

# Session 7

## Levels of Communication

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### Introduction

Communication is a process by which information is exchanged among individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour. Further, communication is described as a skill to be learned and practiced. It is a vital component of every relationship. The greater the need to communicate our feelings, the harder it is to do so.

With therapeutic communication, the sender, or health professional seeks to illicit a response from the receiver, (the patient) what is beneficial to his/her patient's mental and physical health. Just as stress has been proven to adversely affect the health of individuals, the therapeutic approach of communication can actually help. In any given situation everyone uses communication.

Each conversation ought to begin with phatic communication and move through the levels before moving to the more intimate levels. Generally, we look for the other individual to reciprocate at the same level of intensity. There is a social convention to match levels. If the other initiates a conversation at the evaluative level, we often feel compelled to respond in kind. This is dangerous. Sharing our ideas and feelings is generally reserved for those whom we trust. Trust is a function of confidence, commitment and time. We generally share our essence with those we have known for a long time. To do with others is pseudo-intimacy.

There are different levels of communication depending on the situation. Different scholars have categorized communication in different ways. Each level of communion may be formal or informal, personal or impersonal. However, basically communication can be categorized into four different levels, though this categorization is somewhat artificial.

Four levels of communication are,

1. Phatic communication
2. Factual communication
3. Evaluative communication
4. Gut-level communication

## 7.1 Phatic Communication

Phatic communication is the use of conventional messages to establish and/or to end a conversation. You might hug, kiss, shake hands, bow, smile, make eye-contact, and face one another. We exchange pleasantries by using clinches. Clinches are overused expressions that have lost their original meanings and have been taken on new conversation, regardless of our feelings about a person.

Examples:

Hello. How are you?

I am fine. How are you?

Thanks for coming. Have a nice day.

You are welcome.

In linguistics a phatic expression is one whose only function is to perform a social task, as opposed to conveying information. For example, "you are welcome" is not intended to convey the message that the listener is welcome; it is a phatic response to being thanked. In turn its function is to be polite in response to a gift. Similarly, in the English language, the questions that "how are you?" is usually an automatic component of a social encounter. Although there are times when "how are you?" is asked in a sincere, concerned manner and does in fact anticipate a detailed response regarding the respondent's present state, this needs to be pragmatically inferred from context and inflection.

The utterance of a phatic expression is a kind of speech act. In speech communication the term means "small talk" (conversation for its own sake) and has also been called "grooming talking". For most of us, an average day is filled with phatic communication and we never even notice it. In fact, spending 24 hours without any form of phatic communication would probably seem very foreign and unnatural. Imagine spending an entire day without making small talk with your family, answering the telephone with the word 'hello', telling someone to have a nice day, or discussing the weather with a new client. These clichéd phrases and time-worn conversation starters are perfect examples of phatic communication.

Phatic communication can be verbal or non-verbal. A simple wave at a co-worker or a thumb up signal to a friend can be considered phatic communication, in the same way a routine conversation at the bank would qualify. We may call it small talk, but in reality we would all be lost without some form of phatic communication. Sociologists who study the art of human communication suggest that phatic communication, such as discussing the weather, opens up a social channel. This, in turn, can lead to more substantial or factual communication. Very few people start and end conversations with straight facts – phatic communication such as a handshake helps to set the stage first. The current Internet chat room environment is a sterling example of phatic communication. The introduction of a new chat room participant is often unthinking and ritualized, allowing chatters to ease into social conversations without the pressure to be informative or fact-driven.

Phatic communication is also found every day in the workplace. Receptionists use routine greetings to begin and end phone conversations. Co-workers often have social 'water cooler' conversations about common events or issues. Much of our daily work routines revolve on these seemingly trivial moments of social communication. While it is important to develop effective phatic communication skills, one must also recognize varying degrees of comfort with the process. Some people are simply not comfortable with the idea of making meaningless 'small talk'. Others seem to embrace the social ritual of phatic communication, even to the point of avoiding much factual conversation with others.

Communication experts suggest finding a middle ground, using phatic communication as a means to open up more substantial conversation. Too much emphasis on small talk can make a person seem unfocused or chatty, while too little can make someone appear stern or unapproachable. The trick lies in finding a proper balance between factual and phatic communication.



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### Activity 1

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Name 10 kinds of verbal and non verbal phatic communication responses you come across during the stay in the university and discuss how they differ from their original meanings.

## 7.2 Factual Communication

Factual communication is the communication that takes place using events, making observations, offering knowledge to others in a manner which can be called chit-chat or small-talk. At business parties, we rely upon factual communication to network, to schmooze, and to work the room. Factual communication includes reporting what you have read in a text book, what you have studied for a test, showing pictures of your children, and exchanging biographical information about yourself. Factual communication is relatively safe and most do this well.

Examples;

I am majoring in business administration.

I am married with three children, two sons and one daughter.

Did you watch the basketball game last night?

What did we do in the class last Friday?

We have all at one time or another been exposed to information that was "over our heads", utilizing unintelligible jargon, unfamiliar concepts, obtuse wording, or complicated technical data. Examples of this kind of information are readily available in academic or scientific journals, technical manuals, textbooks, and legal documents.

In addition to being generally frustrating, complex information presents particular challenges in conflict situations. Conflicts involving factual issues

cannot be successfully addressed without some type of factual communication process. Factual communication may be between fact-finders and decision-makers, or part of the internal processes of a fact-finding venture, or from decision-makers to the public. In any of these contexts, communicating the facts so that they are understood is of utmost importance. Doing so can be a real challenge, especially when facts relevant to the conflict are technically complex.

Understanding the facts properly is vital to choosing a position. For example, a pharmaceutical company might sell a drug that, according to scientific research, is associated with a  $10^{-4}$  (1 in 10,000) risk of heart failure. Doctors and scientists are familiar with treatment risks, and are in a better position to evaluate whether or not the risk is worth taking by a particular patient. However, the user may not be able to understand the probability of the risk and how it compares with alternative choices. This dichotomy can lead to misconceptions about the drug. For instance, some members of the public might think that it is scandalous if 85 cases of heart failure are reported among users of this drug. Yet, to evaluate that number, one must consider several factors, such as how many people use the drug, the risks involved in not taking it, and the risks of alternative courses of treatment.

There is an enormous amount of information available on practical and theoretical approaches to teaching technically complex material. This is a major focus in educational institutions worldwide, in addition to the academic fields of communication, technical writing, psychology (theories of learning), and the sciences. Yet some key points should be emphasized here in the context of conflicts.

1. The first is that experts may want to prepare some type of technical primer, either in oral or written form. Such primers are designed to bring

newcomers "up to speed" on appropriate background information. So, for example, in an environmental conflict it may be necessary to introduce those involved with basic biological, chemical, and ecological principles. Since every sphere of knowledge seems to have its own "lingo," experts will need to pay special attention to giving comprehensible definitions of key terms. This may involve creation of a custom-made glossary. One that includes terms that are crucial to understanding the dispute, while filtering out those that are not relevant or are solely for academic use. When possible, it helps to define terms in the course of presenting ideas, which makes reading the primer, less onerous.

2. In explaining more complex technical issues, experts can use two common, but especially effective, teaching techniques: teaching by analogy, and use of familiar concepts. For example, in a conflict involving the production of electrical power, it cannot be taken for granted that all readers understand electricity. Electricians and physicists often use the analogy of water-flow as a model for the flow of electricity which is especially successful since things like drains and water pressure are quite familiar to most of us. Or, where the language of economists can easily confuse and overwhelm, the analogy of balancing one's check book might be used to make complex economic ideas more accessible.
3. Most people live in a state of "information overload," because of the huge amount of information we deal with on a daily basis. There is just too much information streaming into our lives from all directions. To deal with information overload, we tend to either "tune out" to some extent, or interpret that which we do not understand in terms of what we already know. This filtering process can easily lead to misconceptions and errors. With this in mind, the best way for experts to ensure that

complex information is properly understood is to present key ideas concisely and in small, manageable portions, giving only the information that the audience really needs to know. These more compact bits of information can therefore sink in and be comprehended. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as keeping presentations short, utilizing repetition, question-and-answer opportunities, and written outlines of key points.

4. Experts must communicate in a way that helps to build trust. When important decisions that may affect an individual's vital interests are to be made, there is a natural reluctance to accept new information, especially when it contains unfamiliar ideas. Yet a fact-finding effort, if it is successful, will likely mean that some people have to go through the admittance that their previous beliefs were wrong. If decision-makers and stakeholders do not trust experts, then the experts' technical expertise is largely wasted as their recommendations will not be taken to heart. Therefore, experts may need to exercise some diplomacy in order to get their points across.

## 7.3 Evaluative Communication

Evaluative communication is the communication that takes place offering opinions, ideas and judgments to others. This is a risky business because the odds are that others will reciprocate with their own evaluations, which may be different from that of yours. When people constantly use evaluative communication, they must be prepared for eventual conflicts.

Many people enjoy sharing at this level and feel that disagreeing with others is useful and revitalizing. Unfortunately, many of us do not use evaluative



communication, with a high level of competence. It is important to consider the value of critical and creative thinking as well as the relational meanings of messages that are exchanged. When using evaluative communication, consider carefully the importance of descriptive, provisional, and responsible expressions. Strive to avoid cautionary language, sarcasm, and non-verbal put-downs (e.g., rolling your eyes in response to another's comments).

Examples:

Of all my children, my daughter is the best athlete.

I thought that movie was excellent, particularly with the surprising ending.

I am not convinced that your argument is well supported.

I agree with you!

From the perspective of communication theory, evaluative feedback is one type of asymmetrical communication task. People in organizations face asymmetrical communication tasks whenever they possess information that is of significance to others but not possessed by them, or vice versa. In addition, the performance appraisal process is generally characterized by power asymmetry. That is, most performance appraisal researchers view the process in terms of leader-member exchange, characterized by vertical dyad linkages between supervisors and supervisees, with consequent power inequities. At the same time, peer appraisals are becoming increasingly, common in both practice and research.

Much of the literature on feedback processes in organizations focuses on the supervisor-subordinate relationship, and always utilizes the dyadic level of analysis. Feedback also comes from peers or subordinates, in this case conceived of theoretically as an interpersonal influence process that

transpires between individuals, which is why it is appropriately investigated at the dyadic level of analysis. Dyadic analysis is generally superior to individual and system-level analyses of organizational networks.

Evaluative feedback is increasingly being delivered via means other than traditional face-to-face contexts. An entire industry of online performance management software has sprung up to provide support to organizations that want to use the Web for their performance appraisal and evaluation processes. Online education support tools all come with features to provide evaluative feedback remotely. These tools have emerged in response to demands for such products from educational and for-profit organizations. This demand is evidence of just how widespread the phenomenon is of delivering Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) based evaluative feedback.

Most of the previous experimental research on CMC has used tasks characterized by impartial information rather than information with positive or negative consequences for the receiver. For the most part, these tasks have also been characterized by information symmetry; that is, all participants have equal information resources to contribute to the interaction and resulting performance. Such tasks include getting to know someone, brainstorming, planning, and decision making.



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### Activity 2

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When using evaluative communication, it is always important to use descriptive, provisional, and responsible expressions. Discuss briefly using examples.

## 7.4 Gut Level Communication

Gut level communication involves sharing our emotions and feelings with another. We are sharing our very essence when we allow others to know our hearts. This is risky business. Societies place constraints upon the specific emotions which can be conveyed (e.g., It is good to express love; but bad to express hatred). We also have rules about when and how feelings can be expressed (“that was the wrong time and place for arguing with your spouse”).

Emotional intelligence involves interpersonal competencies including self awareness, self control, flexibility and empathy.

Examples:

I deeply appreciate your thoughtfulness and generosity in helping me earlier.

I am so frustrated with you.

I wish that I had not called you that name. I hope you will forgive me.

He called me. I am so excited to see him again.

## 7.5 Peak Communication

Peak communication is coming together with another in an extraordinary way. Two individuals who are gut levelling experience a transformation when they are sharing exactly the same emotion at the same level of intensity. This is also called, “communal-level communication”. It is as if,

for the moment, two souls merge into one. Peak communication is rare, even among close friends and family members.

Examples;

I love you. I love you too.

I am so angry with you. I am so angry with you as well.

I am glad that we were able fight long enough to get this resolved.

Yes, I feel exactly the same way, glad that we communicated collaboratively.

I am scared, I am scared too.

## Summary

Communication is a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour. It is a vital component of every relationship and communication is also a skill to be learned and practiced. Everyone involved in communication and each conversation ought to begin with phatic communication and move through other levels. Generally, we look for the other individual to reciprocate at the same level of intensity. There are different levels of communication depending on the situation. Different scholars have categorized communication in different ways. Each level of communion may be formal or informal, personal or impersonal. However, basically communication can be categorized into four different levels, though this categorization is somewhat artificial. Those four levels of communication are phatic communication, factual communication, evaluative communication, and gut-level communication.

# Objectives



At the end of the session 8, the student nurses should be able to,

- Identify different levels of communication.
- Explain different levels of communication with respect to the relationship between individuals.

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## Self Assessment Questions

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1. What are the different levels of communication?
2. Explain different levels of communication in relation to the relationship between individuals.



## References



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