

Chapter 5

Communication Accommodation Theory

ABSTRACT

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) allows us to manage our personal and social identities. According to the theory, people adjust speech, vocal patterns, and gestures to help promote mutual understanding in communication (Gallois & Giles, 2015). CAT helps us examine how to emphasize or minimize the differences between ourselves and others during verbal and non-verbal interactions. Language, context, identity, and intergroup and interpersonal factors are used in this theory to make interaction adjustments. Interpersonal control, interpretability, discourse management, and emotional expression are CAT strategies. There are also several supporting approaches that can help manage communication and adjust to receiver reaction including organizational dynamics, active listening, developing the leader within, style diversity, and ongoing self-assessment. The chapter concludes with information on building individual and team trust.

- **Emerging Research:** CAT is the way we emphasize or minimize verbal and non-verbal interaction differences with other people using language, context, identity, and intergroup and interpersonal factors to make adjustments. Convergence and divergence are accommodation processes used in CAT (Ayoko, Härtel et al., 2002). Convergence is the way people adapt to communicative behaviors to reduce social differences. People highlight speech and non-verbal differences to

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arrive at ways to adjust for success. People can accommodate too much when using convergence and, when that happens, they may seem condescending. Leaders can reverse communication breakdowns by managing discourse and achieving consensus on task processes. One researcher (Ayoko, Härtel et al., 2002) studied discourse management, finding in part that productive conflict resulted from increased use of discourse management strategies that sought common ground to repair communication roadblocks. Leaders should use the valuable resources provided in communication accommodation theory. *SOURCE: Resolving the puzzle of productive and destructive conflict in culturally heterogeneous workgroups: A communication accommodation theory approach (Ayoko, Härtel et al., 2002).*

COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY (CAT)

Leadership is responsible for adjusting approaches to group communication. This allows accommodation and flexibility that lead to effective information exchange and increased understanding. Great leaders are flexible communicators, listening and learning on the fly to adjust to each participant's emotions, risk, and feedback to get the most out of the interaction. They tailor their approach to the group atmosphere and take note of challenges based on the location or time of the interaction. These actions must be taken with care, because communication adjustments gone wrong can lead to problematic, adversarial, or dissatisfying experiences.

CAT promotes success in making these adjustments as we consider the many ways personal and social identity come into play (Giles, 2008). According to the theory, people accommodate communication partners by making changes to their gestures, vocal patterns, and speech when dealing with social encounters, interactions, or negotiations (Gallois and Giles, 2015). We all minimize or emphasize differences with interaction partners and CAT assists with these verbal and non-verbal challenges. CAT also deals with language, context, identity, interpersonal, and intergroup issues in communication.

Divergence and convergence are key factors in CAT. Divergence is when people stress and manage speech and non-verbal differences between themselves and others. Convergence, on the other hand, refers to individual strategies employed to adapt to another person's communication behavior.

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