# POSTFORMAL (MIS)COMMUNICATIONS

SARA NORA ROSS

*Dare Institute and ARINA, Inc., Bethel, Ohio, USA*

Postformal capacities should be employed on everything from poverty to war to planetary survival, yet, there are inherent, unrecognized problems to resolve before they are likely to succeed. Ironically, the very benefits of postformal thought are what make it hard to operationalize those benefits. Postformal thought-leaders need to re-learn and strategically use their earlier ways of thinking and speaking. "Translations" of words using hierarchical complexity's different languages illustrate why. Additional inquiry and dialogic interactions can improve communications and benefit work on our pressing planetary futures.

KEYWORDS: Communications, hierarchical complexity, postformal, thought.

The world is awash in the everyday talk of the concrete, abstract, and formal stages of hierarchical complexity. News reports use mostly Concrete stage 8 to tell us "who, what, when, where, and why." Meanwhile, from bosses, teachers, and parents to politicians and advertisers, Abstract stage 9 commands, slogans, and sales pitches tell us what to do and what to believe. Whether it is "Do the job right" or "Iraq has weapons of mass destruction," or "Our brand is the best"—abstract assertions influence employees, children, voters, and customers alike.

Little-noticed is the fact that neither kind of talk uses any logic or critical thinking. To the contrary. None is usually desired when one is giving orders or selling news, services, or products. If target audiences need to be convinced, the "broken record" method—repeating the assertion over and over—works appallingly well (e.g., G. W. Bush's press conference, pre-Iraq invasion, when his response to most questions was "Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction"). When target audiences are more skeptical, Formal stage 10's chains of linear logic paired with some empirical evidence may be deployed. Generically, we may hear such assurances as "Research shows such-and-such, therefore this is the correct solution" or "It is obvious that if they do 'x' then dangerous 'y' will happen. Thus, this is the correct solution because it prevents them from doing 'x' in the first place." A little logic can be a dangerous thing, albeit very convincing.

Against such everyday backdrops, postformal thinkers—in every domain of endeavor—encounter serious communication problems. What kinds of problems?[1]

---

A majority of adults with decent formal schooling can operate with Formal stage 10 thought in at least one domain. There are many domains of life and many who do not have the benefit of decent formal schooling. Overall, *post*formal thinkers have difficulty communicating with most of the world because they are a minority.

The purpose of this article is to help postformal thinkers and their communication efforts. The following section sketches the broad categories of problems. Then, some "translations" demonstrate that one word can have, for example, five different meanings depending on different orders of hierarchical complexity. I suggest we need to scaffold and support the communication of complex ideas—and why scaffolding and support are essential. Thus, the next section picks up the theme of improving communications by offering some suggestions. Concluding remarks imply the stakes for our future if postformal thought-leaders do not learn how to present their constructive ideas and methods in ways their target audiences may engage, understand, and build on.

## CATEGORIES OF POSTFORMAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

Much of the world is accustomed to authority figures keeping things simple for their followers. Much of the world wants quick-fix paths into promised lands of freedom, security, or planetary sustainability. Much of the world is conditioned to get information in quick sound-bites. Much of the world believes that what it needs to know, understand, and do *can* be thus compressed: "simple, quick, done, and ready for the next thing." Postformal thinkers know otherwise. Accordingly, Table 1 lists five categories of communication problems that arise.

Few people pause to define the terms they use. Most people assume everyone uses the same terms the same way. This is not so, especially when the words' concepts originate at Formal stage 10 (and sometimes Systematic stage 11). Such terms can become a common part of vocabularies, often adopted by other stages of thought. Thus, the same word will be used differently at different stages of development (Table 2).

The assumption that a word has one-and-the-same-meaning for everyone is so prevalent that when a definition is requested—for example, to "get on the same page" with someone in a discussion—respondents are often taken aback by the request. Such postformal efforts to ensure clear communications can backfire, with a respondent feeling insulted, confused, or dismissive of the dumb question(er). Wider recognition that the same term can mean different things could foster better communications.

## THE HIERARCHICAL BUILDING BLOCKS
## OF POSTFORMAL THOUGHT

The problems that arise in postformal communications stem partly from the fact that words are used to mean different things by different people. But it goes much deeper than that. Words are used in sentences, and sentences are required to communicate thought. At Formal stage 10, sentences are unambiguous in their linear, logical structure. This was illustrated with the "x" and "y" example earlier.

**Table 1**
**Categories of Postformal Communication Problems**

| Category Name | Nature of the Communication Problem |
| --- | --- |
| Windmills | Formal stage 10 labels describe complex issues or phenomena, e.g., "poverty" or "terrorism." Labels develop hierarchically, as in this example: Once stories of terrorist acts and groups began to proliferate, a class of acts and a class of people were labeled "terrorist," an Abstract stage 9 variable. As terrorist acts and terrorist people and terrorist victims and terrorist impacts became associated, they resulted in the Formal stage 10 term "terrorism." Labels can reduce complexity to concrete "things" to be "fought"—like enemies that exist independent of what "we" do. A result of labels helping to mask complexity is quixotic "fighting windmills" (if not wars). Early postformal thinkers use the labels but talk about systems of causation that do not jive clearly with the label, so people misunderstand them. Other postformal thinkers use few common labels, which disconnects them from mainstream vocabulary and thus from being "heard" or understood. |
| Motion-sickness | Thoughts at Formal stage 10 can seem to "swirl" when they try to understand answers that are not given in black and white terms, sounding more like "fuzzy logic." Postformal reasoning can sound "wishy-washy" or evasive to stage 10 although it is actually identifying and considering relevant factors. |
| Overload | Postformal discussions of complex phenomena involve more disparate elements than most people can hold in mind or make sense about; the volley of elements means their explanations "go over people's heads." |
| Impatience | It takes time and often many words for postformal thinkers to formulate and express answers and explanations that encompass the combinations of factors and relations they "see." Others run out of patience when they do not get quick answers and are unwilling to invest in understanding what they hear. |
| Non-compute | Theories, processes, or methods developed by very high stages of postformal thought are inconceivable even when laid out methodically. Even when the theory, process, or method responds directly to another's stated concerns, the significance or usefulness of the contribution is neither recognized nor understood. |

Such sentences have "no moving parts"; each part has a fixed place that makes the meaning follow directly from the single starting point or "input."

Formal logics are the essential building blocks for the first stage of postformal thought. Thought at Systematic stage 11 works with and combines Formal stage 10's logics. It thinks in terms of relationships among disparate logical "things." As a result, Systematic thinking is somewhat fluid to listen to; it *does* seem to have "moving parts." The term "fuzzy logic" probably developed in reference to systematic thought. Systematic logic is nonlinear because it combines two or more separate linear "inputs"—like cooking two or three pieces of stiff spaghetti pasta—and weaves them together into a more complex system of thought. This is why systematic thought is "too fluid" or fuzzy for earlier stages of hierarchical complexity to understand—*how* those pieces go together is not so obvious.

**Table 2**
**Examples of Developmental Stage Differences in Word Usage and Meaning**

| Stage | What Does "Democracy" Mean? | What Does "Leader" Mean? |
|---|---|---|
| 8 Concrete | I will get a job.[i] | Specific persons are named in response, e.g., Mrs. Ortega; Rev. Smyth; Mr. Waldheim |
| 9 Abstract | People have a vote. | A politician; a minister; a boss |
| 10 Formal | Citizens have popularly elected representatives in government. | Someone who leads and has followers in political, religious, or other organizational settings |
| 11 Systematic | A system that ensures the voice and will of the people are heard and acted on by officials they elected to represent them. | Someone in a position of elected, appointed, or natural leadership who influences and motivates others in the organization to work toward a shared vision and mission |
| 12 Metasystematic | In the developed West, the term "democracy" may indicate a country has not only popularly elected government but also justice and banking systems and a relatively unregulated economy of non-government-owned businesses. At minimum, the national government has institutionalized checks and balances of power and responsibility between the elected head of government and parliaments or congresses with elected representation of citizens and the states or provinces. | "*Leader* is a temporary role in a human system. It is comprised of the worldview and behaviors of an individual in the performance of that role. Such behaviors are designed to attract and influence others to make a significant change in current circumstances. The behaviors chosen are a product of worldview and capability brought to the role by an individual."[ii] |

[i]Statement of a citizen in Baghdad about the prospect of democracy, reported in the news shortly after the U.S. invaded Iraq.
[ii]R. Volckmann. 2007. Leading comments. *Integral Leadership Review* 7(4). Available at http://www.integralleadershipreview.com/archives/2007_08/2007-08-leading-comment-volckmann.html (Accessed 30 August 2007.)

A postformal thought at Metasystematic stage 12 can be likened to nonlinearly weaving multiple sets of the already-nonlinear weaves of pasta cooked at Systematic stage 11. Thus, it presupposes the multiple foundational logics from Formal stage 10, and rarely even mentions them. Stage 12 thoughts begin with already-complex ingredients. Their focus is on further weaving together the systems already cooked up at the Systematic stage 11. Metasystematic reasoning is incomprehensible to stages that precede it because there are multiple systems of relations "in motion" to develop the metaweave. Two examples are given in Table 2. Others are given in various articles in this issue, and they indicate the kinds of ingredients involved to construct increasingly complex thoughts. They often use

Abstract stage 9 as a starting point, because much adult thought relies heavily on that stage. The building-block pattern of increasing hierarchical complexity is required to construct every postformal thought, on any subject.

## IMPROVING POSTFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS

Many thought-leaders are concerned about healthy change and development in one or more domains of endeavor. Whether in the home, workplace, volunteerism, or activism, if postformal miscommunications are in the mix, endeavors will face challenges. To address them may mean some new politics in the family, the workplace, and/or in public. *Politics* is used here to mean the way we relate to others, people to people. Three contexts for ways of relating with others are selected in what follows, with ideas given to help reduce miscommunications and increase accurate communications.

### Individual Efforts in Life-long Learning

Approaching postformal communications as a life-long learning curriculum is practical because every new or changing context brings additional ingredients to the fore. Such practice may involve combinations and iterations of some tasks like the following:

1. Remembering personal experience, via retrospective reflection, in order to *re-learn* what it used to be like to think and behave at earlier stages of hierarchical complexity;
2. Educating oneself about the pattern of hierarchical building blocks;
3. Inquiring into—and understanding—the needs, motivations, and objectives of others.
4. Practicing using the information gathered in items 1–3, to increase how immediately one can recognize communication gaps, and decrease the amount of reactivity (e.g., irritation) evoked in oneself—and perhaps provoked in others— when communication gaps appear.
5. Educating and supporting others to follow the development of a complex thought *when it matters* on a given subject. If such a scheme were used to assist the process of tracing a postformal thought back to its foundations, it might help while presenting ideas so others can literally see where they come from.

### Thought-Leader Behaviors

As one of the cells in Table 2 suggests, leadership roles emerge that are in addition to formally designated leaders. The following ideas are applicable in possibly any setting. They seem particularly important when serving as or addressing persons with influence or responsibility. These are analogous to providing the building blocks of a thought or position. One could model such behaviors, oneself— unasked—as well as ask others to: (1) Provide logics for their assertions; (2) Explain the factors that lead to conclusions; (3) Justify conclusions by considering how they have taken into account all known, relevant considerations and

perspectives; (4) Illustrate points with examples; (5) Ask if there are additional perspectives or factors to include. When such communications are accompanied by a spirit of genuine, interested inquiry, they can be less likely to trigger defensiveness. Such inquiries can transform communications in positive ways.

*Groups and Issues*

Non-competitive dialogue fosters understanding. It is a natural way to surface misunderstandings so they are in the open. This is better communication than leaving them buried. Dialogue is a venue to perform such tasks as defining our terms, exploring differences and similarities, and proactively working on issues in any domain of life, public or private. There are different approaches to dialogue, and many different purposes for it. Some approaches may meet certain purposes better than others, as well as be more supportive of postformal communications. Approaches that build in getting multiple perspectives voiced is productive for all concerned and opens the door for postformal and all other capacities to make needed contributions.

## CONCLUSION

The intention of this article was to help postformal thinkers learn about sources of miscommunications and provide some resources to those who wish to invest in meeting such challenges. Investment in fostering healthy evolution in self, others, and the world warrants learning about the different languages spoken every day in our 21st-century Tower of Babel. The article reflected the hypothesis that postformal thinkers could benefit from educating themselves about how they construct their thought, and most likely about how they interact with others. It offered three approaches to understand the nature of postformal miscommunications. One approach was to categorize the broad types of problems. Another was to show that a single term can be used to mean quite different things. As a way to deploy these resources, individual and collective methods were suggested to help improve communications. It is hoped that these ideas may support improved postformal communications.

It seems possible that the positive contributions of postformal thinkers will impact the world to the extent that they educate themselves about the complexity of their own thought and practice some perhaps new habits and politics of communicating more effectively. To the extent that develops, we may see more complex thinking and behaviors in others begin to develop more rapidly than they would otherwise. Given the complexity of our challenges, that is just what our shared futures need.

## NOTE

1. The Model of Hierarchical Complexity predicts and accounts for communication challenges between and among all the orders of hierarchical complexity. The focus here is confined to issues involving postformal thought.