Six Angry Jurors

In a backyard disagreement among seven teenaged boys, one young man was brutally stripped of his life before he was given the chance to earn his high school diploma. A jury of six members gathered to decide the fate of the five defendants. Throughout the deliberation, the jurors aimed to reach a consensus, unconsciously utilizing seven different communication variables. All of these variables interacted to reach a well thought out decision, which would ultimately decide the destiny of the defendants.

While no variable in the descriptive model of communication is more important than others, each variable is beneficial to small groups when making decisions. The first and most obvious variable that our group encountered was communication. Communication can be nonverbal or verbal. Ekman and Friesen’s five major types of nonverbal behavior were all identified in the deliberation setting. Kat and Bobby demonstrated an illustrator when they compared their height in relation to the Jimmy Farris and Jason Holland stabbing scenario. Kat stood up next to Bobby, who was also standing, and said, “I’m 5’6” and you’re about 5’11”.” All group members nodded their head while agreeing with various topics being discussed. Nodding was also considered an emblem when group members nodded their head to make a point without any verbal communication. Another example of an emblem occurred when Katie motioned to stab herself in the head with a pen due to frustration during deliberation. Katie’s frustration was also evident as she attempted to jokingly choke Bobby after he repeatedly changed his personal views. Bobby simply said, “Um, yeah, I’m changing my mind.” Katie’s anger was clearly apparent as she displayed affect. Her actions induced laughing among
other group members. Although there were frustrations, group members used regulators to help minimize conflict. Two examples were when group members pointed to another member to speak or when a group member raised his or her hand. Finally, fidgeting and clicking of pens were examples of adaptors. All of these nonverbal behaviors complimented the verbal aspect of communication.

The situation of the deliberation facilitated communication. The six jurors congregated in a conference room to discuss the trial. As soon as everyone was seated, we began our deliberation promptly at 5:00 PM. We were seated in a semi-circle from left to right, beginning with Kat, Christine, Bobby, Katie, Rachelle, and Natalie. This seating arrangement better allowed for a consensus to be reached due to the potential for increased eye contact and more in-group interaction. Although there were people seated at the head of the table, there was no leadership roles associated with seating arrangement.

Leadership was equally divided among the six jurors. At different points in time, each group member exemplified various forms of leadership. Rachelle provided the group with factual information regarding the trial from the pamphlet. Katie took the initiative to write down and organize the gathered information. Christine encouraged critical thinking, as she presented the group with hypothetical “what if” situations. These situations prompted Kat and Bobby to share personal, but pertinent, stories to act out these situations.

These leadership positions generated members to actively take on various task or maintenance roles. In addition to members taking on the information seeker and giver and opinion seeker and giver roles, group members also had other important roles. Our
group stayed on task very well, as almost everyone had a task-oriented role. Natalie and Kat portrayed the clarifier-summarizer role, as she restated other peoples’ ideas. Katie helped the group by being the recorder-secretary, as she consistently noted the group’s progress. She was also the initiator of the group, as she provided general direction by referring the group to the required agenda. Christine possessed the role of evaluator-critic, as she constantly reminded the group of other possible ideas and outcomes. Part of the reason why our group stayed on task so well was because group members also displayed relationship maintenance roles. Bobby and Christine were the group’s encourager-supporters, because they praised and recognized other members. Bobby and Katie monitored participation of members in the role of gatekeeper. Rachelle followed the group’s progress and served as an attentive audience member, but she also offered her personal perspectives at appropriate times. We do not feel there were any self-centered roles during our deliberation.

As a result of there not being self-centered roles, our group demonstrated strong cohesiveness and small group unity. Due to positive rapport, all members left the conference room with positive attitudes towards one another. We did not leave angry with group members, as we successfully separated personal opinions from other jury members. Cohesiveness formed a sense of respect in our group, which led to the establishment of group norms.

From the beginning, we all respected each other’s opinions and encouraged input as we listened attentively. Although there were moments where we interrupted an individual’s viewpoint, we all tried to make a conscious effort to disregard this element as a personal attack. When we were in disagreement, our nonverbal cues were directed
towards the person who made the original comment. Even in situations with high conflict, no group member used profanity. These norms helped us stay on task and to focus our conversation strictly to the conclusion we were trying to make.

These norms assisted us in reaching a consensus of a verdict, which was our group’s goal. This jury deliberation case was a secondary group, as we were trying to solve a particular task. Mutuality of concern was evident during the entire deliberation, because we were able to stay on task and come to a consensus. We were each committed enough to stay on task and listen to everyone’s views and opinions. The lack of hidden agendas helped move along the decision making process of agreement on a verdict.

All of these variables contributed to our group’s supportive climate or emotional weather. We showed that we could deliberate in a supportive climate rather than a defensive climate, because we did not target individuals. Listening to everyone’s opinion helped us understand all perspectives. Our group deliberated in a supportive climate because of how we integrated the six components of supportive climate. We were descriptive as we paraphrased each other in a nonjudgmental way. Problem orientation was fulfilled, because we focused on task instead of control. Members responded honestly in a spontaneous format. While responding, members were able to express empathy towards each other while discussing concerns. Equality was shown throughout the deliberation, because we were able to show each other a mutual trust and respect. Finally, provisionalism was obvious due to the jurors’ flexibility and open-mindedness.

The supportive climate of our group exemplified how we were able to stray away from the misconceptions of conflict. The processes which are group used were the spiral model and the punctuated equilibrium model to resolve conflict. Our group demonstrated
the spiral model by continuously repeating the cycle of Fisher’s stages of orientation, conflict, emergence, and reinforcement. In other circumstances, our group took a punctuated equilibrium approach by going through periods of uncertainty and indecision. When trying to determine an involuntary manslaughter charge, we went through a period of indecision and argument. We reached a conclusion, but after additional evidence, we would go back and further interrogate that same topic. Another example of when we kept switching from one argument to the next was when we were trying to determine sentences for the five young men. We tried to rank order the defendants by who we thought was most responsible to least responsible to help aid in our punishment sentencing.

After taking several votes when deliberating over Jason’s guilt, we found that we were split on several occasions. In one instance, Christine made the comment, “I’m not giving everyone involuntary manslaughter; there just isn’t enough evidence.” Once this reasonable doubt was brought up to the group, we found that we were not as confident in our decisions of sending them to jail for an extended period of time. This moral dilemma prompted group members to switch their views, which made it harder to reach a conclusion. Kat initiated this change by asking the group, “So how many want to take involuntary manslaughter off of Jason’s charge?” One other person was convinced by the uncertainty, and the group now favored dismissing this charge.

In the end, our group reached a consensus on the verdict:

- Jason Holland was tried as an adult and charged with battery and assault with a dangerous or deadly weapon. He will receive ten years in prison with possibility of parole followed by four years probation.
 Micah Holland was tried as an adult with battery and as an accomplice to assault with a dangerous or deadly weapon. He will receive six years in prison with parole followed by two years probation.

 Brandon Hein was tried as an adult with battery and as an accomplice to assault with a dangerous or deadly weapon. He will receive six years in prison with parole followed by two years probation.

 Tony Milioti was tried as a juvenile with battery and as an accomplice to assault with a dangerous or deadly weapon. He will receive six years in prison with parole followed by two years probation.

 We were astonished by the actual verdict, which was:

 Jason Holland was tried as an adult and charged with first degree murder with special circumstances. He was sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole.

 Micah Holland was tried as a juvenile and charged with first degree murder with special circumstances. He was sentenced to juvenile detention facility until the age of 18. After, which he will serve 25 years in prison.

 Brandon Hein was tried as an adult and charged with first degree murder with special circumstances. He was sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole.

 Tony Milioti was tried as an adult and charged with first degree murder with special circumstances. He was sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole.
These verdicts seemed too extreme, because the available evidence for charging all defendants for life in prison without parole did not reflect our understanding of what really happened. Furthermore, Jason Holland’s actions determined the fate for the other young men, who did not admit to charges of first degree murder. We feel that the punishment did not match the crime, and that the Farris’ social status in the town swayed the case.

Just because our group’s verdict did not match the actual verdict of the case, we do not feel that we made a poor decision. We feel that the verdict we reached was just based on the information that we had. Had we known that Jason admitted to killing Jimmy, our outcome would have been tremendously different. Based on an expert from outside the group, we were informed that Jason Holland admitted to stabbing and killing Jimmy Farris. Our group initially wanted to charge Jason with involuntary manslaughter, but due to this lack of evidence, we knew there was room for reasonable doubt. Upon reflection knowing that we could potentially send an innocent person to jail, we had a difficult time assessing sentencing. Additionally, we would have liked to have seen further physical and concrete evidence. If the police requested the pocket knife to undergo forensic testing, all fingerprints and blood would have been crucial to evidentiary support.

For the majority of the deliberation, our group interacted well. However, towards the end of the deliberation, we discussed some ideas of how we could have interacted even better. We could have been more accepting of each other’s ideas. Although we listened to other people’s ideas, members were not very willing to change their beliefs. Therefore, it was difficult to persuade and convince others to compromise. It was
frightening trying to convey ideas because group members kept interrupting one another. We began repeating the same arguments over and over again, sometimes providing new evidence, sometimes not. All in all, we would have liked to have done better on those aspects of communication.

In conclusion, we learned valuable information about small group communication. Each person brings his or her own viewpoints to the group and can greatly contribute to the group’s decision making outcome. A group’s devil’s advocate allows for honesty of opinion and encourages members to elaborate on various points. This approach can reveal much about a person and the ways in which he or she thinks and interacts. The more people in a group, the more ideas are present. However, as groups get larger, it is harder to get all group members to see all issues in the same way. Our group agrees that if we had more jurors, not only would the deliberation take longer, but the outcome could have possibly been different.

Given what we know about small groups, we expected both positive and negative characteristics. From our jury deliberation experience, we feel that the positives of small group communication far outweighed the negative aspects of it. Overall, this assignment was a valuable experience, and we have become confident in how our group will excel throughout the duration of the semester.