

# The Importance of Effective Communication

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## Introduction

People in organizations typically spend over 75% of their time in an interpersonal situation; thus it is no surprise to find that at the root of a large number of organizational problems is poor communications. Effective communication is an essential component of organizational success whether it is at the interpersonal, intergroup, intragroup, organizational, or external levels.

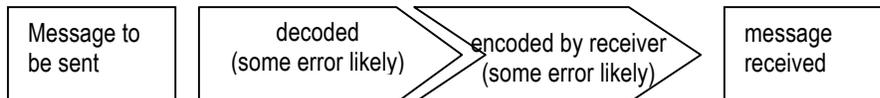
In this chapter we will cover the basic process of communication and then we will cover some of the most difficult communication issues managers face—providing constructive and effective feedback and performance appraisal.

## The Communication Process

Although all of us have been communicating with others since our infancy, the process of transmitting information from an individual (or group) to another is a very complex process with many sources of potential error.

Consider the simple example:

- Terry: "I won't make it to work again tomorrow; this pregnancy keeps me nauseous and my doctor says I should probably be reduced to part time.
- Boss: Terry, this is the third day you've missed and your appointments keep backing up; we have to cover for you and this is messing all of us up.



In any communication at least some of the "meaning" lost in simple transmission of a message from the sender to the receiver. In many situations a lot of the true message is lost and the message that is heard is often far different than the one intended. This is most obvious in cross-cultural situations where language is an issue. But it is also common among people of the same culture.

Look at the example. Terry has what appears to be a simple message to convey—she won't make it to work today because of nausea. But she had to translate the thoughts into words and this is the first potential source of error. Was she just trying to convey that she would be late; was she trying to convey anything else. It turns out she was. She was upset because she perceived that her co-workers weren't as sympathetic to her situation as they should be. Her co-workers, however, were

really being pressured by Terry's continued absences, and her late calls. They wished she would just take a leave of absence, but Terry refuses because she would have to take it without pay.

Thus what appears to be a simple communication is, in reality, quite complex. Terry is communicating far more than that she would miss work; she is conveying a number of complex emotions, complicated by her own complex feelings about pregnancy, work, and her future.

She sent a message but the message is more than the words; it includes the tone, the timing of the call, and the way she expressed herself.

Similarly, the boss goes through a complex communication process in "hearing" the message. The message that Terry sent had to be decoded and given meaning. There are many ways to decode the simple message that Terry gave and the way the message is heard will influence the response to Terry.

In this case the boss heard far more than a simple message that Terry won't be at work today. The boss "heard" hostility from Terry, indifference, lack of consideration, among other emotions. Terry may not have meant this, but this is what the boss heard.

Communications is so difficult because at each step in the process there major potential for error. By the time a message gets from a sender to a

receiver there are four basic places where transmission errors can take place and at each

place, there are a multitude of potential sources of error. Thus it is no surprise that social psychologists estimate that there is usually a 40-60% loss of meaning in the transmission of messages from sender to receiver.

It is critical to understand this process, understand and be aware of the potential sources of errors and constantly counteract these tendencies by making a conscientious effort to make sure there is a minimal loss of meaning in your conversation.

It is also very important to understand that a majoring of communication is non-verbal. This means that when we attribute meaning to what someone else is saying, the verbal part of the message actually means less than the non-verbal part. The non-verbal part includes such things as body language and tone.

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## Barriers to Effective Communication

There are a wide number of sources of noise or interference that can enter into the communication process. This can occur when people now each other very well and should understand the sources of error. In a work setting, it is even more common since interactions involve people who not only don't have years of experience with each other, but communication is complicated by the complex and often conflictual [sic] relationships that exist at work. In a work setting, the following suggests a number of sources of noise:

- **Language:** The choice of words or language in which a sender encodes a message will influence the quality of communication. Because language is a symbolic representation of a phenomenon, room for interpretation and distortion of the meaning exists. In the above example, the Boss uses language (this is the third day you've missed) that is likely to convey far more than objective information. To Terry it conveys indifference to her medical problems. Note that the same words will be interpreted different by each different person. Meaning has to be given to words and many factors affect how an individual will attribute meaning to particular words. It is important to note that no two people will attribute the exact same meaning to the same words.
- defensiveness, distorted perceptions, guilt, project, transference, distortions from the past
- misreading of body language, tone and other non-verbal forms of communication (see section below)
- noisy transmission (unreliable messages, inconsistency)
- receiver distortion: selective hearing, ignoring non-verbal cues
- power struggles
- self-fulfilling assumptions
- language-different levels of meaning
- managers hesitation to be candid
- assumptions—e.g., assuming others see situation same as you, has same feelings as you
- distrusted source, erroneous translation, value judgment, state of mind of two people

- **Perceptual Biases:** People attend to stimuli in the environment in very different ways. We each have shortcuts that we use to organize data. Invariably, these shortcuts introduce some biases into communication. Some of these shortcuts include stereotyping, projection, and self-fulfilling prophecies. Stereotyping is one of the most common. This is when we assume that the other person has certain characteristics based on the group to which they belong without validating that they in fact have these characteristics.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** How we perceive communication is affected by the past experience with the individual. Perception is also affected by the organizational relationship two people have. For example, communication from a superior may be perceived differently than that from a subordinate or peer
- **Cultural Differences:** Effective communication requires deciphering the basic values, motives, aspirations, and assumptions that operate across geographical lines. Given some dramatic differences across cultures in approaches to such areas as time, space, and privacy, the opportunities for miscommunication while we are in cross-cultural situations are plentiful.

## Reading Nonverbal Communication Cues

A large percentage (studies suggest over 90%) of the meaning we derive from communication, we derive from the non-verbal cues that the other person gives. Often a person says one thing but communicates something totally different through vocal intonation and body language. These mixed signals force the receiver to choose between the verbal and nonverbal parts of the message. Most often, the receiver chooses the nonverbal aspects. Mixed messages create tension and distrust because the receiver senses that the communicator is hiding something or is being less than candid.

Nonverbal communication is made up of the following parts:

1. Visual
2. Tactile
3. Vocal
4. Use of time, space, and image

**Visual:** This often called body language and includes facial expression, eye movement, posture, and gestures. The face is the biggest part of this. All of us "read" people's faces for ways to

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interpret what they say and feel. This fact becomes very apparent when we deal with someone with dark sunglasses. Of course we can easily misread these cues especially when communicating across cultures where gestures can mean something very different in another culture. For example, in American culture agreement might be indicated by the head going up and down whereas in India, a side-to-side head movement might mean the same thing.

We also look to posture to provide cues about the communicator; posture can indicate self-confidence, aggressiveness, fear, guilt, or anxiety. Similarly, we look at gestures such as how we hold our hands, or a handshake. Many gestures are culture bound and susceptible to misinterpretation

**Tactile:** This involves the use of touch to impart meaning as in a handshake, a pat on the back, an arm around the shoulder, a kiss, or a hug.

**Vocal:** The meaning of words can be altered significantly by changing the intonation of one's voice. Think of how many ways you can say "no"-you could express mild doubt, terror, amazement, anger among other emotions. Vocal meanings vary across cultures. Intonation in one culture can mean support; another anger

**Use of Time as Nonverbal Communication:** Use of time can communicate how we view our own status and power in relation to others. Think about how a subordinate and his/her boss would view arriving at a place for an agreed upon meeting..

**Physical Space:** For most of us, someone standing very close to us makes us uncomfortable. We feel our "space" has been invaded. People seek to extend their territory in many ways to attain power and intimacy. We tend to mark our territory either with permanent walls, or in a classroom with our coat, pen, paper, etc. We like to protect and control our territory. For Americans, the "intimate zone" is about two feet; this can vary from culture to culture. This zone is reserved for our closest friends. The "personal zone" from about 2-4 feet usually is reserved for family and friends. The social zone (4-12 feet) is where most business transactions take place. The "public zone" (over 12 feet) is used for lectures.

At the risk of stereotyping, we will generalize and state that Americans and Northern Europeans typify the noncontact group with small amounts of touching and relatively large spaces between them during transactions. Arabs and Latins normally

stand closer together and do a lot of touching during communication.

Similarly, we use "things" to communicate. This can involve expensive things, neat or messy things, photographs, plants, etc.

**Image:** We use clothing and other dimensions of physical appearance to communicate our values and expectations  
**Nonverbal Communication:**

The use of gestures, movements, material things, time, and space can clarify or confuse the meaning of verbal communication. In the above example, factors such as Terry's tone, the time of Terry's call, will probably play a greater role in how the message is interpreted than the actual words themselves. Similarly, the tone of the boss will probably have a greater impact on how his message is interpreted than the actual words.

A "majority" of the meaning we attribute to words comes not from the words themselves, but from nonverbal factors such as gestures, facial expressions, tone, body language, etc. Nonverbal cues can play five roles:

1. **Repetition:** they can repeat the message the person is making verbally
2. **Contradiction:** they can contradict a message the individual is trying to convey
3. **Substitution:** they can substitute for a verbal message. For example, a person's eyes can often convey a far more vivid message than words and often do
4. **Complementing:** they may add to or complement a verbal message. A boss who pats a person on the back in addition to giving praise can increase the impact of the message
5. **Accenting:** non-verbal communication may accept or underline a verbal message. Pounding the table, for example, can underline a message.

Skillful communicators understand the importance of nonverbal communication and use it to increase their effectiveness, as well as use it to understand more clearly what someone else is really saying.

**A word of warning:** Nonverbal cues can differ dramatically from culture to culture. An American hand gesture meaning "A-OK" would be viewed as obscene in some South American countries. Be careful.

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## Developing Communication Skills: Listening Skills

There are a number of situations when you need to solicit good information from others; these situations include interviewing candidates, solving work problems, seeking to help an employee on work performance, and finding out reasons for performance discrepancies.

Skill in communication involves a number of specific strengths. The first we will discuss involves listening skills. The following lists some suggestions for effective listening when confronted with a problem at work:

- Listen openly and with empathy to the other person
- Judge the content, not the messenger or delivery; comprehend before you judge
- Use multiple techniques to fully comprehend (ask, repeat, rephrase, etc.)
- Active body state; fight distractions
- Ask the other person for as much detail as he/she can provide; paraphrase what the other is saying to make sure you understand it and check for understanding
- Respond in an interested way that shows you understand the problem and the employee's concern
- Attend to non-verbal cues, body language, not just words; listen between the lines
- Ask the other for his views or suggestions
- State your position openly; be specific, not global
- Communicate your feelings but don't act them out (eg. tell a person that his behavior really upsets you; don't get angry)
- Be descriptive, not evaluative-describe objectively, your reactions, consequences
- Be validating, not invalidating ("You wouldn't understand"); acknowledge other's uniqueness, importance
- Be conjunctive, not disjunctive (not "I want to discuss this regardless of what you want to discuss");
- Don't totally control conversation; acknowledge what was said
- Own up: use "I", not "They"... not "I've heard you are noncooperative"

- Don't react to emotional words, but interpret their purpose
- Practice supportive listening, not one-way listening
- Decide on specific follow-up actions and specific follow up dates

A major source of problem in communication is defensiveness. Effective communicators are aware that defensiveness is a typical response in a work situation especially when negative information or criticism is involved. Be aware that defensiveness is common, particularly with subordinates when you are dealing with a problem. Try to make adjustments to compensate for the likely defensiveness. Realize that when people feel threatened they will try to protect themselves; this is natural. This defensiveness can take the form of aggression, anger, competitiveness, avoidance, among other responses. A skillful listener is aware of the potential for defensiveness and makes needed adjustment. He or she is aware that self-protection is necessary and avoids making the other person spend energy defending the self.

In addition, a supportive and effective listener does the following:

- Stop Talking: Asks the other person for as much detail as he/she can provide; asks for other's views and suggestions
- Looks at the person, listens openly and with empathy to the employee; is clear about his position; be patient
- Listen and Respond in an interested way that shows you understand the problem and the other's concern
- is validating, not invalidating ("You wouldn't understand"); acknowledge other's uniqueness, importance
- checks for understanding; paraphrases; asks questions for clarification
- don't control conversation; acknowledges what was said; let's the other finish before responding
- Focuses on the problem, not the person; is descriptive and specific, not evaluative; focuses on content, not delivery or emotion
- Attend to emotional as well as cognitive messages (e.g., anger); aware of non-verbal cues, body language, etc.; listen between the lines

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- React to the message, not the person, delivery or emotion
- Make sure you comprehend before you judge; ask questions
- Use many techniques to fully comprehend
- Stay in an active body state to aid listening
- Fight distractions
- (if in a work situation) Take Notes; Decide on specific follow-up actions and specific follow up dates

## Constructive Feedback: Developing your Skills

*"I don't know how to turn her performance around; she never used to have these attendance problems and her work used to be so good; I don't know why this is happening and what to do."*

This manager is struggling with one of the most important yet trickiest and most difficult management tasks: providing constructive and useful feedback to others. Effective feedback is absolutely essential to organizational effectiveness; people must know where they are and where to go next in terms of expectations and goals—theirs, their own, and the organization.

Feedback taps basic human needs—to improve, to compete, to be accurate; people want to be competent. Feedback can be reinforcing; if given properly, feedback is almost always appreciated and motivates people to improve. But for many people, daily work is like bowling with a curtain placed between them and the pins; they receive little information.

Be aware of the many reasons why people are hesitant to give feedback; they include fear of causing embarrassment, discomfort, fear of an emotional reaction, and inability to handle the reaction.

It is crucial that we realize how critical feedback can be and overcome our difficulties; it is very important and can be very rewarding but it requires skill, understanding, courage, and respect for yourself and others.

Withholding constructive feedback is like sending people out on a dangerous hike without a compass. This is especially true in today's fast changing and demanding workplace

## Why managers are often reluctant to provide feedback

As important as feedback is, this critical managerial task remains one of the most

problematic. Many managers would rather have root canal work than provide feedback to another—especially feedback that might be viewed as critical. Why are managers so reluctant to provide feedback? The Reasons are many:

- fear of the other person's reaction; people can get very defensive and emotional when confronted with feedback and many managers are very fearful of the reaction
- the feedback may be based on subjective feeling and the manager may be unable to give concrete information if the other person questions the basis for the feedback
- the information on which the feedback is based (e.g., performance appraisal) may be a very flawed process and the manager may not totally trust the information
- many managers would prefer being a coach than "playing God."

Other factors get in the way of effective communication or feedback sessions. Some of these reasons are:

- defensiveness, distorted perceptions, guilt, project, transference, distortions from the past
- misreading of body language, tone
- noisy transmission (unreliable messages, inconsistency)
- receiver distortion: selective hearing, ignoring non-verbal cues
- power struggles
- self-fulfilling assumptions
- language-different levels of meaning
- managers hesitation to be candid
- assumptions—e.g., assuming others see situation same as you, has same feelings as you
- distrusted source, erroneous translation, value judgment, state of mind of two people

## Characteristics of Effective Feedback

Effective Feedback has most of the following characteristics:

- descriptive (not evaluative)(avoids defensiveness.) By describing one's own

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reactions, it leaves the individual free to use it or not to use it as he sees fit.

- avoid accusations; present data if necessary
- describe your own reactions or feelings; describe objective consequences that have or will occur; focus on behavior and your own reaction, not on other individual or his or her attributes
- suggest more acceptable alternative; be prepared to discuss additional alternatives; focus on alternatives
- specific rather than general.
- focused on behavior not the person. It is important that we refer to what a person does rather than to what we think he is. Thus we might say that a person "talked more than anyone else in this meeting" rather than that he is a "loud-mouth."
- It takes into account the needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback. It should be given to help, not to hurt. We too often give feedback because it makes us feel better or gives us a psychological advantage.
- It is directed toward behavior which the receiver can do something about. A person gets frustrated when reminded of some shortcoming over which he has no control.
- It is solicited rather than imposed. Feedback is most useful when the receiver himself has formulated the kind of question which those observing him can answer or when he actively seeks feedback.
- Feedback is useful when well-timed (soon after the behavior depending, of course, on the person's readiness to hear it, support available from others, and so forth). Excellent feedback presented at an inappropriate time may do more harm than good.
- sharing of information, rather than giving advice allows a person to decide for himself, in accordance with his own goals and needs. When we give advice we tell him what to do, and to some degree take away his freedom to do decide for himself.
- It involves the amount of information the receiver can use rather than the amount we would like to give. To overload a person with feedback is to reduce the possibility

that he may be able to use what he receives effectively. When we give more than can be used, we are more often than not satisfying some need of our own rather than helping the other person.

- It concerns what is said and done, or how, not why. The "why" involves assumptions regarding motive or intent and this tends to alienate the person generate resentment, suspicion, and distrust. If we are uncertain of his motives or intent, this uncertainty itself is feedback, however, and should be revealed.
- It is checked to insure clear communication. One way of doing this is to have the receiver try to rephrase the feedback. No matter what the intent, feedback is often threatening and thus subject to considerable distortion or misinterpretation.
- It is checked to determine degree of agreement from others. Such "consensual validation" is of value to both the sender and receiver.
- It is followed by attention to the consequences of the feedback. The supervisor needs to become acutely aware of the effects of his feedback.
- It is an important step toward authenticity. Constructive feedback opens the way to a relationship which is built on trust, honest, and genuine concern and mutual growth.

Part of the feedback process involves understanding and predicting how the other person will react. Or in the case of our receiving feedback, we need to understand ways that we respond to feedback, especially threatening feedback.

People often react negatively to threatening feedback. This reaction can take a number of forms including:

- selective reception and selective perception
- doubting motive of the giver
- denying validity of the data
- rationalizing
- attack the giver of the data

Following the guidelines to effective feedback can go a long way to limit these kinds of reactions but

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we need to be conscious of them nonetheless and be ready to react appropriately.

When we are on the receiving end of feedback we should be careful to avoid these pitfalls. Try to keep these points in mind.

- try not to be defensive
- check on possible misunderstanding ("Let me restate what I am hearing")
- gather information from other sources
- don't overreact
- ask for clarification

## A Short Example of Effective Communication

Example:

*Maria: My project coordinator, Judy, is in a slump; she's just not producing her usual caliber of work. I need to find out what the problem is.*

On the surface, it would seem that getting good information is easy. But like other forms of communication, it takes planning and experience to develop skills in this area

### Key Techniques

#### Focus the discussion on the information needed

*Judy, I've noticed in the past month that you've fallen behind on keeping the project schedule current. I'd like to figure out with you what we both can do to get it back on track.*

#### Use open-ended questions to expand the discussion

*You've always kept the schedule up to the minute-until about a month ago. Why the change?*

#### Use closed ended questions to prompt for specifics

*"What projects are you working on that take time away from your work on this project (warning: closed ended questions are often disguised as open ended as in "Are you going to have trouble finishing this project?")*

#### Encourage dialogue through eye contact and expression

*This involves nodding in agreement, smiling, leaning toward the speaker, making statements that acknowledge the speaker is being heard.*

#### State your understanding of what you are hearing

*This can be done by restating briefly what the other person is saying but don't make fun of it*

*"So it sounds like these phone calls have ended up taking a lot more time than you or Jay expected; you think the three of us should talk about priorities; is this your position?"*

**Summarize the key points; try to get some agreement on the next steps and show appreciation for the effort made so far.** *"So let's call Jay right now and set up a time when we can meet and iron this out; keeping the schedule updated is a high priority and I'd like to get this settled by Wednesday.*

## A Planning Form for Constructive Feedback

Instructions: Before the feedback session, answer these questions:

- what is your purpose in giving the feedback
- what specific actions do you want to reinforce or correct? what are the consequences of the action?
- what do you want to accomplish in this discussion
- what specific information do you need to learn; what questions do you need answered
- what issues of timing, location, advance preparation, or other logistics do you need to consider to get the most out of the discussion

Observe the basic principles of communication

- use open ended and close ended questions appropriately
- use eye contact, encouraging gestures
- focus on the situation, issue, behavior, not the person
- maintain the self-confidence and self-esteem of others
- maintain constructive relationships with your employees, peers, managers
- use active listening techniques such as stating your understanding of what you are hearing
- make sure you summarize
- lead by example