

The High Cost of Disrespect

By George M. Prince

In 1960 my company, Synectics, Inc.® began a systematic study of the creative process. We had been members of the Invention Design Group at Arthur D. Little, and in the process of inventing new products for their clients, had become interested in the process itself. We had established a procedure of working in a small group- 4 to 7 participants, as being far more effective than a person working alone. In the beginning we used audio tape to track the process, and were continually surprised to find the actual behaviors quite different from those we described before studying the tapes. For example, we would remember a session as being productive and orderly and find that in fact it had been wasteful with contributions being lost or ignored.

We began to identify each action in all the interactions, and attempted to evaluate them in terms of did this action increase the probability of success, or decrease it. We then designed our process to elicit more of the positive actions and fewer of the negatives.

When television became available, we switched to that and it overwhelmed us with new data on what goes on in an invention session. Video is a most remarkable tool for observing actuality and for studying interactions in a meeting and it might be likened to the microscope for studying biology. It recorded not only the words and tones, but also the non-verbal actions that can be so influential. Albert Mehrabian¹, a psychologist who was studying communication, established through experiments the relative importance of the channels in conveying meaning: word 7%, vocals (tones, hesitations, etc.) 38%, and non-verbals 55%. I believe what is important in these figures is that a heavy burden is carried by vocals and non-verbals. It does not matter whether words are 7 or 50%; two channels that we did not know much about are far more important than we had known.

As we developed our company, we moved from inventing products for our Clients to helping our Clients invent products and solve problems for themselves. This gave us a great many groups of varied kinds of people and problems to study. In addition, we offered a course in our process so that Clients could continue to be effective inventors on their own.

¹ Mehrabian, Albert, "Communication Without Words", Psychology Today, Vol. 2, No. 4, September 1968, p.52