

## Strategic Contingency Model (SCM)

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‘Effective communication strategy is contingent upon a set of factors that need to be assessed and acted upon if communicating is to be done intelligently’

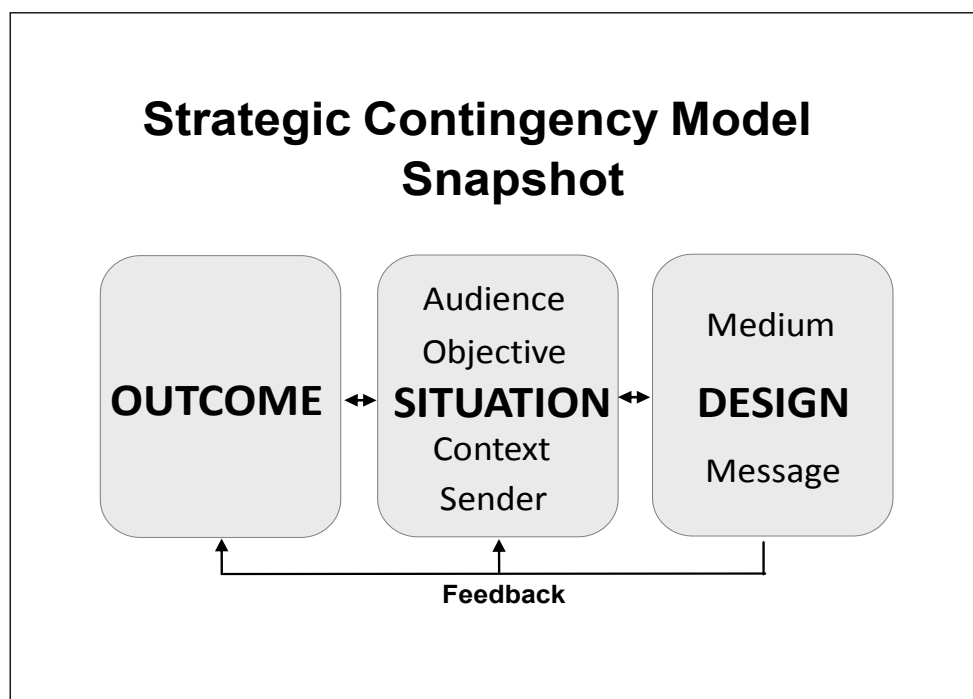
Garnett (1992)

The Strategic Contingency Model (SCM), developed from Garnett’s original model by Baker and Murfett (2012), integrates several solid, well researched theories, such as the Competing Values Communication Framework (Rogers & Hildebrandt, 1993) and Media Choice Model (Trevino, Daft & Lengel’s 1990) into a single systems model, first presented by Garnett (1992) as a way of systematizing government communication.

The SCM is a step-by-step process, which enables us to systematically consider all the ingredients that determine the likely success or failure of a communication. The framework highlights the fact that effective communication primarily involves (a) defining intended outcomes, (b) analysing the management situation, and then (c) designing an appropriate strategy.

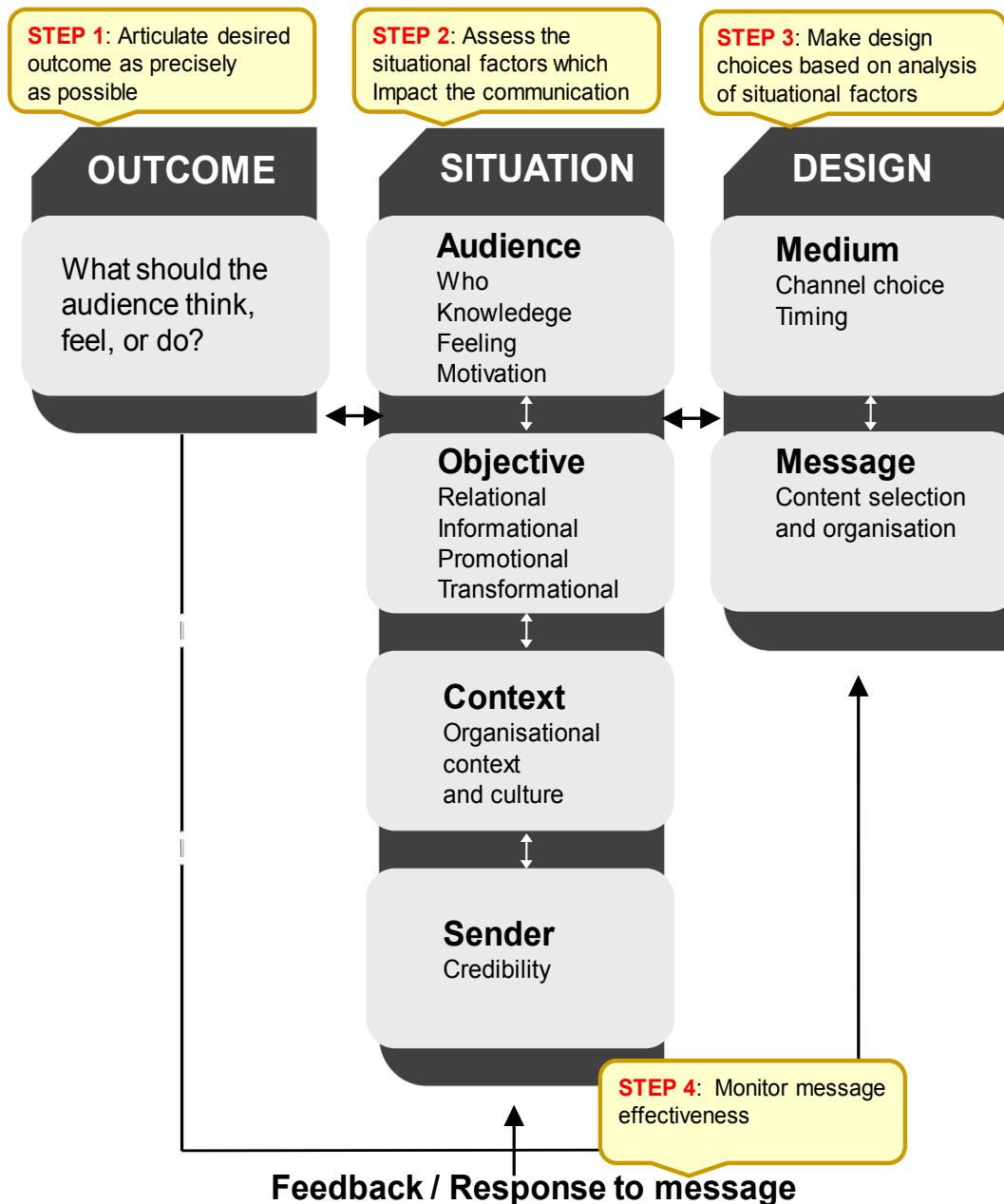
The benefits of this integrated model are many: it is easy to understand and use; it is culture-independent; it provides a practical framework to think about the many factors that contribute to the success or failure of a managerial communication; and it ensures that the communication choices we make are less intuitive and more driven by analysis.

The framework is particularly useful when planning, designing non-routine, high-risk workplace managerial communications.



Baker and Murfett (2012)

## Strategic Contingency Model



Adapted by Baker, Aalto University School of Business, Finland and Murfett, Nanyang Business School, Singapore (2012) from:

- Garnett, J.L. (1992). "Applying a strategic model to government Communication". **Communicating for Results in Government**.
- Munter, M. (2009). **Guide to Managerial Communication**.
- Rogers, P.S. & Hildebrandt, H.W. (1993). "Competing values instruments for analyzing written and spoken management messages", **Human Resource Management**.
- Trevino, L.K., Daft, R.L. & Lengel, R.H. (1990). "Understanding managers' media choices: a symbolic interactionist perspective". **Organisations and Communication Technology**.

Baker and Murfett (2012)

## Step 1 – DEFINE OUTCOME

The communication outcome is the precisely articulated goal we have for our message. This is the starting-point, the main driver, for any communication. We can pinpoint this outcome by completing the sentence:

**‘As a result of my communication (s) I want my audience to (think, say or do)’**

Business communication is very task-oriented so our outcome usually involves some kind of ‘call-to action’. We want to bring about a behavioural change in our audience.

Defining and articulating our communication outcome is the first critical step in any communication process. Once we’ve defined our goal other aspects, such as message orientation and choice of medium, start falling into place.

## Step 2 – SITUATION: Target audience

Designing a message based on a thorough analysis of our audience is probably the most important factor which contributes to a successful communication outcome.

We've done a good job when the message we've written, or the presentation we've given (a) has been understood as we intended it; (b) the audience finds it useful, informative and/or persuasive; and (c) the audience acts upon it.

This checklist covers some key questions to ask when analysing the audience:

### 1. Who are they?

- Who is your primary audience: those who receive our message directly?
- Is there a secondary audience: those who will be indirectly affected?
- Who are the key influencers: decision-makers, opinion leaders, gatekeepers?

### 2. What do they know?

- What do they already know about the topic? Novice, expert or mixed?
- What do they want to know? What new knowledge do they want?
- What do they need to know for you to accomplish your outcome?

### 3. What do they feel? What is their attitude towards the topic?

- What needs and concerns do they have? How can you address them?
- If they have a **positive or neutral attitude** can you attempt to build on it by restating and highlighting benefits?
- If they are **negative** what can you do to win them round? How will this affect how you structure your message?
- What pressures might they be under (deadlines, budgets, stakeholders)?

### 4. How can you motivate them?

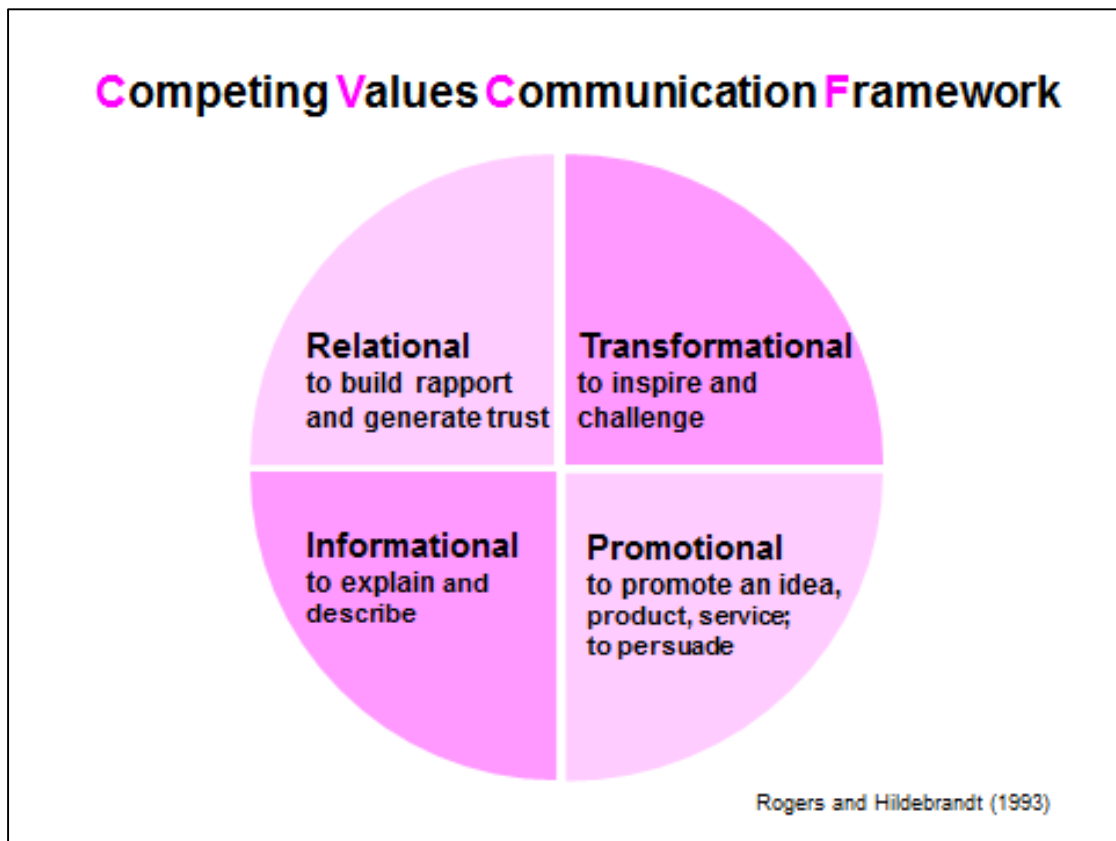
- How interested are they in the topic? How can you gain their interest?
- Can you motivate them by focussing on the benefits you have to offer?
- How do they make decisions? Are the financials crucial?

Adapted from Munter (2012)

## Step 2 – SITUATION: Select message objective

We need to decide which message objective – relational, informational, promotional, transformational - or combination of orientations, we should emphasise. Each objective requires different content, organisation, and delivery strategies.

Although it is common for a number of objectives to be intertwined in any message, we need to decide on what is the main message objective. Other secondary objectives can be integrated but should be subordinated to this main objective. If we try to achieve more than one objective to the fullest extent we are likely to create a confusing and ineffective message. We need to achieve the right mix to achieve our aims.



Adapted by Baker and Murfett (2012)

## Short descriptions of the CVCF message objectives

### **RELATIONAL: to establish credibility, build rapport and generate trust**

These messages are highly receiver-centred. Content, structure, and delivery style are selected based on the communicator's perceived understanding of the receivers' needs and desires. Relational messages may include conversational rather than formal syntactical constructions, familiar words, inclusive pronouns, personal examples, and honest self-revelation. References to the receivers may outnumber references to self. Examples: a thank you email, welcome speech, a letter of sympathy.

### **INFORMATIONAL: to explain, to describe**

These messages focus on selecting and organising necessary details so that, above all else, the message is clear and logical. The content is neutral, precise, controlled, and organised in a step-by-step pattern. Recognisable structural patterns (e.g. topical, chronological, process), tables, lists, precise words, explanatory visuals are used to ensure that the message is crystal clear. Advance organisers, such as headings and summaries, are employed to make the message explicit and to make it easier for the audience to understand the main ideas. Examples: product description, explaining a process, instruction manuals.

### **PROMOTIONAL: to promote an idea, a concept, a product or a service**

Promotional messages are argument-centred. They present claims (recommendations, proposals) that are supported by evidence (facts, statistics, surveys) and sometimes creative emotional appeals. Content is organised around strong assertive, recommendation statements. Benefits are highlighted. Interesting examples, illustrations, and comparisons are used to gain and retain the audience's interest. Memorable visuals (charts, graphs, pictures, diagrams) may be used to highlight key benefits and present evidence. Urgency is promoted via action verbs (*acquire, focus, restructure...*) and modal auxiliaries (*must, should...*). Examples: making a proposal to management, getting personnel to accept new working methods, sales presentations.

### **TRANSFORMATIONAL: to challenge, change and inspire**

These inspirational messages are intrinsically unusual and may look to the future from an unexpected perspective. The entire message attempts to challenge the receiver to accept a mind-stretching vision, a new way of thinking. Organisation and delivery may be unconventional. Content is often built around a central theme which is underpinned by vivid examples, unique comparisons, dramatic statistics, engaging stories, and inspirational quotations. Vivid words, colourful semantic constructions and symbolic comparisons are typical. Oral delivery is enthusiastic. Emphatic gestures are used to show commitment and passion. Written messages may be unorthodox using non-traditional formatting, punctuation, and spelling. Examples: keynote speeches, corporate mission statements, written strategic plans, value statements.

Adapted extracts from *Competing Values Instruments for Analyzing Written and Spoken Management Messages*, Rogers and Hildebrandt (1993)

## Step 2 – SITUATION: Define management context

What is happening in our audience's organization can have a great impact on their reaction to our communication. If an internal division within the organisation is going through a period of restructuring and staff are being laid off it will inevitably affect how we communicate and how our messages are received.

It is relatively easy to assess audiences within our organisation, whereas analysing the organisational context of external audiences can be more challenging. Here is a short list of some key organisational issues we may need to take into consideration when analysing the situation and designing a message strategy.

### Organizational culture

- formal or informal
- primarily upward, downward or lateral
- autocratic or democratic
- risk taking or risk averse
- open or secretive
- supportive or competitive
- routine or variety the norm
- primary motivators: reward or sanctions, praise or blame, economic or psychological
- oral or written communication emphasized

### Organizational context

- prospering or declining
- experiencing normalcy or crisis
- technological capabilities
- turf protection
- coalition building
- overworked or underworked

J.L.Garnett (1992), **Applying a Strategic Model to Government Communication** (Adapted)

## Step 2 – SITUATION: Enhance sender credibility

Our audience's perception of us as a communicator, our credibility and trustworthiness (our *ethos*), will have a huge impact on how enthusiastically they will receive our message and ultimately how successful it is. We can assess our own *ethos* in terms of **initial** and **acquired** credibility.

### Initial credibility

This is the audience's perception of us before we've communicated with them. If we have high initial credibility our ideas will be taken more seriously and it may well be easier for us to, for instance, break bad news or present unpopular recommendations. If our initial *ethos* is low with a particular audience we can try to associate ourselves with someone who has higher credibility, so that your message has more chance of success.

### Acquired credibility

Irrespective of how much initial credibility we may or may not have, we need to earn credibility during our communication. Acquired *ethos* comes from the way our message is both crafted and delivered.

### Credibility enhancing techniques

Factor	Based on	Technique
<b>Rank</b>	Hierarchy	Emphasise your title, rank, position or associate yourself with someone who the audience respects or admires.
<b>Goodwill</b>	Personal relationship and trustworthiness	Refer to your established relationship with the audience or your personal record of providing benefits to the group.
<b>Expertise</b>	Knowledge, competence	Refer to your knowledge, competence, qualifications, track record or the acknowledged reputation of your organisation. Associate yourself with authoritative sources.
<b>Image</b>	Attractiveness, audience's desire to be like you	Build your image by stressing attributes the audience find attractive and by identifying yourself with audience benefits.
<b>Common ground</b>	Shared ideas, problems or needs.	Acknowledge and highlight values and beliefs which you share with the group. Focus on what you have in common.

Based on Kotter (1985) *Power and Influence* and Munter (2012) *Guide to Managerial Communication*

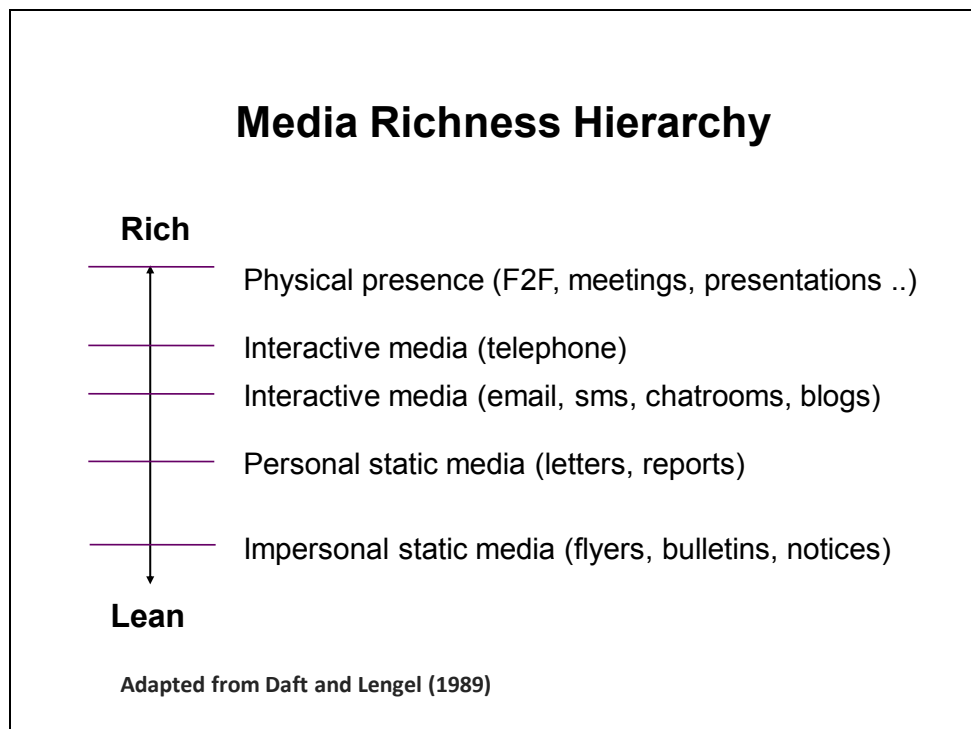


## Step 2 – SITUATION: Choose an appropriate channel

### Media Richness Theory

‘A medium can either enhance or distort the intended message’, (Daft and Lengel, 1988)

There are some useful media choice models, formulated by communication researchers Trevino, Daft, Lengel in the 1980s and 90s and their successors, which can help us quickly choose an appropriate platform for our message.



### Rich or lean media?

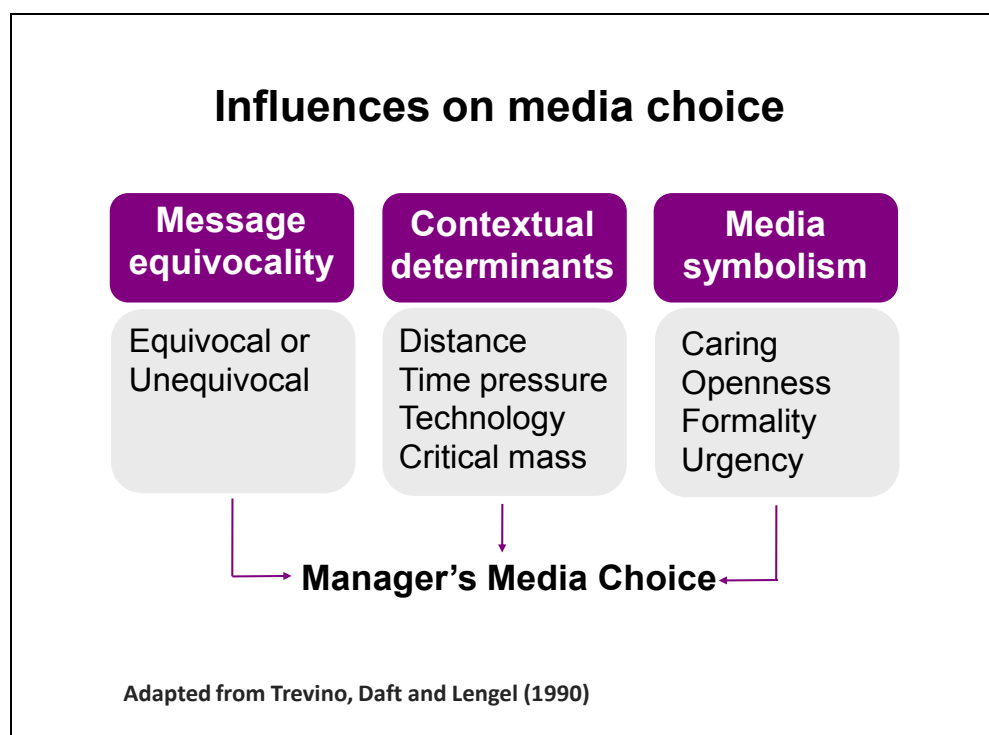
Daft and Lengel (1988) ranked media on a ‘rich-to-lean’ scale based on their ability to facilitate shared meaning. The adjectives “rich” and “lean” *should not* be equated with “better” or “worse”. Effective communication involves matching richness of medium to the needs of the message: our desired outcome, our audiences and the context of our communication.

**Rich media**, such as meetings and presentations, provide lots of cues to aid understanding (spoken words, tone of voice, body movement, gestures, facial expression); are more targeted at a clearly-defined audience; and provide the opportunity for immediate feedback, allowing the sender to further adjust the message to meet audience needs and expectations. A face-to-face conversation is the richest medium as we get instant feedback, lots of nonverbal cues and it’s aimed at a well-defined audience.

**Lean media**, such as letters and reports, have fewer cues to understanding. The message is primarily conveyed through the written words and graphics. There are no non-linguistic cues, such as gestures or voice tone, and little or no opportunity for instant feedback. Also, leaner media, such as fliers, are often directed at a very broad audience.

### Influences on Managers' Media Choice Processes

Research by Trevino, Daft and Lengel (1990) suggests that there are three key factors that might influence our choice of media: message equivocality, contextual determinants and media symbolism.



#### Factor 1: Message equivocality

'Equivocality means the existence of multiple and conflicting interpretations about an organizational situation' (Daft and Lengel, 1986)

This refers to the ambiguity of the message. An **equivocal message** is one that is open to diverse and conflicting interpretations because the message receivers have widely-diverging backgrounds, expectations, needs, and concerns. Equivocality is likely to be high when the message we are sending is nonroutine and is complex, ambiguous or sensitive.

'Nonroutine messages have greater potential for misunderstanding, and are often characterized by time pressure, ambiguity and surprise. They are typified by novel events so that a common frame of reference does not exist between sender and receiver. Moreover, personal feelings and subjective beliefs may influence message interpretation.' (Daft and Lengel, 1988)

For equivocal, more ambiguous, non-routine messages a richer media, such as face-to-face, which allows us to negotiate meaning, create solutions and receive instant feedback is needed.

On the other hand, a more routine, **unequivocal message**, where a common frame of reference exists between sender and receiver, and which is straightforward, logical, impersonal, and contain no surprises, does not require a particularly rich medium.

The following matrix depicts when communication is likely to be more or less effective. It shows that equivocal, nonroutine messages require rich media, whereas lean media are sufficient for unequivocal, routine messages. If lean media are used to communicate equivocal messages problems may well arise due to the lack of cues needed to transmit the complexity of the message. If rich media are used to send an unequivocal message the excessive amount of information may confuse the recipient.

'Communication media have varying capacities for resolving ambiguity, bringing multiple interpretations together, and facilitating understanding', (Daft and Lengel, 1988). To be effective communicators we need to choose the medium which best matches the message.

<b>Message Equivocality / Media Richness matching framework</b>		
<b>Message</b>		
<b>Media Richness</b>	Unequivocal / Routine	Equivocal / Nonroutine
	Rich	Lean
	<b>Communication failure</b> Data glut. Rich media used for routine messages. Excess cues cause confusion and surplus meaning.	<b>Effective communication</b> Communication success because rich media match nonroutine messages.
	<b>Effective communication</b> Communication success because media low in richness match routine messages.	<b>Communication failure</b> Data starvation. Lean media used for nonroutine messages. Too few cues to capture message complexity.

Trevino, Daft & Lengel (1990)

## Factor 2: Contextual determinants

‘The reality of contextual determinants is evident in the research findings. Managers are busy people with limited resources who select communication media, especially the telephone, written media, and electronic mail for their convenience, efficiency, and accessibility’, (Trevino, Daft & Lengel, 1990)

Two factors seem to be particularly relevant when it comes to media choice:

### Distance and time pressure

Managers are busy people and may not have the time to visit a counterpart in a distant location. In many cases an email, SMS or quick call may be the best option even when message content is equivocal.

### Technological capabilities and critical mass

Having access to a particular technology and a critical mass of willing users may determine channel choice, especially when it comes to newer technologies.

## Factor 3: Media symbolism

‘.. symbolic cues have nothing to do with the objective characteristics or capabilities of the medium. They are interpretations based upon the subjective norms in the situation’ (Trevino, Daft & Lengel, 1990)

The choice of channel is not based solely on the purpose of the communication or the contextual constraints. The medium can be symbolic and in itself become the message.

For instance, choosing to meet face-to-face could be used to show concern, interest, trust, goodwill, a desire for teamwork, or to indicate openness to new ideas. The choice of a telephone call rather than an email could symbolize urgency or special concern. Writing a letter could symbolise authority, make the message seem more official, or simply serve to highlight the seriousness of the situation.

The medium we choose for our messages can send a powerful message.

## Practical guidelines

1. Send equivocal messages through a rich medium
2. Send unequivocal messages through a lean medium
3. Assess contextual determinants
4. Consider using the medium for its symbolic message

## Step 3 – DESIGN: Select suitable content and organisation

Business audiences are busy. They receive more messages than ever before but at the same time they have less time to absorb all that information. So, we need to be rigorous in our choice of content and avoid information overload. We should aim to give us much information as the audience needs to achieve our intended outcome, but no more.

There are basically two ways in which we can organise information: **direct** (main idea /bottom-line first followed by explanation) or **indirect** (explanation followed by main idea /bottom-line). Here are a few guidelines that may help you make a decision which organisation pattern to use.

### Direct approach

#### Main idea

Best for:

1. non-sensitive informational messages
2. good news messages
3. an audience that is positively disposed
4. sensitive messages when audience results-oriented
5. sensitive messages when you have high credibility

#### Explain

### Indirect approach

#### Explain

Best for:

1. an analysis-oriented audience
2. sensitive topics when credibility low
3. a negatively-biased or hostile audience

#### Main idea

## Examples of informational organisation patterns

<p><b>Topical</b></p> <p>4 topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History</li> <li>Organisation</li> <li>Products and services</li> <li>Strategy</li> </ol>	<p><b>Chronological</b></p> <p>Recent events:</p> <p>199- Merged with Tomorola</p> <p>199- Acquired 4T, Ohio, US</p> <p>199- Divested cable operations</p> <p>200- Established Seoul office</p>
<p><b>Processual</b></p> <p>Production stages:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Debarking</li> <li>Sawing</li> <li>Shredding</li> </ol>	<p><b>Spatial</b></p> <p>Main export markets</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Far East</li> <li>Europe</li> <li>North America</li> </ol>
<p><b>Cause-effect</b></p> <p>Deforestation of forests in South America and the Far East &gt; Threat to ecological balance of the whole world</p>	<p><b>Comparison-contrast</b></p> <p>X and Y differ in 2 major ways:</p> <p>Point 1 X's v Y's features</p> <p>Point 2 X's v Y's features</p>
<p><b>General to specific (or Specific to General)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>World-wide sales 2XXX</li> <li>European sales 2XXX</li> <li>Nordic region 2XXX</li> </ul>	<p><b>Order of importance</b></p> <p>North 6600</p> <p>West 1567</p> <p>East 1100</p> <p>South 800</p>

## Promotional patterns

### Motivated Sequence

<b>Step 1</b>	Get attention - arouse interest, focus on message
<b>Step 2</b>	Show the need - identify the problem
<b>Step 3</b>	Satisfy the need - present a solution
<b>Step 4</b>	Visualise the results - point out the benefits
<b>Step 5</b>	Request action - obtain commitment

German, Gronbeck, Ehninger & Monroe (2008)

### 4 Ps

<b>Position</b>	Show the audience you know their position
<b>Problem</b>	Show the audience you understand their problem
<b>Possibilities</b>	Outline the possible options
<b>Proposal</b>	Make your suggestion

Making your case: Video Arts (Video)

### A I D A

<b>Attention</b>	Convince them of the importance of the message
<b>Interest</b>	Explain how it relates to them, give details
<b>Desire</b>	Support your claims, provide evidence
<b>Action</b>	Suggest the action you want them to take

## Motivated sequence

**Step 1** Get attention

**Step 2** Show the need - identify the problem

**Step 3** Satisfy the need - present a solution

**Step 4** Visualise the results - point out benefits

**Step 5** Request action - gain commitment

Ehninger and Monroe (1987)

### Step 1 Get attention

Begin by arousing the audience's interest in the topic and focusing their attention on the main message. You could use such attention grabbing devices as a shocking example, dramatic statistic, powerful quotation, etc.

### Step 2 Show the need, identify the problem

Explain the current situation and clarify the problem. You should attempt to show the extent and seriousness of the need and relate it to our audience as much as possible. You could use facts, figures, statistics, examples, etc. to convince your audience that there is a need for action to be taken.

### Step 3 Satisfy the need, present a solution

Outline the changes you are suggesting and give details of your solution. Attempt to address any likely objections the audience might have to your proposal.

### Step 4 Visualise the results, point out benefits

Describe the benefits that the audience will receive if the request or proposal is adopted and/or point out the consequences of failing to act upon your proposal.

### Step 5 Request action, gain commitment

Tell the audience what they should do and attempt to gain their commitment by, for example, restating the advantages of what you are proposing.



## 4 Ps

<b>Position</b>	show you know the position
<b>Problem</b>	show you understand the problem
<b>Possibilities</b>	outline possible solutions
<b>Proposal</b>	make your suggestion

**Position** Show the audience that you are fully aware of the situation.

**Problem** Clarify the problem or concern from the audience's perspective. This is an important step. If you fail to define the need correctly then the rest of your argument will fail.

**Possibilities** Suggest two or three alternative solutions. Analyse each in turn weighing up the pros and cons. This shows that you're being fair-minded and taking a balanced view. You can then eliminate what you consider to be the weaker option(s) leaving the alternative you favour. Of course in some situations you may decide to omit the 'possibilities' step and proceed directly to the proposal. This will depend on the situation: who you are speaking to and what their expectations are.

**Proposal** Suggest which option(s) you would recommend pointing out again the inherent benefits of choosing this particular alternative. In some situations you might omit this step because you want the audience to make the final decision based on the alternatives you've provided. In fact in some parts of the world it would be inappropriate and cause loss of face to firmly state the proposal to a group of superiors. So the presenter would simply provide a few sound options and leave it up to the audience to make the final decision.

## A I D A

**A**ttention show the importance of the message

**I**nterest explain how it relates to them

**D**esire support your claims, provide evidence

**A**ction suggest the action they should take

### Attention

In the **attention** phase you have to convince the audience that you have something useful to say. Make it clear to them what they will gain from your message.

1. Show that you understand their concerns.
2. Point out the main benefit(s).
3. Try to get the audience on your side: say you need their help, describe the problem that you hope to solve, or you'd like their help with.

### Interest and Desire

In the **interest** step you make it clear how the message relates to them: what benefits will they gain? The **desire** phase provides evidence to support the claims made in the second phase and prepares the audience for your request for action in the final phase.

1. State clearly why you are addressing them.
2. Mention the main benefit they will get.
3. Clearly outline what you are requesting or proposing: give all necessary details.
4. Present all the necessary evidence to support your case.
5. Anticipate and present counter-arguments to possible objections.

### Action

The **action** phase points out what you would like them to do: what action do you want them to take?

1. Request action.
2. Make it clear and easy to implement.
3. Emphasise the positive outcome of such action.