SESSION 3

COMMUNICATION FOR MANAGERS

&

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATIONS

UNIT 1   COMMUNICATION FOR MANAGERS

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1.0   OVERVIEW

This Unit gives a broad brush of what Communication in organisations, and more specifically, Communication for managers, is about, tracing the fundamental aspects involved in such Communication. It introduces the importance of effective Communication in organisations, explains the process and difficulties in Communication and sets the stage for the development of key skills for communicating from a managerial perspective.

1.1   LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to do the following:

1.   Describe the characteristics of effective communication in organisations.
2.   Articulate the importance of managerial communication.
3.   Articulate the process of Communication.
4.   Identify the difficulties in Communicating as a manager.
5.   Describe interpersonal communication.

1.2   INTRODUCTION

As a management student, it is essential that you think about "Communication" from an organisational and managerial perspective, and internalise the importance of effective, ever-focussed and careful communication with employees, peers and colleagues, as well as relevant others. Being skilled at communication begins with an essential first step: understanding *why* communication is so crucial to a manager's job and career success, and also *what is involved* in communication: what are the theories or concepts explaining it, what are the steps to be followed, and what pitfalls to avoid in trying to communicate.

1.3 COMMUNICATION IN ORGANISATIONS

One thing is sure: our world is unimaginable without organisations. Organisations come in all shapes and sizes, can be private or public, large or small, old or new, local or global; some are huge conglomerates listed on the stock exchange and with enormous wealth, while others are struggling for survival.

> *An organisation is a social system of collective action that structures and regulates the thoughts and actions of its members through its rules, resources and social systems*

Understanding an organisation using the 'I-We-They-It' principle:

- **'I'**, or how employees are regarded as individual people within the organisation. Are they treated as equitably? What kinds of people are valued most?

- **'We'**, or how employees relate to one another. Does communication flow from management to workers only, or does it also flow upward? Is feedback on performance provided? Is it acted upon? What is the climate prevailing internally and what is the degree of informality allowed?

- **'They'**, or how are customers viewed; what systems are in place for customer service?

- **'It'**, or the way the organisation feels about its 'raison d'être': How does it nurture its corporate image? Are staff proud of the work they do and of belonging to the organisation?

You can use these four dimensions to examine the implications for communication. And ensure that it is communication by and among people of the organisation that is focussed upon.

Communication for the organisation has been variously described:

- its life-blood
- its oxygen
- its central nervous system
- its arteries

All such metaphors go to show that communication has a key role in allowing messages and meanings to be transmitted rapidly, and in connecting people and parts of the organisation together. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that sound internal communication brings enormous benefits to organisations, such as:

- increased productivity
- better product and service quality
- higher levels of creativity and innovation
- greater employee satisfaction
- reduced absenteeism and staff turnover
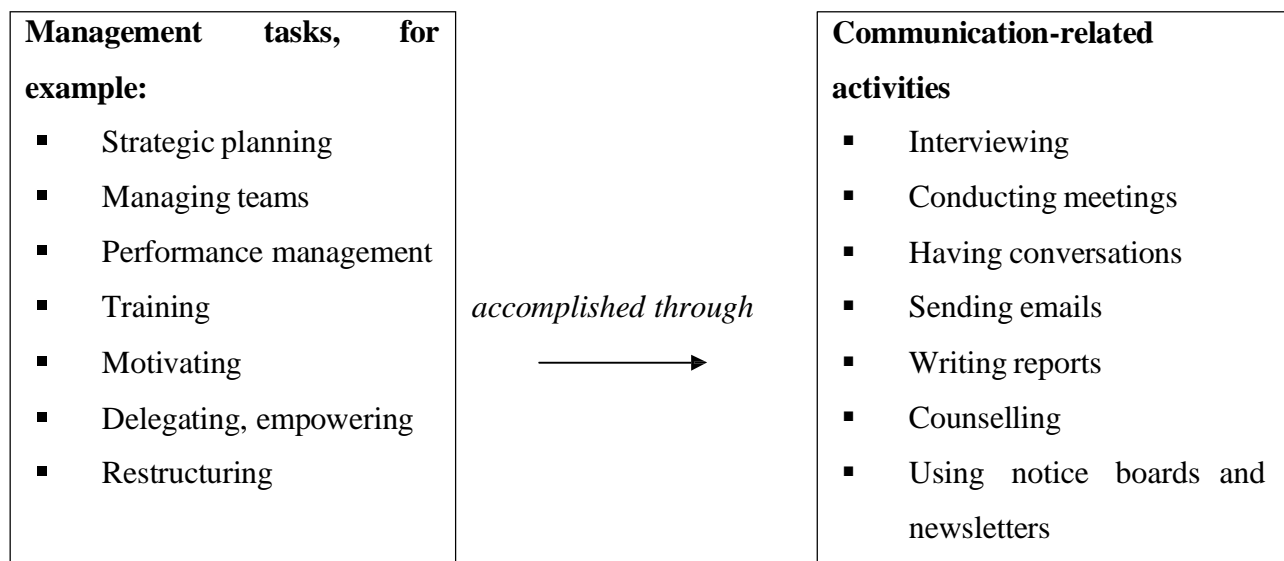- improved industrial relations

1.3.1   The Importance of Effective Communication for Managers

Systematically, surveys of managerial success have shown that "ability to communicate" is the top criterion in determining managerial effectiveness and promotion potential. If you are unable to express your ideas or to interact with others positively, then you might as well have no ideas at all.

Communication is essential in civilisation, and distinguishes human beings from other forms of life. Communication allows us to transmit our ideas, feelings, and opinions, and receive those of others; it allows us to organise and work in groups. Communication, then, is important to all social organisations, including business organisations. Even more than past years, today's

organisational context is characterised by rapid changes in technology, work processes, customer demands, new markets, mergers, joint ventures, diversity in workforces and markets, changes in leadership and managerial styles, all add up to the complexity that creates a greater need for communication in organisations.

Because communication is used repeatedly by managers, communication skills are often referred to as the fundamental management skill. All management activities are in fact accomplished at least in part through communication:

Management tasks, for example:		**Communication-related activities**
▪ Strategic planning		▪ Interviewing
▪ Managing teams		▪ Conducting meetings
▪ Performance management		▪ Having conversations
▪ Training	*accomplished through*	▪ Sending emails
▪ Motivating	⟶	▪ Writing reports
▪ Delegating, empowering		▪ Counselling
▪ Restructuring		▪ Using notice boards and newsletters

Figure 1.1 Management tasks accomplished through communication activities

Strategic planning, team management, performance review, training, motivating, delegating, and others, are accomplished through: interviewing, writing letters, memos, emails, reports, conducting meetings, having conversations, and through counselling, amongst others.

Thus, no group, team or organisation can exist without communication. It is only through the transmitting or transference of meaning from one person to another or others that information and ideas can be conveyed.

Managerial communication is generally more objective, systematic and concise that ordinary personal communication. In addition, as a budding manager, you will develop a focus on *impact*: management is about leading and influencing others for results, and so you will need to constantly think about the response you elicit from those who receive your messages. At the same time, however, studying managerial communication is a self-development process: the higher up you move in an organisation, the more you will need to communicate. The more intellectual or knowledge-based your work, the more you will need to express your ideas clearly in writing, verbally, and using technology. You will also find that you cannot be effective unless you reach out to others, work in teams, and develop conflict-handling skills.

Activity 1

Micro case study: **THE FAILED MANAGEMENT TRAINEE PROGRAMME**

The Turin Digital Company had decided that it would henceforth groom and grow its own management team by recruiting only degree holders with the best academic qualifications in the field of IT. It set out to design and implement an elaborate 12-month management trainee scheme and began with ten fresh graduates from the University who had topped their respective classes. Six months into the programme, six of the trainees had stated their desire to quit, due to 'expectation gaps'. In fact, feedback on their performance had not been tender: they were found to be pretentious, bordering the arrogant, unwilling to learn from older, experienced, but mostly uneducated staff, and generally ungracious in their conduct during meetings.

What do you think were the communication problems leading to this crisis?

How will you be able to ensure this does not happen to you if and when you join a management trainee programme?

1.3.1   Expectations of employees regarding Communication

Employees are the moving parts of the organisational engine. Employees are known to have expectations in the following key domains:

a.   Information

Employees wish to be aware of what is going on, and don't want incomplete or distorted information, both about central concerns of the organisation and about questions of direct bearing on their jobs. When this does not happen they feel they are not valued and become worried that something important is happening behind their backs. This almost invariably leads to activating the grapevine – that powerful unofficial, informal communication network – and breeding gossip and anxiety. Very quickly, if such a situation persists, employees spend more of their time tuned in to the rumour and gossip radio that on their work. Hargie *et al.* (2004) suggest that this is often accompanied –and exacerbated – by the 'mushroom method of management', that is, keeping them in the dark and covered periodically with manure. The opposite of this kind of mal- communication is the establishment of a firm and credible system for the prompt dissemination of communication through a variety of channels.

b.   Upward communication

Today in the age of King Customer, more and more organisations set up systems to obtain feedback and suggestions from their customers, so as to better chart the success of their products or services. However, few organisations acknowledge the importance of soliciting feedback and views from employees. Organisations can only thrive if feedback is two-way: from management to employees, and vice-versa. Employees want to be able to make suggestions for improvement of work processes, they want their initiatives recognised, and they want to feel valued by the attention given to their views. Employee Attitude Surveys, Suggestion Schemes, Quality Circles, are useful, as is a well-managed

Performance Appraisal Scheme, provided these are effectively accompanied by upward communication from employees to management.

c.   Face-to-Face communication

In spite of established reports that employees prefer face-to-face interactions with their bosses, most organisations appear to rely more and more on formal, technology-driven, written communication. More enlightened managers, however (and usually charismatic CEOs..) find ways and means to regularly meet their staff individually or in groups, thus providing the latter to raise any issue they like. It is said that the ideal formula is to have a 'formal informality' about the arrangement, such as sharing a coffee break or lunch, for a set period of time, with an opening statement by the boss. The value of such arrangements has been known to be tremendous, often turning around an ailing organisation simply by re-engaging the workforce and rallying 'the troops' to a common cause.

d.   Good Line Management

It has also been established that line managers (managers of functional areas directly involved in the production of the good or service) who are good at communicating directly with staff are a great contribution to the success of the organisation. A poor relationship between supervisor and employee has been shown to have a high impact on the intention to quit the job. It seems natural that people relate most closely to the person to whom they are immediately responsible on a day-to-day basis. What happens is that a negative relationship often leads to a generalisation of negative sentiment towards the whole organisation, while positive interactions lead to good feelings towards the organisation as a whole. The expectations of employees from their supervisors are that she or he:

-       takes a personal interest in their lives
-       seems to care for them as individuals
-       listens to their concerns and responds to them quickly and appropriately

- gives regular and fair feedback on performance
- holds efficient and regular meetings in which information is freely shared
- explains what is going on in the organisation
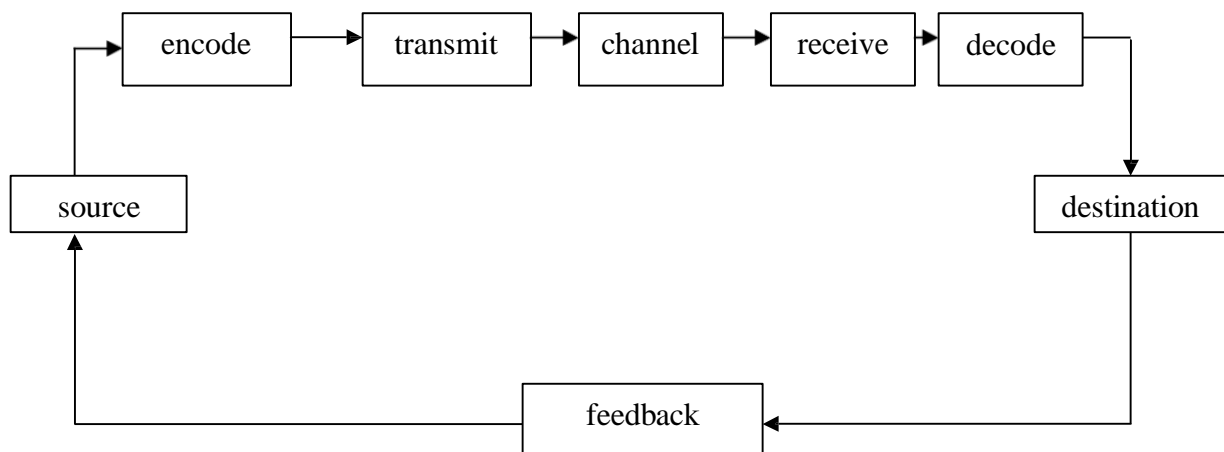

Activity 2

Campus Activity: Read

1.4 KEY CONCEPTS IN COMMUNICATION

1.4.1 The Process of Communication: The Classic Telecommunications Model

A well-established method of understanding communication is by making an analogy with telecommunications, comparing the human process with the electronic:

Figure. 1.2 The Telecommunications Model

The first step in the process is for the central nervous system of the person (sender, or source) to translate his or her abstract thought into some message into speech, or some other form of message (encoding). The sounds, words or images (channels) are then transmitted by the sender

to be received by the senses of the receiver (destination). The message is unscrambled (decoded) in the nervous system of the receiver, instructing the person to understand. *Feedback* is when the receiver acknowledges the message and responds to the sender. This results in a play-by-play (like tennis) situation in which the sender can (and should) adjust the next message to fit the previous response of the receiver.

In this process, the transmitted message may be, and is likely to be distorted by *noise* at any point. It is almost impossible to know whether the abstract idea in the mind of one person has been accurately transferred to the mind of another. For example, a manager under severe time constraint may be forced to communicate with incomplete information. Careless encoding, poor choice of channels, receiver prejudice, perceptual skills, and faulty decoding can all be examples of noise, apart from real noise itself…

Understanding of the message can only occur in the receiver's mind. Once a receiver has obtained, and decoded, a message, s/he can choose to accept, reject, act upon or ignore it. With effective two-way communication, both parties are more satisfied and work accuracy improved.

The electronic analogy is helpful because it introduces the ideas of senders and receivers , and of possible interference in the process. It emphasises the key issue in communication: accuracy. It shows that every message must have an intended audience; it makes sense therefore to take the receiver into consideration when formulating a message. If not, we run the risk of putting together a message that will not be understood.

1.4.2   Flow Patterns

The structure of an organisation should provide for formal communication in four directions: downward, upward, horizontal or lateral, and diagonal.

1.   **Downward communication** flows from individuals in higher hierarchical levels to those lower down. The most common forms of downward communication are: job instructions,

official memos, policy statements, procedures, manuals, company hard and electronic publications.

2 **Upward communication** is essential to an effective organisation. However, eliciting honest and open messages from employees is an especially difficult task, particularly in large firms. Managers who wish to be effective use upward flows in the form of getting feedback, information on progress, being informed of current problems, suggestions for improvement and informal discussions. Popular upward flows are: employee attitude survey information, and performance review reports.

1. **Horizontal or lateral communication** is necessary for co-ordination and integration of the various parts of the organisation. Since mechanisms for ensuring horizontal communication – for instance, between the various Faculties of the University – do not usually exist in the formal structure (Chart) of organisations, it is up to management to facilitate it through peer-to-peer communication, and social interaction.

2. **Diagonal communication** is also important in situations where members cannot communicate effective and swiftly through other channels.

1.4.3   Channels of Communication

Research shows that channels differ in their capacity to convey information and ideas. Some channels are 'rich' in that they are able to (a) handle multiple cues simultaneously, (b) facilitate rapid feedback, and (c) be very personal. The figure below illustrates the spectrum of communication media with respect to their richness. As you can see, face-to-face interaction scores highest in terms of channel richness; it offers multiple cues – words, body language, intonations -, immediate feedback (verbal and non-verbal), and the personal touch. Evidence also exists to show that high-performing managers tend to be the most media-sensitive, that is, they are best able to match the communication medium to the degree of ambiguity in the communication situation. For instance, more and more organisations use meetings, team briefings, performance review interviews, and 'management by walking around' to facilitate

communication, especially in the knowledge that the world is increasingly characterised by non-routine, often uncertain and unsettling situations.

Channel richness	Type of message	Communication medium
RICHEST	NON-ROUTINE AND/OR AMBIGUOUS	
		Face-to-face talk
		Telephone
		E-mail
		Memos and letters
		Bulletins and reports
LEANEST	ROUTINE, CLEAR	

Figure. 1.3 Hierarchy of Channel Richness

1.4.4   Formal and Informal Communications

Many, if not most of an organisation's employees tune in to the informal communication network – the 'grapevine' – and to its assortment of facts, opinions, suspicions, rumours, and gossip which does not normally travel through the organisation's formal channels. According to

research, the impact of the grapevine is very real, even if information travelling in a grapevine does not follow an orderly, predictable path.

The grapevine is so much part of organisational life that managers would be wasting their time in trying to eliminate it. Many managers in effect are suspicious of what goes on behind their backs and try to establish some manner of control by, say, closely monitoring time taken for tea breaks or reprimanding staff for engaging in 'corridor talk'. A grapevine that serves as a constant source of rumours and unproductive gossip can be troublesome, but it usually breeds in an environment where proper communication does not take place in the first place.

Therefore, not only should managers establish plentiful and clear channels of formal communication, they must also recognise that grapevines, rumours and gossip are deeply ingrained in the life of their organisations, and so it is best that they tune in and listen to what is being said. Falsified facts travelling through the grapevine can then be corrected as necessary.

1.4.5   Non-verbal Communication

It is established that only 7% of a message's impact comes from its verbal content. Facial expressions account for approximately half of a message being understood or not. The reason why we are concerned to develop knowledge and competence in this area is because there exist real dangers that our verbal message may be contradicted by our non-verbal communications, such as facial expressions, and body language. This concern will be more fully addressed in a later Unit. At this point, suffice to know that body language is a major source of non-verbal communication, and that no movement or posture is accidental (i.e., every one of our movements and postures conveys some meaning…). So, whether you agree or not on the specific meanings, body language does add to, and often complicates our verbal message.

1.5   DIFFICULTIES IN COMMUNICATION

We have seen that loss of meaning in the process of communicating is referred to as *noise*, or *interference*. Regardless of the term used, there are unavoidable barriers that exist even in the best of situations. Of course, bad grammar, bad delivery and bad organisation certainly create communication blocks, but there are certain barriers that exist despite your skill, which make communication necessarily imperfect. So, learning about such barriers can make us aware of and help us avoid certain pitfalls. Specifically, we should beware of likely psychological, semantic and physical barriers.

1.5.1   Psychological Barriers

Psychological barriers to communication include people's emotions, perceptions, and tendencies to be selective.

o   **Emotional Barriers**. Announcing an unpopular new rule, attending your first big interview, or responding to a boss you dislike, are forms of psychological barriers. Other people, in turn, may feel hostile toward you, or be biased against you (perhaps because you are young, or a woman, or of a particular race, or even the way you dress or wear your hair), or your subject (perhaps because it goes against all they are familiar with, or they think it is a waste of time).

o   **Perceptual Barriers**. Even if there are no or few emotional barriers, perception varies widely from person to person. We may be living in the same 'objective' world, but we all live in different subjective worlds, and so have different world views, and interpret things differently. The classic picture shown below illustrates how some people see an old woman, and others see a young woman.. In a business environment, consider how the latest company newsletter is received and interpreted by staff at various levels and departments, managers, the CEO, and outside people.

Figure. 1.4   Old or Young Woman?

Another type of perceptual barrier is linked to interpretations based on our own experiences. This is referred to our **frame of reference.** We perceive what we expect to perceive. Often people do not necessary resist, resent or dislike what they don't know; they simply do not perceive it. Read aloud the phrases in each of the triangles:

ONCE
IN A
A LIFETIME

SLY
AS A
A FOX

NOW
IS THE
THE TIME
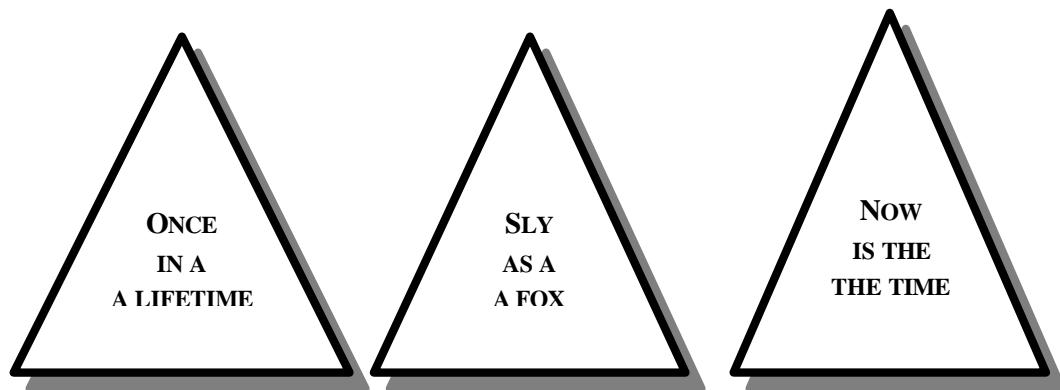
Figure 1.5   Perception of familiar phrases

Your experience or familiarity with the phrases tend to control your ability to perceive them. Teenagers perceive things differently from their parents; deans of Faculty perceive things differently from academics of their Faculty; people might perceive your organisation on the basis of their 'experience' with reading something in the press about it, instead of their experience with you; people in various organisational functions or departments may interpret the same situation differently; such incongruencies in coding and decoding messages are serious barriers to communication.

o   **Selectivity** is another block to effective communication.

  ▪   We tend to block out new information, especially if it conflicts with our existing beliefs. Things that conflict with preconceived notions are either ignored by us or distorted to confirm our preconceptions.

  ▪   We tend to remember the extremes and forget the middle ground. Most people remember the most positive or most negative, and so your communication may be blocked simply because it is not startling or disturbing news.

  ▪   The level of credibility that we assign to a communicator affects how we view and react to the message. Thus, subordinates' evaluation of their manager will affect how they view an instruction or piece of news that the manager sends. This, of course, is heavily influenced by previous experiences with the manager. A teaching staff that views the college Principal as manipulative and untrustworthy is apt to assign imaginary motives to any communication from the Principal.

  ▪   Timing of a message is also crucial. If a union negotiates difficult matters in a meeting and submits its written request weeks later, chances are that management's willingness may have cooled off; if you turn in your report late, it may have a highly negative effect, even if the report itself is 'objectively' good.

1.5.2   Semantic Barriers

There are other barriers relating to what goes on in the minds of receivers as a result of the words we use.

Words are very limited in their capacity to express accurately our meaning. Words are symbols and so may have different meanings to different people, and such differences may cause blocks in communication. The study of words is called *semantics.* The first level of blocks may be overcome by, for instance, avoiding very wordy sentences or pompous words, but you may still run into problems because of the subtleties of meaning in words. Semanticists call this difference the *connotation* of the word. Notice how different it sounds to say *You are invited to a meeting* as opposed to *Please attend a meeting*; or the difference between Chairman and Chairperson of a committee.

Even if you have taken care to remove connotations, semantics may lead to misunderstandings based on different meanings attached to words. Consider what *productivity* means to a worker, as opposed to a manager; the word *turnover* to a sales person and to a human resource manager. Therefore, to avoid such pitfalls refrain from using:

- Abstract words (like performance, honesty, discrimination, framework)
- Indefinite terms (like effectively, several, as soon as possible, democratic)

1.5.3   Physical Barriers

Our words, however well-chosen, skilfully imparted, or however good our ideas, we may still fall prey to potential physical barriers. Our physical appearance, our audience, our media, or the context of the presentation or report we are transmitting, are often the cause of communication blocks.

In written communication, an arsenal of enemies await our well-intended messages: faulty printer, crammed text, creased or smudged letters, cheap stationery, handwritten notes when they ought to have been word-processed, or failure to use established greeting etiquette.

For the spoken communication, apart from lack of skill itself, such as non-fluency in the language, mumbling, reading from a text, speaking too fast, using distracting mannerisms, there are audience-related irritations, such as poor air-conditioning, poor sound system, bad seating arrangement, unreadable slides, interferences from traffic, telephones ringing, or doors opening and closing.

1.5.4   Other Barriers

1.   **Filtering.** A common occurrence in upward communication is the manipulation of information so that the receiver perceives it as positive. Staff can filter unfavourable information so as to protect themselves, to present themselves in a better light, or to promote themselves in the eyes of 'higher ups'.

2.   **Status differences**. Bosses often isolate themselves from valuable feedback because their status in the organisation represents a barrier to communication. Most organisation have expressions of status – titles, size of offices, etc – which are often perceived as intimidating and threatening to persons lower in the hierarchy. These people do not want to come across as incompetent, so they remain quiet instead of expressing an opinion or asking a question. Isolating from feedback is particularly acute at the topmost levels of organisations; most senior managers typically have direct relationships with only ten or twelve individuals, and many senior executives tend to be forbidding and even defensive and discourage honest opinion from the mass of employees.

3.   **Communication overload**. Because of advances in information technology, managers (and their subordinates) often feel swamped by the deluge of information and data they are exposed to. As a result, we cannot absorb and respond to all of the messages –

memos, letters, emails, reports, visitors, telephone calls, meetings, presentations – and so 'screen out' most of them. This means that we never decode these messages.

1.6   INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

In organisations, communication flows from person to person in team settings as well as in face-to-face situations. These are *interpersonal communications* and can vary from direct instructions to casual conversations.
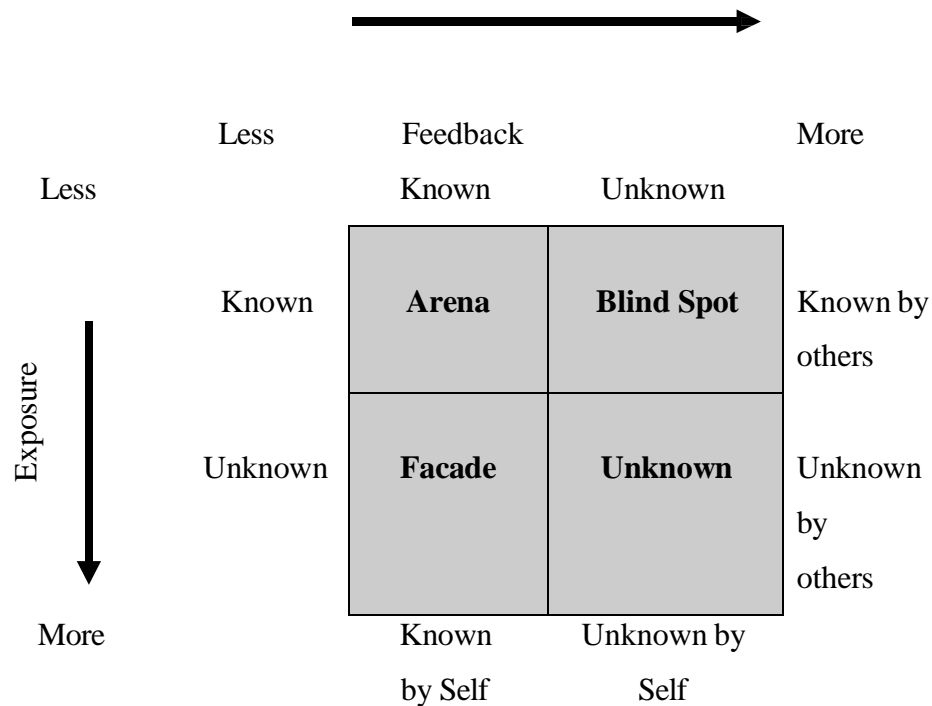
Interpersonal communication is the PRIMARY means of managerial communication: on a typical manager's day, over three-quarters of a manager's communications occur in face-to-face interactions.

Managers relate to and learn from the environment mainly through information transmitted and received. And the way in which managers receive and transmit information and ideas depends greatly on the quality of their interpersonal interactions.

We have seen in the previous section that problems can arise in communications when people perceive their world according to their own background, experiences, frame of reference, and so on. It is known that problems also arise because of the differences in *interpersonal style* of managers.

1.6.1   Interpersonal Styles: The Johari Window

Interpersonal style refers to the way in which an individual *prefers* to relate to others. The fact that much of our interpersonal relationships involves communication, we can see the importance of interpersonal style. The starting point is by acknowledging that information is held by ourselves, and by others, but that neither of us holds or knows the information *fully*. The various combinations of knowing and not knowing relevant information is shown in Figure 1.6 that follows.

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                          ──────────────────►

           Less        Feedback              More

     Less        Known         Unknown

         Known   ┌─────────────┬─────────────┐  Known by
                 │   Arena     │  Blind Spot │  others
                 │             │             │
   Exposure      ├─────────────┼─────────────┤
                 │   Facade    │  Unknown    │  Unknown
         Unknown │             │             │  by
                 │             │             │  others
                 └─────────────┴─────────────┘
     More        Known          Unknown by
                 by Self        Self
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Figure 1.6   The Johari Window

The Arena

The region most conducive to effective interpersonal relationships in general is termed the Arena. Here, both self and others (receivers) know ALL of the relevant information necessary for effective communication. For an attempt to be in this region, the parties involved must share feelings, data, ideas, assumptions, and skills. Since the Arena is the area of COMMON UNDERSTANDING, we must try and make it larger, so making communication more effective.

The Blind Spot

When relevant information is known to others but not to the self, a Blind Spot results. This in effect represents a handicap for the self, since one can hardly understand the behaviours and decisions of others without having the information on which these are based. Others have the advantage of knowing their own feelings, opinions, perceptions, and so on, while we are unaware of these.

The Façade

When information is known to the self but unknown to others, a person (self) may present a "false front" or *façade*. Information that we perceive as potentially prejudicial to a relationship, or that we keep to ourselves out of fear, insecurity or illusion of power, or other reason, makes up the *façade*. Like the blind spot, the façade also reduces the arena and the possibility of effective communication.

The Unknown

Where relevant information is known neither by the self nor by other parties, interpersonal communication is obviously impoverished. This is when we find ourselves in the *unknown* region. When diversity is very present in organisations and when professionals and specialists of varying fields have to co-ordinate their work, their communication may be hindered.

1.6.2   Strategies For Improving Interpersonal Communication

Note that Feedback and Exposure are two elements in Figure 1.6. *Exposure* means purposefully increasing the arena by reducing the façade. We do this by being more honest and open in sharing information and ideas with others. Sharing information and ideas, saying things 'the way they are', tends at the same time to expose us to risks, which is why this strategy is termed 'exposure'.

Feedback is also a strategy for increasing the arena, this time by reducing the blind spot. When we do not know or understand, our communications can become more effective through feedback from those who do know or understand. Of course, obtaining feedback depends on the active co-operation of others.

In theory, managers who wish to communicate more effectively can use both exposure and feedback to enlarge the area of common understanding. The practice is much more difficult and requires some effort on the part of managers who may have a preference for managerial style that opposes feedback and/or exposure.

1.7 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. List 6 benefits of effective managerial communication.

2. List 2 communication-related activities of managers in the performance of the following functions:

   a. Training
   b. Strategic planning
   c. Managing teams

3. What are the four main expectations of staff regarding communication from their bosses?

4. Explain the steps of the telecommunications model.

5. What are the 3 psychological barriers to communication?

6. Describe and explain your preferred strategy for improving interpersonal communication.