Preparing for a New Age: Using A Transactional Analysis Approach
For Teaching Interpersonal Communication Skills

Peter J. Biegel, M.S., N.C.C.
Purdue University - Statewide Technology
South Bend, Indiana

Abstract

The transformation of American industry is well on its way. The impact of corporate downsizing and the desire to regain or capture new markets in the global marketplace have driven companies to reconsider the future roles of staff members. Many who believed that they would prosper in a traditional engineering career now have found that they are ill-prepared to meet the challenges placed upon them in these restructured organizations.

Engineers, not unlike other professionals, lack adequate preparation in what one may consider "soft" or interpersonal skills. Of primary importance are communication skills. More specifically are those used in group or team settings as we find industries moving toward more empowered work groups and Total Quality Management approaches to business. Engineers now find themselves requiring some prowess in group dynamics, understanding roles that members play, and the communication patterns that occur between them.

One means to improve the ability to accurately read communication interchanges and to respond appropriately is to become familiar with the work of Dr. Eric Berne in Transactional Analysis. Berne provides a framework for the analysis of communicational transactions between people based upon the concept of three ego states: Parent, Adult, and Child. His analysis construct utilizes this set of key words to illustrate how individuals are effectively understood when communicating from these separate states.

This paper proposes that through training in interpersonal communication skills from a transactional framework, engineers will be better prepared to effectively determine ego states and more accurately communicate in group interactions. A newly acquired proficiency in these skills will allow engineers to find a comfortable fit, as corporate entities establish their new identity in the global marketplace. Consequently, engineers will be actively contributing to the success of the organization.

I. Introduction

In today's organization, engineers are using their technical skills in less isolation and participating in more diverse work groups. These groups include individuals spanning the entire organization representing technical, production, purchasing, marketing, sales, as well as management personnel. The production line approach to accomplishing tasks is disappearing. Instead, these work groups are performing tasks simultaneously, and individuals work closely together to provide their expertise in a timely manner. This approach has shown great potential in increasing the productivity in problem-solving and enhancing product development.

II. Language & Transactional Analysis

Egan (1973) believes that language is the device by which man examines the world about him. He further states that if we are afraid of this world, then our language lack strength and color. If we are actively engaged in our world and challenged by it then our language will be strong and searching. In 1953 Eric Berne developed his theory of transactional analysis to analyze human behavior through the transactions or communications between people. The key ingredient to creating effective work groups is to gain an understanding of the language participants use to communicate within groups.

The basis of our interactions with others, Berne proposes, comes from the ego state that predominates during a particular communication transaction. Bennett (1976) sees these ego states as a consistent combination of thought-feelings and related behaviors. To him this means that our insides and outsides tend to be in synchronization. With this synchronicity, their is a congruency that exists between words and actions within a collective database that we have accumulated from infancy through pre-adulthood. With a degree of predictability certain established groupings of behaviors have the same meaning each time they are displayed.

Berne's three ego states are PARENT, ADULT, and CHILD. Each of these ego state behaviors originates from different sources, is expressed uniquely, and produces different consequences for those around us.(Bennette 1976) His theory suggests that at any one time within a transaction we operate from only one of these ego states. The CHILD state is the most representative of our individual core emotions and feelings. This is the only state present at birth and is developed in the first five years. In this state the child internalizes the verbal and non-verbal impact of the influence of either parents or significant caregivers. Encoded emotional energy is raw and vibrant, a true source of our intuitive and creative thinking. It is best illustrated if the CHILD ego state is divided into three parts: Natural CHILD, Adaptive CHILD, and Little Professor,

The Natural CHILD is the impulsive, untrained, spontaneous, expressive infant in each of us. In contrast, the Adaptive CHILD, who is a modification of the Natural CHILD, has been negatively influenced by early traumatic experiences, demands, and training. The Little Professor is manipulative, self-centered and creative and bases its problem-solving approach on intuition and fantasy.

The PARENT state originates from outside of ourselves. During the maturation process parents, authority figures, and social institutions feed attitudes, feelings and ideas into our databanks. In our eyes these sources are unquestionable and these attitudes are incorporated into our value and belief systems. In this ego state we operate under rules, laws, and others overbearing care, and expectations. This state takes two forms: the Nurturing PARENT and the Critical PARENT. The Nurturing Parent is supportive and helpful yet in its extreme can be overly protective and smothering. On the other hand, the Critical PARENT is judgmental and moralistic. While the Nurturing PARENT has some usefulness in interacting with others, the Critical PARENT is never productive.

The ADULT state is described by Meininger (1973) as the computer-like part of us in that it processes data, computes probabilities and makes decisions based on facts. It operates in the "here and now" and "real time" rather than in the past as the other two ego states. The ADULT state gathers data from the CHILD, PARENT and from itself to perform the function of mediation and reality- checking. This state is not age-dependent but rather experientially based. All data collected is attached to similar experiences and cataloged accordingly. Only through an accumulative process and practice can the ADULT ego state be effective in performing its functions. Bennett (1976) points out that the goal of the ADULT is not to do away with the CHILD or PARENT. In stead, it wishes to integrate appropriate CHILD and PARENT perspectives with its examination of objective information from the environment with the expectation of the best outcomes.

III. Ego State Diagnosis

After establishing a familiarity with the origins of each of the ego states one can build a basis for accurately identifying each state in others as well as themselves. Each ego state has both verbal and non-verbal (behavioral) elements that are somewhat universal in our culture. Recognition of these elements is the first step to becoming more successful in communication. (Morrison & O'Hearn 1977, p. 16-17)

Bennett (1976) submits that there are four forms of diagnosis for understanding what motivates an individual within the ego states. The first form is the skill to objectively examine behavioral clues exhibited in terms of facial expressions, voice tones, vocabulary, posture, and gestures. Here we are reminded that no behavior is without meaning--actions speak louder than words. In fact, some studies have shown that no more than seven percent of the communications between people is in words, forty-five percent appears to be the tone in which words are spoken, and forty-eight percent is conveyed non-verbally. (Morrison & O' Hearn 1977) A second form is ambiguous in nature: the observation of the outcome of an individual's transactions with others. We must consider the situational factors surrounding the transaction and the chosen language used by the respondent. At best, one may by chance come close to determining the respondents ego state. Thirdly, in subjective diagnosis, we query the respondent as to what ego state they are in. A self-report of their internal state helps us to deduce the operant ego state. We are cautioned to realize that the accuracy of the deduction is dependent upon the individual's ability to recognize and identify their feelings with minimum distortion. A person's past is the foundation of the fourth form of diagnosis. Historical diagnosis considers any factual information about one's childhood that may explain one's current behavior. Relevant facts would include family members, their relationships, rearing practices and particular environmental elements, (education, geography, and politics.) It must be understood that the more forms used in one's diagnosis the more reliable it will be.

## IV. Transactional Analysis

As one determines what ego state individuals are currently in, one then needs to analyze the transactions as they occur. Bennett (1976) points out that when one individual directs communication to another there is an implied expectation of how the other will respond. On the other hand, having the ability to select the appropriate ego state to transact can positively impact one's chances of obtaining the consequence that one desires. These transactions are viewed in terms of three major classes of communication as part of their associated Transactional Analysis Laws of Communication. Transactions are either complementary, crossed, or ulterior. They can be expressed diagrammatically (a transogram) by pairs of circles marked P (PARENT), A (ADULT), and C (CHILD). (Figure 1) Drawing lines between appropriate circles to represent behavior. Unbroken lines between circles show overt behavior or spoken words. Broken lines represent non-verbal or covert communication.


FIGURE 1. TRANSOGRAM
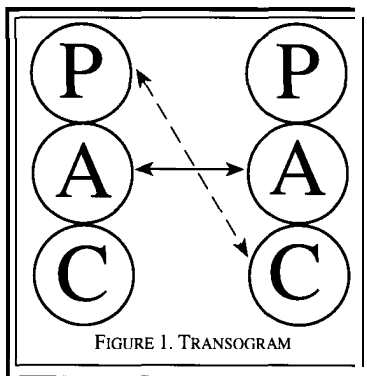
Parallel lines between circles of the same ego state imply that the respondent has responded from the ego state intended by the message sender. This describs a complementary transaction and follows Communication Rule One: *When lines are parallel in a transogram, communication may continue,* (Figure 2)

FIGURE 2. COMPLEMENTARY
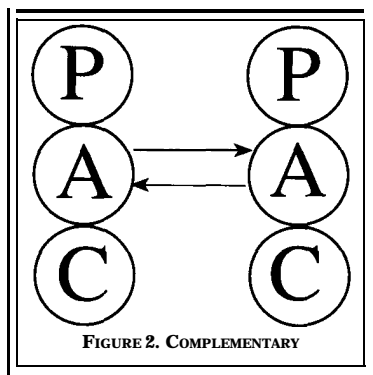
At times respondents do not reply from the ego state that was intended by the speaker. When this occurs, a crossed transaction is apparent. Crossed transactions follow Communication Rule Two: *When transactions are crossed, communication is broken off and can only be restored by returning to complementary transactions.* (Figure 3)

FIGURE 3. CROSSED
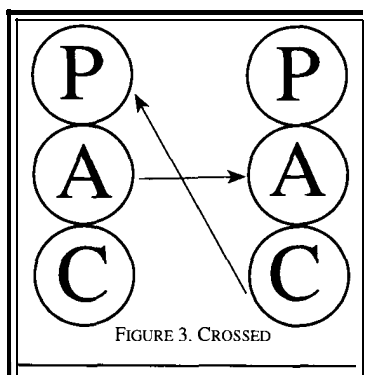
The ulterior transaction is a bit more complex in that three or more ego states are involved. A simplified explanation of ulterior transactions would be multiple transactions occurring simultaneously, one being overt or obvious while the other(s) are non-verbal conveyed through expression, tone quality, body movement, or attitude. (Figure 4)

FIGURE 4. ULTERIOR
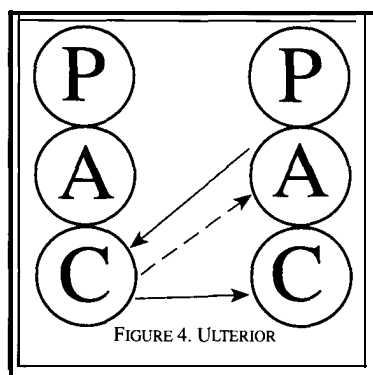
This transaction is angular in nature as one experiences the transaction and knows something different is covertly expected. When four ego states are involved, the transaction is duplex in nature and may be interpreted as flirting, double-meaning jokes, or private jokes, for example. (Figure5)

FIGURE 5. ULTERIOR-DUPLEX
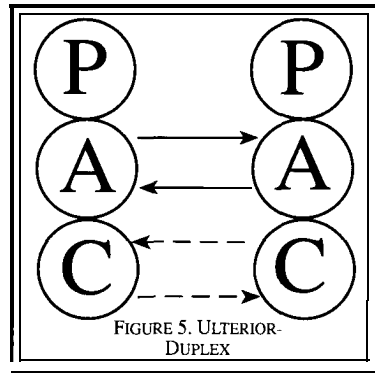
In this case those involved are not attached to the transaction and can discontinue at any time. This situation follows Communication Rule Three: *A transaction originating in two or more ego states is called ulterior. A hidden message is sent disguised as a socially acceptable communication.*

V. Conclusion

As the global economy reaches out and influences how the world conducts business, organizations will find themselves redefining the roles individuals assume within their organization. Engineers, trained adequately in the technical skills, may find themselves ill-prepared in "soft" interpersonal skills, specifically those dealing with group or team activities. If enginers become familiar with the work of Eric Berne in Transactional Analysis, they can become competent at diagnosing the presence of the PARENT, CHILD, and ADULT ego state in others as well as themselves. Once they accurately diagnose ego states they can then make an informed attempt to respond effectively to others. This, in effect, promotes communication until those involved receive the desired outcomes. With this newly squired proficiency they will become more effective in the communication process and Engineers will find themselves actively contributing toward the success of their organizations.

References

Bennett, D. TA and the Manager, AMACOM, 1976.
Egan, G. Face to Face, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1973.
Meininger, J. Success Through Transactional Analysis, Grosset& Dunlap, 1973.
Morrison, J.H. and O'Hearne, J.J. Practical Transactional Analysis in Management, Addison-Wesley
     Publishing Company, 1977.
Novey, T.B. TA for Management, JALMAR Press,Inc., 1976.

PETER J. BIEGEL
Peter J. Biegel is an assistant professor of Organizational Leadership in the Purdue University School of Technology. He teaches a variety of human resource management and supervision courses. He received his B.S. in Food Service Management from Florida International University in 1980, and a M.S. in Counseling & Human Services from Indiana University South Bend in 1989.