors offering courses in *network analysis*: I took most of my material from observing Mike Pennachi of Network Protocol Specialists teach his classes. The material I presented in the second seminar is merely my retelling of the *scientific method*, a way of thinking practiced, in one form or another, by humans everywhere, not to mention by a range of other species -- occasionally controversial, but hardly new.

However, in this seminar, I'm going out on a limb. Certainly, I don't claim to have invented this stuff -- I cite my sources, after all. However, I haven't yet seen anyone pull together this material in the way I will today. Furthermore, the sources I employ are operating on the leading edge of research in *neurology*, *kind-sight*, and *conflict resolution* … frankly, this material contains more speculation and hypothesis than data and experimentally-supported theory.

So this is your heads-up: take what you hear today with salt.

## Summary

In my opinion, my skill at working with other people is the single largest limiting factor in my career development. This isn't to say that I'm awful at working with other people or that my career is on ice; rather, I claim that I can trace my largest inefficiencies and least effective contributions back to people-skills. Why? The larger problems at work require collaborative effort to resolve … it isn't good enough for one person to have the "right" answer … what these problems require is a group of us all pushing the cart in the same direction … and that's where

human *kind-sight* comes in.  If everyone in that group sees themselves as part of the same *kind*, then we push together.  If we see ourselves as alien from one another, then we fragment and not only push in different directions but even push against one another.

Lots of pundits try to address this area … *emotional intelligence* is one such popular approach. The *Harvard Negotiation Project*  is another … *diversity training* a third … in religious circles, *seeing the divine in each other* or seeing each other as all *children of God*.  There are lots of ways people approach this subject, sometimes with a larger focus (*children of God*), sometimes with a narrower focus (*Harvard Negotiation Projecct*).  In this seminar, I offer my own particular brew for how to build collaborative, rather than conflicted, approaches to getting the job done.  I don't claim that my approach is 'better' than anyone else's … merely that it makes more sense to me than anything else I've found.  I encourage you to take what works for you and to discard the rest.


# THEORY

## Pre-wired and Pre-disposed to Become Wired

[Derived from Us and Them]
We are born with a brain which is pre-wired to perform some tasks (breathing, opening & closing the eyes, fear of falling and of loud noises) and which is pre-disposed to become wired for other tasks (grasping an object using our hands, fear of strangers, language).
- The adrenalin shock which comes with a fall takes no conscious effort and is all but unstoppable, barring dramatic brain damage.
- Our brain is pre-wired to learn language … not English or Cantonese or Swedish per se … but *whatever* language or languages to which we are exposed during our early childhood.  Barring extraordinary circumstances, a human child cannot avoid learning a language.
- Even learning an apparently artificial skill, like playing basketball or programming in C, relies on all sorts of pre-disposed capabilities, from physical coordination and reflexes to language.

The result is 'software with hardware-assist', i.e. pathways burned into our brain stimulated by effervescent neurotransmitters which allow us to react at subconscious speeds.

Our fear of strangers (and our ability to distinguish between the familiar and the strange) relies on pre-wired and pre-disposed hardware.  The two collaborate to produce Us-and-Them thinking, allowing us to 'know' at subconscious speeds who belongs to *Our* group and who belongs to the *Other* or *Them* group.

*Us versus Them thinking operates without the need for conscious intervention.*


## We

[Derived from Us and Them]

The brain is composed of many components, each processing independently. Certainly, there is communication between the different parts, though perhaps not as regularly or consistently as we would like! and occasionally wide-ranging communication (emanating from what we call the 'executive' portion of the brain), but the point I'm making here is that the brain isn't a single, unified entity behaving in a coherent fashion. The part directing the lungs to breath generally operates without input from large portions of the rest of the brain … fortunately! and is quite capable of detaching entirely and ignoring the 'executive' instructions to stop (again, fortunately!). The part of the brain which looks for food instructs the hand to reach for the cheese cake … while the part of the brain which anticipates a night of restless sleep wrestles, sometimes unsuccessfully, to stop the hand. Part of your brain can put your keys down on the counter, without any other part recording what you did, leading to those long searches "where did I put the keys?"

*In a literal sense, the brain can be viewed as a collection of semi-autonomous elements and functions.*


## Emotions, Attention, Memory

[Derived from articles published in the last year of Scientific American and Scientific American Mind.]
The brain uses emotions to direct its attention. Overloaded constantly by information deluging it from the five senses, not to mention its own ability to generate information, the brain relies on emotion to focus: the butterfly perched on the flower gets ignored in favor of the tiger behind the tree. Similarly, a short-term memory associated with a strong emotion gets committed to long-term memory, whereas a similar experience associated with no particular emotion gets discarded. The wired parts of the brain move fast -- they generate emotion in response to a situation (fear in response to the tiger, for example). The cognitive part of the brain scans the emotions pouring through it and uses those as a guide for directing its attention.

*The brain requires emotions in order to direct its attention and in order to store memories.*


## Feelings Arise from Needs

[Derived from Nonviolent Communication]
Humans[1] all possess a range of needs, things like safety, food, shelter, sex … community, belonging, respect … autonomy (choice), purpose, play. Emotions arise when these needs are met (cheerful, happy, calm) … or not met (afraid, helpless, sad).

*Emotions tell us whether or not we are getting what we want.*


## Socially Wired

[Derived from Chimpanzee Politics, Nonviolent Communication]

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[1] I would argue that humans aren't the only creatures which not only have needs but are also willing to express them -- see the Frans de Waal article about fairness and chimpanzees.

As social animals, we possess great skill in figuring out who is on our side and who isn't -- we operate by collaborating with some and competing with others.  Until I authentically and completely give up the idea that I can gain at your expense … you person will sense this … and collaborating will be real, real hard.  On the other hand, once I become convinced that I can only succeed if you succeed too … then you sense this, and collaboration becomes way easier.

*Recognizing our interdependence encourages collaboration.*


## Core Need:  To Belong

[Derived from various Frans de Waal books, <u>Nonviolent Communication</u>, lecture by Lucy Leu at the October 2006 Harmony Hill Compassionate Communication retreat]
I claim that one of the strongest human needs is the need **to belong**.  I see people using varying language around this … the need *to matter*, *to count*, *to make a difference*, *to have a place at the table*, *to have worth*, *to be of value* … the need for *consideration*, for *respect*.  I claim that all these descriptions revolve around the same core need, which I label the need **to belong**.  As a social animal, the human cannot survive without its group, its clan, its tribe.  As a result, a collection of tendencies and predilections around this need have become pre-wired and pre-disposed into our brains. [2]

*Belonging is the most basic human need.*


# US AND THEM IN ACTION

So what does all this mean?  Here's a practical example.  As I walked into the yoga studio for class last week, the part of my brain which is wired to distinguish Us from Them starts firing.  When you read this, watch how your own sense of who *belongs* and who is *alien* shifts back and forth.

- I see someone sitting against the wall; this is unusual, most people are sitting on their yoga mats in the center of the room.  I immediately feel wary -- this person smells different from *Us*.

- I don't recognize this person … this is a venue in which I know the names of every single person.  My sense of *unease* deepens.

- I see the person as a powerfully built male, eyes closed, legs crossed.  I'm in full-fledged *enemy* mode now:  in my view, men are *dangerous*, particularly big, strong, young ones whom I don't know, and sitting cross-legged against a wall with your eyes closed is just plan *weird*.  Besides, he has that square-jawed, American-handsome, pretty boy look of

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[2] I suspect that the substrate for this behavior is evolutionarily derived, i.e. competition amongst genes leading to behaviors which increase the likelihood of particular genes being propagated.  Additionally, reciprocal altruism, the tendency of social animals, from bacteria and ants to bats and chimps, to do the "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" dance, as a way to propagate genes, may also drive this wiring.

the people who belong to the *popular* crowd, to which I never belonged, so he must be *dumb*, *arrogant,* and *insensitive* as well.

- I collect my mat and blanket and blocks and move to my spot in the room and spread them out, glancing occasionally in the *stranger's* direction. I notice that his hands are held in a Hindu mantra position -- that's weird, I don't trust people who go *overboard* with this Hindu stuff.[3]

- I notice that he is staying utterly still, and his eyes are still closed, despite the commotion in the room created by arriving students. I feel a little *kinship* for this guy … I know how hard it is to stay still like that, in meditation, particularly when strange people are walking around you.

- Then, I notice that he is seated in lotus position. Now, lotus position is hard … takes years of practice. I feel some *respect* for this weirdo -- he isn't just showing off right now, pretending to be a meditation guru -- this guy has been meditating for *years* if he can sit in lotus. Besides, anyone seated in lotus isn't about to go doing anything dangerous in the next few seconds … extricating oneself from lotus takes time, and straightening out the limbs and getting the blood flowing takes even longer.

- Now the room is full of my classmates, and I feel a little *sorry* for the guy -- he likely doesn't know anyone here, nor is he *familiar* with the routine -- he hasn't rolled out his mat in the middle of the room, like everyone else. He's probably feeling pretty anxious himself, like he doesn't belong [which he *doesn't*, part of me *shouts*].

- And then my yoga instructor announces that her brother, Jay, is visiting her this week and that he is sitting in the back … I remember that she's spoken fondly of her brother in the past … and suddenly Jay becomes one of *Us*, part of the *In Group*, part of our *Yoga Community*, and I can feel my body *relax*.

As I go through my day, my sense of *Us and Them*, my *kind-sight*, shifts wildly, like a kaleidoscope, operating at hard-wired speed, before my conscious mind reacts. Here is an example of the criteria my own kind-sight uses. Notice, as you read my list, how your sense of Us and Them shifts back and forth … when do you see me as an enemy and when do you see me as an ally? Which ones sound silly … and which ones sound deadly serious? The theory behind *kind-sight* claims that our ability to distinguish between Us and Them is hard-wired while the criteria we use to make these distinctions is highly plastic and shifts from moment to moment. Plastic and arbitrary but entirely real -- humans kill each other every day, and I claim that we employ *kind-sight* when we commit such murder. In fact, I claim that converting the other person from an 'Us' to a 'Them' is a prerequisite to murder.

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[3] Never mind that I've trained in Insight Meditation, a Buddhist influenced flavor of meditation, which must appear totally weird to the majority of humans on the planet. The point is that, to my *kind-sight*, we Insight Meditation people are part of *Us*, whereas Hindu influenced meditation people are part of the *Them* … an arbitrary distinction … but a very real one, to which the shunning behaviors of humans attest.

| Us | Them |
|---|---|
| computer geeks | users |
| broad-based (client, server, network) experience | focused expertise (*only* clients or *only* servers) |
| colleague with history[4] | some *newbie* whose name I don't even know |
| works at the Hutch | works *anywhere-else* |
| works in InfoTech | works in some *other* IT group |
| works in Voice/Data | works in some *other* department within InfoTech |
| attends NAG | *hasn't a clue* about information technology at the Center |
| Ivy-league educated | community college or professional degree |
| British or at least European | American |
| reads science | reads astrology |
| practices yoga | cares about football |
| practices Anusara yoga | practices Bikram yoga |
| low on melanin | rich in melanin |
| rich in melanin[5] | low on melanin |
| male | female |
| female[6] | male |
| has a meditation practice | watches television |
| has children | complains about babies crying |
| subscribes to Scientific American and Wall Street Journal | subscribes to People and National Enquirer |
| worries about H5N1 developing human-to-human transmission | thinks you can catch bird flu by eating at KFC |
| wears sandals and baggy pants | wears uncomfortable shoes and a tie |
| likes sushi | subsists on a diet of hot dogs and hamburgers |

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[4] i.e. long-time Hutch employee with whom I've worked on one or more problems

[5] My sweetheart has lots of melanin in her skin; when she's in my thoughts, then other people with melanin seem part of 'Us' and bleached people seem part of 'Them'.

[6] When I'm perceiving men as big, ugly brutes, then they become 'Them' (dangerous) and women become 'Us' (safe).

# PROCESS

During this seminar, we will break into small groups and practice exercises aimed at separating observation from interpretation, deconstructing which feelings are arising from which needs, and watching our own Us versus Them functions. Between exercises, we will reconvene into the larger group and share notes.

By the end of the session, we will take real world examples of interactions at work and apply these techniques to convert our view of a colleague from a 'Them' to an 'Us' -- if you have a scenario in mind, please raise your hand at this point and describe it.

## Goal

The goal of this approach is to keep one's attention focused on *feelings* and *needs*, i.e. what *emotions* are arising and what *desires* are driving those feelings. As I claim above, the need *to belong* lies at the foundation of much of human behavior; and when the *belonging* need is firing neurons, it drives feelings of *wariness* or *fear*, *closeness* or *safety*. With my attention focused on what is happening inside myself, and inside the other person, I can more easily shift the other person from being a 'Them' to an 'Us'. Once both of us sense that we belong, the dynamic between us shifts. Typically, when this transition occurs, I experience a sense of relief or relaxation in my body -- that's my signal that we have both synced to belonging to 'Us'.

At that point, I can turn my attention to problem-solving. **In my experience, once both people see themselves as Us, problem-solving becomes easy -- our social instincts make it easy for us to find solutions which deliver win-win results.**

## Structure

One way I keep my attention focused on what I am feeling and needing is to structure my language (whether I speak out loud or in my head) in the following way:

Focusing on myself:

Observation: When I observe that you are *sitting cross-legged in a lotus position*,
Feeling: I feel *wary*
Need: Because I'm needing *confidence* that we can find common ground
Request: Would you *tell me* what sitting that way does for you?

Or, focusing on the other person:

Observation: When I hear you saying to me that *I don't know what I'm doing*,
Feeling: I'm guessing that you're feeling *pissed off*
Need: Because you're wanting some *hope* that I can help you with your computer
Request: Would you *tell me* what you're hearing me say?

When I have sufficient skill and presence of mind to track my feelings and needs along with the other person's feelings and needs, I tend to drop this structure and just speak 'normally' … all the tracking happens internally.  When I lose my skill and/or presence of mind, I drop back to using this structure.

# FURTHER PRACTICE

If this stuff fires you up, consider subscribing to the giraffe-talk list (http://lists.fhcrc.org); I will use this list to coordinate weekly sessions at which we will practice these skills further. Additionally, consider attending one of the seminars offered at http://www.psncc.org -- this group promulgates the 'Nonviolent Communication' approach, one of many approaches to developing communication skills.

# FURTHER READING

David Berreby
> Us and Them:  Understanding Your Tribal Mind

Marshall Rosenberg
> Nonviolent Communication

Frans de Waal
> Our Inner Ape, Chimpanzee Politics:  Power and Sex Among Apes, Good Natured:  The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals, The Ape and the Sushi Master, Bonobo: The Forgotten Ape, Peacemaking Among Primates

Jared Diamond
> The Third Chimpanzee
> Why is Sex Fun?
> Guns, Germs, and Steel