Yours, Mine, and Ours

Communication Theory Analysis

Dear Admiral,

I am not sure if you have heard about me, but I’m a friend of the Beardsley family. I live in New London and heard about your family’s recent move into the area. I also heard that you recently married your high school sweetheart, Mrs. North. I have known the North kids for a while and I must say they definitely have different tendencies than your kids. They aren’t bad kids, they just don’t follow the same structure you’ve implemented into your kids, but I’m sure you’ve figured that out already.

Anyway, I became fast friends with your eldest son, William. He and I talk a lot about your family’s issues, including your own and I couldn’t help but think, “Hey, I can help his dad with some of the family issues”. You are probably thinking, “How can a kid help me?!” While I may be young, I have a lot of extra-curricular activities and one of them involves studying communication behaviors. I am actually quite the communication scholar and I happen to be taking a very practical and valuable communication theory course. I think studying how people communicate interpersonally is essential to understanding how to navigate through your daily interactions with people. Wouldn’t you agree?

Well, when I first heard about the 18 kid family, I thought you must be a saint to be willing to put yourself through that. William or Will, as I like to call him, has told me about the difficulty you have had meshing the two families together and the two different styles of living that you and your new wife have. When he told me that you hadn’t discussed the potential marriage with your kids first, that’s when I got a little concerned. This is essentially why I decided to write you, in hopes that you may take my advice into consideration. I know you’re a
busy man, but you sound like a man who really cares about his family. It’s your willingness to put in the extra effort to unite everyone that shows a lot of promise for the future of this large family. I must warn you though, as I’m sure you are probably already aware, that with so many kids to take care of, it’s hard to maintain intimacy with all your kids.

I am reminded of two theories that affect both your wife and your kids, and when I say your kids, I’m referring also to Mrs. North’s kids. In relation to you and your wife, Relational Dialectics Theory is quite fitting, and in regards to your kids, particularly to your step-kids, Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory definitely would hit home for you since you are a big rule oriented guy. The reason I mention these theories is that they both have significance to the type of relationship you have with these individuals. I know that if I stepped into such a large family, as you so willingly have, I’d want to make sure that everyone understood the benefits of having such a unit. It is difficult to make sure everyone’s opinions are appreciated and understood, when you have so many people to connect too.

That said, I want to start off first with the relationship with your wife Helen, because let’s face it, in order to run a tight ship you have to make sure the ranks are established. I think Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery definitely had a strong point to be made when they developed Relational Dialectics Theory. I personally didn’t think much of the theory at first, but once I got to the basic relational dialectics, it really started to come into focus for me. Seeing as how you and your wife seem to have such contradictory natures, I felt it only fitting to relay the message of this theory back to you. Conflict and progress almost seem contradictory at first sight, but much like the relationship with your wife, there is always an opportunity to have both, which you clearly desire to have. You know from your Coast Guard experience, that conflict can be an innovator as far as developing a progression in something like a relationship. You have
obviously rekindled an old bond you once had with Helen back in high school. I think the unsettling, non-linear nature of this theory is a strong parallel to what makes life with your wife and her kids difficult at times. Am I right? Structure isn’t always everything, but it sure does make life a little bit more predictable.

Baxter and Montgomery are articulating the interdependence factor that relational life has on individuals, like what you have with your wife. It is difficult to balance work with so many kids and still find time to communicate with her. It’s the three areas of the basic relational dialectics, that I believe spell out the contradictory tendencies that you feel towards your wife. I want to focus primarily on the contradiction of autonomy and connection. Obviously you love your wife and are trying to apply the regimented ideal of family life that you believe will unite the children. It is important first, however, to think about the level of autonomy that you believe you and Helen ought to have in your own relationship. You clearly have a strong desire to be autonomous with your military background and so does Helen with her artistic talents. You respect each other’s careers, even though they hold different ideals. You both desire to be connected too, which makes it difficult when you have so many obstacles, but you are trying which is essential to relational life. As much as relational dialectics plays a significant part of your relationship with your wife, it’s the contradictions that the two of you display to all 18 kids that makes it difficult to maintain a united front. Let’s face it, the kids need to see a united front and that their parents have a mutual respect for each other.

Which leads me to the next theory that I think will help your relationship with your wife, the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory. I’m talking about that reunion cruise that seemed to put all the conflict in motion. W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen both created this theory to shed light on the idea that people co-create meaning in their social world or reality. The
point that really relates to you in this theory is the need for rules in constructing and coordinating meaning in that reality. Yea, *rules*, I knew you would like the sound of that! The first theory relates better to your wife with all the free flowing craziness that it offers, but this theory is definitely up your alley. They stated that rules guide communication between people, which is more of how you feel, is it not? Just like in your career, everything in your life coordinates around structure and order and this theory supports that idea. Clearly when you and Helen reunited on that ship, your separate social realities were significantly different, and perhaps without you fully appreciating the repercussions of your decision to marry. Obviously, you knew you were going to deal with 10 other children, but I’m sure you didn’t envision this much difficulty, did you? Perhaps it is because they don’t follow the same rules you do, or even follow many rules at all. Through your interaction and communication with Helen, you developed a new social reality, one that puts you out of your comfort zone. The kids all need for you and Helen to co-construct a reality that everyone can exist in and feel valued by.

I hope these two theories help you understand the difficulties that I believe ought to be discussed between you and your wife. Remember it all starts with the two of you and it can finish well for everyone, if you establish rules everyone is willing to live by! It seems like you understand the problem, but have no clue how to go about fixing the issues with your family and your wife. If I’ve been accurate to this point, then please allow me to pose some possible solutions to your problems.

Allow me to apply some additional research I chose to do on your behalf, in accordance with your problems. I heard the issue of spanking came up, when you tried to implement restraint on the two little ones. I’m sorry to bring up a potentially sore subject for you, as you may have wished to forget about it for the sake of your wife. I’m sure that form of discipline hasn’t left
your mind, but I wanted to point out that though your form of discipline may be a bit rough, your desired meaning was to instill a level of discipline and respect for others. A deep seeded issue that you and Helen have is your relationship with power. W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce both wrote an essay about a study they had performed relating to the Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory or CMM. They found that being a practical theory as CMM is, the issue of power was a looming concern. They challenged the notion of assigned meaning and roles that people play in their daily interactions. I heard that through your attempts to establish your power, you threatened to bring out “the hammer.” As amusing as it is too me (my father tried the same technique) and sure it’s scary, it won’t establish power effectively, it will only elicit irrational fear. You don’t want the kids to fear you; you just want them to respect you! Reframing messages is essential to getting your point across effectively, without creating a fearful environment for your kids. If you get the kids to love you through mutual respect, then they won’t remain an issue.

The radical question that they posed is what I believe will help you with your issues with your wife. They asked participants to try and answer the question, “What are we making together?” See what I mean? That is exactly the question you and Helen ought to flesh out together. It isn’t like high school is it? Well, that’s because you and Helen didn’t have 18 kids to deal with. But, I must say with an earnest effort, you must try and reconcile your struggle with power. Helen ought to have equal authority over the decisions made in the family. You are the admiral after all, but maybe it’s time to be just, Frank. When you get home from work, make time to address your wife’s concerns, take the time to ask her, how her day was and particularly, how she wishes the children to be raised? Ensuring that she feels authority in the relationship, with regard to decision making, will help maintain stability in your communication. This theory
ought to continuously remind you of the term co-creation. You and Helen, together, create the social reality in your relationship and that reality has a direct effect on your kid's realities.

There is one other solution I would like you to consider, relating specifically to your relationship with the children, but also the significance of your united connection with Helen. It's that level of autonomy and connection that I referred to earlier, you know Relational Dialectics theory. I found research that was focused strictly on step-children and the perceptions they felt towards their parent's relationship. It offered a lot of insightful information that could help you alter your course of action when dealing with Helen and her kids. Dawn O. Braithwaite, Paige W. Toller, Karen L. Daas, Wesley T. Durham & Adam C. Jones are five authors that came together to understand the contradictions that children felt when dealing with step-parents. The children rely on how parents communicate with one another and that is why this theory resonates with your situation. The study illustrates how kids like being the center of attention, but not caught in the middle, bit of a contradiction isn't it? There are times from what I have heard, that you and Helen sort of bottle up your feelings about the process of your relationship. Perhaps you are remaining too independent, without realizing the role of interdependence in the relationship. A part of the study found that children respond well to being informed about their parent's actions, but at the same time didn't want to be told too much. The message to be taken from this study is that kids are conflicted, like parents, in knowing what they want. They have conflicting desires to be autonomous in their life, but still have connection with their parents. Make time to communicate with all 18 of your kids and let know you are there for all of them, whenever they need to talk. I have heard you have orchestrated family activities for everyone, which is a great step towards pulling the family together. Keep a calm and collected mindset and see through the episodes, you are sure to run into in the future.
Structure seems to be the name of the game in your world. You are used to living the military life, but understanding that it is you that is in the military and not your family would give you a better opportunity to be connected to them. Your career means a lot to you, but you gave those dreams up to realize a different dream. Theory and practice are two interesting catalysts for the change that needs to be made, in order to sustain a balanced family life. You and Helen need to make every effort to talk out your problems before it gets around to your kids. I know a number of the kids feel underappreciated in light of your budding career. It is important to remember to maintain a united front with your wife and still be willing to put your power position on hold. Helen and the 18 kids are all connected and interdependent with you. Take the knowledge of communication scholars and apply the theories through a practical means. Given the resolve instilled in you through your military training and your desire to be a good father and husband, I'm confident in the future of your large happy family.

Sincerely,

Elliott Bishop
P.S. I figured being the structured guy that you are; you could appreciate looking up my research for yourself. I hope these references will help you navigate to a happy family and a happy marriage. Best of wishes and I'm sure William will fill me in how you have progressed.

References

