Rapid Skill-Builder ®
Team Communication

Communication is a vital aspect of almost every organisational activity. To be effective, communication should be relevant, timely and focused on the achievement of team and organisational goals. It is important to realise that keeping people informed is crucial for building a high performing team.

Understanding what needs to be communicated, and to who, is a key requirement of any effective team communication plan. The method used for transmitting messages is also important. Although technological means such as e-mail, SMS and intranet bulletin boards can be helpful, they are not always the best solution. Considering the needs of employees is important. Those in medium to large enterprises have consistently shown they prefer face-to-face communication via their direct supervisor to any other method.

This Skill Builder focuses on the key issues regarding communication, and looks at the steps you can take to develop an effective team communication plan.

▼ Understand

When communication takes place between two people, information flows backwards and forward through the process of speaking and listening: Data is transmitted by the sender to the other person, or receiver.

In order to clarify or respond to the message, the receiver will transmit data back to the sender and the information flows backwards and forwards until both parties have finished.

In teams and organisations, this process becomes more involved as it is no longer just one person transmitting a message to another, but potentially one or more to many. In these more complex environments, communication actually flows three ways. These are:

1 Communication flows up the organisation

Information is directed from a lower level of the organisation to a higher one. An example would be when an employee lets their boss know about something.

2 Communication flows down the organisation

This is information that is passed down from a higher level, such as when management informs frontline staff about a directive.

3 Communication flows across the organisation

For this communication flow, information can come from any level in the organisation, but is most likely to be passed across the organisation to others at the same level. A common example of this would be "the grapevine". This is obviously far less formal than the first two communication flows, and is often regarded as the easiest and fastest way to obtain information – or disperse it.

Teams need to recognise all three directional flows of information in their organisation, so they can understand how to successfully design future communication strategies to suit a range of different situations.

How Do You Measure Communication Success?

Successful communication requires that the message the sender is transmitting is interpreted correctly by the receiver.

To use an analogy, think of yourself as a painter. When you communicate with someone else you are painting a picture in his or her mind. The idea is to make sure that the picture they see is the same picture you intended to paint.

This highlights the fact that communication is not a simple matter. Effective communication requires negotiation, skill and practice by everyone involved. In particular, effective communication requires the initiator to carefully consider the position of the other parties (or receivers), including their existing knowledge, needs and interests.

For employees in teams and across organisations, effective communication is vital to a sense of belonging and will also impact on their personal commitment.

Employees who have a sense of what the organisation is about, where it is going and how it plans to get there are likely to feel that the enterprise is interested in them and will consequently be more interested in actively contributing.

▼ Identify

At its simplest level, effective team communication begins by identifying:

- **The need:** what is the purpose of the communication?
- **The message:** what is it the content of the message?
- **The audience:** who does it need to be communicated to?

If communication has no clear purpose or objective, it will be unproductive and ineffective. Team communication is ideally focused on the attainment of long or short-range objectives. An effective communication process will raise employee awareness of what the team – and wider organisation – is about, what it is trying to do and why, how it plans to achieve its targets and how it is progressing.

An ideal starting point is to identify the ultimate objective or mission statement of the organisation. This objective will have been broken into smaller goals: logically ordered stepping-stones. It is also important to identify issues that affect the achievement of these goals. The focus should be on important issues team members need to be aware of, such as competitor activity, technological change or outstanding performance.

Objectives must be precise. A good way to ensure this is to use SMART principles – Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic and Time-framed. This helps ensure that objectives serve as effective goal posts rather than being unclear statements with little practical meaning.

Once any objectives have been identified, the idea is to make sure that information and any related issues will "cascade" throughout the organisation. Like water flowing down a series of steps, a cascade involves information quickly and evenly flowing through one level of an organisation before spilling to the next level.

The way to do this is to consider what teams and their members need to know. Beyond the overall information that is relevant to every employee, each team will also require specific information regarding their particular area of responsibility.

Identifying who needs to know what can present challenges. However, the best way to determine the needs of the audience (the team members or employees) is to ask them what they would like to hear.

Team members throughout the organisation should be surveyed to determine their main information needs. This will help determine what they do and don't need to know, as well as what they are interested in. Give them time to consider and prepare responses so they can examine what they really want information about. Asking what format team members would like to receive information in is also valuable.

At the same time, the survey could include a listing of information already gathered and distributed at each level of the organisation. Collation of this data will allow the organisation to determine exactly what information is available and where.

▼ Relate

Understanding the roles, styles and personality types of the people you are engaging with will help you relate and therefore communicate more effectively.

When considering team roles, don't limit yourself to the official positions people hold, as their unofficial roles in the team are likely to be more revealing. There are many different models that can provide a framework for this. The one used as an example here is from the Management Team Roles Indicator (MTRi) developed by Steve Myers. Using a tool like this to identify and understand what drives each type will help you more accurately target your communication.

- **Innovators** use their imagination to create new and different ideas and perspectives. They often produce radical solutions to problems.

- **Sculptors** get things done – now! They like to have an immediate impact, inject a sense of urgency and aim to achieve clear goals and tangible results.

- **Conductors** are the people who introduce logical structures into the way things are done. They systematise the world around them.

- **Scientists** are interested in how and why things happen.

- **Coaches** are interested in creating harmony in the world around them and will focus on building rapport with people and creating a positive team atmosphere.

- **Curators** bring clarity to the inner world of information, ideas and understanding by listening, asking questions and absorbing information.

- **Crusaders** are value driven, and in a team discussion they often bring a sense of priority that is derived from their strong convictions.

- **Explorers** will promote exploration of new and better ways of doing things, to uncover hidden potential in people, things or situations.

The Effect of Personality and Style

When developing communication protocols, it is important to consider the effects of personality and style. Each person has their own conversation style. For some, it's a very formal style, no matter what the situation is – and they can't ever loosen up, even when talking with their kids. Others prefer a really casual style, which can be entertaining and engaging in some circumstances but will be inappropriate in others. Most people are able, because of previous experience, to identify the style that is most appropriate for a specific situation and adapt their own natural communication style accordingly. But no matter how well you adapt your personal communication style to suit different situations, it still has an effect on your conversations.

Your personal communication style is heavily influenced by how you prefer to interact with other people. **Some people are internally focused (introverted)** preferring to work through problems before speaking about them. These individuals are happy to work on their own and tend to avoid group activities. When they're in a meeting, they often hold back unless they have something really important to say, preferring to work out what they're going to say in advance. This can create some difficulty in face-to-face communication because, if the conversation gets away from the main topic, introverted people might not be comfortable.

More outgoing (extroverted) people are focused externally. When they have a problem or issue that they're trying to deal with, they will usually share it with others right away. They are comfortable in meetings and usually viewed by introverts as people who "talk too much". They tend to work things out by talking them through as the ideas occur to them. In face-to-face communication, extroverts may appear to "shoot first and ask questions later".

Although you cannot always tailor your verbal or written message to suit a particular individual's style, you can at least be aware that your audience is likely to have needs quite different from your own. If you think about this issue carefully your personal and group communication is likely to be more effective.

Face-to-face: Why it's Important

Employee surveys consistently indicate that the majority of people want **face-to-face** communication, ideally with their direct supervisor. Keep that in mind when you are choosing each communication vehicle.

Face-to-face communication means getting the message "from the horse's mouth". This provides the opportunity for questions to be asked immediately. Additionally, people not only think, they also feel; face-to-face communication helps employees interpret the information in the context in which it is presented.

Learning from a newsletter or company e-mail that your company is downsizing and one hundred jobs will be lost is likely to come across as cold and impersonal. Hearing the same information delivered by an empathetic and concerned supervisor is immeasurably better; it allows you to share your concerns, and provides an immediate forum where people can voice their fears and ask questions.

A face-to-face approach is particularly vital for communications about important goals and objectives and how to achieve them. Face-to-face communications can involve formal one-on-one meetings, team or departmental briefings or informal interaction through strategies such as "visible management", where supervisors and managers are on hand and accessible to employees. This could be via regular informal visits to departments, for example.

Employees in medium-to-large enterprises have consistently shown a strong preference for face-to-face contact with direct supervisors. The direct supervisor is regarded as the most credible source of information in the organisation – the employees' link with the organisation, helping to interpret organisational goals, policy and aspirations. The direct supervisor is also in a position to feed back any employee comments and concerns to higher management levels.

▼ Determine

Compared with body language and tone of voice, words play a smaller role in communication, however, you still need to work at getting the words right. **If you use the wrong words, or words that the other person or the group doesn't understand, you will create ideal conditions for miscommunication.**

Someone once said that Britain and the United States of America are two nations separated by a common language. This is because the same word can have a different meaning to each even though both nations are English-speaking. The words you use are the foundations of the conversation. If they are not correct, it's very easy for the conversation to get off track. If that happens, the opportunity for a mutually beneficial exchange of information might be lost forever.

One trap many people fall into is the use of **jargon, abbreviations, acronyms** or **language that might not be appropriate** – and may not even be understood. When planning communication, getting the language right should be part of the process.

Effective communication also includes asking and listening – not "talking at" and "telling." When what you are trying to communicate is very important or makes you a little nervous, you may be tempted to try to get it over with as soon as you can. Instead, try to maintain an easy pace. In verbal communications in particular, rushing or going too slow can affect the focus of both parties.

Use a checklist like the one shown here, to help you determine how to word your message.

Communication Effectiveness

	Comments
Communication message content • Clarity • Completeness • Relevance • Credibility • Interest (etc.)	
Communication vehicle • Form • Facilities • Technology • Size of group • Distractions (etc.)	
Presentation style • Length • Pace • Tone • Body language • Feedback/question-handling (etc.)	
Other comments • Other subject of interest (etc.)	

Once you determine *what* needs to be communicated, the next step is to determine *how* you will ultimately deliver your message.

Firstly, you will need to identify all the communication vehicles, taking into consideration the structure, geographical spread of people and available technology in your organisation.

With the rapid development of new technology, the list of alternatives may include:

- **SMS (text messages)**
- **individual face-to-face communication**
- **team and/or departmental meetings**
- **videos**
- **newsletters or e-zines**
- **magazines**
- **tele-conferencing**
- **noticeboards**
- **pay slip inserts**
- **facsimile messages**
- **e-mail**
- **intranet bulletin boards**

Once the alternatives have been listed, you can consider the advantages and disadvantages of each, given your particular circumstances and the message you need to deliver. It's important to consider the speed with which the information needs to be communicated, whether an ongoing record of the communication needs to exist, and the needs of the employees or team members.

While the possibilities of modern technology are endless, keep in mind that **nearly all surveys of employees reveal a strong preference for face-to-face verbal communication, followed by simple printed material. The last preference is to get the news electronically!**

Electronic communication vehicles should only compliment and support face-to-face communication, not replace it.

In this way, employees will feel part of an organisation that cares about its people, actively seeks to keep them informed and encourages them to contribute via feedback.

Building a culture of this kind is well worth the effort and is likely to result in an increase in commitment and discretionary effort by team members.

▼ Facilitate

Communication is more than simply sending messages – it is the sharing of real meaning, and this involves getting a response from your audience regarding their thoughts and feelings about your message.

Communicators need to actively solicit feedback and work jointly to improve the communication process. This often means that people's skills in giving and receiving feedback and in effective listening need to be considerably improved.

Training or coaching people to listen well and provide effective feedback will take some effort. However it should include some or all of the following topics:

- **Effective listening techniques**
- **Dealing with difficult situations/resolving conflict**
- **Use of questions to direct discussions and elicit responses**
- **Interpreting non-verbal behaviour**
- **Reflective listening/showing empathy**
- **Adapting your communication style to suit different situations.**

People who have to regularly communicate should be given as much opportunity as possible to practice these skills and techniques in different circumstances. Role plays are particularly useful for practicing listening and feedback skills before they are used in real situations.

Flexible communication skills develop over time; a written plan to help remember the steps can help considerably. When preparing a written communication, a presentation or initiating a one-to-one conversation, it helps to have a communication plan that answers many of the questions listed below.

Elements of a Communication Plan
• What do I want to achieve? • Is it possible to achieve it in a single conversation or will we need more discussion? • How long do we need in order to cover everything? • How will I know the other party understands what I'm saying? • Are there cultural issues I need to be aware of/watch out for? • Is there any baggage from the past that might affect our conversation? If so, how might I deal with it? • How will I start? • What will I do if I suspect something is going wrong? • What do I need to do to get the other party talking? • How do I find out what they need? • How will I express what I need? • What needs to be agreed upon? • How will we acknowledge agreement? • How will I finish the conversation?

Feedback requires an open atmosphere in which contributors are encouraged to provide constructive evaluation of good and bad features of the communication content, and suggestions for improvement.

As with all upward communication, remembering that not everyone you communicate with will be a peer or a subordinate, feedback requires listening and then action. If team members don't believe that their contributions will be accepted and acted upon, they won't bother contributing.

Gathering feedback is not a tactic to be used in just one session. It is a valuable feature of any good communication system. As such, a good communicator will remove barriers and make sure that messages are transferred as effectively as possible by listening to suggestions about where improvements can be made and taking action on them.

Creating and Removing Barriers in Communication

These actions remove barriers:

- Welcoming/shaking hands
- Smiling
- Making introductory small talk
- Making good eye contact
- Listening
- Sharing personal experiences
- Being open and honest
- Asking for feedback
- Trying to understand others' feelings
- Agreeing (when you do)
- Checking your understanding

These actions can create barriers:

- Not paying attention
- Talking over the other person/interrupting
- Being angry/attacking
- Faking interest, sincerity etc.
- Talking down to the other person/people
- Avoiding eye contact
- Ridiculing/being sarcastic
- Not listening
- Knocking down ideas
- Scoring points
- Making the other person or group feel stupid

▼ Follow up

Communication always has an outcome in mind. For teams and organisations, the purpose of communication is to contribute to the achievement of pre-determined goals. While some communications may appear to be informational only, they should in fact be moving everyone forward in accordance with a common purpose.

Well-informed team members are generally much more satisfied. Ensuring information flows effectively throughout the team and organisation also minimises the likelihood of ill intentioned – or even just incorrect – behind the scenes gossip, which can cause irreparable harm and have a significant impact on staff retention.

Imagine that you have now worked through the following steps and have:

- **Discovered** what needs to be communicated and who it should be communicated to

- **Considered** the effects of team roles, personalities and styles and thought about how you may need to tailor any communications accordingly

- **Determined** how you will deliver your communication

- **Delivered** your message, and

- **Provided** the opportunity for feedback to help ensure understanding.

Your final task is to ensure that the purpose for the communication is achieved. For example, if your communication was to advise certain team members of new weekly reporting responsibilities which will start on the following Tuesday, you can deliver the message – and even respond to initial concerns – but if the new reports do not actually materialise, the ultimate success of the communication is questionable.

To help ensure that the required outcome is achieved, here are some points to consider:

- When communicating, make sure team members are clear on **who they can contact** on an ongoing basis if they have any further queries

- **Ask for agreement**, particularly where specific action is required in response to the communication (as in the example provided above)

- **Consider issuing a follow-up communication** (perhaps a brief e-mail or intranet bulletin posting) as a reminder – perhaps on the day before the first time the new report is required.

- **Monitor compliance**, for example by making sure that all reports have been submitted on the required date. Follow up with the staff concerned if they have not.

To ensure your team communication plan remains relevant, it should be reviewed every six to twelve months. With the fast pace of business and changing staff, information requirements can alter reasonably quickly.

The Skill Building template on the following page will help you to work through the steps presented in this booklet, and develop your communication plan.

Team Communication Skill Building Template

Communication Cornerstones

Facilitate
Transfer
Understanding
Feedback

HOW

Follow up
Clarity
Agreement
Action

HOW

Understand
Principles
Dynamics
Processes

HOW

Determine
Key points
Method
Means

HOW

AUDIENCE
(large, small, specialist, decision-making, etc.)

DELIVERY STYLE
(formal, informal, lecture, collaborative, fast, slow, etc.)

CORE MESSAGE
(key points, sequence, flow, final words, etc.)

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS
(potential misunderstanding, clarification needed, etc.)

Relate
Roles
Styles
Personality

HOW

Identify
The need
The message
The audience

HOW