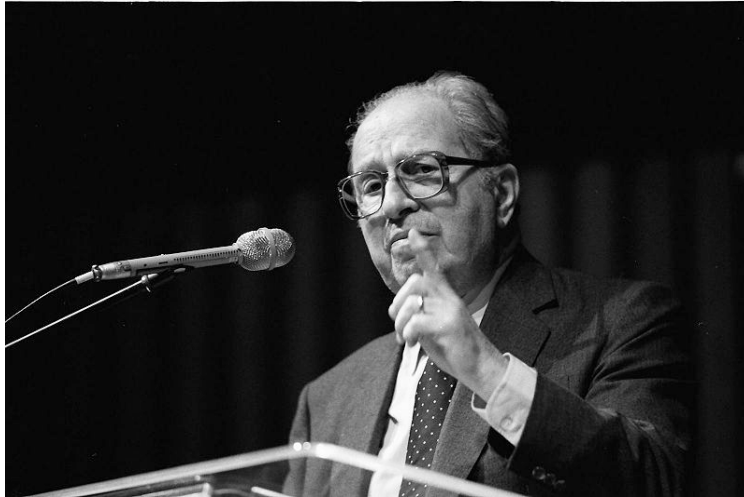


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THE ART OF COMMUNICATING

**A discussion of the arts of
THINKING — CONVERSING — LISTENING**

Mortimer J. Adler

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Million Dollar Round Table
of the National Association of Life Underwriters
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Part 1 of 2

FOREWORD

Technological advances in the field of communication have broken the distance barrier. Yet . . . MISUNDERSTANDING . . . born of ineffective communication in the area of human relations . . . continues to taunt us at every turn. . . on the international scene, among the human races, between capital and labor, in the family circle, and certainly in the day to day contacts of the successful life insurance salesman endeavoring to serve the best interests of his clients.

For many years, the Million Dollar Round Table has observed that the art of communicating is distractingly elusive. Likewise, in a perennial search for enlightenment, it found an appalling scarcity of negotiable orientation material and those adept at its demonstration.

In Dr. Mortimer J. Adler, eminent philosopher, educator, author, and consultant, we discovered . . . to our delightful surprise . . . a “fellow-salesman”. . . and, for the first time, . . . a truly significant measure of understanding of this vital skill. Through him we were startled into recognizing that the art of communicating is vital to all mankind . . . if it is to survive !

In this common interest, we are glad to share Dr. Adler’s penetrating thoughts with all who join the search with us.

James B. Irvine, Jr., C.L.U.
Chairman, 1961 Million Dollar Round Table

Mr. Irvine, members of the Million Dollar Round Table, I am delighted to be here but I am not quite sure of the capacity on which I should speak to you. Mr. Irvine called me a philosopher. Since you are daily concerned with the problems of life and death, I could, of course, address you as fellow philosophers. Philosophers, however, have done a very poor job of communication. I have spent the last ten years in San Francisco at the Institute for Philosophical Research studying the failures of communication in the history of western thought, and they are enormous.

That being the case, I would prefer not to talk to you about communication under the guise of a philosopher. I would prefer to talk to you about this difficult problem in terms that are more immediate to your interests and certainly are part of mine. I prefer to talk to you as fellow salesmen.

You may think this is a far cry from being a philosopher, but it is not quite as remote as you might suppose. One of my favorite philosophers wrote the first great book on salesmanship. It is not published under that title, and you might not recognize it at first, but I assure you that Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is the first and perhaps the greatest book ever written on salesmanship. It was written about twenty-four hundred years ago. In it, he reduces salesmanship to just three things, and they are the three essentials. The Greeks had three words for it, and the Greek words were, *ethos*, *pathos*, and

logos. Let me explain these briefly and perhaps this will also explain why I wish to talk to you as a salesman.

The word “*ethos*” refers to the character of the speaker. In any form of persuasion, any situation in which one human being addresses another, he must gain the attention and the confidence and the willingness to listen on the part of the other person. To do this, he must establish a favorable character for himself. That is what the word “*ethos*” means. You can see how this is an indispensable first step. Unless his character appeals to the person to whom he is talking, unless he makes it appealing, he does not really get to first base.

The second thing Aristotle said of a speaker is that anyone who is attempting to move other people to thought or action must concern himself with *pathos*—their feelings or emotions. If he touches only their minds, he is unlikely to move them to action or to change of mind, the motivations of which lie deep in the realm of the passions.

Ethos and *pathos* are not enough, for after all we do have minds and our minds can sometimes be critical, and being critical they may be resistant, and resistance is one thing the salesman wants to overcome; and so *logos* comes into play as the third basic term. “*Logos*,” as the word indicates, relates to logic, reason, the reasons for the action proposed, the reasons for the policy adopted, the reasons for the thought to be accepted.

If you will stop to think for a minute, I think you will see that these three things, the *ethos* of the speaker, the *pathos* of the persons spoken to, and the *logos* of the case itself, constitute all there is to salesmanship.

You may still think that I am an outsider to such mundane matters, being Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research in San Francisco. However, for many years I was Professor of the Philosophy of Law at the University of Chicago. During my last ten years at Chicago, I was engaged with Mr. Hutchins in editing a large set of books, the *Great Books of the Western World*, and I created for it a two-volume index called “The Great Ideas, A Syntopicon.” I spent so much money there—something over a million dollars—on producing the Syntopicon, that after the books were set in type and plates were made, there was no money left to print them, and I was afraid that the business decision of Encyclopaedia Britannica, the publishers, would be to get rid of the plates as old lead or put them on the shelf. So I undertook to sell the first five hundred sets at \$500 apiece, a patron’s edition, to raise the

money to produce a first printing, which would then enable us to start creating a sales force and start selling.

That was in the year 1952. I did sell the first five hundred. I knew something about what is involved in selling, and I am happy to tell you that this is a success story because in 1961, some nine years later, that set of books is selling about seventy thousand sets.

In selling the first five hundred, I remember that one of the things I had to learn about communication, and the whole business of persuasion, was that it is not the longest story or the most elaborate and detailed presentation that is most effective or successful. On one occasion, I had exactly twenty minutes of the time of the chairman of the board of Allied Stores, and I wanted to sell him not one set of these books, but a great many. What I wanted to persuade him to do was to put one set in the high school or college or library in each community in which Allied Stores had one of its associated department stores.

I saw him late in the afternoon. He had his briefcase on the desk ready to leave, and I decided that if I took all the time that was necessary to explain what the Syntopicon was about, and why this set of great books had really basic educational value, I would never make the sale; so I reduced to twelve minutes what normally would take me one-half to three-quarters of an hour to explain, allowing a few minutes for him to ask me what I wanted. When he asked me what I wanted, I told him I wanted him to buy eighty-five sets at \$500 a set, putting one in a school in the community of each of his department stores, as a public relations gesture to the community. He paused. He called his secretary, and asked for the list of stores. He thumbed through it very quickly, drawing a red check here and there, and at the end of about four or five minutes he said, "We'll take forty-five," which was, I think, the largest single book sale on record.

I have had another experience that has some bearing on this subject. While I was at the University of Chicago, the president of R. H. Macy's was then Percy Strauss, He invited me to come in to talk to the top executives of that department store. After some conversations with Mr. Strauss and with Mr. Ruml, who was then treasurer of the corporation, I was offered the post of vice-president of R. H. Macy's. I came back to New York after this, called Mr. Strauss, and said, "I can't understand this. I have been a philosopher and teacher all my life. What in the world would I be in charge of in R. H. Macy's?" He said, "Department X." I said, "Please tell me the duties of the vice-president in charge of De-

partment X.” He said, “We know that you know nothing about the department store business and even less about merchandising and buying, but your reputation is that you are able to think and we feel that someone who does not know our business and who would spend time just thinking about it, would be helpful. If you were given that task, can you tell me right now what kind of thing you would do to earn your salary?” I said, “How much time, Mr. Strauss, do you and the vice-presidents and officers of this company spend weekly around a table in business conferences, talking about the problems and policies of this corporation?” He said, “Approximately one-third of our time, sometimes a little more than that. On the average, it would be about one-third of our week is spent talking to one another.” I said, “If I saved you one-half of that one-third, and if, considering the value of the time of the ten or twelve top persons in this corporation, you added up the time saved, would that earn my salary?” He said, “More than twice or three times your salary.” I said, “I think I can do that because I have attended enough meetings of all kinds, meetings of businessmen, meetings of committees, meetings of faculties at universities, meetings of charitable foundations, and I know from long experience that failures in communication, lack of skill in the address of one mind to another, ends up not merely in an irreparable loss of time, but actually, worse than that, in the defeat of the purpose of the meeting.”

So little conversation, in business or in other aspects of our public life, is effective. It could be made more effective if someone could run meetings and see to it that the talk stuck to the point, that relevance was maintained, that the questions were in good order. I was convinced then, and have been more convinced in the years since, that conversing with one another is a function for which we are all too little prepared.

I wish that the rest of what I am going to say this morning could be optimistic counsel, with easy rules to follow for success. However, that is not the case. Talking is one of the most difficult, as well as the most characteristically human, of all of man’s activities. It is so difficult that even though the human race has been at it upward of some eighty thousand years, going back to the Neanderthal man, we are still, in the middle of the twentieth century turning in a very poor performance.

I know this from a wide variety of experiences. Any lecturer or teacher, whether standing before a college class or conducting an executive seminar, realizes how much of what is said or read is missed. I tried to do something about this many years ago in a

book called *How to Read a Book* which is simple enough, but the rules of which few people do, in fact, follow.

The fault is not always with the reader, by the way. The fault is sometimes with the writer. The fault is not always with the listener. The fault is sometimes with the speaker. Yet, when failures in communication take place, most of us tend to put the blame on the other fellow. We have been perfectly clear in what we have written. We have been perfectly clear in what we have said. If only they had read or listened well, they would have heard it or read it and understood it. Of course, this is not true. The fault is usually evenly divided between writer and reader, speaker and listener.

What I am going to try to say this morning is said not from the point of view of either of the parties involved but with both in mind. I would like to have you think of communication as a two-way process, in which each person is writer and reader, speaker and listener. I am concerned with the situation in which two people face one another, and in which talk is going on. I am concerned with what each person's obligations are, in that situation, to communicate well. I should add, not just to communicate actively on the side of speaking but to engage in communication well on the side of reception, because I can assure you that, if it is taken as a two-way process, what one does as speaker and writer is partly dependent on what one does as reader or listener.

From casual remarks that I picked up from various members of this association that I have had the pleasure of talking with since I arrived, I know that I have no need to persuade you of the importance of this. On the contrary, you are, I think, overwhelmed by the problem of communication. Those that I have talked to already recognize it to be an important and difficult problem. Far from having to persuade you that it is a difficult problem, I want to preface what I am going to say, by making the point at once that in some respects, the problem is insoluble. I say this so that you do not hope for easy and quick solutions.

I know what you would like. You would like a set of rules that would, if followed by all the parties concerned, provide for perfect communication, complete understanding, nothing lost in the process of communication.

This is completely Utopian, I assure you. Be prepared to settle for much less than that.

I would go so far as to say that if we succeed up to fifty per cent in

any of our communications or situations in which communication is involved, we are doing very well for human beings. I do not believe we are doing even fifty per cent well now. But a hundred per cent, or anything approaching a hundred per cent, is out of the question.

Why is that so?

The Bible, curiously enough, provides us, whether we are religious or not, with some indication of the answer to that question. Communication was perfect in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve got into trouble. In the Garden of Eden, under conditions when human nature was unspoiled, there were no misunderstandings at all. Adam's mind and Eve's mind, or the minds of their children, if they had had children, in the Garden of Eden, would have communicated perfectly. Their emotions would never have clouded their mind. Their minds would have been perfectly clear, though they would have been finite minds not divine.

The language that was used would have been a perfect language. Remember the story of the day in the Garden of Eden when one of the archangels brought the animals for Adam to name as he sat under a tree? Remember that he gave each one of the animals its proper name? That is very hard for you to understand, I know, very hard for anyone to understand; but Adam just called them by their right names.

“Dog” is not the right name of that animal any more than “chien” is, or “hund.” I do not know what the right name for dog is, but Adam knew it. If you had all the right names for things and your mind was unclouded by any passions or self-interest, communication might be perfect.

Can you imagine what life would have been like for Adam and Eve if they could have talked to each other perfectly? They obviously did not succeed or the trouble would not have happened.

The second thing the Bible tells us, which is also very relevant, is the story about the Tower of Babel. It is right on the point. Again I ask you to imagine what is very difficult to imagine—what human talk was like before the episode of the Tower of Babel took place. Obviously, until that happened, until God pluralized or diversified the tongues that men spoke, they all spoke one language. I cannot imagine, nor can you probably, what the human race, speaking one language, was like. However, we know that we live in the post-Babelian era. We live in a world in which men have their minds

clouded by their passions, and speak a diversity of tongues.

These two facts—that we are not just minds but minds controlled by emotions and feelings and fears of all kinds, and that our languages are far from perfect, are the basic facts which mean to me that we will never succeed perfectly in communicating. However, we can just do a little better than we now do.

I have mentioned language as one of the obstacles. We often talk of language as a medium of communication, and we think of a medium as something through which something flows. It would be wonderful if language were a translucent medium so that, as you heard the words of another man or as you spoke your own words, your mind or his mind was perfectly revealed, as if those words were registered without any change of meaning on the mind of another. We know that this is not the case.

It is almost impossible for any of us to use any words that are understood by other people in exactly the sense in which we use them. I know, for example, how in lecturing on some difficult subjects, I must labor my vocabulary. I have to say, “By this word I mean, for the purposes of this talk, this and just this,” and I have to carry this on to the point of boredom. At least, I am bored by the repetition. Then I will hear at the end of a lecture a question from the floor which shows that I have not gotten the simple point across at all. Why, I do not know.

I mention this merely to indicate that even the most careful and precise use of language, which is difficult sometimes to accomplish, leaves the result incomplete, inadequate, and, often worse than that, something that is moving in the wrong direction.

There is another reason why communication is difficult, and more difficult, I think, for us than for our ancestors. I do not like to say that anything in the twentieth century is worse than anything in any previous century, but in this case, I think I must.

As I look at the literary record, and in some cases the historical record, I am persuaded that the Greeks did a better job of talking to one another and that in the eighteenth century in our country and in England conversation and discussion and letter writing were at a much higher level than they are today.

I think I know the reason for this. It is partly, of course, that they were more skilled in the liberal arts. I assure you that our failure in communication is in part due to a deep deficiency in our liberal

schooling. No colleges today anywhere in this land do the job of training in the liberal arts that our eighteenth century colleges did, and the liberal arts are the arts of writing and reading and speaking and listening and measuring and observing and calculating. They are the arts of communication and of thinking.

Our ancestors were, for the most part, much better trained in these arts than anyone today is. All you have to do to test this for yourselves is to read, among the great books, the *Federalist Papers* by Hamilton and Madison and Jay, written for a public newspaper in New York State in 1787-1789, at the time when our Constitution was being ratified. You will see for yourselves that no political speaking or writing, none at all—and I do not except FDR or Churchill—no political speaking or writing in this century compares with the *Federalist Papers*.

Our lack of liberal art is only part of the trouble. The other thing that makes communication more difficult for us, not just in business but generally, is that our education has become specialized. It is hard for you to realize this, but anyone who went to school and college before 1900 had something that no one who goes to school has today. They had a common literary heritage. I doubt, for example, if there is any one book that all of you who are college graduates have read, not even the Bible. Yet, those of our ancestors who were educated persons had read a large number of books in common and this gave them a common vocabulary and a common background of ideas and references, allusions, which made communication between them easier.

Today this is not true. I had this experience at the University of Chicago. Our teachers or our professors cannot talk with one another. They are all so specialized. Each of them has read or studied or worked in such a special field of literature, with its own technical jargon, that communication across the lines of their specialties is very poor. Even in certain fields, subordinate specializations within the field of physics and mathematics, communication is difficult among mathematicians and physicists, which would not have been true two or three hundred years ago.

Allow me to make one other observation. Nothing I can say about the rules of communication will go very far unless we do something in this country or in the world about restoring liberal and general schooling. By liberal schooling I mean schooling that is primarily devoted to training in the liberal arts and by general schooling, up to the Bachelor of Arts degree, I mean schooling with no specialization whatsoever, in order to give the members of

our society a common set of skills, a common body of reading as the background for doing what they have to do day in and out—talk to one another about their common problems.

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