

On Making Sense

1. The phrase I probably hear most often in working with clients, students and supervisees is: "That makes sense." Over the years I have come to learn the importance that comment. It reflects much more than a cognitive understanding of something I have said. Here the linear notion of communication utterly fails to capture what is going on. I would like to use my understanding of that comment to demonstrate the assumptions about language that are so fundamental to my thinking and ways of working.

2. To me language is all about coordination and not communication. I learned this from Humberto Maturana. If one thinks about language as physiological, the coordination of many systems at many levels is required both inside the body of one person and in the interaction between people. Specific networks of nerve cells fire in the brain as the person processes the stimulation from the other person's words, and muscles must regulate the breathing and the making of sounds, not to mention the auditory processes of listening to sounds from another person and regulating the flow of a conversation of listening and speaking.

Maturana assumes the nervous system of a person is closed, meaning in simple terms, that one cannot get inside another person's head. One can only stimulate another's brain and it can only respond within the limits (though vast) of its own physiological repertoire of its genes and its particular experiences. People naturally engage one another in a process of mutual stimulation like two dancers so the coordination makes it seem like they are one. I would see this unity not as a melding of one person into the other, but of very coordinated mutual stimulation.

3. Maturana would call this linguistic coordination, but not necessarily language. He reserves for the definition of language, the coordination of the coordination of action. This basically refers to the process of reflecting on the coordination or taking it to the level of abstraction, or to Deacon's level of "symbolic." When people say something makes sense, they are referring to a fit. My understanding of something 'making sense' is that the person is now operating with a better level of coordination as the newly discovered abstraction fits better.

4. Another systemic model that helps me to understand 'making sense' is Gestalt's figure/ground. Gestalt is a model of perception where there is a 'figure' or foreground, and a background or 'ground.' One assumption is that both must be present for there to be a perception at all. Another assumption is that figure and ground are not static, but in dynamic balance. Actually this model of figure/ground is very consistent with Maturana's notion of making distinctions.

One could say that something making sense now means there is a new perception. Something has changed in the figure/ground relationship. Perhaps the old figure is now seen in a different light, against a different background. Or something may have just become a focus as figural. This figure/ground shift could be seen as a different coordination.

5. An important aspect of the mutual stimulation between people is that that stimulation creates a structure or pattern that itself becomes part of the stimulation for each person. One could think of this process as one of coordination that now includes the relationship the people have developed. Using the image of the dancers, they begin to develop moves that they only do that way with this person as they have danced together before. As they coordinate the movements of their own body, they incorporate the responses of the coordinated movements of the other. They don't have to explain everything, but as they work together, at times they discover new movements that fit better than others. These movements make sense in their dance.

6. Finally, as with the dancers, there is a flow to their coordination that leads somewhere. It has a momentum. When the coordination is poor, there can still be momentum, but the movement is not smooth or efficient. There is a lot of wasted energy.

Examples:

When people say something makes sense, they are referring to a fit. Something we are talking about suddenly fits for them. It may fit with something we have been talking about over several weeks or months and at that moment they discover a new perspective. They can connect several discussions as they fit together.

It may be a fit with some old patterns that they now can understand. It may be that what their mother said to them as a child only now is understandable.

This fit in conversation with me creates another fit which becomes of the relationship with me and is the reason many people (clients, students, supervisees) work with me for long periods of time. It is because I "understand" and they don't have to start over again with someone new. While that is probably a factor, I think the notion of structural coupling explains the phenomenon better. Their making sense of things continues as they stay in relationship with me, where there is this fit that allows more fits.