

## CHAPTER 5

# Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication: A Model That Works Across Cultures<sup>1</sup>

by Richard Francisco<sup>2</sup>

“Hey! Look! Listen!”

— THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME<sup>3</sup>

When I was twelve years old, I was a member of a swim team and considered myself a strong swimmer. But always wanting to improve my strength and skills in swimming, I sometimes would swim in the ocean. I recall an occasion when I ventured too far into the ocean when the waves were high enough to be over my head and the currents were strong. Once

I identified my error, I began to swim toward the shore. However, my return to dry land was difficult, as the waves kept both trying to push me under and drag me farther out to sea. I could have easily panicked and drowned, but instead I trusted and relied on the training I had received. The first point was not to allow myself to be overtaken by fear. The second was just to consider and focus on one stroke at a time. So, when wave

1 Francisco, R. P. (1999). Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication. In Cooke, A. L., Brazzel, M., Craig, A. S., & Greig, B. (Eds.), *Reading Book for Human Relations Training, Eighth Edition*. NTL Institute.

2 Richard P. Francisco, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist, a Lecturer in Management at the GSB, and an Interpersonal Dynamics instructor. I asked him if / how he wanted me to reference his identity as a Black / African American man. Here was his response, which I'd like to quote in full: "On my birth certificate, my race is listed as "Colored." And I grew up Negro (which is Spanish for Black). And then in 1968, I heard brother James Brown's (the "godfather of soul") song (way before the term "African American" emerged): "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud." And all of those Negroes and Colored folks of my generation said it loud, we were Black and we were proud to be Black. And I still am."

3 These infamous words by Na'vi, Link's fairy companion, have become known by many gamers.

after wave would come crashing down on my head, I simply took a breath and swam under the surface, resurfacing again to take another breath, and repeated the process until I was safely on shore.

The process of communication can sometimes be as dangerous as swimming too far out into the ocean. People do get into communications that are sometimes far over their heads. And they sometimes drown in an ocean of emotions during those communications. In general, individuals drown when they make the mistake of thinking that because they can speak with some alacrity and clarity, they are able to communicate. But just as swimming in the ocean involves having skills and tools to fall back upon when you find yourself in dangerous waters, individuals also need skills and tools to help them get through some of the dangers lurking in the waters of the process of communication.

And what are some of those dangers? One danger is misunderstanding. It is basically common knowledge that most everyday misunderstandings derive from ill-delivered communications. That in turn leads to conflict. Each of us is easily able to recall a time when we have verbally fought with a colleague, a coworker, a friend, or a significant other due to a communication misunderstanding. And often, when the disagreement or argument has concluded — and usually not on the best of terms — neither party has the skills or tools to repair the damage done to the relationship.

Other dangers in the waters of interpersonal communication include such things as poor listening, an inability or refusal to empathize, defensiveness, sarcasm, inappropriate criticism, and the like. The list of dangers in those waters is almost endless and far too many individuals fool themselves into thinking they are quite capable of going through those dangerous waters with the limited skills and tools they have used all their lives. They refuse to acknowledge the complexity of interpersonal communications or the skill needed to have success in that area. So, they often drown in damaged interpersonal relationships — at work, at home, and at play.

One useful skill that helps to simplify the complexities of interpersonal communication is an understanding of a model called The Five

Levels of Interpersonal Communication. The five levels, in order of interpersonal depth, are *ritual*, *extended ritual*, *surface*, *feelings (about self in relation to content)*, and *feelings (about us and our relationship)*.

To explore and expand the model and add to the ease of understanding it, the ocean is again used as a metaphor. Picture the first level, *ritual*, as a high-flying bird: a seagull circling far above the water, ducking in and out of low-hanging clouds. The *extended ritual*, or the second level of communication in the model, is also above the water. However, it is not quite as high as the birds flying at level one, but rather level two might be described as the top mast of a tall sailing ship. The third level, *surface*, is just that: the surface of the water. It is the level on which birds, boats, and people float or swim on top of the water. Levels four and five, *feelings*, are below the surface. Level five of course is deeper than level four. However, neither level four nor five can be explored, seen, or felt until an individual is willing to take a risk and leave his or her safe place on the surface of the water and dive headlong underneath. Going beneath the surface anytime — especially for the first time — is akin to the novice scuba diver going underneath the ocean waters. That can be both

## The Five Levels of Interpersonal Communication

LEVEL 1: RITUAL
LEVEL 2: EXTENDED RITUAL
LEVEL 3: SURFACE
LEVEL 4: FEELINGS ABOUT SELF IN RELATION TO CONTENT
LEVEL 5: FEELINGS ABOUT US AND OUR RELATIONSHIP

very scary and very fascinating and a beautiful area of self-discovery.

# Understanding the Five Levels

## Level One: Ritual

Eric Berne introduced the concept of “rituals” in his 1964 bestseller about the psychology of human relationships, *Games People Play*.<sup>4</sup> Berne defines “rituals” as a simple form of social activity. As defined in this model of interpersonal communication, ritual is the simplest form or level of communication. It is a basic level of communication. Though ritual is the starting point for deepening interpersonal relationships, some interpersonal relationships may never go beyond the simple ritual. Consider the following:

*Person A is a security guard at a high-tech company. He has worked for the company in the same position for three years. Person B is a software engineer who has also worked for the company for three years. For the last three years when B has walked past A's station, A has acknowledged B by saying, “Good morning, how are you?” B has always replied “Fine,” smiled, nodded, and walked on. Neither A nor B has ever bothered to extend their communication beyond their ritual.*

The example above is a classic level-one communication. It is communication that simply allows two people to acknowledge each other as human beings and to acknowledge that each works for the same company. Moreover, level-one communication allows each participant to feel a sense of safety, security, and well-being. As noted, although level-one communication is the foundation for deepening interpersonal relationships, Person A and Person B may never deepen their communications and may continue level-one communication for another three years and beyond.

## Level Two: Extended Ritual

As the name implies, level-two communication is an extension of level-one communication.

Expanding upon the first example, a level-two communication might sound somewhat like the following:

*Person A to Person B as B approaches A's station: “Good morning, how are you?”*

*Person B (nodding and responding with a smile): “Fine.”*

*Person A (as B continues to walk): “That's great. Yes, that is great, and it looks like we're going to have a great day weather-wise.”*

*Person B (pausing to respond): “Yeah, you're probably right about that. Too bad we must spend it indoors.”*

*Person A: “Yeah, too bad, but have a great day of work.”*

*Person B: “Thanks, you too.”*

The difference between *ritual* and *extended ritual* is that an extended ritual may change from day to day. As a rule, a ritual does not change. The following demonstrates how A and B's extended ritual may appear a day later:

*Person A: “Good morning, how are you doing today?”*

*Person B: (again nodding and responding with a smile) “Not bad.”*

*Person A: “Good to hear that and I hope it continues.”*

*Person B: “Thanks a lot and I hope you are doing alright today.”*

*Person A: “Oh, I'm doing just fine.”*

*Person B: “Great, see you tomorrow.” (and B walks on)*

While there is more depth to the level of communication in *extended ritual* than in *ritual*, it is nevertheless a very safe level of communication. On those two levels of communication, Person A and Person B can engage each other without fear of emotionally hurting the other. Additionally, on those levels there is no commitment or danger of misinterpreted communication. These two levels enable us to keep a safe distance from others;

4 Berne, E. (1996). *Games People Play* (Reissue edition). Ballantine Books.

so safe that we do not need to know the other person's name to communicate on those levels. Indeed, level-one and level-two communication can be carried on between complete strangers. And most communications with unfamiliar persons are level-one and two communications.

Though level-one and two communications are at most very superficial, they are necessary, as they do serve as a foundation to build trust and safety in interpersonal relationships. In doing that, they serve to assist individuals to be able to move into the deeper levels of communication.

### Level Three: Surface

Along with level-two, level-three is the level that, on a given day, individuals operate on the most, especially in their place of work. Level-three or *surface* communications involve giving and receiving information, analyzing projects in meetings, problem solving about office procedures, sharing and talking about tasks, sharing information about self and self-accomplishments (self-disclosure) on a safe level, making statements regarding favorite hobbies or sports teams, talking about cute things your children have done, talking about your favorite movies, and the like. Again, using the previous examples of Person A and B, a level-three communication might be as follows:

*Person A to Person B as B approaches A's station: "Good morning, how are you?"*

*Person B (nodding and responding with a smile): "Fine."*

*Person A: "That's great. By the way, we've been saying 'Hi' to each other for about three years and I'm sorry to say, I don't know your name or the area in which you work."*

*Person B, while extending his hand to shake A's: "Why, I'm Kareem. I work in engineering."*

*Person A: "Pleased to meet you, Kareem. My name is Rajesh and of course you already know that I work for security."*

*Kareem: "Well, it is good to finally know the name behind the face I've seen for the past three years. See you tomorrow, Rajesh."*

Notice, however, that Kareem and Rajesh still do not really know each other. They know each other's names only. And though they have made a personal connection and no doubt feel safer in their relationship, it still has very little if any depth. It is also important to note that although Kareem and Rajesh reached a level-three communication by sharing information (content concerning their names and work areas), they could easily return to a level-one or two communication the next day. For example:

*Rajesh: "Good morning, Kareem. How are you doing?"*

*Kareem: "Fine, Rajesh, and you?"*

*Rajesh: "Just fine."*

*Kareem: "Well, have a good day." (he walks on)*

Regressing back to the previous level of communication may happen when one or both parties feel uncomfortable with the new level. In the above example, the only way to keep communication from reverting to a level of less depth would be for either Kareem or Rajesh or both to keep pressing for more information about the other. Gaining information, such as what specific duties the other does for the company, where he lives, is he married, does he have children, will not only continue level-three communication, but set the foundation for moving into the deeper levels.

### Level Four: Feelings (About Self in Relation to Content)

Level-four communication is below the level of surface communication and it is a level of risk-taking. It occurs when the information provided on level three becomes more personal and has depth. It is more than Kareem conveying to Rajesh that he works in engineering. It is Kareem taking a risk, after the relationship has developed between him and Rajesh, to let Rajesh know of his real feelings concerning the engineering division and his work there. A level-four communication might be as follows:

*Rajesh: "Good morning, Kareem, how are you doing?"*

*Kareem: "Well to be honest, Rajesh, not too good. I feel just awful."*

Rajesh: "What's up?"

Kareem: "To tell you the truth, I am so upset about the way my performance appraisal went yesterday. I was put down and eaten alive... (pausing and shaking his head)... That didn't and still doesn't feel too good. I don't know what to do."

In the above communication, Kareem takes the risk to share his true feelings of the moment with Rajesh. He also reveals to Rajesh that he has a certain despair, as he says, "I don't know what to do." If you were Rajesh, how would you respond? Do you respond on level four and stay beneath the surface with Kareem? Or would you feel so overcome with fear and have the need to come up above the surface for air that you'd give a level-three or two response. Before exploring those questions, the fifth level of the communication model is reviewed.



### Level Five: Feelings (About Us and Our Relationship)

Level five is the deepest of the five levels of communication. It is the level that involves the greatest risks. It is the level of giving and receiving honest feedback, listening to another individual without getting defensive when hard messages are communicated, responding to another's communication in ways that help the other to clarify his or her message, and reflecting the feelings of the other. In general, it is the level of being able to talk to someone in an honest

and straightforward way about your feelings concerning the relationship between the two of you. Continuing the example of the level-four communication from the point at which Kareem tells Rajesh "I don't know what to do," a level five communication might be:

Rajesh: "Are you asking me what to do, Kareem?"

Kareem: "I guess in a way I am, but I know you can't tell me. It's something I need to figure out for myself. But thanks for your support. And something else, Rajesh, I'm glad we connected. Even though it's only been for a couple of months. You're a good person and friend. I'm only sorry we wasted three years."

Rajesh: "Thanks, Kareem. I appreciate your saying that. I, too, value our relationship. As for helping you on this performance appraisal thing, why don't we have lunch later today and talk some more. I'm not an engineer or an HR person, but I know that sometimes just talking things through helps. And I am willing to listen."

In the last example, both Kareem and Rajesh acknowledge the value of their relationship. It is a "here and now" communication in which they consider several issues (most unspoken) currently in their relationship. Trust, the value of a close friendship, and honest straightforward communication are but a few of the ingredients that distinguish level-four and five communications.

Level-four and five forms of communication always focus on the "here and now" rather than the "there and then." "There and then" communications focus on things outside of the immediate relationship and are generally shallower than "here and now" communications. "There and then" communications can readily be found on levels two and three.



# Successfully Navigating the Levels

To gain the skill of successfully navigating through each of the levels, it is first important to understand and note that there are no wrong levels. Each level has a legitimate and proper function within the communication process. Additionally, we all have at one time or another, depending upon the circumstance, engaged in all five levels.

Levels one through three are safe and build a foundation for deepening our interpersonal relationships. It is difficult if not virtually impossible to achieve levels four and five without first building a solid communication foundation using levels one through three. Moreover, it should come as no surprise that levels one through three are the levels on which individuals feel the most comfort and therefore are used the most.

Additionally, most individuals work hard to avoid level four and five communications, because they know those levels are difficult and require certain skills to safely navigate them. They are also often seen as scary and, among some individuals and organizations, level-four and five communications are given derogatory labels such as “touchy-feely” or “real soft.” Those labels reinforce the fact that communications on levels four and five are not only to be avoided, but are generally not worth the time and effort spent on them. Through the nonverbal norm of avoidance, organizations as well as families teach people to stay away from level-four and five communications. For example, most managers would rather harshly scold an employee who is consistently late for meetings and work (a level-three communication) than give that person honest feedback about his or her behavior (a level-four or five communication). They would rather do the scolding because it is easier and feedback, especially when given with feelings, may lead to unearthing the real reasons for the tardiness. And that, in turn, might lead to additional and uncomfortable level-four and five communications.

# Culture and the Five Levels

The model of *Five Levels of Communication* is also consistent across and within cultures. For example, it is not only mainstream White American culture that discourages the use of or stays away from level-four and five communications. Most cultures avoid those levels of communication and few cultures in both their formal and informal socialization processes teach individuals the benefits of level-four and five communications. Rather, in most cultures, just as in the dominant culture in the United States, these two levels, when and if used, are only used sporadically in families or with close or intimate partners.

Understanding and using level-four and five communication increases the potential for gain in cross-cultural communication. The gain is especially significant for organizations that desire to improve cultural relationships throughout all their organizational levels. Moreover, the gain can be extended to society in general as we use those levels to work on solving the long-established difficulties involving racial, cultural, and gender differences.

The need for advancement in cross-cultural communication has never been more apparent than it is today. Current sociological research indicates that one of the most salient problems we have in societies throughout the world today is race relations. Why else would many world leaders, including those of our country, establish national commissions on race to investigate that issue? Additionally, survey after survey in this country shows a polarization of races, especially between the Black and White races. That polarization is due in large part to years of miscommunication and misinterpretation of communication by both sides.

Real communication — both sides hearing, understanding, and empathizing with the other — will not occur until trust, cohesion, and openness are established. To do that, risks must be taken to go beyond level-one through three communications. To date, that has not happened and it does not appear that there are signs on the horizon to soon bring it about. So, as a society, unless we are

willing to risk level-four and five communications, which often involve taking personal ownership for miscommunications, we may be doomed to grapple with the problem of strained relationships between the races forever.

## Effectively Using the Model

The Five Levels of Communication is indeed a very useful model for understanding the complexities of the process of communication. Through knowledge of it, individuals can not only diagnose the effectiveness or efficacy of communication but are also able to instantly use that information to make an informed choice about how the communication can proceed. To effectively do that, or to use the model, an individual must engage in self-assessment. The self-assessment begins with the individual asking and answering the following questions:

- At what level of communication do I operate the most?
- Do I operate at safe levels (one through three) all the time? If so, why?
- Do I allow myself to be open to levels four and five? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Do I block or interfere with another's level-four or five communications? By redirecting the communication to content subject matter, telling a joke, or being sarcastic?
- Do I scare others away from me by jumping too quickly into level-four or five communications?

The next step in the assessment process is for the individual to determine whether he or she possesses the interpersonal tools to safely navigate through all five levels of the model. Tools such as listening actively, making "I" statements, giving and receiving feedback, being able to appropriately self-disclose, and responding empathetically are all helpful and needed. Moreover, understanding and practicing with a model such as the Johari Window (See Chapter 2) helps in acquiring the tools. Such practice can readily take place in and is encouraged in a T-group. One purpose of the T-group is to help

individuals learn to sustain their capacity to communicate at levels four and five without the fear of drowning in a sea of emotion. Additionally, individuals who have never been in a T-group or do not have access to one can always enlist the aid of close friends and intimate partners to provide feedback about their use of interpersonal tools.

Based upon the above ongoing assessment, individuals can know the current level on which they are communicating and are then able to decide whether to remain on that level or move to another. The decision to change levels or remain on the same level is based of course on the assessment of whether the communication or interaction is effective.

## Conclusion

Safely on shore, I turned and looked at the waters of the ocean. If not for the tools and skills I had acquired through learning and practice, I surely would have drowned. I have always had respect for anything that is so overwhelming and overpowering as the ocean. As a twelve-year-old, I thought nothing could come close to the ocean in terms of magnitude. However, as I grew older, I discovered that the process of communicating within interpersonal relationships can be just as overwhelming and overpowering as ocean currents. It, too, demands respect as well as knowledge of tools and skills to keep one safely swimming within its ever-changing and complex waters.