**UNIT 1 : THE NATURE OF COMMUNICATION**

**Introduction**

This Unit provides a general understanding of the nature and purpose of communication. It gives an overview of the importance of communication, and explains some concepts in communication. It also describes the different models of communication that were developed over the years.

In addition to that, it outlines what is involved in the communication process and also describes some communication channels used in the public sector. The unit ends by outlining some problems that may arise as individuals/groups communicate.

**Outcomes**

Upon completion of this Unit, you will be able to:

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|  | * Define communication * Explain the purpose and importance of communication * Describe the different models of communication * Explain some concepts in communication * Identify appropriate communication channels in the public sector * Identify and handle communication barriers when they arise |

**Content**

* Definition and purpose of communication
* Common concepts in communication
* Models of Communication
  + Linear Model
  + Interactive Model
  + Transactional Model
  + Communication and Symbolic Interactionism
* Channels of communication in the public sector
* Barriers to effective communication

**Definition of Communication**

Communication is said to be the process of transmitting information from one point to another. It is the ability to share information with people and to understand what information and feelings are being conveyed by others. It is a two way process and can take many forms which include verbal and non-verbal ones.

Communication includes a broad range of actions which help people to work more effectively with others. The ability of a person to contribute to the achievement of the organisation’s objectives will depend on his/her communication.

**Purpose of Communication**

***Ask yourself, ‘Why is communication important?’***

Communication is a pervasive part of human nature and is thus basic to all human activities. In the organizational setting, communication is essential for a range of reasons including:

* Planning and carrying out activities
* Coordinating approaches with others
* Providing information to others
* Receiving information from others
* Building a positive relationship
* Understanding roles and assignments

So, when we are communicating, we could simply say we do it so that we:

* are understood
* understand others
* are accepted
* get action/ initiate action (change of behavior or attitude).

**The Communication Process**

The communication process is described using a number of key concepts. These are sender, encoding, medium, receiver, decoding, and feedback.

The process of communication begins when one person (the **sender**) wants to transmit an idea to someone else (the **receiver**). This idea/information has meaning to the sender.

The sender is an individual, group, or organization who initiates the communication. He/she has an idea or information which he/she wants to transmit.

The first step the sender is faced with involves **encoding**. In order to convey meaning the sender must put his idea into acceptable symbols which can take numerous forms such as languages, words, gestures or facial expressions. Encoding is creating a message.

After the message has been created, it is transmitted through an appropriate **medium** to the receiverwho decodes it. **Decoding** involves interpreting the symbols sent by the sender and translating the message in order to derive meaning. Successful communication takes place when the receiver correctly interprets the sender’s message.

**Feedback** is the final link in the chain of the communication process - it is a response. After receiving the message, the receiver responds in some way and signals that response to the sender. The signals may take the form of a spoken comment, a sigh, a written message, a smile or some other action or even inaction.

During the communication process there is the element of noise. **Noise** includes the physical, psychological, semantic, and hierarchical influences that either disrupt or shape the interpretation of messages.

**Common Concepts in Communication**

* ***Sender*;** the initiator and encoder of a message; the originator or source of a message
* ***Receiver*;** the one that receives the message (the listener) and the decoder of a message
* ***Decode*;** translates the sender's spoken idea/message into something the receiver understands by using their knowledge of language from personal experience.
* ***Encode*;** puts the idea into spoken language while putting their own meaning into the word/message.
* ***Channel*;** the route through which the message travels such as across, upwards, etc.
* ***Medium;*** the form in which the message is sent such as through oral communication (radio, television, phone, in person) or written communication (letters, email, text messages) etc.
* ***Feedback*;** the receiver's verbal and nonverbal responses to a message such as a nod for understanding (nonverbal), a raised eyebrow for being confused (nonverbal), or asking a question to clarify the message (verbal).
* ***Message*;** the verbal and nonverbal components of language that is sent to the receiver by the sender which conveys an idea.
* ***Noise*;** interference with effective transmission and reception of a message.
  + For example;
    - physical noise or external noise which are environmental distractions such as poorly heated rooms, startling sounds, appearances of things, music playing somewhere else, and someone talking really loudly near you.
    - physiological noise are biological influences that distract you from communicating competently such as sweaty palms, pounding heart, butterfly in the stomach, induced by speech anxiety, or feeling sick, exhausted at work, the ringing noise in your ear, being really hungry, and if you have a runny nose or a cough.
    - psychological noise are the preconception bias and assumptions such as thinking someone who speaks like a valley girl is dumb, or someone from a foreign country can’t speak English well so you speak loudly and slowly to them.
    - semantic noise are word choices that are confusing and distracting such as using the word tri-syllabic instead of three syllables.

**Models of Communication**

A model is a systematic representation of an object or event. Models allow us to see one thing in terms of another, i.e. they provide new ways to conceive of hypothetical ideas and relationships. **Models of communication** are conceptual models used to explain the human communication process. There are a number of communication models that have been developed over the years, but for purposes of your study we will just consider three.

Early models of communication depicted that communication was simply instructions (messages) given by a sender to receiver(s). What such models assumed was that most business communication was top down and basically one-way. This one-way communication model was known as the Linear Model.

## Linear Model

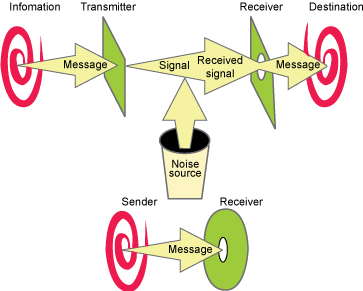
It is a one way model to communicate with others. It consists of the **sender** encoding a message and channeling it to the **receiver** in the presence of noise. In this model there is no feedback which may allow for a continuous exchange of information. This form of communication is a one-way form of communication that does not involve any feedback or response.

The linear model views communication as a one-way or linear process in which the speaker speaks and the listener listens. Laswell’s (1948) model was based on the five questions below, which effectively describe how communication works:

http://lms.oum.edu.my/e-content/OUMH1303KDP/content/24094922OUMH1303_OralCommunication_v1/OUMH1303_Topic1/OUMH1303_Topic1_Grafik/OUMH1303_1.2.1.jpg

**Fig 1.1**: Laswell’s Linear Model

Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) model includes noise or interference that distorts understanding between the speaker and the listener. Figure 1.2 shows Shannon and Weaver’s linear model of communication:

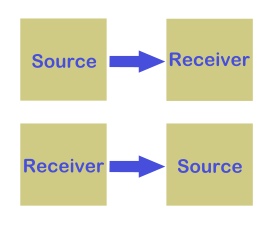


**Figure 1.2**: A linear model of communication  
**Source**: Wood, J. T. (2009). *Communication in our lives* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth

## The main flaw in the linear model is that it depicts communication as a one-way process where speakers only speak and never listen. It also implies that listeners listen and never speak or send messages. As the understanding of the nature of communication improved, newer models included the responses (feedback) that a receiver of a message gives to the sender.

## Interactive Model

Later scholars (Schramm – 1955) came out with a more interactive model that saw the receiver or listener providing feedback to the sender or speaker. The speaker or sender of the message also listens to the feedback given by the receiver or listener. Both the speaker and the listener take turns to speak and listen to each other. Feedback is given either verbally or non-verbally, or in both ways. This model was referred to as the interactive model.

[](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Interaction_comm_model.svg)

**Fig 1.3**: Interactive Model of Communication

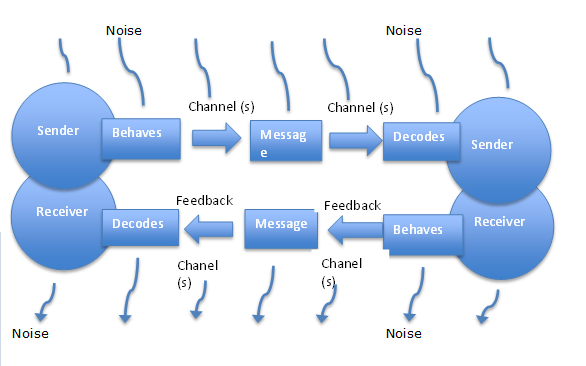
Simply stated, it is two linear models stacked on top of each other. The sender channels a message to the receiver and the receiver then becomes the sender and channels a message to the original sender. This model has added feedback, indicating that communication is not a one way but a two way process. The main drawback in the interactive model is that it does not indicate that the communicators can both send and receive messages simultaneously. This model also fails to show that communication is a dynamic process which changes over time.

## Transactional Model

This is a much later model which assumes that people are connected through communication; they engage in transaction. First, it recognizes that each of us is a sender-receiver, not merely a sender or a receiver. Secondly, it recognizes that communication affects all parties involved. So communication is fluid/simultaneous. This is what most conversations are like. The transactional model shows that the elements in communication are interdependent. Each person in the communication act is both a speaker and a listener, and can be simultaneously sending and receiving messages.

There are three implications in the transactional model:

1. “**Transactional**” means that communication is an ongoing and continuously changing process. You are changing, the people with whom you are communicating are changing, and your environment is also continually changing.
2. In any transactional process, each element exists in relation to all the other elements. There is this interdependence where there can be no source without a receiver and no message without a source.
3. Each person in the communication process reacts depending on factors such as their background, prior experiences, attitudes, cultural beliefs and self-esteem.



Transactional Model of Communication

**Communication and Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective which is particularly important in microsociology and social psychology. It however, can be linked to communication studies as it focuses on three main aspects of communication: meaning, language and thought. According to the symbolic interactionist theory, meaning is not inherent in objects, but is instead, constructed and modified within different contexts through interaction. Herbert Blumer, who coined the term ‘symbolic interactionism’ stated that ‘people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation’.

Blumer set out three basic premises :

* Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.
* The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society.
* These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters.

The first premise includes everything that a human being may note in their world, including physical objects, actions and concepts. Essentially, individuals behave towards objects and others based on the personal meanings that the individual has already given these items. The second premise explains the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with other humans. Blumer, claimed people interact with each other by interpreting or defining each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their "response" is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. Meaning is either taken for granted and pushed aside as an unimportant element which need not to be investigated or it is regarded as one of the causal chains between the causes or factors responsible for human behavior. Social interaction is the source of meaning, and out of which the typical communication media which have meanings, i.e., the language arises, and is negotiated through the use of it. We have the ability to name things and designate objects or actions to a certain idea or phenomenon. The use of symbols is a popular procedure for interpretation and intelligent expression.

The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. We naturally talk to ourselves in order to sort out the meaning of a difficult situation. But first, we need language. Before we can think, we must be able to interact symbolically.

Symbolic interactionism is very useful for understanding how miscommunication occurs between people. A word in one context can have an entirely different meaning in another context. Miscommunication frequently occurs when symbolic messages are analysed outside their original context.

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|  | Activity  Your manager tells you to prepare for an important meeting that would take place that afternoon. His actual words are “Prepare for a big meeting this afternoon.”  Outline the preparations you would make. |

**Channels of Communication in the Public Sector**

Communication in organizations flows among and between organizational units or groups. It flows in various directions which are referred to as channels. There are both formal and informal channels of communication.

Formal channels are officially established routes for formal interactions between and among employees. The channels are represented by the lines that connect offices of responsibilities as illustrated on the organization chart. These include vertical and horizontal and diagonal.

Vertical Communication: It is the communication that flows up and down the organization hierarchy, usually along formal reporting lines. It takes place between employees and their superiors and subordinates and may involve several different levels of the organization.

Vertical upwards communication: Consists of messages from subordinates to their direct superior and then to that person’s direct superior, and so on, up the hierarchy.

The typical content of upward communication is requests, information, responses to requests, suggestions, complaints, and financial information.

Vertical downwards communication: Occurs when information flows down the hierarchy from superiors to subordinates. The typical content of these messages is directives, assignments, performance feedback and general information.

In order to be effective, vertical communication should be two-way in nature, with active feedback.

Bypassing: Occasionally, a message might bypass a particular superior or subordinate depending on the urgency or importance of a communication. Bypassing is where certain levels of the hierarchy are skipped or bypassed in order to get the message across quickly. This channel should be used judiciously as it can cause problems.

Horizontal Communication: Flows laterally within the organization and it involves colleagues and peers at the same level of the organization. It may involve individuals from several different organizational units. This type of communication facilitates coordination among interdependent units and can be used for joint problem solving. Horizontal communication also plays a major role in work teams with members drawn from several departments. Sometimes it is called lateral communication.

Diagonal Communication: Flows diagonally across departments and units in an organization. It involves staff at different levels in the organization, and working in different departments or units. This type of communication relays requests, information, suggestions, and responses to requests. In simpler terms, it is communication between a superior in one department and a subordinate in another and vice versa.

In organizations, people relate to each other outside the laid down formal channels. This is not only for personal/social interaction but even official information may be exchanged informally.

The Grapevine: Is an informal communication channel that can permeate the entire organization. This kind of communication has no specific direction and no identification of the source. Users and distributors of grapevine sources of information find their material in the form of confidential letters left unattended on desks, accidental or careless remarks, and loud voices coming from behind closed doors.

The basis of the grapevine is gossip and rumour, and it flourishes more in organizations in which communication channels are more closed than open. The grapevine allows for idle talk between employees, ad distorts truth – a tendency which can damage the reputation of the organization. It is not possible to completely eradicate the grapevine but its use can be minimized.

It has sometimes been described as a’ necessary evil’ because it has certain advantages and disadvantages.

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|  | Activity   1. List down advantages and disadvantages of the grapevine. 2. Suggest ways in which the grapevine can be reduced. |

**Barriers to Effective Communication**

Although the communication process seems simple, it is not. Certain barriers present themselves throughout the process. These barriers are factors that have a negative impact on the communication.

Some common barriers include:

* Differing perceptions
* Emotions
* Language differences
* Technical jargon
* Information overload
* Too little information
* Stereotyping/prejudice
* Distortion along the channel
* Failure to give/seek feedback
* Status
* Wrong message
* Poor timing
* Wrong audience
* Inappropriate medium
* Not listening
* Noise

The most important point to note is that one should be able to identify barriers when they present themselves and also be able to overcome them. Successful and effective communication within an organization stems from the systematic and careful implementation of the communication process. All members of an organization will improve their communication skills if they follow the communication process, and prevent or avoid different barriers.

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|  | **Activity**  Explain the barriers outlined in this unit with relevant examples and how they can be overcome. |