

The Satir Interaction Model

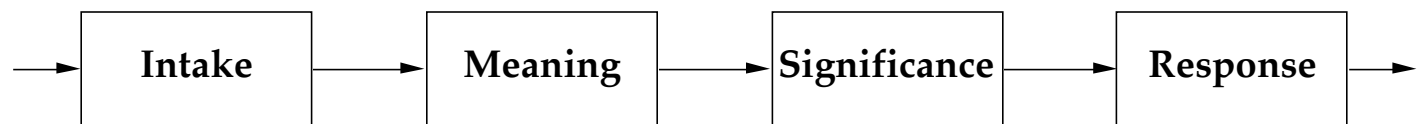
Purpose

- To understand what goes on within each one of us during communication
- To provide insight into what might be happening when a person's response is not what is expected

There are two roles in communication: the Sender sends a message; the Receiver receives it and returns with a response.

The Satir Interaction Model examines what happens within the Receiver: how the Receiver processes the message from the Sender and formulates a response to the Sender.

There are four steps to this model:



When communication "works," the Receiver's Response is within the bounds of the Sender's expectations; the Sender/Receiver continue communicating rapidly, effectively, and these steps are invisible.

When communication "goes wrong," the Receiver's Response is beyond the bounds of the Sender's expectations. Often, these steps are invisible to the Receiver, and the Sender may be puzzled, hurt, confused by the Receiver's response. The Satir Interaction Model can be used to "dissect" the communication, to identify what went wrong, and to try to resolve the "gone wrong" communication immediately.

When communication is "at risk of going wrong," the Receiver can recognise and use the Satir Interaction Model in an attempt to "right the wrong" before it actually does go wrong.

Doing This

In the following discussion, "we" and "our" refers to our role as the Receiver.

INTAKE

- What we see, hear, taste, touch, smell ...
- What we take-in with our five senses
- What the Sender sends and the 5-sensory environment in which the Sender is sending

What could go wrong?

- We do not see or hear or otherwise observe what the Sender sent; we do not receive the Intake
- The Intake is obscured by something in the environment, and we only receive a part of it (e.g., too much noise, so we do not hear everything; our view is obstructed)
- Something about our relationship with the Sender influences the accuracy of our Intake (e.g., our friend talks a lot and says very little, so we "filter out" most of what he says)

- We do not understand the Sender (e.g., the Sender has an accent or uses terms not familiar to us)
- One sensory Intake overwhelms another (e.g., the aroma from the kitchen causes us to focus on dinner, not what the person is saying to us)
- We have learned to ignore certain Intake (e.g., we may have been trained to turn away from those things that are "painful" to our culture, such as the homeless)
- We have finite brain capacity; in order to survive and be effective in this world, we learn to discriminate early in life, and pay attention to some Intake, and just ignore others; we just "miss" things as a normal, natural part of living
- We are feeling "not-OK" to begin with (e.g., we are tired, ill, distressed about other matters, worried, etc), and we are pre-disposed to mis-interpret (or even miss) the Intake

How to recover?

Check your Intake against what the Sender sent, using "I" messages.

- "Could you please repeat ... I could not hear ... "
- "I cannot see what you are pointing to ... "
- "I was distracted by that delicious smell of chocolate ... what did you say?" (Or, "Those cookies are just too distracting; let's take a cookie break, and then discuss this problem.")
- "I'm not sure I understood you; could you please slower/more clearly?"
- "I am not familiar with the technical jargon you are using; could you try to simplify your explanation a little bit?"
- "Let me check if I heard you correctly ... did you say xxx?"
- "I'm sorry; I'm not able to cope right now ... can we do this later?"

MEANING

- How we interpret the totality of the Intake we received - what we saw, heard, tasted, touched, smelled

What could go wrong?

- We make a Meaning that is different from what the Sender intended
- We make the worst possible Meaning
- We make the best possible Meaning
- The Meaning we make is influenced by something in the environment vs what the Sender sent (e.g., multiple Intakes and an un-specific message: if we are at a party with music, drink, and chocolate, and the Sender says, "isn't this grand?" we may think the Sender is referring to the music, while the Sender means the chocolate)
- Something in our relationship with the Sender influences the interpretation we make (e.g., if we do not trust the Sender, we may assume the worst possible Meaning)
- We have learned to make certain Meanings from certain symbols/Intake (e.g., if the Sender is wearing flashy clothing, the Sender must be frivolous)
- We have finite experience, and the Meanings we make derive from our experiences, and so we may make the wrong Meaning.

- We may recognise that we do not know what the Sender means, and we choose not to check
- We are feeling "not-OK" to begin with (e.g., we are tired, ill, distressed about other matters, worried, etc), and we are pre-disposed to make the worst possible Meaning
- We got the Intake wrong or incompletely, so we are at risk of making an incorrect interpretation

How to recover?

Check your Meaning against what the Sender intends, using "I" messages.

- "I'm not sure I understand what you mean ... "
- "Let me see if I understand ... did you mean xxx?"
- "I'm totally confused; I'm not following your explanation ... "
- "I am not familiar with yyy; could you use another example?"
- "I am surprised to hear you say that; that's not what I would have expected ... maybe I misunderstood ... "
- Think of at least three possible Meanings, and check each one ... "I am confused; let me check a few things with you ... Do you mean xxx?" ... if you are right three times in a row, you more than likely have made a correct interpretation (this works well if what the Sender has sent is complex)
- Try the three possible Meanings with a twist: "I am confused ... here is the best possible Meaning I could make ... here is the worst possible Meaning I could make ... and here is what I think is most likely ... I'm guessing what you mean is somewhere in here ... "
- "I'm sorry; I'm not able to cope right now ... can we do this later?"
- Go back and check the Intake; if that is wrong, the Meaning is most likely wrong

SIGNIFICANCE

- How we feel about the Meaning(s)/interpretations we have made of the Intake
- How we feel about that feeling (OK? hurt? angry? joyous? confused?)

What could go wrong?

- We feel bad/negatively about the Meaning we have made
- Our feelings about the Meaning are influenced by something in the environment vs the Meaning we made (e.g., if we are feeling sad already, the message from the Sender may trigger a much greater sadness than if we were not feeling sad)
- Something in our relationship with the Sender influences how we feel about the Meaning (e.g., if we do not trust the Sender, we may feel angry or belittled by whatever the Sender sent, especially if we have made the worst possible Meaning already)
- We have learned that we should feel certain ways about certain Meanings (e.g., Intake is young person drinking from a bottle in a brown paper bag at a bus stop; Meaning is person is drinking alcohol and is under-age; Significance/feeling is anger at the person for doing something illegal; Significance/feeling about the feeling is not-OK; we have been trained that drinking in public is not-OK)
- We are feeling "not-OK" to begin with (e.g., we are tired, ill, distressed about other matters, worried, etc), and we are pre-disposed to feel even "less OK"

- We got the Intake wrong or incompletely, or we made a Meaning that does not match what the Sender intended, so we are at risk of feeling not-OK with the communication

How to recover?

Check your Significance - your feelings, and your feelings about those feelings. Try to get to an "OK" or better position before responding, and then respond. Otherwise, try to defer a response until you can be OK, and offer an "I" message.

- "I'm not comfortable, and I'd rather not continue/respond."
- "I'm really upset, and if I respond right now, I might regret what I say later."
- "I just don't know how to respond to you ... "
- "I cannot consider what you're asking of me; it doesn't seem right to me ... "
- "I'd like more time before responding, OK?"
- "I need to give this more consideration; it just doesn't feel right to me."
- "I'm sorry; I'm not able to cope right now ... can we do this later?"
- Go back and check the Meaning and the Intake; if they are wrong, the Significance is most likely wrong

RESPONSE

- How we choose to respond to the Sender, based on the Intake we observed, the Meaning we made, and the Significance we felt

What could go wrong?

- We do feel not-OK, and we feel not-OK about that (Significance)
- Our Responses are guided by something in the environment (e.g., in a meeting with the customer, we choose not to point out when our colleague made an error)
- Something in our relationship with the Sender influences how we choose to respond (e.g., even if we know we are right, we choose not to disagree with our teachers, because teachers should be honoured, always)
- We have learned that we should respond certain ways to certain Intakes, Meanings, Significances (e.g., we learned that "boys don't cry" and "girls should not act too smart" and "always defer to your elders" and "never disagree in front of the customer" and "the teacher is always right"); these are our "rules for responding"
- We are feeling "not-OK" to begin with (e.g., we are tired, ill, distressed about other matters, worried, etc), and we are pre-disposed to feel even "less OK"
- We got the Intake wrong or incompletely, or we made a Meaning that does not match what the Sender intended, or the Significance we feel does not match what the Sender might expect, so we are at risk of providing a Response that does not match the expectations of the Sender

How to recover?

Check your Significance - your feelings, and your feelings about those feelings. Try to get to an "OK" or better position before responding, and then respond. Otherwise, try to defer a response until you can be OK, and offer an "I" message.

- "I cannot respond right now; let me get back with you."

- "I need more time before I can respond."
- "I need to think this through, when I'm more clear-headed."
- "This is really difficult for me, and I'm not sure what I say really reflects how I feel."
- "I don't quite have the right words, so if you want an answer right now, what I say might be 'tougher' than I really mean."
- "I'm sorry; I'm not able to cope right now ... can we do this later?"
- Go back and check the Significance, the Meaning, and the Intake; if they are wrong, the Response is most likely wrong

An Example: Communication "Gone Wrong"

The Intake in this example is real. In fact, it happened when I was teaching communication skills. This example proved so useful in illustrating the Satir Interaction Model, that we used to focus the discussion it in all five class sessions.

Intake: Matt entered the classroom, where I was teaching. It was Tuesday, 10:00am; class was to begin at 10:05am. Matt took a seat toward the back of the room, put his arms on the table, crossed them, put his head on his arms, turned his head, closed his eyes, and had a semi-smile on his face. A few students looked at him.

For the sake of this example, let's assume that I'm not feeling very well, and that I have been annoyed with Matt in previous class sessions.

Meaning: Best possible meaning: Matt was relaxed, glad to be there, and getting ready to engage. Worst possible meaning: Matt was bored, sick of the class I was teaching, irritable and ready to be irritating, not respectful, and generally annoyed to have to be there. Most likely meaning: Matt had worked late the previous night, was tired, was comfortable enough with me and his classmates to exhibit his fatigue, and ready to participate actively, if needed.

Given my state of being (not well) and my past experience with Matt (annoyance), I unconsciously select the worst possible meaning.

Significance: I'm not feeling very good to start, and Matt's "antics" really get me angry. How dare he act so arrogantly in my class! If he doesn't want to be here, he should just go away! I feel angry! And I should not be angry at a student, after all, should I? So I feel badly about feeling angry!

Response: I ignore all the rules for responding (good people should never raise their voices!), and I yell at Matt, "Look - if you don't want to be here, if I bore you that much, then just don't bother coming to class!!!"

... and Matt suddenly sits up straight, hands down at his side; Matt's eyes open wide, his jaw drops ... is he shocked by my Response? Would my Response match his expectations? I do not believe so! Would this exchange contribute to a healthy relationship between us? I doubt it! Would it accomplish anything? Yes; I would let Matt know how I feel ... and probably lose his respect and the respect of the other students in this class (and rumours spread ...). I do not like these results, and then I'd feel worse about it all ...

An Example: Communication "Gone Better"

Intake: Same as above ... this is a real story.

And, in the real situation, I was a little tired but otherwise feeling fine; I was excited about teaching this module on communication, and Matt was a very attentive, good student, adding

value and fun in class, and often stopping by my office to "just chat." Moreover, I was delighted, because Matt had, inadvertently, given me an absolutely perfect example to use!

Meaning: Knowing Matt, I suspected the most likely meaning: that he had worked late, was comfortable, and was ready to participate.

Significance: I felt sympathetic, and a little sad, that he was working so hard, so early in the term. I felt OK about those feelings.

Response (just before class began, officially): "Hey Matt - it looks like you had a long night again, eh? How ya doin'?"

... and Matt confirmed my "most likely meaning." And, after a brief exchange he was willing to let me use his "Intake" as an example.

Other Ideas

- If we get the Intake wrong, chances are very high that our Meaning and Significance are impacted, and our Response may be unexpected.
- What is going on, now, in the environment around us influences each step.
- What has gone on before, in our personal and cultural background and environment, influences each step.
- Our relationship, past and present, with the Sender influences each step.
- When we get stuck, going back to Intake, and getting agreement on Intake, is the best place to re-start.
- If we are not-OK at any point in the communication, the best thing may be to ask for a "time out."
- Two minds are necessary in the process; there is no such thing as "mindless communication."
- The following hypothesis links the four Myers-Briggs leadership styles with the different steps in the Satir Interaction Model:
 - SJ (planners, organisers): best at Intake
 - NT (visionaries, innovators): best at Meaning
 - NF (cheerleaders, motivators): best at Significance
 - SP (jugglers, clowns): best at Response

In the best case, this might explain why different people may have very different views of the same situation. In the worst case, when under stress, people with different styles may get "stuck" in their preferred step of communication.

Related Activities

- Communication skills

References

- Bamberger, Judy. *Effective Meetings Helpful Hints*. 2000.
- Bolton, Robert. *People Skills - How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others, and Resolve Conflicts*. New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 1979. ISBN: 0-671-62248-X. (Bolton uses the term "three-part assertion message" for what we call "gentle confrontation.")

- Satir, Virginia, John Banmen, Jane Gerber, and Maria Gomori. *The Satir Model, Family Therapy and Beyond*. Palo Alto CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1991. ISBN: 8314-0078-1.
- Weinberg, Gerald M. *Becoming a Technical Leader*. New York NY: Dorset House Publishing, 1986. ISBN: 0-932633-02-1. (This discusses the four leadership styles.)
- The connection between the steps in the Satir Interaction Model and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator were introduced by Weinberg, McLendon, and Weinberg.