



ESSAY

Can You Hear a Pin Drop?

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Seeking Clarity Amidst Cacophony

The world is teeming with messages of all sorts, swirling around us as if we lived in a giant blender. Visual media include film, broadcast and cable TV, and signs of all kinds telling us what to do, where to go and how to get there. Aural media include radios, telephones, formal speeches and presentations, music of all kinds and routine conversation, not to mention random background noises like the sound of an approaching car or the chirping of bluebirds overhead. Graphic media include books, newspapers, email, texts, tweets and websites of infinite variety. Advertising, of course, is ubiquitous — it seems to permeate the air that we breathe. All of this screams for our immediate attention. How in the world are we to make sense of it?

Fortunately, the human brain is equipped to distinguish between the urgent and the mundane, at least to some degree. Still, it's often hard to separate the signals from the noise. Effective communication, not to mention our sanity, requires that we prioritize. The irony is that in order to take it all in and make sense of it, we have to filter most of it out.

And that's just the signals we receive. What about the signals we send out? All of us clamor for attention. We want to be heard, but even more importantly, we yearn to be understood.

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We are constantly broadcasting a stream of messages: through our appearance, our posture, how we behave, how we speak, how we listen and how we respond to others. To compound the confusion, most of the time we broadcast conflicting signals, full of ambiguities and contradictions.

Is it any wonder that there is so much confusion in the world or that people are so frequently misunderstood? In truth, it's amazing that we communicate as well as we do. Effective communication requires simplicity and clarity. The first and most important step is to engage the attention of the audience. How will people know we have something useful to say and that it's worth listening to? Why should they care? (Here, it helps to remember that what's important to us is unlikely to be equally important to others.)

The problem of communication in the design and construction industry is particularly acute because we use many different languages during the life of a project. There are written and spoken words, of course, but there are also graphics (both hand-drawn and computer-generated) that compress the three-dimensional qualities of space into just two dimensions. The graphic language of design — plans, sections and elevations — is an abstraction that requires a certain skill to decipher, and very few clients are truly fluent in that language. While clients are highly intelligent, they are also frequently confused as to what is meant by “design intent.” Then there is the language of finance: budgets, spreadsheets and balance sheets.

These are things most clients understand quite well but are baffling to many, if not most, architects. It is just as difficult to translate design value into business terms as business value into design terms, yet both languages are crucial to the success of any project.

On top of that, the skills of many different people are required to bring a project to life: clients, architects, engineers, consultants, suppliers, contractors and subcontractors, not to mention financiers and the authorities that have jurisdiction over the project, such as zoning and planning officials. Each of these experts has his/her own special language, acronyms and folklore. All of them bring their special expertise to the table, but it's a challenge to communicate effectively across the silos.

How do we make sense of all this?

The first rule of communication is to be truly observant. Listening is more important than speaking. Why? Because to respond effectively to the situation at hand, you must first understand the context. There are lots of ways to do this, many of which have nothing to do with the spoken word. If you doubt this, just imagine that you're in an airplane watching a movie without the sound on. Can you follow the story line? Do you know who's happy or sad and why? Can you sense which of the characters are friends and which are the antagonists? Can you anticipate what's likely to happen next? Do you know how the story will end? That understanding comes from being attuned to the context; none of it comes from the soundtrack.

The second rule of communication is to have something useful to say. In a world where we are all clamoring for attention, this is surprisingly rare. We are often tempted to "clarify," "amplify" or "echo" a point of view offered in a meeting without adding any real value. There is no need to repeat what is already obvious. Before you speak, consider if what you are about to say will really contribute useful information or change the course of the discussion in a meaningful way. If not, keep quiet. Remember the proverb: "Even a fool is thought wise if he remains silent and discerning if he holds his tongue."

Good communication starts with careful listening and a true economy of speech, but there's much more to it than that. Here are a few tips:

1. Take it slow.

Most people have a limited capacity to absorb new information, not because they are dull, but rather because their heads are already chock-full of stuff and they need to make room for more. You will be better understood by your audience if you let each point sink in before proceeding to the next one.

2. Use the preferred medium.

Some people respond best to one-on-one conversation; others are more comfortable with phone calls or email. Some people are visual, in which case sketches are a good way to get a point across, while for others those scribbles are baffling or confusing. In short, if you are traveling in France and wish to be understood, speak French.

3. Listen more than you speak.

The rule of thumb when meeting with clients is they should talk more than half the time. When this happens, you have a chance to learn something. That is not the case if you are hogging too much airtime.

4. Say it once.

Multiple versions of the same message often lead to ambiguity. It's OK to repeat the same point for emphasis, but waxing poetic is bound to sow confusion (or worse, boredom). Do your audience favor — make it easy to understand your message and don't waste their time.

5. Be clear, concise and convincing.

This is the best way to get your point across. If you present for half an hour, your audience will remember that you gave a speech. If you speak for five minutes, they'll remember what you said.

6. Consistency counts.

Stick to the message. If you deviate too much, it dilutes credibility, and people will stop paying attention — or worse, stop caring.

7. Speak loudly through silence.

Being quiet is one of the most powerful forms of

communication. Allow time for your message to sink in. Wait before you respond to a comment or a question. A thoughtful pause will focus attention and serve to tee up your next point.

8. Confirm receipt.

Did your audience really understand what you said? How do you know? Body language speaks volumes. Are your listeners leaning forward? Is there good eye contact? Are they nodding in understanding and agreement? If not, you've missed the mark.

Above all, keep it personal. The most effective communication occurs when people are truly on the same wavelength; messages are sent and received with total clarity. That is not to say large-scale communications cannot be effective, but the most meaningful are those that involve a personal connection of some sort. What's truly important to you? If you want people to care, let them know how you really feel and why. That's how to achieve true commonality of purpose. When that happens, anything is possible.

In this noisy, confusing and raucous world, can you still hear a pin drop?

You can if you are paying attention.