



Where Are They Coming From?

A few months ago I was discussing the most important aspects of effective communication with an experienced executive. Her view was that the secret was to understand the other person and their perspective. This is simple advice - yet it is both profound and difficult to deliver when we are concentrating on what we have to say.

Another executive recently provided a powerful example, based on his own personal experience. A family member had had a serious health issue which left him in a coma for around two months, with emotional consequences for all of the family. When the family member finally (and happily) returned to full consciousness he asked, with some difficulty, "what's happened?" His brother, understandably excited and relieved at his recovery, proceeded to describe what had been happening in the world in great detail. A nurse gently brought the flow of information to a close by suggesting that the right response was actually "you have been sleeping for a little while".

Let's set aside for now the complex challenges of understanding the other person and reflect on some of the challenges in considering the other person's perspective. As illustrated in the above example, there are three common problems:

- The emphasis on thinking about what I am going to send (rather than what they might want or need to receive)
- The "one-way" nature of much of our communication (rather than "two-way")
- A lack of empathy before and during the communication (where empathy is simply a genuine awareness of the other person)

Here are some possible solutions to these three problems:

- Take some time, perhaps as little as 30 seconds, to plan the communication by asking "what's in it for them?" This may help focus on what they want or need to know.
- Remember to check for feedback during any communication. Are they interested? Understanding? Listening? This may help secure a two-way experience.
- Be sensitive to the other person. What is their emotional state? Look for clues in their body language and tone. This may help remember that we are dealing with a human being rather than an answering machine.

If we are going to be truly effective in our communication there has to be a genuine connection between two parties. And that is going to require some active consideration of the other party.