



A FIRST LOOK AT COMMUNICATION THEORY

**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Randy Hirokawa,
creator of the Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agqQQnhD9NE>

Griffin: I'm with Randy Hirokawa. He's the author of the Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making. Randy, what's the function of the Functional Perspective; what's it trying to accomplish:

Hirokawa: Simply, the theory is designed to explain why groups make good or bad decisions. The idea of the theory is to account for what is a relatively, deceptively simple question, that is, why do some groups make better decisions than others.

Griffin: And the answer is?

Hirokawa: And the answer is that there are four essential functions that decision-making groups have to perform well in order to make a good decision. Those four functions are: the ability to analyze the problem; the ability to identify appropriate criteria for making a decision; the ability to develop alternative choices from which to choose; and the ability to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of alternate choices prior to making a decision.

Griffin: Is the order important?

Hirokawa: Order is not important. In fact, we found that groups have quite a bit of idiosyncrasy. What is important is that those functions ultimately get performed well in order to arrive at a high-quality decision.

Griffin: Is there one of those functions that's particularly crucial?

Hirokawa: Oh yeah, absolutely. I think research clearly demonstrated that of those four functions, a group's ability to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of alternate choices is *the* single most important function that a group needs to perform well in order to make a good decision.

Griffin: The theory is still being developed. Do you think you might find a fifth function?

Hirokawa: You know, I think that that's possible. I might find a fifth, or a sixth, or a seventh, or an eighth, or a ninth, or a tenth. I think what is important for us to consider is, does adding a

fifth function make a difference in terms of accounting for group decision-making performance? To date, the functional theory accounts for approximately sixty to seventy percent of the variance. Now, what that means is if you and I were to go to Las Vegas to gamble, and let's say we walk into a casino and the casino had this gambling game called "Bet On The Outcome of The Decision." And what this game was was that we'd watch a videotape of a group making a decision, and just before the group made the decision, the videotape would stop; and then we would bet whether the decision they make would be a good decision or a bad decision. If you and I went to Las Vegas armed with the knowledge of Functional Theory and we used our knowledge of the theory to predict whether or not the group would make a good decision or a bad decision, we would win more times than we would lose. And depending on how much money we bet when we won and how much money we bet when we lost, you and I could leave Las Vegas one of the ten percent winners. Seventy percent of the time we would be correct, and thirty percent of the time we would be wrong.

Griffin: But it does raise a question, Randy. How do you know when a decision is good?

Hirokawa: I think goodness or badness is a subjective judgment, and I personally believe that goodness or badness should be determined by the people who are impacted by the decision. If your university makes a decision about raising tuition, and we would ask the question, "is that a good decision or bad decision?" the people who are in the best position of rendering the judgment would be the students impacted by that tuition raise.

Griffin: Well, maybe I'm just creating a small problem, but I know there's a lot of times that I'm in a group – and as you know, in academia we're in groups a lot – and, quite frankly, I'm bored out of my gourd. I often, I must confess, maybe for entertainment purposes, will make a quip or a pun or something like this, to lighten the atmosphere. According to Symbolic Conversions Theory, gee, I may be starting a fantasy chain and doing good things; but it sounds like, according to your Functional Perspective, I'm hindering the group. Should I cut that out?

Hirokawa: That's not necessarily the case, Em. I mean, jokes very often are highly functional in getting a group to recognize an appropriate goal. It may be highly functional in getting the group to recognize what the pros and cons are of the different alternatives.

Griffin: I'm not sure my purpose is that noble.

Hirokawa: It may not be, it may not be; but that's one of the great intriguing aspects of group communication. That is, how you intend your message to function may not at all function in a way that you intended. There's an irony there, but it is a reality.

Griffin: Randy, it strikes me that this is a very rational approach to decision making. You aren't talking about attraction or cohesiveness or conflict or credibility or deviance – all the social-emotional factors that Bales and many other researchers have said are so important. How come?

Hirokawa: Well, admittedly, it is rational approach; but it is a rational approach that recognizes that social factors such as those you've mentioned do impact upon a group's ability to perform

those essential functions. The problem, if there is a problem, is that the theory has at this point not been developed to the point where it properly accounts for those social factors.

Griffin: So, it's in process.

Hirokawa: It is in process. One of the ways of thinking about this, Em, is that we know that a group's ability to perform essential functions depends on their ability to work well together. So, if a group is characterized by conflict issues, where two or three members have over time not gotten along with each other, it stands to reason that, before they can address functions like analyzing a problem or evaluating alternative choices, they have to work out their interpersonal differences. And until they can do that, those functions will remain largely unperformed; and what we would expect that group to do is not be able to make decisions.

Griffin: So Randy, in conclusion, if a group diligently performs all four of the functions that you've outlined, is a good decision guaranteed?

Hirakawa: No, never guaranteed. In life we always talk about probabilities, Em; and the likelihood is that, if those four functions are performed, then a group is *likely* to make a good decision.