

Communications 101

By Dot Young

Introduction

The ability to effectively communicate always ranks as a top skill desired by employers. At work, at home, even driving down the road, we are constantly communicating in one way or another. We have been communicating non-stop since birth, both verbally and non-verbally. One would think with all that practice, by now we should all be experts at communication.

If only it were that easy.

Communication can be simple, but it can also be extremely complex, difficult and inconsistent. Many times a lack of communication and/or ineffective communication is the primary cause of additional and unnecessary issues. So, exactly what is communication?

What is Communication?

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, communication is defined as:

- The act or process of using words, sounds, signs or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else
- A message that is given to someone: a letter, phone call, etc.

That seems simple enough, and yet most of us can attest to experiencing some type of communication breakdown, either at work or at home. (If you are a parent, you may experience these mishaps more frequently.) So what is it that happens during communication that causes these breakdowns? What are the risk factors or weak points in the communication process that contribute to failure? Before we can determine that, we need to take a step back and review the basics of the communication process.

The Communication Process

The communication process consists of three main elements: *the sender, the receiver and the message*. The process starts when the sender decides to transmit a message to the receiver. Figure 1 illustrates the communication process in its simplest form.



Figure 1 - Basic Communication Process

Types of Communication

Communication can be *two-way*, such as a conversation, meeting, or internet chat room, or *one-way*, like magazine articles, videos, blogs, or recipes.

One-way communications are mainly used to inform, influence or provide direction. The receiver of the message has no ability to ask questions, validate understanding or provide feedback to the sender. When you read a book, watch a video or listen to the radio you are the receiver of one-way communication. When you write a report or memo, create a video or post a picture online, you are the sender of the communication.

Two-way communications simply mean the receiver can respond and send a message back to the sender. All conversations are considered two-way communications, and participants take on both the sender and the receiver roles. The internet and social media sites have enabled two-way communications to occur almost instantaneously and on a global level.

The message or communication may be sent verbally, non-verbally or in writing. The graphic in Figure 2 shows an example of each of these communication types.



Figure 2 – Types of Communication

Communication Process Roles

The process outlined in Figure 1 does not consider any of the variables that can affect communication. Each of the roles in the process have specific activities associated with them, and the skills used while in the sender role are different than those used in the role of the receiver.

The Sender initiates the communication process by encoding the message and selecting the channel(s) for message delivery.

Encoding is the process in which the sender determines what and how they will communicate the message. This is when the decisions are made as to the intended content and context, which words to use, the tone of the message, location of delivery, is it written or oral, face-to-face, etc. It is also the first risk factor in the communication process. The encoding process is the responsibility of the sender with the primary objective to compose and deliver a clear message to the recipient. Keep in mind that no matter how clear the message is, the receiver may not interpret it as intended. Depending on the type of message, it's important to consider:

- Who is/are the intended receiver(s)?
- What is the best channel to use to communicate the message?
- Will the communication be verbal, non-verbal, written or a combination thereof?
- What are the appropriate words, images, signs, etc., needed to convey the message and reduce chances of misunderstanding or misinterpretation? Consider using multiple types of media to reinforce the message.

- What is the context and tone of the message? Does it match the message content?
- Are there other known factors or influences that might impact the message? This could be anything from a language barrier or unfamiliar terminology to the emotional state of the intended receiver.

Channels are the mediums selected for transmitting or delivering the message. Communication channels include mediums like meetings, presentations, letters, memos, emails, telephone calls, social media sites, videos, etc. The sender usually selects the channel during the encoding process. It’s important to select an appropriate channel for the message. The channel choice can greatly influence the overall communication and is therefore our second risk factor. There are other factors that can impact the message as well.

Noise is the term used to describe all the other risk factors that can interfere with the message. Both the sender and the receiver can be affected by noise. The effect noise can have on both message encoding and decoding can be huge and often underestimated. If, while attending a meeting, you have ever done “side work” or “got lost in thought” and missed something that was said, you have experienced the influence of noise on communication. Table 1.1 lists a few examples of the different types of noise that may impact communication.

TABLE 1.1 - COMMUNICATION NOISE		
ENVIRONMENTAL	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL
Distracting sounds, like ringing phones, barking dogs, voices / talking, etc.	Physical disabilities such as hearing loss, poor eyesight, speech impediment, ADD, dyslexia, etc.	Mood /state of mind /how you feel (angry, happy, sad, peaceful, lonely, etc.)
Distracting smells (smoke, baking, chemicals, perfume, etc.)	Sick or ill (short-term and long-term)	Focus/Attention (preoccupied with XYZ, other priorities, etc.)
Temperature (too hot, too cold)	Injury or any type of physical pain or discomfort	Past experiences (work or life), beliefs, values, morals or lack of
ESL / Slang / Lingo	Language – accents. terminology	Thought process, personality style, social style, etc.
Culture	Culture	Culture

Context can directly influence both the delivery and the interpretation of the communication. There are different areas of context that can impact communication, such as:

- Physical context – The setting or location where the communication takes place.
- Social context – The relationship between the sender and receiver(s).
- Chronological context – The timing of the communication. This could be seasonal or time of day.
- Cultural context – This refers to all types of group dynamics or group culture, such as organizational, generational, corporate, ethnic, male/female, geographical, etc.

The Receiver has the responsibility to decode the message after it has been delivered.

Decoding is the process by which the receiver determines their interpretation of the message. Just as there is noise when encoding a message, the meaning of the message can be impacted by the receiver's noise when it is decoded. This is one of the reasons why you can send the exact same memo to different people and get different interpretations. This is another risk factor.

Receivers have the responsibility of decoding and interpreting the meaning of the message. When in the role of receiver, it is important to focus on what is being communicated. To help prevent misinterpretations, receivers should try to remove any noise and consider the context and intention of the sender. With verbal communication, the primary skill needed by the receiver is effective listening.

Figure 3 shows a more detailed depiction of the communication process. Everything in the background is considered noise and has the potential to affect the overall communication. Since there are so many factors that influence communication, it is important that both senders and receivers do their best to minimize the risks of a breakdown.



Figure 3 - Communication Process

Interpersonal Communication

The information discussed so far applies to communication in general. With interpersonal communication, which is defined as communication between two or more people, there are even more variables involved. For example, it has been shown in recent studies that emotion is one of the biggest influences on the overall interpretation of a message. Any emotion detected during message delivery compounds with any emotion the receiver may already be feeling. In turn, this perception can trigger unplanned and/or unanticipated reactions and responses. There are also personality and social style differences, organizational hierarchies, formal and informal networks (like the infamous grapevine), group, team, and individual meetings, etc. We spend a majority of our time sending and receiving messages, otherwise known as communicating, and yet very little time is spent learning the skills that increase our effectiveness.

Good communicators are aware of the potential risks and barriers and try to ensure the messages they send are clear and in terms the receiver understands. They will also:

- Know the desired outcome of the communication.
- State the message in more than one way and/or restate the message to reinforce content.
- Ask for feedback or ask questions to verify understanding.
- Minimize body language and other visual distractions.
- Speak calmly. State facts without judgment or emotions.
- Say what they mean and mean what they say.

It's important to note the three components of a spoken message and their impact on the receiver. The content, tone and packaging of the message impact the receiver's interpretation.

- *Content* is the wording, data and other information contained in the message.
- *Tone* is the way in which it is delivered.
- *Packaging* is the body language or signals derived from the channel selected.

The words you select are important, but have less impact than tone or body language of the speaker. Just changing the *emphasis* of a word in a sentence can change the entire meaning of the sentence. When the words do not match the tone or body language, the words have even

less meaning. There is truth in the old saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” People tend to believe what they have seen over what they have heard.

As previously mentioned, the responsibility of communication does not fall entirely on the sender. The receiver does have the important task of listening and interpreting the message. Part of the difficulty with message interpretation is that people do not always speak with perfect clarity. Sometimes messages are confusing and are conveyed based on the sender’s own biases and assumptions – not on the receiver’s. Receivers who use effective listening techniques tend to have better success interpreting the message as intended.

Effective Listening

Effective listening is an important management skill, involving active participation as the receiver in the communication process. It is an activity that helps the speaker to ensure that the message is understood. To be able to accurately comprehend a message, and to be viewed as willing to listen, are leadership attributes that encourage commitment and enthusiasm.

There are barriers to effective listening, one of which is *word lag*. People are able to listen ‘faster’ than they can talk. The problem with word lag is that it creates an excess of mental capability, and allows receivers to attempt to multi-task while listening. This mental excess can easily get in the way of accurate message reception and interpretation. Unless you actively try to listen or pay attention, you may find that you are drifting off or daydreaming, thinking about other things, or thinking about what you are going to say. You may even be anticipating what you think the sender is saying or what you think they want from you. These are just a few of the different barriers that can occur when listening.

Active listening is when the receiver makes the effort to hear exactly what is being said to them, and to ensure that they understand the message as intended. There are some basic tactics used by effective listeners, which include some of the following:

- Suspend judgment and emotion – truly listen.
- Sit or stand alert and focused, nodding, maintaining eye contact with the speaker.
- Concentrate on the speaker’s words and tune out other distractions.
- Pay attention to voice tone and body language of speaker.
- Show empathy; reflect feelings to indicate understanding of emotions.
- Allow the speaker to talk without being interrupted.
- Paraphrase to confirm the accuracy of your interpretation.
- Summarize, restate or question the speaker to verify or clarify the meaning of the message.

Remember, listening is half of the communication process and although it may seem passive, it is truly not. Hearing does not equal comprehension. It is also important to note that a lack of attention or focus when reading written communications creates the same type of comprehension issues. When in the role of receiver, it is important to focus and give your full attention.

Conclusion

The information provided so far is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to communication skills. Communication is often situational and therefore needs to be adjusted accordingly in order to be effective. The adjustment may need to be made by both the sender and the receiver, and may be dependent on a variety of different circumstances. The communication process, although simplistic in nature, is actually extremely complex. There are nuances upon nuances to be considered when both sending and receiving messages; and all parties have active and important roles in the process.

About the Author

Dot Young is an Instructional Designer with more than 15 years' experience designing and developing training materials and courseware for a variety of organizations, including for two large multi-unit retail organizations. Prior to this, she was a Human Resource Generalist for over 175 company-operated retail units and also spent time in field operations as a multi-unit manager with twelve locations. She has been certified as an instructor through Achieve Global and is certified in Instructional Design through Langevin and the Center for Performance Improvement. She currently provides design and development services for a variety of clients on a contract basis.

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