

Communication Practices for Social Change

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Connie Rice has been working for social change in Los Angeles first as a litigator in civil rights cases involving police brutality, race, and sex discrimination followed by a leader, mediator, and co-founder of the Advancement Project. As a civic leader and mediator in Los Angeles, Connie Rice's involvement includes helping change policing tactics, negotiating gang truces, and helping communities and groups learn to solve problems themselves. Connie Rice has been on the frontlines of creating social change for the better part of 30 years. While working as a litigator, Rice learned that litigation was helpful in opening doors but was not sufficient for creating social change. Rice states that "litigation can't [*sic*] do the delicate work of creating the political will to solve problems" (Lefer, 2008, p. 6). Creating the political will to solve problems is precisely what Connie Rice began to do with her work at the Advancement Project. Social change is complicated and involves more than a few variables for success. This paper will explore Rice's use of three communication practices, the ethical dimensions of those practices, and the social situations those practices created in producing an environment where social change had a chance to incubate.

Defining Terms and Objectives

The first communication choice that Rice made was to help define terms and objectives for the parties with whom she was working. Defining terms and objectives were particularly important when dealing with gang members and the police force. Years of containment suppression and paramilitary-style policing had left their toll on the police force and the communities of South LA. The disparity in the terminology used by and towards both groups is not conducive to creating any real change. Rice was interested in changing the culture of police brutality, but she needed to learn how to redefine the terms she used. "Of course, one of the first

lessons I learned was that they don't call it 'brutality.' They call it 'good policing.' My language shut down the debate. I wasn't communicating; I was still fighting them" (Lefer, 2008, p. 6).

Rice also learned not to refer to gang members as such, thus giving legitimacy to their gang activities. The unintended consequences of using language like "war on gangs" only creates a stronger and more closely-knit gang dynamic and thus is counterproductive to creating an atmosphere where social change can happen.

Standpoint theory helps shed some light on the disparity between the LAPD, the neighborhoods, and the gang members views on each other. Standpoint theory attempts to answer differences in how the perspectives that people's experiences, knowledge, and opinions are shaped by the social groups to which they belong (Griffin, 2009). The LAPD's and the neighbors (including gang members) each have different experiences and understanding that shape their views of each other and themselves. These views can differ wildly depending on the extent of their experiences. Concepts and terminology do not mean the same thing to everyone, and this can create a disconnect in communication and hinder change. By working toward a universal understanding of terminology around policing and gang members, Rice was able to use language to help create the atmosphere where change could be possible.

It is important to note that Rice did not condone either excessive policing or illegal gang activity. She did not attempt to pick sides but instead worked to see change take place for the good of the communities of Los Angeles. This ethical dimension of Rice's work in creating more common understanding is born out of her desire to see communities become safer and more equitable for the residents who live in them and to alleviate the devastation that gang violence and over-policing create. The work that Rice did in this area of communication created an

atmosphere where police and gang intervention leaders (who were often seen as mouthpieces for the gangs) could communicate and work for the greater good (Lefer, 2008).

Communicating Interculturally

When Connie Rice first encountered rival gang members, she realized that while she and they were all African American's, they were not of the same culture. She was out of place and needed to learn from and rely on those who were fluent in that particular cultural milieu. Intercultural competencies need to be honed and developed to help create space where change could happen. Connie Rice was also aware that much of the police did not understand the culture of those they were policing, which could lead to serious misunderstanding, often with deadly consequences (Lefer, 2008). Rice challenges a common perception that police exhibit a high degree of racial bias, an opinion she refutes. Rice instead attributes much of the apparent racial bias to being interculturally incompetent.

Research shows that cops make decisions with *less* subliminal bias than ordinary citizens do. The real problem is when the police aren't fluent in a culture. If you put me in the Samoan part of town, I wouldn't [*sic*] know how to read those people. For many underclass African American males, life is a fight, so the way they say hello may be combative, and that scares white rookie cops who have never been in a black community (Lefer, 2008, p. 8).

Rice also adds that middle-class African Americans often are interculturally incompetent when dealing with underclass African Americans too. It is often difficult to tell what a real threat is, so when white rookie cops are thrust into poor African American communities, "they shoot anything that moves" (Lefer, 2008, p.8). This lack of understanding creates tension and can lead to unnecessary violence. Rice talks about rising tensions around the civil case of Rodney King

and how the police began ramping up their paramilitary operations, when she intervened and asked the police instead to canvas the neighborhoods and talk with people, to shake hands and listen. This simple act of trying to understand helped diffuse rising tensions in the neighborhood. This practice, what could be called community policing, allows the police the opportunity to learn from those who live in the neighborhoods that are being policed. The police can begin to gain some intercultural competency, which leads to different actions and attitudes of those in the neighborhood (Lefer, 2008).

Rice used intercultural competencies to bridge differences between police and neighborhood and community leaders. The ethical dimension of doing this work is rooted in an understanding that each community cannot solve problems on their own. Neither the police nor the neighborhoods can do so by themselves. Both groups need to work together to create change but to make that happen; both groups need to learn and understand each other and their cultural differences (Johnson, 2009).

Addressing Power and Conflict

Understanding cultural differences is a good start, but that is not enough if power and conflict are not addressed. “Power is a relational concept; it does not reside in the individual but rather in the relationship of the person to his environment. Thus, the power of an agent in a given situation is determined by the characteristics of the situation” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2009, p. 365). Rice navigated adeptly through many situations where power and conflict were at the forefront. Whether she was addressing community leaders and gang-intervention specialists on one side of the situation or the police on the other, Rice was able to address the dynamics of power in ways that allowed power to shift back and forth between the two groups in ways that helped create space for social change. Before this work, these groups were stuck in a seemingly hopeless

power struggle. Bringing these groups together to address these issues was a high-risk proposition, but through tenacity and determination, progress happened.

After four or five years we're [*sic*] at the point where a deputy chief picks up the phone and calls Bo Taylor to come down to the precinct. That wouldn't [*sic*] have been possible when I started this work thirteen years ago. I was at war with the cops in court; the gang-intervention specialists were at war with the cops in the streets; the officers were out to annihilate Bo Taylor and others like him (Lefer, 2008, p. 11).

The move in the situation in Los Angeles was from disruptive power, using force, control, and aggression over another to a more integrative power, which works together to try and accomplish mutual goals. Power moved from an either/or mindset to more of a both/and mindset (Wilmot & Hocker, 2009).

Power and conflict have strong ethical components to them. Rice was working for a more equitable and safer Los Angeles. This goal would never be reached while one group fought to keep power over another. This either/or understanding of power led to conflict. This type of conflict led to more violence, gang members, and police brutality not less. One group, in this case, the police trying to control power, often through excessive force and another group, gang members, fighting to gain a measure of control through violence and coercion created ethical dilemmas that would not be solved until the issue of power and control got addressed. Solutions and change didn't start to arise until both parties were willing to sit and talk together, shifting the power dynamic from an either/or to a both/and.

It's not pie in the sky. I brought together police, gang-intervention workers, sociologists, educators, demographers, and epidemiologists who study violence as a disease—a real dream team of experts on gangs. And that team told the city and the county what they had

to do to end a youth-gang homicide epidemic that their police helped create. The city did not want to hear that twenty-five years of containment suppression had produced twice as many gang members and six times as many gangs, with no end in sight (Lefer, 2008, p.9).

Creating space where groups, who all had the goal of eliminating violence and changing the social landscape created a social shift where both groups were able to come together to work for solutions that benefitted all.

Connie Rice's approach to social change using specific communication choices provides a blueprint that others can learn from, adapt, and use. Defining terms and objectives help create a place where mutual understanding is possible. One cannot deal with conflict and change if groups are not speaking the same language and without a shared understanding of the issues and terms used in those issues. Creating shared understanding is not enough to create social change. In our global village, we interact with others who are different from us. Gone are the days when the only people we interact with are just like us. If one wants social change amongst the different cultures that exist in our world, then intercultural competencies are a must. We must learn to interculturally communicate if we hope to bring together different cultures and groups to bring about change. Power dynamics are often tied in with multicultural groups and learning how to address those power dynamics, which often lead to conflict, and sometimes violence is critical for creating the space where social change can happen. It becomes essential to understand the different dynamics of power that exist and help to develop and use power in a way that is mutually beneficial. This work takes effort and tenacity, as Rice puts it "power concedes nothing without a demand" (Lefer, 2008, p 6).

References

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