

Effective Communication

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Effective Communication

by Dave Sharpe*

Effective communication is crucial for working successfully with others. It enables us to maintain relationships and accomplish tasks with both individuals and groups.

Communication is an interactional process in which meaning is stimulated through sending and receiving verbal and non-verbal messages. If all goes well, we transmit the meaning in our minds so that a similar meaning is stimulated in the minds of others. The effectiveness of any communication is judged by how closely the receiver's understanding matches the sender's intent. In the final analysis, the only message that matters is the one the other person receives.

A COMMUNICATION MODEL

Figure 1 presents a model of how interpersonal communication takes place. It represents the communication process of a single message between two people.

Understanding this process can help us communicate more effectively with others as individuals and with others in groups. The same basic process occurs in groups, though several individuals may be sending and receiving messages almost simultaneously.

The parties in the process are identified as communicators rather than sender and receiver because both parties are sending and receiving messages. While the first party is sending his message, he is also receiving non-verbal feedback signals from the second that indicate how the second is reacting to the message.

The Sender's Message

Before the sender speaks, he or she has an idea of what to send to the receiver. The idea could be a thought, a feeling or a fact. The sender's goal is to transmit that idea so clearly that the second person understands it just as the sender does.

The sender expresses his or her idea by transmitting the message verbally and non-verbally to the receiver. It is, for better or worse, this encoded form of the sender's idea that the receiver listens to, sees, interprets and responds to. En route, the message may become distorted by the sender's lack of ability to express himself through verbal and non-verbal signals and by the filters of both the sender and receiver.

Some messages are easier to transmit than others. Factual messages are generally easier to transmit clearly than abstract thoughts or emotions. But all can be misinterpreted if the sender has not considered the best way to send the message.

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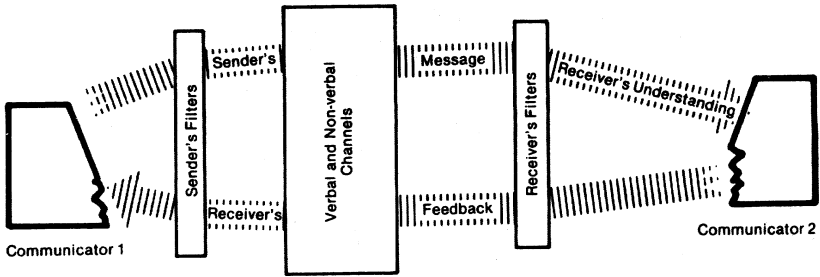


Figure 1. Communication Process Model

In considering any message, keep in mind that meanings do not exist in the words that are sent. Rather, meanings are assigned to the words by the people who use them. Different people assign different meanings at different times to the same word.

Messages have both a content and a relational dimension. The content is the idea being communicated; the relational dimension conveys how the sender feels about himself, the message and the receiver. The content is primarily sent with verbal signals. The relational dimension is sent non-verbally. Even written messages display a relational level. The feelings communicated in a hand-written memo may be quite different from those of a formal letter, even though the content is identical.

Communication is irreversible. Once a message is sent, it cannot be retrieved. Once sent, it is completely out of the sender's control and firmly in control of the receiver to make of it what he or she chooses.

Filters

Media philosopher Marshall McLuhan claims we go through life observing it through our own set of goggles. The images of reality we perceive are colored, changed and filtered through these goggles. These images pass through and are distorted by a number of filters including our experiences, our education and our attitudes. Consequently, no two people attach the same meaning to a shared event.

In the communication process, the sender's filter consists of several individual factors that affect the sender as he or she composes the message. The sender's opinions, experiences, education, values and stereotypes (about the message or the receiver) tend to be fairly constant filters. Others, such as the sender's mood at the time the message is conveyed, may vary considerably from time to time. The sender's filters influence how he or she expresses the message-which words, gestures and voice tones to use.

The message must also pass through a similar set of filters belonging to the receiver. The receiver's filters color how he or she understands the message. The two sets of filters in communication double the chance for misunderstanding.

Being aware of your filters and your ability to adjust to them, both as a sender and a receiver, is important for reducing the chances for misunderstanding. All effective communicator also takes into account the receiver's filters and attempts to encode the message so the receiver can interpret it with the least distortion.

Channels

We send our messages through both verbal and non-verbal channels. The verbal signals are the words of the message, the content. The words we choose are determined by our vocabulary, our filters and our assessment of the receiver's ability to understand them.

The non-verbal signals transmit the relational dimension of the message. Our postures, body movements, touches, tone of voice, eye contact, pauses, rate of speech and volume all indicate how we feel about the message, how we feel about ourselves and how we feel about the receiver.

Non-verbal behavior has stronger impact on impressions than the accompanying verbal message. Estimates of the amount of meaning conveyed through nonverbal messages run from 60 percent to 90 percent. The more emotional the message, the more meaning assigned to the non-verbal component. When the verbal message and the non-verbal message are not congruent, we usually believe the non-verbal message.

Receiver's Understanding

The receiver's understanding is the meaning the receiver gets from the sender's message. The meaning may be exactly as the sender intended, or it may be distorted to some variation of the intention as it passes through the filters and channels. The effectiveness of the communication is a measure of how closely the receiver's understanding matches the sender's intention.

Feedback

Feedback is the receiver's acknowledgment that the message has been received. It may be verbal, non-verbal or both. The best feedback goes beyond acknowledging that the message has been received. It tells the sender how it has been received and what meaning the receiver made of it. Feedback also passes through the two sets of filters. So, like the original message, it is subject to distortion.

This feedback makes effective communication a two-way process. Two-way communication takes more effort than one-way, but it reduces the chances for misunderstanding between individuals.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Barriers can arise during the communication process that prevent accurate message reception. The barriers may be caused by either the psychological characteristics of the communicators or factors in the environment. The effective communicator considers both sets of factors.

Semantics

Semantics are the meanings people attach to words. The different meanings people attach to the same word create one barrier to effective communication. It has been suggested that words are only symbols that refer to something in reality. Since we perceive reality through our own set of filters, the meanings we assign to these symbols of reality may differ from the meanings others assign to them.

Words may also evoke emotional responses that lead to misunderstanding. “Love,” “mother,” “dog,” “wilderness,” “water rights,” “profit” may conjure up quite different images for different people and different interest groups.

We choose words for our messages that reflect reality as we perceive it through our filters. Depending on how we perceive another, we might describe him or her as “cautious,” “cowardly,” “kind” or “soft.” The same person may be described as “generous” by those who approve of him and a “spendthrift” by those who do not.

When communicators assign different meanings to the same words, meanings become distorted and the message misunderstood.

You cannot “tell it like it is.” You can only tell it the way you perceive it.

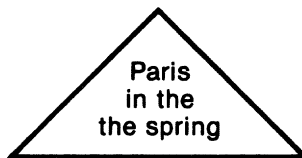
Selective Perception

“A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.”

—*Simon and Garfunkel*

Selective perception is a psychological barrier to communication. Our brains constantly receive many messages. But we are able to handle only one at a time. So, we select the important messages and screen out the rest. For example, we don’t need to be aware of the feeling of our left shoe unless there is a problem with it. So, most of the time we screen it out. Similarly, we screen out unimportant noises.

But we may also screen out messages or portions of messages that don’t fit our perception of reality. We block out unacceptable information. We select only those items or facts that fit our notion of what ought to be. Try reading aloud the phrase in the triangle.



Did you pronounce “the” twice?

We also screen out messages according to our needs, pressures and priorities at a particular time. We select the message we find most pertinent at that moment. If too many message are coming in, communication overload results and none of the messages may get through.

By selecting only certain elements from a message, we distort the message's meaning.

Listening

Poor listening skills form another barrier to effective communication. A study by Dr. Paul Ranklin at Ohio State University found that 9 percent of communication time is devoted to writing, 16 percent to reading, 30 percent to speaking and 45 percent to listening.

We spend more time listening than we do in any other phase of communication. Yet, most of us pay little attention to it.

Research indicates that normal listening results in a 50 percent retention immediately after a 10-minute presentation, then declines to only about 25 percent after 48 hours. Extension Specialist Bob Lind says the average person will hear 71/2 minutes of a one-hour presentation and will forget half of that.

One reason we listen so poorly is that our minds work much faster than our mouths. The average person thinks 600-700 words per minute but speaks at a rate of about 125. His listeners' minds are occupied with hearing only one-fifth of the time he is speaking. The listener may consider and react to what is being said during the other four-fifths of the time, or become absorbed with fashioning his response, or think other thoughts and miss the rest of what is being said.

If we really listen, we may be forced to accept a different perspective of reality. Most of us have a firmly developed view of reality that we do not want to change. Carl Rogers, the psychiatrist, points out that if you are really willing to listen to another, to enter his private world and see reality as he sees it, you run the risk of being changed yourself. "This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening prospects most of us can face." (Rogers 1952)

Inaccurate Non-verbal Behavior Interpretation

While estimates of the amount of information communicated non-verbally range as high as 90 percent, research studies show that we are not very good at reading non-verbal signals.

DePaulo and Rosenthal conducted a review of non-verbal communication experiments and concluded people's lay theories regarding non-verbal clues are not particularly accurate. In an experiment they conducted at the University of Houston, oil company negotiators viewed videotape recordings of 30 speakers. The negotiators then rated the speakers as honest, evasive or deceptive. The results: the negotiators' accuracy ranged from a low of 27 percent correct to a high of only 43 percent correct. Further, the negotiators were just as confident of the accuracy of their incorrect judgments as they were of their correct judgments. The negotiators felt relatively few of their judgments were even slightly doubtful.

If negotiators—people supposedly expert at interpreting others' intentions—performed so poorly, imagine how frequently most of us misinterpret non-verbal signals.

Climate and Attitudes

The emotional climate during the interaction may create still another psychological barrier to effective communication. Anger, hostility or distrust can distort both the sending and receiving of meanings. Such emotions may cause us to mask or overstate our true feelings, Our concern becomes winning rather than communicating. The stronger such feelings are, the less likely a mutual exchange of understanding will occur.

Likewise, preoccupation with other matters can foster negative feelings that form a communication barrier. Body language may indicate feelings of indifference, impatience, unimportance or inattention to the other's message, adding to the barrier.

Our attitudes can be a major barrier to effective communication. How we feel about the message, the receiver or even ourselves affects the accuracy of the message. If we are closed-minded, have an "it-can't-work" or "know-it-all" approach, attempts at communication may amount to nothing more than merely going through the motions. If we assume that all politicians, salespeople or members of an ethnic group are alike, any message we receive from them will be affected.

Typically, as a relationship progresses, there is an increased tendency to share information, attitudes and opinions. But, concealment of information through evasiveness, compliancy or aggressiveness occurs when there is a relationship of distrust. Communication is less complete and accurate when the sender cannot be sure whether the receiver will use the information to harm him. If experience has shown the receiver used openly communicated information to harm the sender, the sender will be much less open in the future.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Obviously, barrier-free communication is not likely to occur. Nevertheless, we can reduce or overcome most barriers. Leonard Sayles and George Strauss emphasize two approaches. First, we must continually strive to improve the message we send. Second, we must continually strive to improve our understanding of the messages we receive. We must strive, not only to be understood, but also to understand. The following recommendations will help accomplish these tasks.

Attitude

Assume that others have valuable contributions to offer and encourage them to speak. This fosters a climate of openness and sharing that promotes effective communication. Active listening and check-back responses indicate that you want to find out exactly what others mean and how their ideas can be important to you.

As a sender, develop a receiver orientation. This is an important step toward becoming a more effective communicator. As you send a message, consciously put yourself in the place of the receiver and adapt the material you are communicating so that the receiver can interpret it with a minimum of distortion. Choose words and expressions that are familiar to the receiver. Avoid expressions that are likely to be misunderstood.

Before saying anything, check your emotions, your attitude, your timing and your feelings about the message. Will your emotional state make it likely that you will convey your present mood into an unrelated message? What is your attitude toward the receiver? Is this someone who always puts you on the defensive? How did your last interaction go? Watch especially for any negative stereotypes you may have toward this person or the group he or she represents.

This assessment of yourself, the receiver and the situation takes only a few moments. With time, it becomes part of your communicator style and makes you a more effective communicator.

Listening

Active listening is more than just keeping quiet and paying attention. It requires sending and receiving verbal and non-verbal signals to fully understand what others are saying.

Active listening occurs when the receiver tries to understand exactly what the sender is feeling or what his message means. The receiver then puts the message into his or her own words and feeds back to the sender what he feels the message means. The process continues back and forth until both have a similar understanding of the message.

Management consultant Keith Davis developed 10 commandments for good listening:

1. Stop talking. You can't listen if you are talking.
2. Put the talker at ease. Help the person feel it's okay to talk.
3. Show people that you want to listen. Look and act interested.
4. Remove distractions. Will it be quieter to shut the door or go elsewhere?
5. Empathize with people. Try to put yourself in their shoes.
6. Be patient. Allow plenty of time. Don't interrupt.
7. Hold your temper. Anger hinders communication.
8. Go easy on arguments and criticism. Don't argue, even if you win you lose.
9. Ask questions. It helps to further develop points.
10. Stop talking. You can't listen if you are talking.

Bob Lind's MontGuide 8303, "Talk about Listening," provides more techniques for improving your listening ability.

Sending Your Message

Begin your message with a "door opener." The first words you say should set the stage for the interchange to follow. They give the receiver a chance to prepare for the interaction and give you a chance to determine the receiver's readiness for the message.

Examples of door openers:

"I need to touch base with you about—"

"I would like your thoughts on—"

"About next month's meeting—"

"I can see that you're busy, but I need to interrupt for a moment—"

Follow your door opener with your message. In giving your message, remember:

- Use clear, simple language (eschew obfuscation).
- Is your body language congruent?
- Maintain eye contact with the receiver.
- Speak slowly and distinctly.
- Use “I” messages.
- Don’t overload the receiver.
- Check back to assure understanding.
- Place important information in positions of emphasis. There is a tendency to distort the middle of a message. The elements at the start and the end are mostly likely to be clearly received.

Giving Feedback

Feedback helps the sender know how his words or actions affect others. It is communication to a person. It gives the person information on how his words or actions affect others.

Feedback may be:

Evaluative—“You are a very cold person.”

Interpretive—“You are acting very cold toward others, and I think it is because you are uptight about your new position.”

Descriptive—“Sometimes it is difficult for me to interpret your comments because you look so stern and angry and speak so abruptly, which gives me the impression you are angry.”

Descriptive feedback is most useful because it allows the recipient to understand which specific behaviors are causing a reaction.

“I” messages provide descriptive feedback without blaming others or putting them on the defensive. Instead, “I” messages honestly express your reaction to a problem and your concern with finding a solution. The opposite of an “I” message is a “you” message.

Examples:

“You” Message—“Mary, you’re late again, holding up the whole meeting.”

“I” Message—“Mary, when you are late, I get frustrated because I have to go over all the material again.”

There are three parts to an “I” message. It begins with a statement of the behavior. It follows with a clear expression of your feelings. It ends with a “because” to explain the consequences of the behavior.

“I” messages are also useful in reinforcing positive behavior. For example, “I was quite impressed with your efforts as committee chairman, Ellen. They made the whole project a success.”

Checking Back

Checking back completes the loop in our communication model. Checking back helps the sender confirm that the receiver understands the message just as the sender intended. Checking back also helps the receiver clarify the meaning of the message.

As the sender, you can ask the receiver to state his or her understanding of the message. Use open-ended questions that encourage the receiver to provide his complete understanding of your message. As examples, “What do you get from this?” “What’s your reaction to that?” “What can I clarify” rather than, “Do you understand?”

As the receiver, you can use either check-back questions or check-back statements. Use questions when the message is unclear and statements when the message seems clear. Check-back questions ask for more information: “I’m not sure I understand completely. Can you tell me more?” Check-back statements restate, in the receiver’s words, his understanding of the message, serving as a confirmation to the sender: “In other words—,” “it sounds like—.” Avoid, “What I hear you saying is—.” This has been overused and is likely to turn people off.

Remember, the only message that matters is the one the other person perceives. Communication is effective to the extent that the perceived message matches the intended message.

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