

Mkombozi

Empower. Engage. Enable.



THINK PIECE:

Conscious communication at Mkombozi:

Social anthropological reflections and considerations

You can communicate with people about themselves and you can communicate with people about others. The first happens for the sake of change among the individuals themselves, and the second happens for the sake of change in the world; change in the relations and perceptions between groups of people. This document is about the first - communicating with people about themselves. It asks the question: What do we need to consider about ourselves and others while finding ways to encourage positive change?

Communication as a manifestation of the whole organisation

Communication at Mkombozi cannot exist in isolation - it must manifest the "whole" (i.e. who / what we collectively are). Within the organisation, everything is ideally tied together: what we find and know (research) is what we say (communication), and it is also the reason behind what we do (practice). If all parts of the organisation work from the same understanding, then all parts have become aware of the others (i.e. they operate with one consciousness).

The greatest importance does not lie in what we do - but in what we are. If we are, we will automatically improve and love the things we do. We will do them with greatness and we will all be operating in alignment. Thus, the ideas in this thinkpiece can be relevant to Mkombozi communications, as well as any other part of the organisation.

Communication as a means to raise consciousness

The focus here is what some might call "cultural awareness". Not only does Mkombozi have multi-cultural staff, but it operates with theoretical and practical influences from different cultures and settings. We must aim to be knowledgeable, self-aware and conscious as an organisation if we are to enter the windows of opportunity through which we can spark the same qualities in others. We must be a leader of self-awareness. We must find our own wisdom in order to detect the wisdom in others. If we are to say that we are "culturally sensitive", we must also actively understand what the threads of the cultural fabric are - in ourselves and in others.

It may come to our attention that organisations such as Mkombozi are communicating (through the press and online) messages that are not aligned with local, pre-existing meanings, assumptions and language about the lives of children. This does not mean, however, that we should not communicate about the importance and relevance of child rights, it simply means that we must identify and consider the existing perceptions, beliefs, traditions and behaviours of the context in which we operate. Children's rights don't necessarily need to feel like an abstract, international philosophy. It is our responsibility to impart and translate our message in a language that is locally understood and culturally relevant.



Among the values, beliefs and actions which directly shape the lives of children in families and communities, there are “points of entry” in which Mkombozi and its stakeholders can communicate and better understand each other. If we actively work towards understanding the fabric of social life among our stakeholders, we can find those entry points (or “fields of understanding”) through which significant communication can take place.

Communication is, therefore, a tool we use to:

- enlighten people and communities about present realities;
- encourage positive change;
- raise self-awareness in people and communities;
- raise awareness of how Mkombozi relates to people and communities.

Key principles in finding the “field of understanding”

Good to you is bad to another...

It is not always appropriate to see things as “good” and “bad”; reality is far more complex than such a dichotomy. What is seen as “good” to one person is seen as “bad” to another - simply because they have applied different meanings to the same thing. Similarly, what some may see as a “sin” is not necessarily a “crime” to others, and what some may define as “crime” is not a “sin” to others. Thus, if we communicate things in a simple dichotomy that considers only our own perspective and context, then our audience will miss the deeper meaning and complexity of the reality to which we are drawing their attention.

There is a meaning, a significance, behind everything people do...

Knowledge about peoples’ social lives, their perceptions and experiences can only be discovered and understandable if they are seen as carriers of meaning and if they are properly contextualised. It is through peoples’ actions and reflections that these meanings can be discovered. Seek for meaning in peoples actions and social life rather than trying to explain it or find “truths”.

The whole, not isolated events, is the key to understanding...

Peoples’ actions and words create and reflect meaning; they are more complex than they might first appear / sound. If we consider events in the life of a child or parent, they might never make sense if we have not understood the whole historical, social and personal context which resulted in that particular event. Isolated events and statements lack meaning. (For example, imagine that you are reading a poem and you notice one metaphor for which you seek an explanation. Even after receiving an explanation of the metaphor itself, you will not be able to understand the metaphor’s true meaning in the context of the poem unless and until you take the time to read and understand the poem in its entirety.)

Observation and and participation results in usable knowledge...

Through study of the interactions that take place between people - the beliefs and relationships which become expressed and embodied - we can begin to understand and analyse social life in a certain setting. It is on that basis that we can begin to understand people’s “problems”, and the changes that they themselves strive for, or oppose.

The same knowledge must then be used in communication...

In order to facilitate change in the life of a child, we must first understand what his/her life is comprised of; we must consider the child’s context (where s/he is from, what is his/her history, what beliefs s/he is shaped by, what significance s/he holds among the people around him/her). After having discovered this invisible net which is already spun around the child, and after having fully understood what it is that we are looking at and trying to change, only then can we can unravel the local significance or non-significance of our own words and thinking as an organisation. This is the place where we stand a better chance of finding the “field of understanding” - the entry point.

Considerations for communicating & perceiving...

We interpret what we see, and our interpretations come from our own present social conditions, views, opinions and experience. It is common to interpret history from the viewpoint of present ideals.

The historical conditions of the “west” are often applied on the present conditions of the “south”. But, the south is not a reproduction of western history.

The way we view humans is often influenced by our own personal experience of religion, industrialisation, science and political systems.

If we do not understand our audience, our audience might not understand us.

Before challenging the actions, beliefs and values of others, we must first challenge our own through deep reflection.

Even if we, as an organisation, are angry about injustice, or impatient about the slow process of change in society, we still need to find the right “entry point” through which we can communicate that injustice. After all, communication takes place for the sake of understanding the impact of positive change, and so we need to first make sense of our own environment.