Chapter 8
Communication Accommodation Theory:
Finding the Right Approach

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ABSTRACT

A lack of face-to-face interactions affects society while digital influences on the world create and sustain communications characterized by limited feedback, incomplete information, tentative connections, and misunderstandings. Thousands of digital messages lack the full communication components—sender-receiver-feedback— creating barriers to communication completion. The ability to adapt to the receiver and the medium is enhanced in face-to-face communication, as defined within communication accommodation theory (CAT). CAT allows all parties to emphasize or minimize differences in verbal and non-verbal conversations.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, modern society is challenged by a lack of direct, face-to-face interactions and digital influences, resulting in broken communications characterized by limited feedback, incomplete information, tentative connections, and misunderstandings. Without effective sender-receiver-feedback, the thousands of digital messages exchanged daily results in barriers to complete communication. Senders who can adapt messages to be more likely accurately understood by the receiver, often through use of the appropriate medium, are more likely to experience success in those interactions. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) posits that successful communication is often determined by each party's ability to emphasize or minimize verbal and non-verbal interaction disconnects. The theory maintains that people adjust speech, vocal patterns, and gestures to help promote mutual understanding in communication (Gallois and Giles 2015).

In business situations, leaders must adapt their approach to interpersonal and group communication to the information exchange situation at hand. This accommodation and flexibility increases understanding, which makes interactions more powerful. Great communicators listen and learn on the fly to adjust to each participant's emotions, risk, and feedback and ensure successful interactions. Approaches are tailored in the group atmosphere to adjust to challenges of the location or time of the interaction.

Communicators must not only adapt, they must use visual and verbal cues to ensure the adaptations are right for each situation. This is important because communication adjustments that fail can lead to dissatisfying, problematic, or even adversarial experiences (Gallois, Giles & Ogay 2005).

There are many ways personal and social identity affect our interactions and CAT is a way to ensure success in making these adjustments (Giles 2008). CAT demonstrates that people accommodate communication partners by adjusting to their gestures, vocal patterns, and speech when dealing with social encounters, interactions, or negotiations (Gallois and Giles 2015). Minimizing or emphasizing differences with interaction partners is normal and often occurs without sender or receiver realizing it. CAT assists with verbal and non-verbal challenges and helps communicators navigate the path to understanding that is filled with considerations of language, context, identity, interpersonal factors, and intergroup factors.

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