—— A FIRST LOOK AT ——
COMMUNICATION THEORY

The following document is an **archived chapter**
from a previous edition of
A First Look at Communication Theory
by Em Griffin, the leading college text in the
field of communication theory
(all editions published by McGraw-Hill).

The theory is no longer covered in a full chapter of the current edition.

This document is posted on the resource website for the text
www.afirstlook.com

Interact System Model of Decision Emergence
of B. Aubrey Fisher

Throughout the twentieth century, group members involved in decision-making tasks have been urged to follow educator-philosopher John Dewey's pattern of reflective thinking. The six-step logical process parallels a doctor's approach to treating a patient:

1. Recognize symptoms of illness.
2. Diagnose the cause of the ailment.
3. Establish criteria for wellness.
4. Consider possible remedies.
5. Test to determine which solutions will work.
6. Implement or prescribe the best solution.

Despite its widespread use in discussion-leadership training, the late B. Aubrey Fisher, a communication professor at the University of Utah, judged Dewey's system to be "of little value as a *guide for groups* involved in making decisions." Fisher noted that although reflective thinking can help individuals figure out good solutions, not all decisions faced by a group are problems to be solved, and rationality isn't always the ultimate test of an effective outcome. Decisions are worthless unless they're implemented, so member commitment to the solution is sometimes more important than reaching the logical or right decision.

Consider the appointment of Juan Ladamora to a joint faculty-student search committee which has the task of recommending a candidate to be the new dean of students. The former dean resigned under fire when minority groups on campus produced convincing evidence of systematic discrimination in college housing and employment. Juan is a Filipino undergraduate chosen by the president to represent Asian students on campus. He is joined by an African-American graduate student, the presidents of a sorority and the

local chapter of NOW, an avowed homosexual, and three faculty members from different departments. The president of the college has instructed the committee to submit a single name that all eight can enthusiastically support and sell to their constituent groups. As Juan walks across campus to attend the first meeting, he wonders what twists and turns the course of the discussion will take. That's precisely the question that Fisher's interact system model of decision emergence is designed to answer.

THE DECISION-MAKING GROUP AS AN OPEN SYSTEM

Fisher viewed groups as systems in the same way that telephone companies, football teams, and Detroit auto assembly lines are systems. They are "a set of units bound by a definable context within which the component units interact with each other."[1] Although there are differences, AT&T is quite similar to General Telephone, the Chicago Bears are like the San Francisco Forty-Niners, and putting together a Taurus has much in common with assembling a Saturn. Fisher thought it reasonable to expect that Juan's search committee will reach a decision in roughly the same way as a problem-solving group at IBM or a jury deliberating the fate of a defendant does. His interact system model tries to capture the similarities.

Some systems theorists would regard the eight individuals on the search committee as the basic units of analysis, and therefore concentrate their efforts on understanding the relationships among group members. They would see the committee as a closed system, its decision a predictable result of the nature of the people appointed.

Not so with Fisher. He would have viewed Juan's committee as an open system which can interact with outsiders, generate new information, and adapt to change. He thought Bales' social-emotional categories were extra baggage that distract the observer from the crucial elements of a task group system that is open to input from the outside. He focused on what was said regardless of who said it or of the feelings that surrounded the comment. Fisher didn't believe that the initial mix of personalities dictates the final outcome. He was convinced that the verbal interaction does.

A GROUNDED THEORY OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Given his systems orientation, Fisher began his study of decision making with the belief that all groups go through similar phases or stages before reaching consensus. Just as people experience birth, childhood, maturity, and death, he assumed that groups share a common life cycle. But he was careful not to anticipate the number or nature of these phases.

Most scientifically oriented theorists begin with a core idea. Berger is convinced that people who have just met are concerned with reducing uncertainty. Festinger was certain that inconsistency causes dissonance. Petty and Cacioppo believe there are two routes to persuasion. These researchers then

formulate hypotheses, axioms, postulates, or corollaries which spell out the specific implications of their central tenet. Finally, they test their predictions by applying them to real-life situations to see if they fit. This deductive approach is reflected in the organization of chapters you've already read. The report of research usually comes after the statement of theory.

Fisher feared that a preliminary conclusion would bias the way the results are interpreted. He wanted to base his theory on what actually happens rather than on what people expect or think ought to happen. He was committed to having data generate the theory rather than the other way around. He called this "grounded theory"; the label refers to the idea that principles are constructed on a solid base of direct observation and evidence rather than on mere inference or speculation.

CODING TASK INTERACTION

Fisher's research required a means of separating the statements of group members based on their reaction to a specific decision proposal. Suppose Juan's group is considering limiting its search to off-campus candidates. Any statement Juan makes on that topic could be classified according to Fisher's system of observation. But comments not anchored to the decision proposal would be ignored by the person using Fisher's system. When he summarized the procedure he used in his own research, Fisher reported that "any interaction considered to be serving purely a procedural or socializing function, i.e. nontask function, was coded into an 'et cetera' category and excluded from the data."[2] That means that statements which Bales would rate as "seems friendly/unfriendly," "dramatizes," or "shows tension" were not recorded.

Figure 21.1 shows the ultimate categories that Fisher used to classify verbal responses to a decision proposal. The original system had a slot for "summarizes," but it was used so seldom that he dropped it from the analysis. The "disagreement" category is a later addition put in for balance. Statements in parentheses illustrate things Juan might say which would be assigned to that particular category.

FOUR PHASES OF DECISION EMERGENCE

Fisher applied his coding system to ten nonclassroom groups facing major decisions. The groups ranged in size from four to twelve members, in duration from twenty-five minutes to thirty hours, and in age of participants from teens to sixties. Some groups were all male, some were all female, and some were mixed. He sought this variety to ensure that any recurrent pattern wasn't due to similarity of group composition. Like Juan's committee, all ten groups had tasks that required consensus, and all achieved that goal.

The data collected were analyzed on two levels. Fisher totaled the frequency of eight types of verbal "acts" that took place at various times

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│              DECISION PROPOSAL: LIMIT SEARCH                  │
│                 TO OFF-CAMPUS PERSONNEL                       │
│                                                              │
│  1. Interpretation: Simple value judgment, no support stated │
│      f–favorable     ("It would be good to get a dean from   │
│                       outside.")                             │
│      u–unfavorable  ("I don't like the idea of cutting ourselves│
│                       off from candidates here at the school.")│
│      a–ambiguous    ("I'm sure there are advantages and dis- │
│                       advantages both ways.")                │
│                                                              │
│  2. Substantiation: Includes evidence, explanations, arguments│
│      f–favorable     ("The U.S. Council of Deans recommends bringing│
│                       in someone who can make a fresh start.")│
│      u–unfavorable  ("Asian students are convinced that a newcomer│
│                       wouldn't understand their problems.")  │
│      a–ambiguous    ("Fifty percent of the deans hired last year│
│                       were promoted from within.")          │
│                                                              │
│  3. Clarification: Providing or seeking information          │
│                    ("Would an outsider have access to the files│
│                     on past discrimination?")               │
│                                                              │
│  4. Modification: Amending or changing the decision proposal │
│                    ("We could exclude present student personnel│
│                     employees, but consider candidates from │
│                     academic or other departments.")        │
│                                                              │
│  5. Agreement: With the preceding comment                   │
│                    ("I think John is right.")               │
│                                                              │
│  6. Disagreement: With the preceding comment                │
│                    ("That's not how I see it.")             │
│                                                              │
│  7. Other                                                    │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```
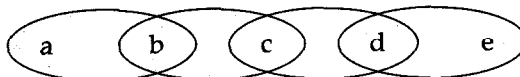
FIGURE 21.1
Fisher's Categories of Verbal Interaction Applied to Hypothetical Task Group
(From Fisher, "Decision Emergence: Phases in Group Decision Making.")

throughout the life of the groups. These isolated acts can be symbolized as a series of separate statements:

Figure 21.2 shows what percentage of the time each type of statement was used.

Fisher also examined statements in combination with what went before or came after. The paired progression below shows how these "interacts" were formed:

	Favorable interpretation	Unfavorable interpretation	Ambiguous interpretation	Favorable substantiation	Unfavorable substantiation	Ambiguous substantiation	Explanation	Agreement	
	1f	1u	1a	2f	2u	2a	3	5	Total
Phase One (Orientation)	11	8	12	12	8	9	29	11	100%
Phase Two (Conflict)	15	11	7	17	10	7	23	10	100%
Phase Three (Emergence)	17	8	13	18	5	9	23	7	100%
Phase Four (Reinforcement)	30	3	7	22	3	4	22	9	100%

FIGURE 21.2
Percentage of Interaction Response Coded for Each Category (From data in Fisher, "Decision Emergence: Phases in Group Decision Making.")

The next four sections of the chapter describe significant interact trends. Both the act and interact analyses suggest that consensus is reached in a four-phase sequence of decision emergence:

Orientation → Conflict → Emergence → Reinforcement

Phase 1: Orientation

The first phase is characterized by a great amount of clarification and agreement. Clarification seems to serve two functions. First, it reduces the uncertainty members feel as they begin their task. Every new group has a "shakedown" period in which members become acclimated and try to figure out the choices that are open to them. Second, a request for clarification is also a way to express disagreement without disturbing the peace ("I'm not sure I understand what you're saying").

The high amount of agreement discovered by Fisher appears to be a way to keep the conversational ball rolling in the middle of start-up tension. Although group members concur with a broad range of statements, agree-

ment especially follows statements that are ambiguous (1a/5, 2a/5). Members can't tell at that point which way the group will go, and agreeing with ambiguous interpretations and substantiations is a way to keep options open.

There are other indications of tentativeness in the orientation phase. Unfavorable responses are lower than in the second phase. Also, favorable interpretations are rarely reinforced with another favorable interpretation (1f/1f). Fisher concluded that many of the ambiguous comments reflect a safe way to express tentative agreement with the decision proposal. His assumption is supported by the nonassertive way ideas are presented during Phase 1 ("I may be wrong, but perhaps. . . . ").

Phase 2: Conflict

The transition from phase 1 to phase 2 can be spotted by the decline of ambiguity and the increase in strong reactions—both favorable and unfavorable. The tentativeness of the orientation stage is replaced by certainty and vehemence ("You have to. . . . "). As attempts to persuade increase, people form coalitions with other like-minded members. It's not unusual to have a back-to-back string of favorable interpretations (1f/1f) spoken by participants who discover they react the same way.

In all probability, Juan will get caught up in the controversy and identify with one side or the other. Perhaps Juan, the black graduate student, and one of the professors are adamant that the whole student personnel department is tainted by racism. Of course, it's possible that he or someone else will withdraw from the conflict. But as polarization increases, not to take a stand is uncharacteristic. Unfavorable substantiation (2u) is higher in phase 2 than at any other time, another indication that conflict is now the norm.

Individual roles solidify in the latter half of the conflict phase. Leadership emerges from the ranks of the majority and those in the minority begin to recognize that they are fighting a losing battle. The move to phase 3 is more prolonged and less distinct than the other phase transitions.

Phase 3: Emergence

Groups can take only so much conflict. As the discussion slides into a new pattern, it becomes obvious to all which way the group is heading. Yet the group won't reach consensus if one side loses and the winners gloat. The take-no-prisoners combativeness of the second phase softens so that those who are outnumbered are given an opportunity for strategic withdrawal. Ambiguity becomes the path of retreat. "If conflict was a clash of favorable and unfavorable opinions, emergence is . . . a semi-clash of favorable and ambiguous opinion."[3]

Ambiguous statements (1a,2a) are heard just as often in the emergence phase as in the orientation stage. But Fisher described their function quite differently. Ambiguity served as tentative agreement in phase 1, but here it

reflects muted disapproval. Unfavorable statements (1u,2u) are fewer, and ambiguity becomes a way station on the dissenter's journey to embracing the group decision ("I just wondered . . . ").

Fisher originally hoped to be able to pinpoint the exact time that a decision was reached but concluded that this was an unrealistic goal. He could only say with certainty that the third phase lasts longer than the others, the group attains unanimity toward the end of that stage, and the term *emergence* captures the gradual nature of the process. Juan may never know for sure when the committee reached a consensus on seeking an outside candidate.

Phase 4: Reinforcement

Although the final phase is brief compared with the stages that came before, it is vital for creating group solidarity. Members have an increasing awareness that the decision has already been made, and even those originally opposed have a deepening commitment to the final outcome. The reinforcement stage is like the idealized Old West where "seldom is heard a discouraging word." This is evidenced by the virtual disappearance of unfavorable reactions. Dissent may be constructive during the conflict and emergence phases because disagreement can stimulate innovative ideas. But controversy in phase 4 would be a hindrance to a spirit of unity.

According to Fisher, this absence of disruptive talk reflects real agreement rather than mere avoidance of conflict. In this final phase, favorable interpretation and substantiation (1f,2f) accounted for over 50 percent of everything that was said. Analysis of the interacts shows that almost all the positive reinforcement is given to statements favoring the decision proposal (1f/5, 2f/5).

Fisher characterized the reinforcement stage as a time of uninhibited joviality. Members engage in loud laughter, verbal backslapping, and mutual congratulations on a job well done. No matter which candidate the search committee ultimately settles on, Juan will walk away from the final meeting with a warm glow, convinced that the person they've nominated will seek racial justice on campus.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Fisher was the first to admit that not all groups go through the four-phase developmental sequence. His interact model is designed to apply to groups that need to reach a consensus on issues of major importance to members. Don't expect to see the sequence in operation over mundane matters or when the majority rules through a quick vote.

Fisher also noted that variations are common. Effective members shift from phase to phase, altering their verbal behavior as appropriate. But sometimes a group will get stuck in a phase because one member is unable to adjust to changing conditions. This could be due to interpersonal insensitivity, but usually it's because he or she has a hidden agenda that drives every comment. Either way, the group gets bogged down and is unable to progress to the succeeding phase.

Other group researchers agree with the overall thrust of Fisher's model, if not with its details. Bales found a three-step group progression. And like Fisher, he called the first period a time of orientation. The categories that predominate in his evaluation period match the interactions in Fisher's conflict phase. Bales didn't spot a distinct time of emergence, but his final period of control has some similarity with Fisher's reinforcement phase.

Perhaps the greatest outside confirmation of Fisher's four phases comes from a survey of group process literature undertaken by B. W. Tuckman, who is now dean of education at Florida State University. Before the interact system model was published, Tuckman synthesized previous research and concluded that groups go through a developmental cycle of *forming, storming, norming,* and *performing.* Not only do the labels rhyme, they also seem to match the four phases that Fisher discovered.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DECISION PHASES

Unlike Bales' categories, which have been used by a variety of consultants to analyze specific groups and their members, Fisher's verbal categories have served mainly as a tool to establish his four-phase hypothesis. The theory itself, however, is highly useful. If Fisher has correctly identified the stages of decision emergence, the perceptive leader can spot the phase a group is in and avoid saying things that might sabotage the natural process. In fact, any member who regards consensus as a goal would do well to heed advice based on Fisher's research:

Phase 1—Realizing that ambiguity serves the function of tentative agreement, don't press for specifics during this orientation period. Since requests for clarification often mask disagreement, don't assume you already have unanimity and push for closure.

Phase 2—Arguments are natural and necessary in the conflict stage. Insist that members fight fairly, but don't try to smooth over controversy that the group needs to hear.

Phase 3—At this point, dissenters use vague comments as a means to give in somewhat gracefully. Don't short-circuit their acquiescence by demanding total commitment.

Phase 4—Let people enjoy their new found unity. An overflow of positive reinforcement increases the likelihood that members will stick by the decision after the meeting.

CRITIQUE: AN EMERGING CONSENSUS ON THE INTERACT MODEL

Although there is widespread agreement in the field of group dynamics that decision-making groups go through a somewhat predictable process, the interact system model has its critics. One of them was B. Aubrey Fisher himself. Later in his life he regarded his decision to ignore nonverbal interaction as a mistake. He became even more convinced that relational issues shouldn't be excluded:

> The original purpose of the investigation which discovered these four phases was to observe verbal task behavior free from the confounding variables of the socioemotional dimension. That purpose, of course, was doomed to failure. The two dimensions are interdependent.[4]

The omission of relational issues is particularly shortsighted when there are large discrepancies in the power wielded by certain members of the group. Consider Juan's involvement on the joint faculty-student search committee. We can expect his comments to be a bit circumspect if one of the faculty members is also his professor in a required psychology course. There's also the issue of cultural differences. Juan might be more opposed to a proposal than anyone else sitting at the table, but his Filipino upbringing would make direct criticism unlikely. Fisher's classification method doesn't record these subtle interpersonal dynamics. As University of Minnesota communication researcher Dean Hewes notes in his critique of interaction category systems, "That complexity, if it does exist, does not disappear from the phenomenon under investigation simply by requiring that coders ignore it."[5]

Despite the problems with Fisher's categories, most observers applaud his efforts to capture the process of group development through analysis of verbal interacts. The mere categorization of single statements wouldn't have revealed the different functions of ambiguity in phase 1 and phase 3. It's not only helpful to know what Juan said during the search committee's delibera-

tions, it's important to understand where it came in the flow. As all systems theorists note, sequence is crucial.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1.   Could a well-prepared group leader plan out the first few *interacts* of a *decision-making process*?

2.   Fisher believed that *ambiguous* statements in the group serve a different function in the *emergence phase* than they do in the *orientation phase*. How do they differ? How could he tell?

3.   What changes would you expect if Fisher has advocated a *closed systems* theory rather than an *open systems* theory?

4.   Fisher's interact systems model has been criticized for ignoring the effect of *emotion* on communication. Which of the other theories already presented are open to that charge?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: B. Aubrey Fisher and Donald Ellis, "Anatomy of Communication in Decision-Making Groups: Improving Effectiveness," in *Small Group Decision Making*, 3d ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, 1990, pp. 170–200.

Brief summary: B. Aubrey Fisher, "Decision Emergence: The Social Process of Decision Making," in *Small Group Communication: A Reader*, 4th ed., R. S. Cathcart and L. A. Samovar (eds.), Wm. C. Brown, Dubuque, Iowa, 1984, pp. 149–156.

Theoretical assumptions: B. Aubrey Fisher and Leonard C. Hawes, "An Interact System Model: Generating a Grounded Theory of Small Groups," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 57, 1971, pp. 444–453.

Quantitative analysis: B. Aubrey Fisher, "Decision Emergence: Phases in Group Decision Making," *Speech Monographs*, Vol. 37, 1970, pp. 53–66.

Quantitative analysis: B. Aubrey Fisher, "The Process of Decision Modification in Small Discussion Groups," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 20, 1970, pp. 51–64.

Research update: Kenneth Cissna, "Phases in Group Development: The Negative Evidence,"*Small Group Behavior*, Vol. 15, 1984, pp. 3–32.

Critique: Dean Hewes, "The Sequential Analysis of Social Interaction,"*Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 65, 1979, pp. 56–73.

Systems approach: B. Aubrey Fisher, "The Pragmatic Perspective of Human Communication," in *Human Communication Theory*, Frank E. X. Dance (ed.), Harper & Row, New York, 1982, pp. 192–219.

Early review of literature: B. W. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 63, 1965, pp. 384–399.

Reflective thinking: John Dewey, *How We Think*, Heath, New York, 1910.

1 B. Aubrey Fisher and Leonard C. Hawes, "An Inter-
act System Model: Generating a Grounded Theory of
Small Groups," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 57,
1971, p. 445.
2 B. Aubrey Fisher, "Decision Emergence: Phases in
Group Decision Making," *Speech Monographs*, Vol. 37,
1970, p. 55.
3 B. Aubrey Fisher, "Decision Emergence: The Social
Process of Decision Making," in *Small Group Commu-
nication: A Reader*, 4th ed., R. S. Cathcart and L. A.
Samovar (eds.), Wm. C. Brown, Dubuque, Iowa,
1984, p. 153.
4 B. Aubrey Fisher, *Small Group Decision Making*, 2d
ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, 1980, p. 149.
5 Dean Hewes, "The Sequential Analysis of Social In-
teraction," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 65, 1979,
p. 64.