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"Splaining" -- What It Is and Why It Matters

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In his profoundly important book about addressing issues important in communication, Harvard University's Robert Livingston (2021, p. xiii) has written that "conversation is one of the most powerful ways to build knowledge, awareness, and empathy. . . (and) is also a primal way for people to form bonds, build trust, and create community." As advocates of enhancing the effectiveness of communication, we have written this editorial about "Splaining," a communications approach that can often undermine the communication and trust-building that Livingston has encouraged.

It is not news that ineffective communications are the cause of much interpersonal and organizational dysfunction, and the *State of the Global Workplace Report* confirms that poor communication between leaders and employees cost organizations more than a trillion dollars (Gallup, 2023). Poor communication undermines trust – whether in one-on-one conversations or in a group context – and building that trust is a critical element in establishing effective organizations and in forging relationships of all types (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007).

As advocates of effective communication, we join a large group of scholars and thought leaders who seek to improve the ability to be more effective advocates of organizations' self-interest. We have written this editorial to assist individuals and organizations to proactively improve their collective ability to communicate more effectively. We focus on the nature of "Splaining," as a means of communication that is unproductive and that results in inadequately addressing key issues that clarify or improve communication. We begin by incorporating scholarly literature about the importance of trust in communication. We then offer ten characteristics of "Splaining," propose a practical definition of the term, and suggest six reasons why "Splaining" impairs communication effectiveness. We identify four contributions for practitioners and scholars and conclude by identifying opportunities for future research.

Trust in Communication

Although communication is traditionally defined as the transfer of information from one party to another (Leal, 2017), the degree to which information is received, interpreted, and accepted is often a function of the relationship between the sender and the receiver (Minhas, Zhang, & Tran, 2010). Trust and effective communication are closely related constructs, and the extent to which a receiver of information responds with commitment is a function of the trust that exists between the parties (Zeffane, Tipu, & Ryan, 2011). It is well established that trust is the byproduct of the trustworthiness of another party, based upon that party's character, competence, clarity, and caring (Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017). When a receiver of

information trusts another party, that trusting receiver relies upon that communication and responds in a collaborative manner in the pursuit of shared goals (Hannah, et al., 2008).

Effective communication requires far more than simply conveying a message to others. To be optimally successful in motivating others to action requires highly developed skills. John C. Maxwell (2023), has identified five contexts for effective communication that he incorporates into what he advocates as "undeniable laws of communication."

Who Says It - Communication depends upon both the conviction of the communicator and her/his belief in the message being communicated. At the same time the person advocating the message must also be a credible representative of that same message if (s)he is to be believable as a person worthy of trust. The depth of the communicator's conviction to a set of values is measured by their example in modeling those values. Failure to live consistently with what one advocates undermines others' belief in the message.

What Is Said – The message communicated must be accurate, well-reasoned, and well-documented. The communicator must be extensively prepared in presenting information in a clear and logical manner and that message must be evidence-based and verifiable. In addition, that which is communicated should be significant and important and have practical value as a message that others find worth listening to.

How It Is Said – The way information is communicated makes an important difference in how it is received. The most impactful message clarifies complex ideas but makes them simple – while retaining their accuracy and avoiding stereotyping or overgeneralizing. What is communicated is most powerful when it is relatable to others and relevant in their lives. Messages that are most effective, communicate at both the factual level and the emotional level – incorporating the ability to tell a story rather than to simply convey an idea or a principle.

When It Is Said – Timely communication does more than repeat a message that has been previously communicated. The content of the message should respond to the current context and should offer added value, rather than simply repeating a theme that has been previously stated. Repetition of an often-stated message diminishes rather than strengthens its power. Effective communication requires understanding how events have changed the conditions of a message and how that message creates a new insight demanding a response that reflects a greater effort.

Why It Is Said – The most powerful communication does far more than simply expressing an opinion or conveying ideas. Communication is most effective

For those who are respected as leaders, communication is how they earn the trust and followership of others (Hackman, 2013). Such leaders communicate to serve, uplift, enrich, engage, and empower – rather than to convince, manipulate, or control others' responses (Bennis, 2003; Caldwell, 2012; Solinger, Jansen, & Cornelissen, 2020).

Understanding Splaining

The Merriam Webster online dictionary explains that to "splain" something is a term that has its roots in the early nineteenth century (Merriam.com). The term "splain" was originally a colloquialism used to justify one's actions or attempt to clarify meaning. Although "to splain" has been in the American lexicon for more than two hundred years, its meaning has evolved slowly. Although the term has consistently centered around the efforts of an individual to clarify something, in the common vernacular the term is typically used in a self-justifying way in communicating (Dictionary.com, 2013).

In a 2008 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Rebecca Solnit wrote about "Men Who Explain Things" as part of an article that she wrote about the "mansplaining" phenomenon. Over time, to "splain" something has become a derogatory term that has implied that one person has assumed a position of interpersonal superiority over another. For example, Teun De Rycker (2022, p. 137) describes the sometimes-common condescending "mansplaining" of men to women as "socio-pragmatic inappropriateness," "arrogance," and "toxic" in its impact on relationships.

We introduce a modern definition of "Splaining" as a device that is frequently used as individuals communicate with others. In this section we identify ten fine-grained characteristics or nuances of "Splaining," propose a definition of the term, and identify why "Splaining" is a communication option for individuals to avoid in the quest to build organizational and interpersonal trust.

Ten Characteristics of "Splaining"

To explain something means to make meaning clear, more understandable, or to justify a specific position or behavior (Merriam-Webster.com). Mroz and Allen (2020) note that an explanation is often associated with an attempt to offer a justification or to excuse behavior "Splaining" is commonly used as a means of justifying behavior, rationalizing a conclusion, or sometimes actually obscuring meaning in communication. We have identified ten examples of "Splaining" and briefly explain each of those meanings.

Denying Accountability – Choosing to deny accountability may include an attempt to minimize duties owed to others, to deny that such duties exist, or to claim that an outcome has not resulted from a specific cause (cf. Wullenkord & Reese, 2021). Such a denial is a self-protection strategy intended to minimize a personal obligation. Reasons, justifications, and excuses are given to avoid personal embarrassment. Batson and Collins (2011) acknowledge that such rationalization is a common self-protection strategy.

Blaming Others – The attempt to blame others for one's own inappropriate conduct is an effort to avoid personal ownership for any wrongs committed. Scapegoating others and making ad hominem attacks as the justification for one's actions are attempts to make others responsible and absolve oneself from a moral obligation (Murphy, 2023). Blaming others is motivated by a desire to avoid personal guilt or acquire control of the narrative of a situation.

Rationalizing Outcomes -- Rationalizing a mediocre effort or unsuccessful outcome is often an attempt to minimize the failure to achieve a desired goal and save face or retain one's positive image (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002). Rationalizing outcomes can also be used to attempt to explain external forces and the complexity of the realities of life (Coe, 2014).

Manipulative Criticism – Sarcasm and condescension are sometimes used as a means of belittling others for past injustices that have occurred – even when those injustices have not been caused by the people being criticized (Dexter, 2022). Language that insults or belittles others for wrongs that their progenitors may have engaged in or committed creates ill will when the people insulted are not to blame (Wullenkord & Reese, 2021).

Diverting Attention – Changing the narrative by diverting discussion to another topic is a communication strategy intended to avoid examining a topic about which the diverter is uncomfortable (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Choosing to avoid an issue and change the subject of discussion is a communication strategy that borders on intellectual dishonesty, particularly when a personal agenda is involved (Shohamy, 2006).

Justifying Action – Justifying the reasons for conduct that creates a division between individuals or groups is a common form of rationalization that is self-serving (Schwitgebel & Ellis, 2017). Such action is sometimes based upon the motive for restorative reparations or self-serving outcomes that may result in short-term gratification but long-term problems (Cook & Powell, 2006).

Claiming Innocence – Claiming that one is a victim of the wrongful actions of other individuals or society is an effort to generate sympathy for one's own behaviors (Smith, 2022). Declaring one's personal innocence based upon others' actions is an attempt to provide a rationale for questionable personal conduct (Gaucher, Hafer, & Kay, 2010).

Affirming Virtuousness -- Declaring one's personal virtuousness and citing one's past positive acts may be used to attempt to convince others that one is free from error and should therefore be absolved from blame or criticism (Nolan, 2014). This "moral self-licensing" may also be used to represent oneself as virtuous or be used to cover future behavior that may be far less than virtuous (Effron & Conway, 2015).

Articulating Perspective – A perspective is widely understood to be a personalized way of regarding situations or topics that reflects one's individual point of reference and is the viewpoint of the perceiving individual (Vocabulary.com, 2011). Because of the subjective nature of every perspective, a danger in articulating one's personal perspective is in representing it to be fact (Michael, 2020). Claiming that one's point of view is the only valid way of interpreting the world is both dangerous and conflict generating (Cappelen & Dever, 2014).

Practicing Self-Promotion -- Self-promotion is the furthering of one's own growth, advancement, power, or position – often by the presentation of incomplete information and the withholding of other important facts (Latour, 2022). To the degree that self-promotion becomes dishonest, it has the potential to negatively impact how a person is viewed by others and can undermine a person's reputation, destroy trust, and raise questions about one's character and integrity (Hernez-Bloome, McLaughlin, & Trovas, 2009).

Each of these ten forms of communication incorporates some degree of embellishing of information, self-justification, rationalization, and opinionizing when conveying information to others (Millar, 2004). Maxcey and colleagues (2019) acknowledge that such rationalization may often be sincerely believed due to perceptual or memory error. For many individuals, their personal experiences may result in drawing inferences about the world that are stereotypical and untrue. Those experiences may nonetheless lead to strongly held beliefs about the world that are incorrect, extreme, or distorted.

We define "Splaining" as *the often irrational and self-justifying communication used to attempt to explain one's position about an often-complex issue*. "Splaining," whether intentional or unintentional, reflects a bias in communication about personal beliefs and represents a perspective that may be incorrect – resulting in undermining trust, destroying personal credibility, and eroding one's reputation (Innis, 2008). When seeking to justify or explain a perspective, "Splaining" may be perceived by others as dishonest, gaslighting, or manipulative communication. Regardless of the conscious behavioral intentions and well-meaning desires of the communicator, biased representation of perceived "facts" inevitably creates a breakdown in the relationship of the conveyor of information and the receiver (Hoesgen, 2022).

How "Splaining" Impairs Communication

The most effective communication is purpose-centered and focused on enabling those involved to productively collaborate to achieve a shared set of goals (Amir, 2022). Effective communication is perceived by others as possessing six important qualities (Sen, 2007).

Clarity   *The information provided is unambiguous in its meaning and free from the use of jargon or language that lacks specificity.*

Validity   *What is communicated is true, correctly represents facts that are readily verifiable, complete in presenting all the relevant information, and appropriately documented.*

Fairness   *The presentation of the information is impartially presented, unbiased, objectively set forth in the usage of language and emotion, and ethical in its intention.*

Timeliness   *The message communicated is relevant to the current timeframe and focused on present day realities appropriate for the parties currently involved.*

Proactive   *The information shared is purposeful and positive in its orientation and focused on addressing realistic solutions intended to create a better outcome.*

Uniting   *The mode and message seek to build a stronger collaborative relationship and demonstrate empathy for others' perspectives and a commitment to work together.*

In context with each of these six qualities, "Splaining" suffers in its ability to convey information as a communication tool. *Table 1,* provided below, 1) explains how these six qualities promote or erode trust in relationships and impact communication, and 2) identifies how the absence of each quality reduces commitment and negatively affects organizations.

Table 1: Positive and Negative Impacts of Communication Qualities

Quality	Promoting Communication & Trust	Eroding Communication & Trust

Clarity	Precise in explaining important facts in unambiguous language. Information is clear.	Broad generalizations and lack of specificity raise questions about the facts and the intent.
Validity	Information is well-documented and verifiable, and its truthfulness is accepted as accurate.	Information presented lacks documentation and key information may be omitted.
Fairness	Facts are objectively presented in and do not reflect bias or emotion.	Bias in tone or in the presentation of information may raise questions about ethical intent.
Timeliness	Information is relevant to the present day and the current day audience.	Information is not relevant to those present but implies that they are responsible.
Proactive	Identifies realistic and positive alternatives to improve the status quo	Information provided does not identify realistic solutions to address relevant issues.
Uniting	Information identifies mutual interests and promotes collaborative cooperation.	Information creates divisiveness and fails to unify the parties in a common goal.

For leaders to improve their effectiveness in communication, their understanding of the ten "Splaining" examples can help them to rethink how they communicate -- whether interpersonally to individuals or within an organizational context.

Contributions of the Paper

As advocates of positive ways by which leaders communicate, we are strong supporters of helping those who lead and serve in achieving their goals and enhancing their quality of life. We suggest that this paper makes four important contributions to scholarly literature related to communication.

1. We identify the nature of "Splaining" as a communication method that is often dysfunctional in its impact and define the term.
2. We describe ten specific examples of "Splaining" and cite sources from the current communication literature to confirm the validity of those examples.
3. We list six widely accepted characteristics of effective communication and explain how those six characteristics improve or impair communication and trust.
4. We provide an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to discuss "Splaining" in context with the most effective ways to address communication issues.

As previously noted throughout this paper, we join with many others in seeking to productively address issues of communication leaders struggle to communicate. Believing that the discussion of "Splaining" is an ineffective topic to improve leadership communication and build trust, we encourage others to engage in the discussion of the topic.

Opportunities for Future Research

Organizational leaders of all types have sought to improve their effectiveness in communicating, yet the overwhelming evidence from current research about trust, engagement, and employee commitment confirms that these topics merit much greater discussion and research (Clifton & Harter, 2019). The increase in employees who have withheld their commitment to their organizations – evidenced by the "Great Resignation" and "Quiet Quitting" – has become a major issue and the importance of leadership communication

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has been identified as a major root cause of organization dysfunction (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

Gaslighting and passive aggressive communication by leaders are particularly dysfunctional and merit much greater study as well (Stark, 2019). We encourage scholars and leaders in all sectors of society – in churches, civic groups, and in daily dialogue as well as at academic institutions – to reflect on and increase their understanding of effective and dysfunctional communication patterns that are used in justifying and rationalizing individual and organizational efforts.

At a time when organizations are struggling to earn follower support, the study of effective leadership communication is clearly important (Barrett, 2008). More than two decades ago, W. Edwards Deming (2000) reminded the world that there was no "instant pudding" answer to human progress. Improving the effectiveness of leaders in achieving their goals will take hard work, clear thinking, and cooperative effort. As leaders understand the dysfunction of "Splaining," we are hopeful that their efforts to improve their communications in their relationships and in organizations will be increasingly successful.

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