Symmetrical and Complementary Relationships

An interesting perspective on complementary and symmetrical relationships can be gained by looking at the ways in which these patterns combine to exert control in a relationship (Rogers-Millar & Millar 1979; Millar & Rogers 1987; Rogers & Farace 1975). Such relationships may occur in interpersonal, small group, interviewing, or organizational communication settings. Nine patterns are identified; three deal with symmetry (similar type messages), two with complementarity (opposite type messages), and four with transitional (neither the same nor opposite type messages). Table WebUnit 2.1 presents these types of relationships to show one approach to research in this area.

Table WebUnit 2.1. Relationship Types. This classification is based on the research of Rogers-Millar & Millar 1979; Millar & Rogers, 1987; Rogers & Farace 1975. Do you find this classification helpful for understanding relationships?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| In competitive symmetry each person tries to exert control over the other (symbolized by an upward arrow, _). Each communicates one-up messages (messages that attempt to control the behaviors of the other person): | Pat: Do it now. _
|                                                                                 | Chris: I'll do it when I'm good and ready; otherwise, do it yourself. _ |
| In submissive symmetry each person communicates submission (symbolized by a      | Pat: What do you want for dinner? _
|                                                                                  | Chris: Whatever you'd like is fine                                      |
downward arrow, _); both messages are one-
down (messages that indicate submission to
what the other person wants):

| In neutralized symmetry each person communicates similarly but neither competitively, one-up, nor submissively, one-down (symbolized by a horizontal arrow, _): | Pat: Jackie needs new shoes. _
Chris: And a new jacket. _ |
| --- | --- |
| In complementarity one person communicates the desire to control (one-up) and the other person communicates submission (one-down). | Pat: Here, honey, do it this way. _
Chris: Oh, that's great; you're so clever. _ |
| In another type of complementarity—the reverse of the above—the submissive message (one-down) comes first and is followed by a controlling (one-up) message: | Pat: I need suggestions for managing this new team of recruits. _
Chris: Oh, that's easy; I've managed similar groups for years. _ |

Transition patterns are those that don’t involve stating the opposite of the previous message; they don’t respond to a competitive message with submission, nor to a submissive message with a competitive one. There are four possible
transition patterns:

- a competitive message (one-up) is responded to without either another competitive message or a submissive message:
  
  Pat: I want to go to the movies. 
  Chris: There surely are a lot of choices this weekend.

- a submissive message (one-down) is responded to without either another submissive message or a competitive message:
  
  Pat: I'm just helpless with tools.
  Chris: Lot's of people have difficulty using a router.

- a transition message (one-across) is responded to with a competitive (one-up) message:
  
  Pat: We can do it in lots of ways.
  Chris: Well, here's the right way.

- a transition message (one-across) is responded to with a submissive (one-down) message:
  
  Pat: We can do it in lots of ways.
  Chris: However you do it is fine.

Think about these patterns in relation to your own interactions, whether among friends, loved ones, family, or colleagues at work:
• How rigid or flexible are these patterns? For example, do you and your friends or colleagues share control and submission or does one of you exercise control and the other respond with submission?

• Can you identify a relationship you have that makes use of one major pattern? What part do you play? Are you comfortable with this pattern?

• Can you identify a general pattern that you use in many or most of your interpersonal relationships? In most of your work relationships? How satisfied are you with your customary patterns of expression?

Can you identify relationships you have that began with one pattern of communication and over the years have shifted to another pattern? What happened?