

Communication

Source: Communicating for Results: A Canadian Student's Guide

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Successful communication on the job doesn't merely happen by chance. It is the result of learning how to structure your information strategically—of using text, design, and technologies to achieve an intended purpose for a clearly defined audience. Delivering information effectively can depend on a fine balance between you and your audience, between a commitment to your business goals and an awareness of the needs of your audience. Delivering information at Internet speed, as so many jobs now require, may demand a little more than simply familiarizing yourself with the basic rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It is also a matter of keeping up with changes and developing an accessible, functional style that is flexible enough to be applied to the many forms of communication in your workplace.

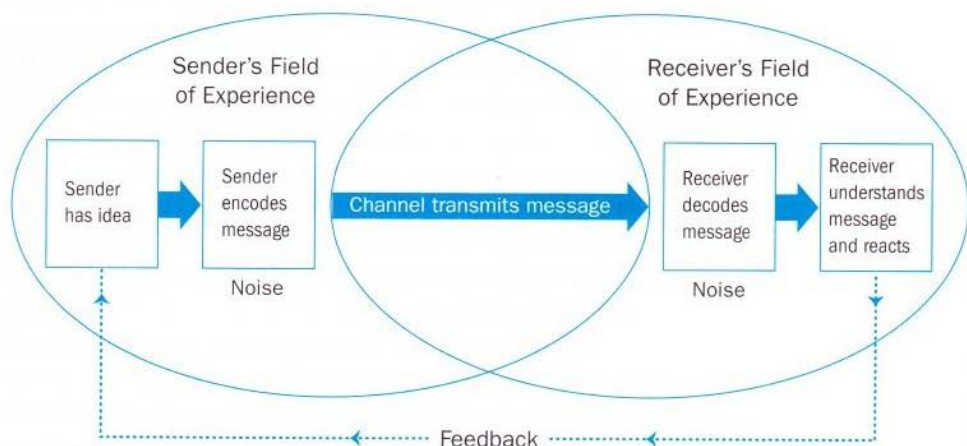
The Communication Process

communication a transactional and relational process involving the meaningful exchange of information.

The term **communication** derives from a root word meaning *common*. Having something in common through the sharing of knowledge and exchanging of information lies at the heart of the communication process. Communication brings people together, and in business it brings them together to solve problems, make decisions, buy and sell products and services, maintain functions and operations, and work in the best interests of employees and stakeholders.

The idea of exchange is fundamental to modern communication theory, which in its various branches helps to explain some of the more basic tasks of writing and speaking for business. Communication without the involvement of a partner is like a tennis match with just one player. Communication is relational and transactional. It isn't simply something that is *done* to others, it is something that is conducted together—a process in which both sender and receiver are involved in a necessary if not entirely equal partnership.

Figure 1.1 Transactional Communication Model



Elements of the Communication Process

message any type of oral, written, or non-verbal communication that is transmitted by a sender to an audience.

sender the participant in the transaction who has an idea and communicates it by encoding it in a message.

encoding the act of converting ideas into code in order to convey a written, oral or non-verbal message.

channel a communication pathway or medium over which a message travels.

receiver the person for whom a message is intended, who decodes the message by extracting meaning from it.

decoding the act of extracting meaning from spoken, written, and non-verbal communication.

feedback the receiver's response to a message that confirms if the original message was received and understood.

For communication to occur, there must be both a source and a destination—someone at one end to formulate and launch the **message** and someone at the other end to receive it. The success of this process depends on the extent to which a message received corresponds to the message transmitted. The goal is for the message to be understood. The process, unfortunately, is not always as simple and straightforward as it sounds. Difficulties with transmission, reception, and interference in between have the potential to disrupt the process.

Sender

The sender, also known as the transmitter or communicator, is the person or group with a particular idea or purpose in mind and an intention to express that purpose in the form of a message. The form the idea ultimately assumes—its content, tone, emphasis, and organization—is shaped by the sender's context, knowledge, attitudes, background, and other assumptions based on the sender's experience. The act of taking ideas and putting them into a code—signals comprising words and gestures—is known as **encoding**. The message can be encoded verbally or non-verbally—in writing, speech, or gestures—with the goal that it will eventually be understood.

Channel

The channel is the medium by which the message is physically transmitted. Delivery can be by letter, memo, report, telephone, computer (e-mail), voice, or gesture. Choosing the optimal channel depends on a variety of factors discussed later in this chapter.

Receiver

The receiver is the person or group at whom the message is directed. The receiver is responsible for **decoding** the message—extracting meaning from its symbols. The receiver's life experiences, knowledge, attitudes, and context can influence how he or she will interpret and respond to the message.

Feedback

Feedback is the discernable response of the receiver to a sender's message. It can be non-verbal, like the nod of a head during a face-to-face conversation; oral, like the "umms" or "aahs" heard during a telephone conversation; or written, such as the reply e-mail message that conveys the receiver's reaction. Feedback is a vital part of communication, allowing for clarification and ensuring that the message has been properly understood. Making no provision for feedback and choosing a medium whereby feedback is delayed when it is required immediately can bring the communication process to a frustrating conclusion.



For a quick overview of communications, including Shannon's model and a guide to modes of communication, refer to *Part I: Introduction to Communications*, a site authored by Brian Brown:

http://eserver.bell.ac.uk/mirrors/dc100www/dc_001.html

Barriers to Effective Communication

In today's fast-paced business environments, there is always the potential for miscommunication. The average workplace is not immune to human error or spared from the fact that trained professionals are sometimes imperfect people. The technology on which an organization relies may not be reliable 100 per cent of the time. **Noise** refers to **communication barriers** and physical and psychological obstacles that can interfere with every aspect of the communication process, creating misunderstanding anywhere at any time. Noise might be called the Murphy's Law of the communication process. If something can go wrong with a message, it will go wrong unless you understand potential communication barriers and take precautions to prevent them.

noise any form of physical or psychological interference that distorts the meaning of a message.

communication barriers problems that can affect the communication transaction, leading to confusion or misunderstanding.

channel overload the inability of a channel to carry all transmitted messages.

information overload a condition whereby a receiver cannot process all messages due to their increasing number.

emotional interference a psychological factor that creates problems with the communication transaction.

- **Channel overload.** This problem occurs when the number of messages transmitted through a channel exceeds the capacity of the channel to handle them. You may, for example, try to leave a voice-mail message for a business contact only to find that his or her voice-mail box is full.
- **Information overload.** Another common problem, information overload occurs when a channel simply carries too much information for the receiver to absorb it easily or when too many messages are transmitted at a time for the receiver to properly handle them. Too much information is sometimes too much of a good thing because it can leave receivers annoyed and confused.
- **Emotional interference.** Strong feelings of joy, anger, hostility, and resentment can interfere with an individual's ability to communicate objectively and prevent a person from either encoding or decoding a message satisfactorily. Flamed e-mail messages, composed in the heat of anger and certain to inflame tempers, demonstrate the damage emotional interference can cause.
- **Semantic interference.** Words do not have assigned or fixed meanings, thus creating at times a wide margin for misinterpretation. In fact, one word may mean different things to different people, and its meaning can also change in various contexts. Shifts in meaning, faulty diction, and emphasis placed on the wrong part of a message can all lead to miscommunication.
- **Physical and technical interference.** Every so often, technical difficulties arise—phone lines jam, computers crash, cellphone connections fade.
- **Mixed messages and channel barriers.** Some messages give off conflicting signals, resulting in misunderstanding when the receiver can't decide which signal to observe. A speaker might claim to agree with an idea at the same time as he raises his eyebrows, suggesting that he still harbours a few doubts or reservations. Likewise, choosing the wrong communication channel—for example, by e-mailing a contentious message—or transmitting a message through too long a communication chain can lead to a breakdown in communication.

- **Environmental interference.** People differ from one another in their demographics, attitudes, and perceptions. Age and cultural gaps can create differences in perception that influence how a message is interpreted.

non-verbal communication communication that does not use words but takes place through gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions.

Non-Verbal Communication

Communication involves more than spoken and written words alone. Messages are also actively conveyed through a subtext of non-verbal language, both unwritten and unspoken. How a message is delivered according to the sender's tone and inflection, eye contact, body movements, appearance, and even personal space and setting can influence how a message is interpreted and can sometimes work at cross-purposes to a message's primary aim. Some silently non-verbal behaviours, as well as some vocal ones, are obvious—a veritable source of uncensored data—while others are much more subtle, often defying detection. A nod of the head, a pointing of a finger, a steady gaze, a slumped posture, a frown—these signals, like all non-verbal cues, are powerful indicators of feelings and attitudes in verbal communication, where they may repeat, regulate, or stand in place of a verbal message, and sometimes even contradict it. Non-verbal cues are easily misinterpreted and can be particularly misleading when taken out of context. Because their meaning is often culturally determined, it is impossible to interpret them in universal terms. Developing an awareness of intentional and unintentional non-verbal signals can help you not only to decipher them but also to regulate their impact on your own communication. Tuning in to the signs and signals of human behaviour can help you “read” people and their attitudes, not just the words they speak or write, and make you a more effective communicator.

paralanguage non-verbal vocal communication.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage refers to the non-verbal vocal qualities of verbal communication—the way in which a message is spoken in terms of its intonation, pitch, speed, volume, emphasis, inflection, and use of pauses and fillers (the “aahs,” “umms,” and “you knows” that can punctuate everyday speech and conversation). These voice patterns, because they can reveal underlying emotions, sometimes come across more strongly than the actual words that are spoken, at times creating mixed messages when the words and vocal cues clash. Shifts in meaning can occur with the subtlest changes in volume and emphasis. “We can’t fill your order” is a factual statement when delivered at normal volume but may terminate the customer relationship if it is shouted. “I’m very concerned about this problem” delivers a different message than when you say “*I’m* very concerned about this problem” (other people may not be), “I’m *very* concerned about this problem” (my concern is strong), or “I’m very concerned about *this* problem” (there are other problems). Becoming an effective speaker is a matter of learning to capitalize on paralanguage to complement and reinforce the words you use.

body language (kinesics) non-verbal communication conveyed by gestures, eye contact, posture, and facial expressions.

Body Language (Kinesics)

Kinesics is a field of research that examines communication through body movements, based on the assumption that all humans, consciously or not, act and react to situations both verbally and non-verbally. The meaning of these signals and their

positive and negative value can shift depending on the receiver's culture, personality, and experience.

eye contact the act of looking another person directly in the eye.

1. **Gestures and posture.** Various hand and arm movements and specific body positions have special meanings, often culturally determined ones, that may both complement and contradict other forms of communication. Open body positions (arms uncrossed and away from body, legs uncrossed, leaning forward) suggest openness, ease, comfort, and agreement. Closed body positions (arms folded across the torso, legs close together or crossed, hands in pockets) may be signs of defensiveness, a lack of receptivity, or physical or psychological discomfort. Finger wagging is usually a sign of disagreement, while forming a circle with the thumb and index figures signals approval. Excessive gesturing of any kind is a distraction and should be kept in check.
2. **Eye contact.** Eye contact is a powerful form of communication. What it conveys depends very much on its degree, duration, and context. It can mean different things in different cultures. Direct and purposeful eye contact is a sign of honesty, sincerity, respect, and recognition. It is difficult, after all, to fake eye contact or to look someone in the eye and lie. More than a passing glance between strangers, however, can make both parties uncomfortable. Prolonged eye contact in any situation can prove to be a source of intimidation. An averting of the eyes can communicate stress or dishonesty; a deliberate averting of the eyes can indicate anger or a lack of interest, although in some cultures it is interpreted as a sign of deference. Knowing how to maintain good eye contact is important to the success of public speakers and presenters, who may use it as a means of holding an audience and assessing their receptivity, level of interest, and attitudes.
3. **Facial expressions.** On the basis of eye contact, it is possible to read a face through its range of expressions, reflecting feelings of interest, happiness, sadness, disgust, anger, surprise, and fear. Facial expressions provide a useful, if not always reliable, source of feedback. It is easy to misjudge how people feel by the expressions on their faces, just as it is often common for people to mask their true feelings, especially in a professional environment.

Use of Space (Proxemics)

proxemics the study of the use of space.

The term **proxemics** refers to the study of the use space, specifically to the amount of space that individuals maintain between each other. How space is used and manipulated is yet another form of non-verbal communication. Proxemics explains why invading someone's personal space, or overstepping what is appropriate in a particular social context, can lead to anger and resentment. Spatial requirements are defined according to four territorial zones:

| | | |
|-------------------|------------------|---|
| Intimate distance | 0–18 inches | for interacting with family and close friends |
| Personal distance | 18 inches–4 feet | for communicating among close business associates |
| Social distance | 4–10 feet | for business conversations |
| Public distance | beyond 10 feet | for formal business exchanges and public speeches |

The size of an office, its colour, even its arrangement of furniture conveys a variety of information about the occupant that can in turn influence how people feel and respond. Productive and efficient business communications depend on how well respectful workplace distances are maintained and approachability and interaction are enhanced.

Image

Clothing, possessions, and grooming communicate specific messages about an individual's integrity, professionalism, status, trustworthiness, interests, education, and work habits. Clothing especially sends out certain signals about an individual's willingness to conform to company standards as outlined in unofficial rules or dress code.



For a series of links to websites covering topics related to non-verbal communication, including an online dictionary of gestures, signs, and body language cues, log on to the **Utah Education Network Themepark**:
www.uen.org/themepark/communication/verbal.shtml

Communicating in Organizations

Internal and External Communication

Businesses today, to stay in business and be successful, must communicate with two main audiences: the organization's internal audience, comprising employees and owners, and its external audience, encompassing customers, government officials, suppliers, and the general public. **Internal communication** stays within an organization and involves the back-and-forth sharing of ideas and information among superiors, co-workers, and subordinates. Although the speed, instantaneousness, interactivity, and relative informality of e-mail messaging make it the most popular and logical choice for use within a company, internal communications systems are also supported by other pathways such as memos, department reports, in-house newsletters or magazines, face-to-face conversations, group meetings, opinion surveys, speeches, and telephone conversations. Functioning together, they provide the means for organizations to detect and solve problems, coordinate activities, foster decision-making and policy-setting, introduce and explain procedures, and persuade employees and managers to accept change.

Through **external communication**, organizations establish themselves in the marketplace, foster good public and media relations, and work to keep their operations functional, efficient, and productive. Some of the functions of external communication are to influence consumer decisions through advertising and promotion, process orders and collect payment, provide customer service in answering inquiries and handling complaints, respond to government agencies, and carry out purchase transactions. Though customer communication can take a variety of forms, most external communication with businesses consists of letters sent on company letterhead. Whether an externally directed message is written or spoken, it carries its company's reputation and corporate values with it. Today's businesses recognize the importance of using communication with outside stakeholders as an opportunity to build prestige and a favourable

internal communication
communication through the
channels of an organization.

external communication
communication with
audiences who are part of an
external environment and not
part of a writer's organization.