

## **2.4 Expressing Yourself**

### **Introduction**

Effective Communication plays a vital role in every relationship and organization. Since the interaction between people can determine the success or failure of a project, it is important for individuals, and especially leaders, to have the skills to be able to communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing.

If a message is not delivered effectively, it can generate negative and unwanted consequences. The effectiveness of a message is determined by both its tone and its format – some are more appropriate and effective than others, depending on the situation.

This topic gives you some of the techniques you can use to become a more effective communicator.

### **Communication in Daily Life**

It is no surprise that communication is a vital part of our daily lives. But the ease of miscommunicating – sending or receiving the wrong signals – is often underestimated. The effects of miscommunication can be very damaging to relationships and organizational effectiveness. That is why it is important to “dissect” the communication process to see how we can improve.

If you are in a leadership position, you have additional responsibilities for communicating effectively. You will probably come in contact with people from a variety of backgrounds, and should be able to communicate effectively in a number of tones and formats: formally and informally, in writing and in person, one on one and with large groups.

People often think of communicating as the act of sending a message, but in reality, communication is a two-way process involving both sending and receiving messages. Both elements must be present for communication to have occurred.

Although totally barrier-free communication is unlikely, being aware of conditions that block messages may produce fewer barriers and better communication in the long run.

Ineffective communication or miscommunication is one of the biggest problems that we face in our dealings with others. On the other hand, good communication reduces stress, prevents misinterpretation, and builds confidence.

The following story illustrates a typical case of miscommunication.

### ***The Pig and the Sports Car***

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*A college student had just bought a new red sports car, and he wanted to see what the car would do when he really opened it up. So he drove onto a country road and let it fly. Coming toward him from the opposite direction was a car that was weaving from one side of the road to the other. Not knowing what this crazy, drunk, or sleepy person was going to do, the student began to slow down. There was a curve up ahead, and as the other car came around the curve, the driver yelled through the window "Pig!" The student yelled back, "Same to you!" and was pleased with himself that he had not really lost his cool. He floored his little red sports car, took the curve, and then... slammed on his brakes and careened into the ditch, narrowly avoiding the pig that was in the middle of the road!*

The "pig" story is a good example of miscommunication on the part of the sender. If the sender had yelled, "There's a pig in the road!" then perhaps the student wouldn't have driven his car into the ditch. The difference between the message that was intended and the message that was actually received is due to a failure to communicate clearly.

Have you been involved in a case of miscommunication? Especially in the age of email, most of us can understand that it is easy to miscommunicate, or to be misunderstood when we try to get our message across. The only way to avoid this is to be careful about what we say, how we say it, and the context in which it is said.

Sometimes the message you think you are sending is not the message received and understood. The message may be only partially received, or even missed entirely, as a result of the circumstances surrounding the communication. These circumstances may be environmental, emotional or skill-oriented. For this reason, communication is better when you employ a variety of communication skills to compensate for circumstance.

One way to compensate for circumstance is to be informed: know your subject and your audience as well as possible. Research a subject before you communicate about it in a formal setting, and be aware of the knowledge base of the audience you are addressing. Whether you are communicating with 1 person or 100, you will alienate your audience rapidly if you speak above their heads, or talk about a topic in an overly simplistic way.

If you take the time to be aware of circumstances, your communication will be more effective. Barriers to communication are another area to keep in mind, and these are detailed in the next section.

Barriers hinder the communication process, and can serve as roadblocks to effective communication. It is useful to think of barriers as obstacles in the path of free-flowing communication – they may not totally block the messages being sent, but can filter or screen them, causing the messages received to be somehow different from the ones sent.

Some of the conditions that create barriers to communication can include the following:

- **Ordering, Directing, and Commanding:**  
Telling another person to do something, giving him or her an order or commanding.
- **Warning, Admonishing, and Threatening:**  
Warning another person about the dire consequences of an action or alluding to the use of force.
- **Moralizing, Preaching, and Obliging:**  
Telling another person why he or she ought to do something.
- **Advising and Giving Suggestions or Solutions:**  
Telling another person how to solve his or her problem.
- **Persuading with Logic, Arguing, Instructing, and Lecturing:**  
Trying to influence another person with facts, arguments, logic, information, or an expert opinion that happens to agree with your own.
- **Judging, Criticizing, Disagreeing, and Blaming:**  
Making negative judgments or evaluations of another person.
- **Praising, Agreeing, and Evaluating Positively, or Approving:**  
Offering a positive evaluation or judgment in a condescending, sarcastic way.
- **Name Calling, Ridiculing, and Shaming:**  
Making another person feel stupid, outcast, or foolish or stereotyping and categorizing.
- **Interpreting, Analyzing, and Diagnosing:**  
Telling a person what his or her motives are, that you have him or her figured out or psyched out, or that you have diagnosed his or her behavior.
- **Reassuring, Sympathizing, Consoling, and Supporting:**  
Trying to make the other person feel better, trying to talk him or her out of the feelings or make them go away, or denying the strength or significance of the feelings.
- **Probing, Questioning, and Interrogating:**  
Trying to find reasons, facts, motives, causes, or information to help you solve another person's problem.
- **Withdrawing, Distracting, and Humoring:**

Trying to get another person away from his or her problem, getting away from it yourself, or trying to change the focus by joking, offering other things to do, or pushing the problem.

As you can see from reading the list, barriers to communication may be hard to recognize. When we think we are being sympathetic or helpful, we actually may be blocking effective communication.

Making note of these “roadblocks to communication” will help you avoid them in your conversational style.

### **Skills and Resources**

There are four types of communication:

1. Written communication.
2. Oral communication.
3. Listening
4. Reading

### **Written communication**

In writing, legibility and readability are as important as the content. If you're writing is full of jargon, typos, and run-on sentences, readers may ignore the content.

### **Oral communication**

- **Group communication**  
Involves three or more people with a common purpose.
- **Public communication**  
When one or more people communicate with an audience.
- **Mass communication**  
Communication with a large audience through various media.
- **Nonverbal communication**  
What you do, what you wear, and how you talk are all nonverbal communication. These include movements, gestures, eye contact, language, and body posture, and are a big part of oral communication.

### **Listening**

Active listening is especially important. You will need to have good listening skills to communicate with people effectively.

### **Reading**

Reading is an important way to receive information. Being in the Information Age means that there is so much material available literally at our fingertips. We must learn to skim decide what material is important.

These types of communication are all the methods of sending or receiving information.

As you can see, there are many types of communication, both verbal and nonverbal. In fact, it is virtually impossible to NOT communicate – our body language and posture sends signals even when we are not actively communicating.

Here are some ways we communicate with the people we work with and in our community:

- Face to Face
- Telephone
- Video
- Email
- Letters and memos
- Flyers
- Newsletters
- Third Party
- Rumors
- News Media
- Readiness Support Group Meetings
- Office Meeting

### **Principles of Communication**

The most important thing to remember about communicating is that it is very easy to misunderstand and to be misunderstood. When a person makes a statement, never assume that you know what is meant. Each assumption that you make has the potential to create a misunderstanding.

Just as you can misunderstand messages that are directed at you, messages that you send can be misunderstood by others. For all kinds of reasons, people often “read into” messages and hear things that aren’t there.

Maximize the possibility of getting your message across by being as clear as you can, and avoiding vague statements.

Here are some general principles of communication that you should keep in mind to help you clarify your communication and avoid miscommunication:

1. The message sent is not always the message received.
2. It is impossible Not to Communicate.
3. Every message has both content and feeling.
4. Nonverbal cues are often more believable than verbal cues.

### **The message sent is not always the message received**

Earlier in this lesson you read the story about a man hitting a pig with his car. That happened because the message sent was vague. When we send a message, verbally or otherwise, we need to clarify the intended meaning of our statements. This allows others to understand what we mean. Thus, the message we send will be the message received.

**It is impossible to NOT communicate**

Every action we take communicates a message. Even if we don't speak or intentionally send a message, we still communicate in other ways. For instance, body language (such as facial expressions) or tone of voice can convey attitudes or feelings.

**Every message has both content and feeling**

Content is the substance of the message. Feeling is the intended expressions (or inflections) of the sender, such as excitement in a speech.

**Nonverbal cues are more believable than verbal cues**

There is an old saying: actions speak louder than words. Usually we are not even aware of the many nonverbal cues we communicate to each other. Watch others when they speak. Are their arms folded? Do they look away while talking? When someone tells you nothing but is smiling and acting interested, what might this indicate? Your movements, gestures, eye contact, language, and body posture can say a lot.

A person cannot obtain knowledge if he or she is merely given data. Obtaining knowledge is actually a three-step process:

1. Raw data must be interpreted for the receiver; the data then becomes information.
2. The receiver must be able to understand what this information means to his or her daily life before the information can become knowledge.
3. The information must be applied to provide assistance and support.

**Remember: Effective communication is a two-way street. This means that if we want to be heard, we also have to listen.**

**Exercise: Two-way Communication**

Effective communication is a two-way street: it requires a sender and a receiver.

The following exercise illustrates the ineffectiveness of one-way communication. To do the exercise, you will need an 8 1/2 by 11 inch sheet of paper and a pen or pencil. All you have to do is draw according to the instructions. At the end of the exercise, compare what you drew to the diagram.

1. Draw a circle to the left of center.
2. Draw a triangle under it.
3. Draw 2 lines that extend right from it.
4. Draw a rectangle that meets the lines.
5. Draw a rectangle under them.
6. Draw a square to the top and right of the rectangle

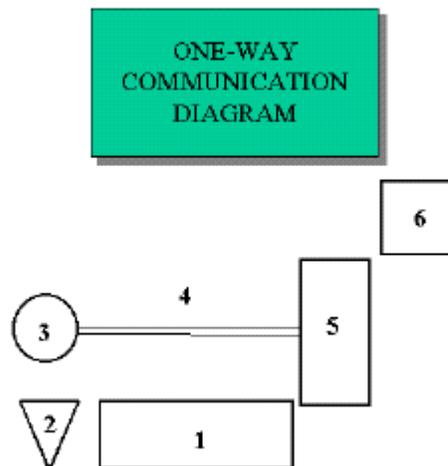
The instructions were pretty vague and it is unlikely that your picture matches the one being described very closely.

Try it again, with better instructions. You may be surprised at the difference between your two drawings!

**With a new sheet of paper, let's try this again**

1. Hold your paper so that the long edge goes left to right.
2. Draw a moderately small circle halfway down the page and 1/3 the way in from the left side.
3. Draw 2 parallel lines that extend from the right edge of the circle to just past the center of the page.
4. Under the circle (but not touching it) draw an upside down triangle, roughly the same size as the circle.
5. Parallel to the triangle and the 2 lines, draw a rectangle the same length as the lines and the same height as the triangle.
6. Draw a rectangle twice the height of the circle that extends up and down, with the two lines meeting at the middle of the left side of the rectangle.
7. Draw a square 1/2 the size of the 2nd rectangle you just made, with the bottom left corner of the square almost touching the rectangle's top right corner.

Compare your pictures to the diagram:



Source: Edward E. Scannell and John W. Newstrom, *Growth Through Play* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.) © 1980. Reprinted by permission.

Were you able to get a picture that looks something like it was suppose to? Is one-way communication easy?

Imagine what your picture would have looked like if the instructions had been even more vague! And just think how good your picture would have looked had you been

able to discuss your drawing and receive feedback on your current progress. Without being able to use all of your communication skills, there is room for misunderstanding.

### **Effective Listening**

We've discussed the "sending" side of communications in detail, but we also know that communicating is a two-way street. Let's look more closely at the receiving side: listening.

#### **First of all, why do we listen?**

We listen for a variety of reasons: to learn, to analyze information, to connect with others, or simply to be entertained. All of these are legitimate ways of listening. But in all these cases, the message heard can be different from that which was sent. The communication process is hampered because of ineffective listening.

#### **Some barriers to effective listening are as follows:**

- Presupposed rejection.
- Information overload.
- Personal concerns.
- Outside distractions.

#### **Presupposed rejection**

During the listening process, you begin to formulate a personal opinion on what is being said as opposed to hearing all that is said. Listen to the viewpoint, and listen totally to what is being said; then and only then should you form your conclusion or remarks.

#### **Information overload**

Often, a speaker has so much to say that the listener gets information overload.

#### **Personal concerns**

The listener's focus strays, and accordingly his or her listening ability is significantly reduced.

#### **Outside distractions**

When a listener brings his or her excess baggage, the ability to listen to a conversation is significantly reduced. One must concentrate on what is being said and how it is being said.

In conclusion, the best thing to remember about communication is the importance of sharing an immediate, here-and-now sense with the person that you are communicating with. The conversations that you have will be much more rewarding, and your listening and speaking skills will be much better if you slow down, be "in the moment" and give each conversation your full attention.

So when you are talking, don't race ahead thinking of what you will say next. Don't be distracted by what happened several hours ago. Your communication will be much more rewarding!

### **Exercise: Communication Self Assessment**

Now that we've discussed communication, let's assess your own communication skills. You can use this exercise as a personal guide to understanding where your communication strengths and weaknesses are.

For each item, rate yourself from 1 (low) to 5 (high). For each item, consider specific examples of your own behavior that illustrate the skills being discussed.

- \_\_\_ **Completeness:** Do I give all of the information that I should?
- \_\_\_ **Conciseness:** Do I keep my messages both accurate and brief?
- \_\_\_ **Congruency:** Does my body language match my words?
- \_\_\_ **Clarity:** How clear do I usually make myself?
- \_\_\_ **Feeling:** How effectively do I empathize?
- \_\_\_ Total of your scores.

**20 – 25 = Excellent!!!** You are really a good communicator, and you are aware of the way your body language, spoken words and unspoken signals are all part of communicating.

**17 – 21 = Very Good.** You could probably use some improvement in one or two areas, but you can communicate very well overall. Think about how you can improve your style and become a more effective communicator, both at giving and receiving messages.

**12 – 16 = Average.** Though you are a fairly good communicator and can get your point across, you have some areas where you should probably apply yourself so you can become a more effective communicator.

**11 or below = Time to take stock!** You are honest enough to answer these questions and identify your weak spots. Now it is time to think about the ways you can improve.

### **Additional Resources**

- [University of Nevada Cooperative Extension](#)  
Has developed a Community Leader's Guide with information on various topics including Communication, Teambuilding, and Meeting Management.
- [Cooperative Communication Skills Internet Resource Center](#)  
offers advice on listening and offers a free subscription to the Journal of Cooperative Communication Skills.
- [Iowa State University](#)

has put together a site offering advice on communicating as a leader, including chairing meetings and speaking as a spokesperson.