

Communication Challenges: Navigating Choppy Waters

Course Overview

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Alleviating Interpersonal Communication Challenges

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Course Overview

Look, I'm 32 years old...I know when you were a kid...things are different now.... Look, I gotta go. Bye.

[Scene opens: Host is speaking on the phone.]

Ever dealt with someone who seems unable to "hear" the message you're sending?

[Host addresses the viewer.]

Or delivered a message you knew would be hard to accept? Communication gets tough when the message is difficult. Especially when emotions like hurt, anger, or confusion come into play. Sometimes it shuts down completely. People stop talking. Avoid one another. But it doesn't have to be that way. In this course, we'll examine some common communication challenges and how you can overcome them. By showing patience, perseverance, and accountability, you can get back on track, and reach mutual understanding and agreement.

Yeah – I had to do something.... No...

[Host answers his cell phone.]

Of course no one is more important than you...

When Your Best Intentions Go Awry

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *recognize how to address a miscommunication that has occurred*

1. When Your Best Intentions Go Awry

Did you get my mail?

[Scene opens: Cary and Joe are walking together.]

What mail?

[Joe is engrossed in reading his cell phone screen.]

I sent you my ideas on the new delivery system. It's going live next week. I need some help.

Next week? I can do that.

But...why didn't you get back to me?

About?

My mail...do you think you can help me or not?

Yeah, sure. I can work on implementation next week.

[Joe, distracted, notices someone else and walks away.]

The most common interpersonal communication challenge is when an intended message is "lost" or misinterpreted. With good planning, and by paying attention to the verbal and non-verbal responses you're getting from your audience, you should be able to tell if there is – or if there's potential for – a miscommunication. Here are some telltale signs.

You get no response from the other person to indicate they "heard" you. The other person asks no clarifying questions or confirming comments. Their body language or tone of voice reveals confusion or a misunderstanding of your intent.

Even if you feel you've been a good communicator, these signs require some action on your part. You can prevent miscommunication before it occurs.

During the communication, check to see if your message is clear. For example, you could ask "What questions or comments do you have so far?" or "I'm interested in what you think about this."

After the communication, check again – ask "What are your thoughts about this?" "How could I further clarify?"

Then you can respond to any confusion, misunderstanding, or request for clarification. Listen to the other person – if their response isn't in the form of a question or doesn't restate what you meant, rephrase it. So "I don't get what you're saying" becomes "OK, I'm not sure you're understanding what I mean."

Next time you find yourself in a situation where you think a miscommunication has occurred, get the other person involved and deal with it together.

I know, I'll e-mail him. He's always buried in that phone....

[Cary, now sitting at her laptop, begins typing.]

OK. First, confirm with the other person that there may be a miscommunication, acknowledging that you could be mistaken.

Sorry Joe, you may have misunderstood our conversation earlier....

Second, state what you think the miscommunication is. You could say something like "It seems to me that I might not have been successful in communicating what I intended...." Try to give a specific example.

I think you think I need help with the implementation...I mean, you mentioned working on it next week....

Third, share what you intended and ask the other person to share how they interpret it.

Actually, what I need help with is the report on the implementation.

Fourth, resolve any misunderstandings through problem-solving. Ask questions like "What do you suggest?" "How can we resolve this?" or "What if we did this instead of that?"

How's this...we sit down for an hour to discuss ideas and then maybe collaborate on the best format for the report?

And fifth, agree that the communication is clear and there is a plan of action. Keep the door open for further questions such as "Please let me know if I can give more information or help explain this better."

That plan sounds good. Let me know if you're free on Thursday. And ping me if anything's unclear!

Remember that there is a shared responsibility for interpersonal communication. Just because you communicate something doesn't mean the other person "heard it." They have the responsibility to listen and ask questions – and so do you. Rarely is just one person responsible.

In a perfect world, communications have clear intentions, a sense of trust between parties, and a shared interest in mutual understanding. In this perfect world, people use the correct channels to communicate, and demonstrate the listening and questioning skills needed to ensure the message that was intended was received and understood. This is very satisfying! But it's easy to make a mistake, act too quickly, or get emotional, causing miscommunication. We all make mistakes when we communicate – consider it a common learning experience, and keep at it.

When You're the Bearer of Bad News

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *communicate messages that are likely to be difficult for your audience to hear*

1. When You're the Bearer of Bad News

Hi Joe. Your e-mail said something about the company's financial position. Is everything OK?

[Scene opens: Cary approaches Joe at his desk.]

Hi Cary. Have a seat. It is about that. We're not moving ahead with the new product. Without the funding, well, we've had to make some decisions to streamline the organization, keep costs under control. As part of the restructuring, you're being moved to the technical writing team and you'll be reporting to a new manager.

[Joe is sympathetic.]

What? Are you kidding?

[Cary is upset.]

I know this was a big opportunity for you and that you put a lot of effort into the new product.

Yes, effort for this company. And now you're just dumping me into a lesser role?

We thought it would be a good fit for now, in the hopes that maybe funding would come through later. And with your prior experience, you could probably take the lead in that group.

Why can't I just be assigned to another project? I'm talented – there are other teams I could help.

I understand that this is disappointing. Why don't you take the rest of the afternoon off and gather your thoughts. We can schedule a meeting tomorrow to discuss your transition. And I'll be here to check in with you over the next few weeks, to see how things are going.

But...OK...I'm going to head home. I need to think about this.

That's fine. Thanks, Cary.

Nice job!

I know! I almost felt like it was real. Good one, Joe!

You were both great. Thanks for your help, guys. I'll take it from here.

[Cary and Joe smile.]

Bad news. We all have to hear it sometimes. Things don't work out as we hoped; opportunities aren't presented to us, or are taken away. Communicating this kind of news is challenging, but the news is often not as difficult to communicate as the associated emotions are to manage. You can't make someone feel differently, but you can be prepared for, and help to manage, emotional responses.

You might need to deliver bad news to only one person or a group, but either way, it requires face-to-face communication using a no-fail approach.

First – prepare. Consider the audience's perspective and what their possible reactions might be. Write out your message to rehearse. With a focus on empathy, think carefully about words you want to emphasize and words you want to avoid using. Prime the conversation shortly beforehand. It's acceptable to use e-mail and your electronic calendar to schedule time to meet. Don't leave too much time between the notice and the message, and be careful with your subject line. "Update on cut-backs" will not help to prime the communication. But "Review of company financials" or "Discuss project quality" will let people know there is news coming.

Manage your emotions. Be authentic and in control. Your body language is the primary messenger. Remember that no matter how uncomfortable you feel, the other person will feel at least as uncomfortable. Move past your own discomfort so that you can deliver the news they deserve to hear. Deliver the message directly, with a short front-end that includes the important facts. Joe did a good job leading off with this.

We're not moving ahead with the new product. Without the funding, well, we've had to make some decisions to streamline the organization, keep costs under control. As part of the restructuring, you're being moved to the technical writing team and you'll be reporting to a new manager.

The next step is to follow the lead-in message immediately with a statement of empathy and understanding. Like the way Joe acknowledged Cary's emotions and her contributions.

I know this was a big opportunity for you and that you put a lot of effort into the new product.

Then, you need to move away from the details. Just after delivering or receiving bad news is not the best time to discuss the finer points. Joe let Cary know there may be more to come, but not right away.

We thought it would be a good fit for now, in the hopes that maybe funding would come through later. And with your prior experience, you could probably take the lead in that group.

Next, acknowledge emotions. Here you have choices. If it's one to one, you can just listen. In a group, you can invite responses to the news either in an open forum, or in small groups. But put time boundaries around this emotional processing. Let people take whatever time they need afterwards to process what they've heard. And finally, check in later. You can use an e-mail follow-up, if it's straightforward and unemotional. If a follow-up discussion session makes sense, hold one, but keep it short. Always be accessible after giving bad news and keep in touch with people on a regular basis.

Delivering bad news often puts the communicator in a "bargaining" position – people will try to change the situation – "What if we do this?" or "Can't we try that?" These may be legitimate ideas, but don't allow yourself to "take back" the news. If someone raises a point that is reasonable and might alter the news, say you'll take it under consideration and get back to them.

The worst mistake is not to deliver bad news or to delegate the delivery of bad news to someone else when you should be doing it. It's your responsibility as a communicator to be clear and confident.

When Communication Shuts Down

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- recognize techniques for fixing or improving communications that have broken off

1. When Communication Shuts Down

OK, I could've put it better. But how is it my fault?

[Scene opens: Joe is trying his best not to smirk.]

We used to be such good friends....

We still are....

How can we be friends if you're my boss now?!

I didn't mean it that way. Of course I'm not your boss! It's just one project!

You say that now....

It was a joke...I was trying to be funny.

Forget it. Talk to the hand.

What? Very professional...as ever.

[Joe is slightly shocked.]

The hand.

No wonder Marta chose me.

Uh-oh. Here's the background: Marta, the department manager, told Cary and Joe that they would be jointly in charge of a new project...but then changed her mind and decided that Joe would be in sole charge. When Joe broke the bad news to Cary, he did it in a way that was less than ideal, and now there is blame and resentment between the two colleagues.

In interpersonal communication, the worst-case scenario isn't bad communication: it's no communication. These situations create choppy waters for everyone. "I don't want to talk about it," "Forget about it, it's over" or totally ignoring another person is a position that offers no way forward. With no sense of mutual understanding or willingness to work things out, ideas remain stuck, conflicts arise, and important decisions don't get made. Communications can get strained when they involve money, recognition, or power – or if someone's actions serve to work against another person's success or achievement. At times, we all need to take responsibility for easing communication challenges.

Clearly, communication between Cary and Joe is broken. The promise of equal footing between friends has turned a partnership into a struggle. And it's not just about Joe's success or Cary's – this battle of wills can put the success of the project at risk. They need to get past the hurt feelings and resentment and get back to business. The good news is that with a few skills, you can turn on communication that's been shut off. Let's take a look at some techniques that work.

Don't wait for the other person to be the first to make amends. At a certain point, you have to realize that the way to move forward is to move on. Be honest and "name" the issue. There are many ways you could say it. "I realize we disagree on this, and even if that remains true, I want to keep the lines of communication open between us." or "I

feel like there's tension between us because of recent conversations...can we open things back up and get to a better place?" Share the "blame" for any miscommunication or disagreement. By accepting that you also play a part in the problem, you reduce the chances of it ending in a stalemate. Acknowledge that the communication challenge has an effect on others and prevents them from being at their most productive or meeting business goals. Ask as many questions as possible about how you can both move forward. "What are your thoughts about how we can move forward?" "How do you think we could resolve our differences?" "What actions could we take to reopen our communication?" Then really listen to the responses and come to a mutual agreement. And after trying those techniques, if you still can't seem to make progress, consider a mediator to help you succeed.

On the other hand, there are some techniques that don't work. Let's talk about them for a minute, so they won't waste your time and energy when you're trying to make progress.

Don't point the finger of blame. Have you ever heard the saying that when you point a finger to blame someone else, three fingers point back at you? Keep that in mind the next time you think something's not your fault. Don't defend yourself. Going on the defense means the other person has to muster an offense. Now you're both drawing up battle plans, instead of working toward resolution. Don't ask others to mend the issue for you. Drawing colleagues into the middle of your issue takes their focus off their jobs and you and your problem. Address it directly yourself, or with the assistance of a mediator. And last, don't pretend that everything is fine. That just delays the battle for another day. Get the issue out in the open, deal with it, and move on.

So, how can Joe and Cary get back to a more fruitful working relationship?

Cary, I really want to move forward and find the best possible resolution.

[Joe is apologetic.]

Me too. I know you're not responsible for Marta's decisions. You would've been happy to run the project jointly....

[Cary's tone and body language are conciliatory.]

I shouldn't have concentrated so much on me and on defending myself. And you're disappointed and frustrated: it's only natural....

You've always been a good friend, Joe. I'm sure we can work it out. Not talking will hold us both back.... Sorry about the "hand" thing earlier. I was....

No, no, no. It's me who should be sorry. That "boss" joke...I should've been more sensitive.

Well! Looks like they both applied the techniques! Now they can get back to the business at hand.

Exercise: Moving Past Communication Missteps

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *work through challenging interpersonal communications*

1. Exercise Overview

Being able to resolve miscommunication issues is a key skill when working in a team. Communication can be particularly challenging – and misunderstandings more likely – when the message is difficult. When misunderstandings take place, it's possible to get communication back on track only through patience, perseverance, and understanding.

In this exercise, you'll have a chance to demonstrate that you can

- address a miscommunication appropriately
- communicate messages that are likely to be difficult for an audience to hear, and
- identify techniques to use when communication breaks down

2. Exercise: Moving Past Missteps

Case Study: Question 1 of 5

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You are a manager at an online bank. Earlier in the week you received a customer report from a team member, Joe, that had many errors. Having highlighted these, you asked Joe to fix the report and re-submit. However, when he did re-send it to you, although some formatting issues were fixed, most of the more important content errors were still present. Clearly he didn't realize that these were his responsibility too.

You need to take this up with Joe. Answer the questions in order.

Question

How should you address the miscommunication issue you had with Joe? Place the steps in sequence.

Options:

- A. Confirm with Joe that there may have been a miscommunication
- B. State what you think the miscommunication is
- C. Share what you intended and ask Joe to share how he interprets it

- D. Resolve any misunderstandings through problem-solving
- E. Agree with Joe that he is clear about the message now and how to proceed

Answer

Correct answer(s):

Confirm with Joe that there may have been a miscommunication is ranked

If you find yourself in a situation where you think a miscommunication has occurred, the first step is acknowledging that there may have been a miscommunication, and that you could be mistaken.

State what you think the miscommunication is is ranked

Once you've acknowledged that a miscommunication has occurred, make sure to state clearly what you think that miscommunication was.

Share what you intended and ask Joe to share how he interprets it is ranked

It's important to share what your actual intention was. Also, make sure to get Joe involved and ask him to share what his interpretation of your original communication was.

Resolve any misunderstandings through problem-solving is ranked

Once you and Joe have acknowledged that a miscommunication has occurred, you should suggest a way to resolve the problem.

Agree with Joe that he is clear about the message now and how to proceed is ranked

Having suggested a resolution to the problem, you again need to get agreement from Joe, making sure he is fine with this plan and clear about what needs to be done.

Case Study: Question 2 of 5

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You are a manager at an online bank. Earlier in the week you received a customer report from a team member, Joe, that had many errors. Having highlighted these, you asked Joe to fix the report and re-submit. However, when he did re-send it to you, although some formatting issues were fixed, most of the more important content errors were still present. Clearly he didn't realize that these were his responsibility too.

You need to take this up with Joe. Answer the questions in order.

Question

You've identified the sequence of steps needed to address the miscommunication. Now, how exactly do you approach this with Joe?

Match each step of the process to the appropriate statement or question for that step.

Options:

- A. Confirm
- B. State
- C. Share
- D. Resolve
- E. Agree

Targets:

1. "Joe, I think there was a misunderstanding about the fixes I was asking for."
2. "I may not have been clear about the fixes I was looking for because I see most of the errors are still there."
3. "What I had requested was that the highlighted errors in the actual content should be fixed. How did you understand the request?"
4. "Now that you know what's needed, could you re-submit it with the content errors fixed?"
5. "Could you re-submit by this afternoon? Let me know if that's doable and, if not, I can see about pushing back the report deadline."

Answer

By confirming with Joe that he has misunderstood, you are stating clearly that a miscommunication has occurred. By framing it as a miscommunication, you are not blaming Joe, since it's implied that communication is a two-way process with mutual responsibility.

In this step, you are clarifying for Joe what the nature of the miscommunication was.

You need to make clear to Joe what your actual, original intended message was. Also by inviting him to share what his interpretation of your message was, you are acknowledging your own responsibility as the "giver" of the message.

As the "giver" of the original message, you are responsible for coming up with a resolution to any problems that have arisen from the miscommunication. Or you might invite Joe to suggest a resolution himself.

Finally, find out from Joe if he is in agreement with your suggested resolution. If not, try to work toward some other resolution. But if he is, ensure that he knows the next step to take.

Correct answer(s):

Target 1 = Option A

Target 2 = Option B

Target 3 = Option C

Target 4 = Option D

Target 5 = Option E

Case Study: Question 3 of 5

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You are a manager at an online bank. Earlier in the week you received a customer report from a team member, Joe, that had many errors. Having highlighted these, you asked Joe to fix the report and re-submit. However, when he did re-send it to you, although some formatting issues were fixed, most of the more important content errors were still present. Clearly he didn't realize that these were his responsibility too.

You need to take this up with Joe. Answer the questions in order.

Question

With the bank not meeting its targets, you must deliver some bad news from the management – certain employees must cut down to a three-day week.

What should you do to deal with this issue?

Options:

1. Don't waste time – let the team know immediately by making an unrehearsed announcement
2. State the message right away, by sending out an e-mail entitled "Team cutbacks"
3. Manage your emotions, maintaining authenticity and control
4. Move away from the details after the announcement, but state that you can provide more details at a later time
5. Follow the news up immediately with a statement of empathy
6. Acknowledge emotions by inviting employees to respond to the news
7. Check in regularly afterwards

Answer

If you deliver bad news inappropriately, it would have a negative affect on the mood and conversation among employees. People would be hard-hit by the news, and there could be emotional outbursts and finger-pointing. They could even blame you. Think about how you might deliver the bad news differently.

Option 1: *This option is incorrect. Prepare how you will deliver a difficult message. Write down the words you will use and rehearse them.*

Option 2: *This option is incorrect. Although it **is** necessary to be direct with your message when it's time to deliver it, priming the conversation in a sensitive manner helps because it enables employees to prepare themselves. Schedule a time via e-mail or electronic calendar to meet with employees for an announcement, taking care with your subject line. A better title for your e-mail would be "Review of company financials."*

Option 3: *This option is correct. When you deliver the bad news, move past your own discomfort so that you can deliver the news employees deserve to hear.*

Option 4: *This option is correct. Once you have made the announcement, give the team time to absorb it. Move away from the details and say something like "I have additional information and am available to discuss this in more detail, once we come to terms with this."*

Option 5: *This option is correct. Follow the message with a statement of empathy and understanding, such as "I recognize this will come as a disappointment, especially in these difficult times."*

Option 6: *This option is correct. You can allow for emotional processing in different ways. You can do this on a one-to-one basis, with you just listening. Or, if in a group that is familiar, you can invite responses to the news – in an open forum, or in small groups. You can ask people to write down their concerns and then address them anonymously.*

Option 7: *This option is correct. After the message is delivered, make yourself accessible. You can use an e-mail follow-up if it's straightforward and unemotional. Check in with people on a regular basis. If a follow-up discussion session takes place, keep it short.*

Correct answer(s):

3. Manage your emotions, maintaining authenticity and control
4. Move away from the details after the announcement, but state that you can provide more details at a later time
5. Follow the news up immediately with a statement of empathy
6. Acknowledge emotions by inviting employees to respond to the news
7. Check in regularly afterwards

Case Study: Question 4 of 5

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You are a manager at an online bank. Earlier in the week you received a customer report from a team member, Joe, that had many errors. Having highlighted these, you asked Joe to fix the report and re-submit. However, when he did re-send it to you, although some formatting issues were fixed, most of the more important content errors were still present. Clearly he didn't realize that these were his responsibility too.

You need to take this up with Joe. Answer the questions in order.

Question

Having received the bad news, one of the employees, Thomas, meets with you and has suggested an alternative plan, in which other teams in the company work overtime to try and meet demands. Since you've already delivered the news to the team, this is frustrating for you, because it's completely impractical. However, you are sensitive to the fact that Thomas is upset.

What is an appropriate response to Thomas's position?

Options:

1. Remain clear and confident in the original message
2. Tell Thomas that is out of the question, that the company is in difficulty, and that he needs to get over it
3. State that the alternative idea is reasonable and that you'll try to implement it
4. Avoid getting frustrated, trying to keep your emotions in check

Answer

Option 1: This option is correct. At this difficult time, remain on-message. Be honest and name the issue. Restate the original message and maintain confidence in it.

Option 2: This option is incorrect. No matter how difficult it is for you to deliver bad news, keep in mind that the receivers of this message are probably finding it far more difficult. Maintain composure and deal with the issue sensitively.

Option 3: This option is incorrect. If the receiver's alternative idea is reasonable, state only that you'll take it under consideration, without promising anything more. And remember, never point the finger of blame at any other party.

Option 4: This option is correct. It's important not to get emotional at this time. It is your responsibility as a communicator to be clear and confident, without getting emotional or frustrated. Stay strong and try to have a storehouse of emotional strength.

Correct answer(s):

1. Remain clear and confident in the original message
4. Avoid getting frustrated, trying to keep your emotions in check

Case Study: Question 5 of 5

Scenario

For your convenience, the case study is repeated with each question.

You are a manager at an online bank. Earlier in the week you received a customer report from a team member, Joe, that had many errors. Having highlighted these, you asked Joe to fix the report and re-submit. However, when he did re-send it to you, although some formatting issues were fixed, most of the more important content errors were still present. Clearly he didn't realize that these were his responsibility too.

You need to take this up with Joe. Answer the questions in order.

Question

After more time has passed on the project, you realize that communications with Thomas are still proving difficult. Despite your best efforts, it's clear he still harbors resentment toward you for the cut-backs.

How should you fix or improve the broken communication?

Options:

1. State honestly that the issue lies with his resentment over the cut-backs
2. Discuss with Thomas how the breakdown in communication between you is adversely affecting your work
3. Ask Thomas what you can do to patch things up, and listen carefully to his response
4. Ask other people in the team what they think about the issue

Answer

Option 1: *This option is incorrect. Although it is important to be honest and name the issue, it's counterproductive to point the finger of blame. Communication is a two-way street – always share the blame for any miscommunication or disagreement.*

Option 2: *This option is correct. It's important to acknowledge that the communication challenge you're experiencing is affecting you both, preventing you both from being as productive as you might be, or from meeting business goals.*

Option 3: *This option is correct. To resolve the issue, ask as many questions as possible about how both parties can move forward, and listen carefully to the responses. As well as finding out what you can do to help mend things, demonstrating to Thomas that you are interested in his perspective shows empathy, which will make him more likely to want to patch things up too.*

Option 4: *This option is incorrect. This is between you and Thomas - not the other team members. If you really cannot make progress on your own, at that point consider bringing in a mediator – but you and Thomas both must continue to try and resolve the issue.*

Correct answer(s):

2. Discuss with Thomas how the breakdown in communication between you is adversely affecting your work
3. Ask Thomas what you can do to patch things up, and listen carefully to his response