

Use Surprise

Communication works through getting someone's *attention* and then holding it. There are several ways to provoke their interest. Some techniques are especially frequently used by social scientists (summed up by Davis, 1971 and Weick, 1979) and they all rely on using an element of *surprise*.

Surprise = an attack on assumptions

'All interesting theories share the quality that they constitute an attack on assumptions taken for granted by an audience. People find non intersecting those propositions that affirm their assumption ground (that's obvious), that do not speak to their assumption ground (that's irrelevant), or that deny their assumption ground (that's absurd).' (Davis, 1971:331).

Davis suggests 12 categories into which interesting propositions can be sorted, including the following:

- *Generalisation*: If a person assumes that a phenomenon is local and it turns out to be general, or vice versa, then interest is provoked, e.g. Freud asserts that sexual behaviour is not confined to adults, it is also found in children.
- *Organisation*: Interest will develop when people assume that a phenomenon is disorganised or unstructured and then discover that it is really organised, or vice versa, e.g. if it can be shown that there is a lack of structure in government decision-making where structure was presumed to exist.
- *Causation*: What seems to be the independent variable in a causal relationship turns out to be the dependent variable, e.g. participative management styles don't increase productivity, the presence of productivity leads managers to adopt more participative management styles.
- *Opposition*: What seem to be opposite phenomena are in reality similar, or vice versa, e.g. people who join opposing social movements are in fact joining them for similar reasons.
- *Co-variation*: What is assumed to be a positive co-variation between phenomena is in reality a negative co-variation, and vice versa, e.g. the assumption that lower-income people are charged less for goods and services turns out to be wrong, and in fact they pay more.

In sum, people seem to find a proposition interesting not because it tells them some truth they did not already know, but because it tells them some truth they thought they already knew was wrong.

Source

- Weick, Karl (1979) *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2nd ed, New York: McGraw-Hill, pp 51-60.

Further resources

- Davis, M. S. (1971) 'That's interesting: Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology' *Philosophy of Social Science* 1:309-344.