

# 13

# COMMUNICATION

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and other communication initiatives are helping to raise employees' knowledge of goals and to improve job satisfaction and other attitudes at Georgia Power.<sup>1</sup>

### What's Your Answer?

1. Why did CEO Dahlberg think that good communication was so important for solving Georgia Power's problems?
2. What specific steps were taken at Georgia Power to improve communication? ■

## OVERVIEW

Communication is one of the most important processes that take place in organizations; it has major effects on individual, group, and organizational performance.<sup>2</sup> High-performing organizations like Microsoft and Sony have mastered the communication process. As a result, members of the organization have the information they need when they need it to achieve their goals. In contrast, the poor performance of Georgia Power, IBM, and other organizations in the early 1990s can be attributed in part to communication problems within the organization. Faulty communication among top managers and between top managers and workers lower in the hierarchy (for example, those in sales) prevented IBM's top managers from realizing that they needed to change IBM's focus to deemphasize the manufacturing and marketing of mainframe computers in order for the company to remain competitive. And, as we saw in the opening case, the fact that only 4 percent of Georgia Power's employees knew what the company's two major goals were in the late 1980s suggests the magnitude of the communication problems that that company experienced.<sup>3</sup>

An organization's effectiveness hinges on good communication, and so too does the effectiveness of groups and individuals inside the organization. Groups are able to achieve their goals and perform at a high level only when group members communicate with each other and with other organizational members and groups as needed. Similarly, individual learning, motivation, and job satisfaction hinge on good communication. Even when individuals have the ability and motivation to perform at a high level, for example, communication problems can prevent them from being effective. A highly capable and motivated sales representative for a textbook publisher may fail to meet her sales goal because the publisher's editorial and marketing staffs did not properly communicate the best features of the books to be sold.

Given the significant influence that communication has on individual, group, and organizational effectiveness, this chapter focuses on the nature of communication in organizations. We define communication, outline its implications for understanding and managing organizational behavior, and describe the functions that communication serves in organizations. We provide a model of the communication process and discuss communication problems and ways to avoid them. We explore one of the key components of the communication process, the communication medium, in depth. And we examine patterns of communication that are prevalent in organizations. By the end of this chapter you will have a good understanding of effective communication in organizations.

## WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

One of the defining features of communication is the *sharing of information with other people*.<sup>4</sup> An accountant for Price Waterhouse communicates with his boss when he tells him how a large auditing project is going, when he asks to take his vacation at the beginning of June, and when he requests that his boss purchase a new computer software package to help in the preparation of complicated income tax forms. A member of a self-managed work team at Rockwell Corporation, which manufactures parts for the Hellfire missiles that were used in the Gulf War,

communicates when she tells another member of her team that there is a serious defect in one of the parts the team has just completed and when she suggests that another team member is letting product quality slip and thus imperiling the armed service members who are the missile's ultimate users.

The simple sharing of information is not enough for communication to take place, however. The second defining feature of communication is the *reaching of a common understanding*.<sup>5</sup> The sharing of information does not accomplish much in organizations unless people concur on what this information means. For example, when the accountant at Price Waterhouse tells his supervisor that he has run into some problems on the large auditing project and completing the project might take more time than was originally allocated, the supervisor might assume that the audit is a relatively standard one that is just a bit more complicated and time-consuming than most others. The "problems" the accountant has unearthed, however, pertain to questionable (and perhaps illegal) activities that he suspects the top-management team was trying to hide from the auditor. In this situation, communication has not taken place because the supervisor does not understand the magnitude of the problems the auditor is referring to. A common understanding has not been reached. This lack of a common understanding reduces the effectiveness of both the auditor and the supervisor. The auditor does not receive the supervisor's advice and help in handling this tricky situation, and the supervisor is not performing an important role responsibility—namely, close involvement in unusual or especially difficult auditing projects.

**Communication**, then, is the sharing of information between two or more individuals or groups to reach a common understanding. Reaching a common understanding does *not* mean that people have to agree with each other. What it does mean is that people must have a relatively accurate idea of what a person or group is trying to tell them.

Communication is good or effective when members of an organization share information with each other and all parties involved are relatively clear about what this information means. Communication is ineffective when people either do not receive the information they need or are not quite sure what the information they do receive means. When a CEO screams at a top manager that he is an idiot, the CEO may be trying to convey that he is disappointed with the performance of the manager's division, worried about its future, and concerned that the manager has not done everything possible to help turn things around. Having been screamed at, however, the manager leaves the room thinking that his boss is unreasonable, unbalanced, and impossible to work for. The boss's use of the word *idiot* conveyed nothing of the boss's real concerns about the division and its performance. To the manager, being called an "idiot" meant only that his boss lost his temper and was dumping on him. In this case, communication is ineffective because the communicators reached no common understanding about performance of the manager's division, its future, and the steps that should have been or should now be taken to improve its performance.

Although most people assume that they will be communicating with others who speak the same language as they do, the increasingly interconnected nature of the global economy often results in people communicating with others whose first language is different from their own. In some situations, people believe they have a right to speak in their native tongue, as indicated in Insight 13.1.



### INSIGHT 13.1: A GLOBAL VIEW

*European Union Grapples with Multiple Languages*

economic and political relations among member nations, one unexpected source of contention is the language that EU officials and delegates should use for communicating orally with each other and for law writing.

Germany is the leading economic power in the EU, and German is the single most widely spoken language among EU countries. French and English, however, are the languages that delegates use to discuss issues and draft laws. German chancellor Helmut Kohl is disappointed that German is rarely heard and that EU documents are written in French and English and are translated into German rather than being written in German in the first place. Why isn't German used instead of French or English? Representatives to the EU from non-German-speaking countries such as Greece, Portugal, Italy, and Spain usually can speak French or English but not German. Nevertheless, German delegates have been told by the German government to speak German at certain formal EU meetings and speaking engagements.

Being able to speak their native language at EU meetings has become a matter of pride to EU delegates from other countries as well. After German delegates Martin Bangemann and Peter Schmidhuber began to speak in German at formal EU meetings, the Italian delegates decided that they were going to speak in Italian at the meetings. Delegates from other countries followed suit, greatly increasing problems in communicating with each other.

From the start, it had been agreed that delegates to the EU would be able to speak in their native tongues at certain meetings. However, with more and more countries joining the EU, each of which has its own language, maintaining effective communication is becoming difficult. With 132 language combinations to be handled (translating documents from Portuguese to Finnish, Greek to Norwegian, Italian to Norwegian, and so on) and over three hundred translators translating EU discussions and documents, the urge to select one common language in which to conduct EU business is increasing.<sup>6</sup>

As the experience of the European Union illustrates, it is sometimes a luxury to be able to communicate in your native language to others who speak and understand it. Because Americans generally speak fewer languages than do citizens in other countries, Americans need to be sensitive to the fact that they are fortunate to be able to speak English as much as they do when communicating with people from other countries.

## THE FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is important in organizations because it impacts practically every aspect of organizational behavior. For example, members of an organization come to understand each other's personalities, attitudes, and values (discussed in Chapters 2 and 3) only when they communicate effectively with each other. Likewise, workers are motivated to perform at a high level when someone communicates clearly what is expected and the consequences of performing at a high level and when someone expresses confidence in their ability to perform (Chapters 5–8). Finally, groups can work efficiently and effectively to accomplish their goals and leaders can influence their followers (Chapters 10–12) only when effective communication takes place.

When organizations experience problems such as unmotivated workers or excessively high turnover, poor communication is often partially to blame. A secretary may have low motivation to develop new bookkeeping skills or to take on the additional responsibility of planning conferences because he thinks he is in a dead-end job. If no one has bothered to communicate to him that secretaries do have opportunities to advance in the company, the individual, the group of which he is a member, and the organization as a whole are deprived of the benefits a highly motivated worker can bring. Similarly, an organization that announces that it has been acquired by another

Good communication prevents many problems important functions in organizations: providing knowledge, motivating organizational members, controlling and coordinating individual efforts, and expressing feelings and emotions (see Table 13.1).

## Providing Knowledge

A basic function of communication is to provide knowledge to members of an organization so that they can perform their jobs effectively and achieve their goals.<sup>7</sup> By providing knowledge about, for example, ways to perform tasks and about decisions that have been made, an organization makes sure that members have the information they need to perform at a high level. Georgia Power in the opening case used communication to provide workers with knowledge about the company's major goals so that they would work toward achieving them.

Although the knowledge function of communication is most apparent when a worker has just started a new job, it is often equally important for seasoned veterans. As you learned in Chapter 10, individuals starting a new job face considerable uncertainty about what they are supposed to do, how they should go about doing it, and what the standards for acceptable behavior are in the organization. Communication from coworkers, supervisors, customers, clients, and others helps to reduce this uncertainty and provides newcomers with the knowledge they need to perform their jobs effectively.

Communication is essential for the socialization of newcomers at all levels in an organization. When Stanley Gault and Mike Walsh took over as CEOs of Goodyear and Tenneco (respectively) in the early 1990s, for example, each of them spent the first couple of weeks on the job communicating with as many workers as they could to learn about the troubled companies they were hired to help turn around.<sup>8</sup> Walsh instituted a series of "town hall" meetings and traveled around the United States talking to employees at all levels about Tenneco's problems.

The knowledge function also is important for even the most experienced members of an organization because things change. Just as the products or services an organization provides change in response to changes in customers' desires, so does the nature of a worker's job responsibilities. Clear communication of new tasks, goals, responsibilities, and policies helps to ensure that members of an organization will continue to understand what needs to be done to achieve organizational goals.

**Providing knowledge** about company goals, how to perform a job, standards for acceptable behavior, needed changes, and so on

**Motivating organizational members**—for example, by determining valences, raising expectancies and instrumentalities, assigning specific and difficult goals, and giving feedback

**Controlling and coordinating individual efforts**—for example, by reducing social loafing, communicating roles, rules, and norms, and avoiding duplication of effort

**Expressing feelings and emotions** such as positive and negative moods, excitement, and anger

## **Motivating Organizational Members**

As you learned in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, motivation is a key determinant of performance in organizations, and communication plays a central role in motivating members of an organization to achieve their goals. Expectancy theory (see Chapter 6) proposes, for example, that managers need to do the following:

- Determine what outcomes subordinates are trying to obtain from their jobs—that is, determine the valences of various outcomes.
- Make sure that workers perceive that obtaining these outcomes is contingent on performing at a high level—that is, make sure that instrumentalities are high.
- Make sure that workers believe that they can perform at a high level—that is, make sure that expectancies are high.

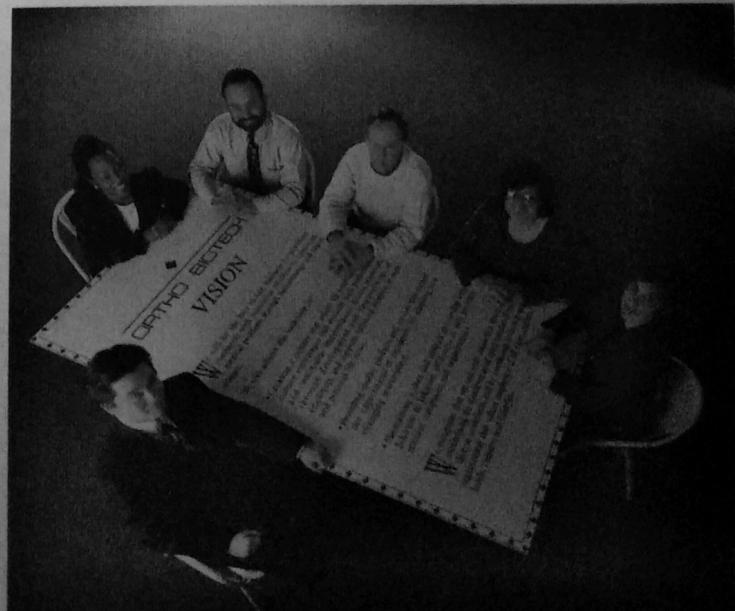
The only way that a manager can determine the valences of different outcomes for any given worker is by communicating with (talking *and* listening to) that worker to find out what outcomes the worker desires. Likewise, managers need to communicate to workers that they are capable of performing at a high level and that they will receive the outcomes they desire if they do so.

As another example of the role of communication in motivating workers, consider goal-setting theory (examined in Chapter 7). It suggests that workers will perform at a high level when they have specific and difficult goals and are given feedback concerning how they are doing. Managers use communication to let workers know what goals they should be striving for and how they are progressing in their efforts to achieve those goals. At Georgia Power, the “Everybody Has a Customer” award helps to motivate workers by communicating to them that their efforts are appreciated.

## **Controlling and Coordinating Individual Efforts**

As you learned in Chapters 10 and 11, it is essential for groups and organizations to control their members’ behaviors so that they perform their jobs in an acceptable fashion. Recall, for example, that a key challenge for self-managed work teams and other kinds of work groups is to reduce social loafing, the tendency of people to exert less effort when working in groups than when working on their own. When a member of a group engages in social loafing, one of the primary ways that other members of the group can reduce it is by communicating to the loafer that his or her behavior has been observed and is not going to be tolerated. Groups and organizations exert control over their members by regularly communicating information about roles, rules, and norms to them.

*Ortho Biotech, a biopharmaceutical company with a diverse work force, is well known for the time and effort it expends communicating to its employees so that they buy into its central vision and work to achieve organizational goals.*



In addition to controlling members' behavior, groups and organizations also need to coordinate the efforts of their individual members. In Chapter 11, we discussed how members of a group and organization are often interdependent, so that the work performed by some members affects what others do. As the interdependence between group members increases, the need for communication to coordinate their efforts in order to achieve group goals also increases.<sup>9</sup> Communication also helps to eliminate duplication of effort and to prevent one poorly performing member from keeping other members from achieving group goals.

### Expressing Feelings and Emotions

One of the most important functions of communication is to allow people to express their feelings and emotions.<sup>10</sup> These feelings and emotions can be general or specific and can originate from inside or outside the workplace.

Recall from Chapter 3 that *work moods* are the feelings people experience on a day-to-day basis as they perform their jobs. Often, individuals and groups can better achieve their goals if they can communicate their moods to others. The moods workers experience on the job influence their perceptions and evaluations of people and situations as well as their behavior.<sup>11</sup>

For example, when the manager of an electronics store snapped at a subordinate who was proposing an innovative way to increase customer traffic through the store and thus increase sales, the hurt look on the subordinate's face made the manager realize that such impatience was out of line. The manager decided to communicate his feelings to the subordinate, and he frankly told him that he was in a lousy mood and that they should wait until the next day to discuss what sounded like a promising proposal. This simple communication of feelings helped to prevent a minor incident from turning into a major problem.

Emotions such as excitement or anger are often stirred by specific events at work or at home, and it is often useful for individuals to communicate their emotions to others in an organization. A worker who has just learned that she has received a major promotion may be so elated that she can't think straight enough to have an in-depth discussion with her supervisor about finding and training her successor. Simply communicating this fact to the supervisor and postponing the conversation for a while is the sensible thing to do. Similarly, as you learned in Chapter 9, a worker who is upset and angry about his spouse's terminal illness may feel a little bit better when he communicates his emotions to others and receives their social support.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, supervisors, coworkers, and subordinates will be more understanding of the worker's lack of enthusiasm or recent tendency to be overly critical when they realize the tremendous strain he is under.

Communication of moods and emotions helps organizational members understand each other, and when people understand each other, they are better able to work together to perform well and achieve their goals.

- Make sure your subordinates have all the information they need to perform their jobs and achieve their goals. Give them clear information about any changes in the organization.
- Encourage your subordinates, let them know that you are confident they can perform

## THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Effective communication involves a number of distinct steps.<sup>13</sup> Workers and managers who are aware of these steps can ensure that communication provides knowledge, motivates organizational members, controls and coordinates their efforts, and expresses feelings and emotions. These steps and their interrelationships are indicated in the model of the communication process presented in Fig. 13.1 and are described below. Although the model is cyclical, the sender initiates the process, so we start by discussing the sender and the message.

### The Sender and the Message

The **sender** is the individual, group, or organization that needs or wants to share information with some other individual, group, or organization in order to accomplish one or more of the four functions of communication described above. The **receiver** is the individual, group, or organization for which the information is intended. For example, a supervisor may wish to send information to a subordinate about his or her performance, a task force on diversity may need to communicate to top management its assessment of barriers to the promotion of minorities into management positions, or an organization may need to communicate to the Environmental Protection Agency the actions it has taken to comply with new waste disposal regulations.

The **message** is the information that the sender needs or wants to share with other people. Effective communication depends on messages that are as clear and complete as possible. Clarity is important regardless of the content of the message—that is, whether it is performance feedback to an individual worker, task-force findings and conclusions, or an organization's response to new government regulations. A message is *clear* when it contains information that is easily interpreted or understood. A message is *complete* when it contains all the information necessary to achieve a common understanding between the sender and the receiver. Sometimes, problems in the communication process crop up because the sender is vague or unsure about what the message should be. A supervisor, for example, might give vague feedback to a subordinate about performance on a recent assignment because the supervisor gave too little thought to how the subordinate actually performed or how performance could improve in the future.

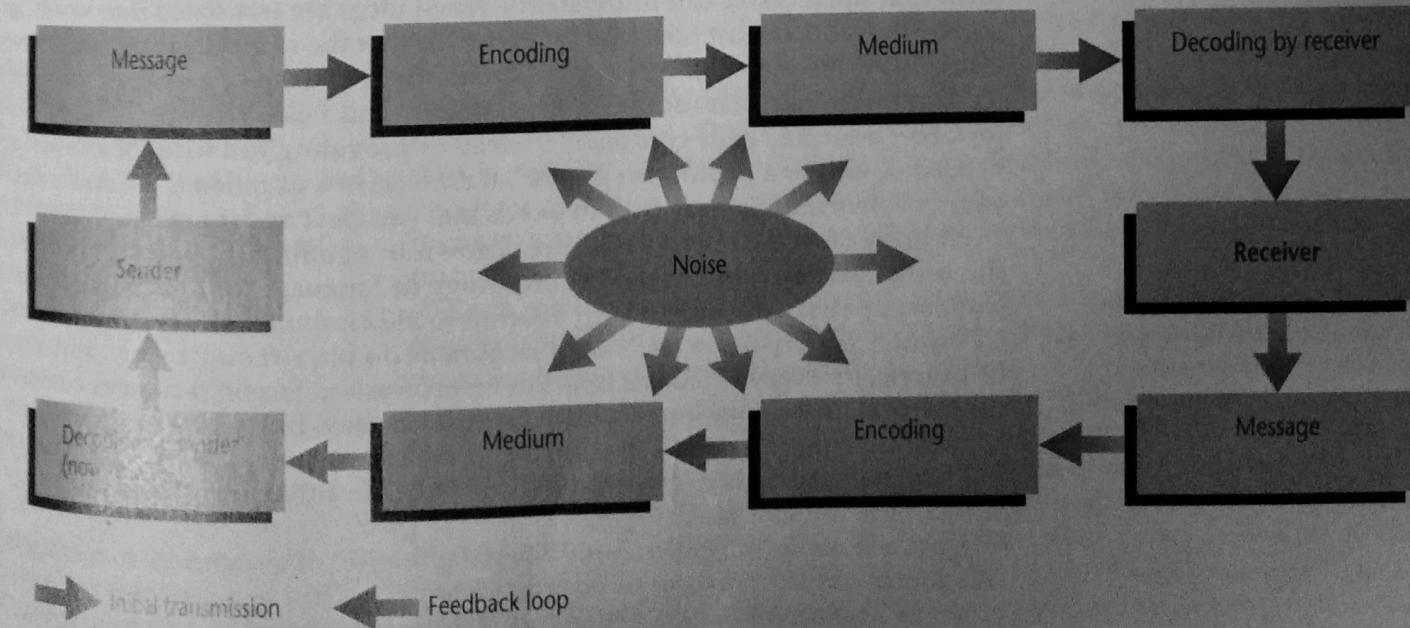
**under**  
the individual, group, or organization  
that needs or wants to share informa-  
tion with some other individual, group,  
or organization.

**receiver**  
the individual, group, or organization  
for which information is intended.

**message**  
the information that a sender needs or  
wants to share with other people.

FIGURE 13.1

Communication Process



## Encoding

Translating a message into symbols or language that a receiver can understand.

### Encoding

Once the sender has decided what the message is, the next step in the process is **encoding**—translating the message into symbols or language that the receiver can understand. A supervisor who puts ideas about how a subordinate is performing and ways that performance can be improved into words, a task force that summarizes the results of its investigations and weekly meetings into words and statistics such as the number of African Americans and women in top-management positions, and a member of an organization who shows a government inspector the organization's waste disposal operations—all of these are examples of the encoding of messages.

Although encoding ideas by putting them into words seems simple enough, some organizations are finding that their employees lack the basic writing and oral communication skills needed to do this and are taking action to improve encoding. First Bank Systems Inc. in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for example, helps workers ranging from clerks to managers improve their grammar through skills-upgrading classes. Smith Corona Corporation, located in New Canaan, Connecticut, trains workers in how to answer telephone calls.<sup>14</sup>

For communication to be effective, the sender must translate the message into a form that the receiver can understand. When ideas are translated into words, for example, the sender must take care to use words that the receiver understands. Have you ever listened to a computer expert explain the workings of a new software package using terminology that meant nothing to you? This failed attempt at communication probably added to your confusion instead of providing you with the knowledge you needed. A visit to a doctor can also be an exercise in frustration if the doctor describes your problem and its treatment in words that you can't understand.

In both of those examples, a breakdown in communication occurs because of the use of **jargon**, specialized terminology or language that members of a profession, occupation, or other group develop to aid communication among themselves. Computer experts have their own jargon, as do physicians, lawyers, and members of practically every other occupation or profession. Jargon facilitates communication within an occupation because it simplifies encoding. Rather than having to describe a complex array of symptoms and their likely causes, a nurse can use a single medical term such as *gastroenteritis*, and other health care providers will know the ailment the nurse is referring to.

Jargon becomes a problem only when the receiver of a jargon-laden message is outside the sender's profession or occupational group (just as a patient is not part of the group of health care providers that includes doctors, nurses, and lab technicians). Mes-

sages encoded with jargon can lead to effective communication when senders and receivers are members of the same occupation or profession. When receivers are outside the occupation or profession, the use of jargon leads to ineffective communication.

Although jargon is often used to simplify encoding, it sometimes is a source of humor in the workplace, as illustrated in Insight 13.2. Virtually all occupations and professions and sometimes even companies have their own jargon.

### INSIGHT 13.2: COMMUNICATION

#### *Send the Double Header to the Bates Motel, the Redhead Needs a Toxic Clean-up, and Run Some Lab Rats Please*

The title of this Insight uses jargon from three professions. According to jargon expert John Davis, among psychiatrists a “double header” is a schizophrenic, and “the Bates motel” is a mental hospital. To some day care workers a “redhead” is a child with measles, and a “toxic clean-up” is a diaper change. “Lab rats” are focus groups, small groups of consumers that advertising agencies bring together to determine how consumers are likely to react to new products and advertising campaigns.<sup>15</sup>

Parents may be dismayed to learn that they are referred to as “meddlers” who engage in “ambushes” (unscheduled visits) of their children’s day care centers only to find their child with a “deathgrip” (stuffed animal). Company executives may be surprised that their ad agencies use “liars for hire” (advertising copy writers) to promote the company’s “cancer cures” (new products).<sup>16</sup>

Just as workers at day care centers and advertising agencies have their own jargon, the employees of a particular company often develop their own jargon. At Adolph Coors Company, newly developed beers are called “the liquid.” At Microsoft, a worker’s knowledge and ability are referred to as his or her “bandwidth.” At Wal-Mart, training the employees of newly acquired companies to smile and offer extra customer service is known as being “Wal-Martized.” And Intel Corporation executives “Intellize” new businesses they are trying to get into such as telecommunications.<sup>17</sup>

## *The Medium*

Once a message is encoded, it is transmitted to the receiver through some medium. The **medium** is the pathway through which an encoded message is transmitted to a receiver (*media* is the plural form). **Verbal communication** is the sharing of information by means of words, either spoken or written. For messages that are encoded into words, the media can include face-to-face oral communication, oral communication over the telephone, and written communication through the use of memos, letters, and reports that may be electronically transmitted through electronic mail or fax machines.

Each medium of verbal communication has advantages and disadvantages. Although there are no clear-cut rules about when to use one rather than another, there are two guidelines for selecting a medium.

One guideline is to select a medium that the receiver monitors—a medium that the receiver pays attention to. People differ in their preferences for communication media. Lou Gerstner, CEO of IBM, prefers to use oral face-to-face communication. Ron Shaich, president of the Boston-based fast-food chain Au Bon Pain, likes to see things in writing. The most effective communication with people such as Shaich entails written memos, reports, and letters.<sup>18</sup> A sender who ignores receivers’ individual preferences for media is asking for trouble. A receiver may not realize the importance

of your message because you deliver it in a casual conversation over lunch rather than in a formal report. Or a receiver who prefers oral communication and is inundated with memos and letters may toss your letter into the trash without reading it.

The other guideline to follow in selecting a medium is to try to select one that is appropriate to the message you are trying to convey and to use multiple media when necessary. Common sense suggests that if you are communicating a personal and important message to an individual (such as information about being fired, being promoted, receiving a raise, or being transferred to another unit), oral communication is called for, preferably face to face. Alternatively, if the message you are trying to communicate is involved and complex, such as a proposal to open a new factory in Singapore, written communication is appropriate. If the message is important, you might want to back up the written communication with oral communication as well. In the opening case, Georgia Power uses multiple media to communicate important information to employees.

Words are not the only way people communicate. **Nonverbal communication** is the sharing of information by means of facial expressions (smiles and grimaces), body language (posture and gestures), and even mode of dress (elegant business attire versus jeans and a T-shirt).<sup>19</sup> The boss's look of disgust when you tell him the recent sales promotion you designed was a flop, your coworker slamming his door in your face after a recent argument, or the uniform worn by a police officer standing next to your illegally parked car all transmit encoded messages to you. Likewise, "jeans day" at Georgia Power communicates that workers and managers are partners and should trust one another.

Often, when people do not feel comfortable about expressing part of a message verbally, they express it nonverbally. In general, because people tend to have less control over their nonverbal than over their verbal communication, their facial expressions or body language give them away when they wish to withhold some information. A sender who compliments someone he dislikes but fails to look the receiver in the eye, for example, is not concealing his insincerity.

Nonverbal communication also can be useful for communicating support, acceptance, and a sense of camaraderie. Researchers have long noted the value of hugs as a form of communication. Hugs help reduce stress, raise self-confidence, and make people feel connected with those around them. Studies of newborns, the elderly, and children in orphanages have shown that touch is necessary for psychological well-being. Sometimes a good hug at the right time can express powerful feelings and emotions. This was the case when retiring Supreme Court justice William Brennan greeted his successor David Souter after Souter's confirmation hearings. According to Souter, "He hugged me and he hugged me, and he went on hugging me for a very, very long time."<sup>20</sup>

We have covered just some of the issues involved in selecting a communication medium. Given the importance of choosing the right medium and the difficulty of making the right choice, we focus on additional aspects of this step in the communication process later in this chapter, in the sections on information richness and the impact of technological advances on organizational communication.

## *The Receiver: Decoding and the Feedback Loop*

Just as senders have to translate their ideas or messages into a form that can be sent to the receiver, receivers have to make sense of the messages they receive. **Decoding** is interpreting or trying to make sense of a sender's message. For messages that are relatively clear-cut, such as information about a raise or about a specific goal, decoding can be straightforward. Some messages, however, are ambiguous. For example, what caused your boss's look of disgust when you told him your sales promotion was a flop? Was the look due to his displeasure with your performance or his concern over the dwindling sales of the product involved? Or was it just the result of one

### **Verbal communication**

Sharing of information by means of expressions, body language, and of dress.

more piece of bad news that day? During decoding, the receiver tries to determine which interpretation of the message, of all the possible interpretations, is accurate.

When messages are ambiguous, the receiver may have difficulty with decoding or may think that the message means something other than what the sender intended. When messages are ambiguous, the likelihood increases that the receivers' own beliefs, attitudes, values, moods, perceptual biases, and so on will influence decoding.

You may be tempted to think that communication is largely complete once decoding has taken place. As indicated in Fig. 13.1, however, only about half of the communication process has occurred up to this point—the initial-transmission half. Recall that communication is the sharing of information to reach a common understanding. Up until and including the point at which the receiver decodes the message, the communication process has largely been concerned with the sharing of information. Members of an organization know they have reached a common understanding and have communicated effectively by completing the feedback loop, the second half of the process illustrated in Fig. 13.1.

After decoding the message, the receiver has to respond to it and start the feedback loop. The receiver must first decide what message to pass on to the original sender. Sometimes the receiver's message is as simple as "I got your memo and agree that we need to meet to discuss this issue." At other times the receiver may provide, in a long and detailed message, the information that the sender requested. Or the receiver's response might be that he or she did not understand the message.

Once the receiver decides on a response, he or she *encodes* the message and transmits it, using a *medium* that the original sender monitors. The original sender *decodes* the response. If the original sender is confident that the receiver properly interpreted the initial message and a common understanding has been reached, the communication process is complete. However, if during decoding the original sender realizes that the receiver did not properly interpret or decode the message, the whole communication process needs to continue until both parties are confident that they have reached a common understanding.

The feedback loop in the communication process can be just as important as the initial transmission of the message because it confirms that the message has been received and properly understood. Thus effective communicators do whatever they can to make sure they receive feedback. For example, an advertising executive hoping to convince an automobile company to use her firm to promote a new car may send a detailed proposal to the manager in the automobile company who will make the decision. In the letter accompanying the proposal, the advertising executive makes sure she will receive feedback by telling the manager that she will be calling him in two or three weeks to answer any questions he has. During the phone conversation, the advertising executive makes sure that the manager has understood the key components of the proposal. At Georgia Power, after managers watched a video of CEO Dahlberg discussing his vision for the company, feedback was encouraged by giving the managers the opportunity to ask questions of the top-management team to make sure they understood the message the video was trying to convey.

## Barriers to Effective Communication and Ways to Improve Communication

**Noise** is anything that interferes with the communication process. Noise can include the use of jargon, poor handwriting, a broken answering machine, a heavy workload that prevents a receiver from reading a written report, a receiver's bad mood resulting in the misinterpretation of a message, or the operation of perceptual biases (see Chapter 4). One of the key challenges for managers is to eliminate as much noise as possible. At Georgia Power, noise was eliminated by improving the readability and clarity of the company's written communications.

Noise is a general term, but there are specific communication problems that result in ineffective communication. Here we examine four important communication

## Chapter 13 Communication

problems in organizations and ways to overcome them so that individuals, groups, and organizations can communicate effectively and thus better achieve their goals: filtering and information distortion, poor listening, lack of or inappropriate feedback, and rumors.

### **Filtering**

Filtering is withholding part of a message because the sender thinks the receiver does not need or will not want to receive the information.

**Filtering and Information Distortion and Ways to Avoid Them.** Filtering occurs when senders withhold part of a message because they think the receiver does not need the information or will not want to receive it. Nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news, and subordinates are particularly loath to pass negative information on to their bosses. However, if subordinates withhold negative information or filter it out of their messages, a supervisor may not even be aware of a problem until it's almost too late to resolve it and what was once a minor problem that could have been easily fixed looms as a potential disaster. Supervisors also sometimes filter information in their communications with subordinates. As a result, subordinates may have more negative attitudes, be less effective, or experience more stress. Sometimes when an organization is making major changes, such as downsizing, supervisors fail to give their subordinates information about the changes, and the result is high levels of stress as subordinates become uncertain about their future with the organization.

The magnitude of the filtering problem is underscored by the fact that subordinates are sometimes reluctant to convey negative information to their superiors even in crisis situations. For example, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) scientists who analyze commercial airline crashes have found that junior crew members are often afraid to transmit important information to the plane's captain. A tragic example of this problem is the Air Florida plane that crashed into a bridge over the Potomac River after taking off from National Airport in Washington, D.C., in 1982. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) investigators determined that the crash resulted in part from the copilot's failure to tell the pilot about problems with engine power readings that were caused by ice on the engine sensors. As a result of this and other instances of poor communication and filtering, the FAA now has mandatory assertiveness and sensitivity training for airline crew members to make sure that they communicate effectively and do not engage in filtering.<sup>21</sup>

### **Information distortion**

Information distortion is meaning that occurs when a message travels through a series of senders to a receiver.

Related to the problem of filtering is **information distortion**, the change in meaning that occurs when a message travels through a series of different senders to a receiver. Experiments (and the children's game "Telephone") have shown, for example, that a message that starts at one end of a chain of people is likely to become something quite different by the time it reaches the last receiver at the other end of the chain. In addition, senders may deliberately alter or distort a message to serve their own interests—to make themselves look good or to advance their own individual or group goals at the expense of the organization's goals.

Filtering and information distortion can be avoided by establishing trust in an organization. One aspect of trust is not blaming the sender for bad news. When subordinates trust their supervisors, supervisors trust their subordinates, and coworkers trust each other, and when all members of an organization are confident that they will not be blamed for problems that they are not responsible for, filtering and distortion are less likely to take place.

**Poor Listening and Improving Listening Skills.** Many people enjoy hearing themselves talk more than they enjoy listening to others. So, not surprisingly, poor listening is responsible for many communication problems in organizations. Consistent with this observation are findings from a recent study that suggests that managers think the voice mail they send is more important than the voice mail they receive and that senders generally think their messages are more important, urgent, and helpful than do the receivers.<sup>22</sup> In addition, people sometimes listen only to the part of a message they want to hear.

Members of an organization can do several things to become better listeners or receivers of messages. Being a good listener entails giving a sender your undivided

attention, looking him or her in the eye, and not interrupting. Rather than thinking about what they are going to say next, good listeners focus on trying to understand what they are hearing and how the sender feels about it. Being a good listener also means asking questions and rephrasing key points to make sure you understand their meaning, avoiding distracting the sender (for example, by glancing at the clock or tapping a pencil), and accepting what the sender is telling you even if it is not what you want to hear. It is especially important for supervisors to be good listeners when communicating with their subordinates and thereby counter the natural tendency to pay more attention to information that comes from one's superiors rather than from one's subordinates. The FAA's mandatory sensitivity training for airline crews, for example, may help pilots become better listeners.

**Lack of or Inappropriate Feedback and Developing Good Feedback Skills.** Sometimes communication breaks down because receivers either fail to provide feedback or provide feedback in an inappropriate manner. This barrier to effective communication is especially likely to occur when feedback is negative, for giving negative feedback makes people feel uncomfortable. A manager at a bank, for example, may be reluctant to let one of her subordinates know that a loan application on which the subordinate worked closely with a customer is going to be turned down. The manager may avoid bringing up the issue, thus putting the subordinate in the embarrassing position of first hearing the bad news from the unhappy customer. By developing good feedback skills, managers and workers at all levels in an organization will be more likely to respond in an appropriate manner to messages they receive, whether positive or negative.

Good feedback concentrates on the message being responded to, not on the sender's personality, attitudes, capabilities, or more general performance levels. Good feedback is specific and focuses on things the sender controls. In providing feedback, the receiver should try to put himself or herself in the original sender's shoes, understand how the sender feels, and relay feedback in a manner that will convey the right message while not unnecessarily hurting the sender's feelings.

**Rumors and How to Overcome Them.** A **rumor** is unofficial information on topics that are important or interesting to an organization's members. Rumors usually spread quickly and uncontrollably and, once started, are often hard to stop. Rumors are especially likely to spread when members of an organization are not informed about matters that have the potential to affect them personally, such as a takeover attempt by another company, an impending layoff, or a scandal involving a top manager. Rumors on sensational topics help relieve the everyday boredom of organizational life. Such rumors often entail gossip about the personal lives and habits of members of the organization.

How can companies try to halt the spread of inaccurate and sometimes damaging rumors as well as provide workers with up-to-date, accurate information on issues that are important to them? One way is through the use of company television systems, as indicated in Insight 13.3.

### **INSIGHT 13.3: COMMUNICATION**

#### ***Company TVs and Rumor Control***

## SELECTING AN APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION MEDIUM: INFORMATION RICHNESS AND NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

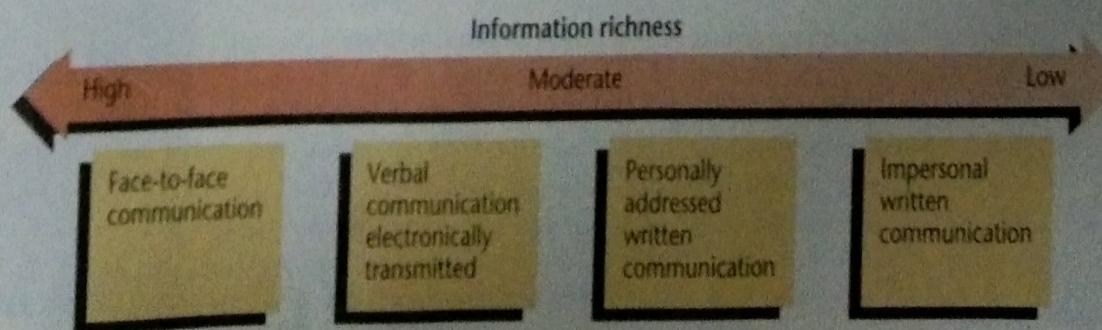
That sharing information to reach a common understanding is often more difficult than it seems is evidenced by the communication difficulties experienced by organizations such as Georgia Power and IBM. Choosing the right communication medium for any given message can help ensure that a message is received and properly understood, but selecting a medium involves tradeoffs for both the sender and the receiver. One way to examine these tradeoffs is by exploring the information richness of various media, their demands on the receiver's and the sender's time, and the paper trail they leave. In this section, we explore these issues and the implications of advances in information technology for communication in organizations.

### Information Richness

Communication media differ in their **information richness**—that is, the amount of information they can carry and the extent to which they enable senders and receivers to reach a common understanding.<sup>26</sup> Media that are high in information richness are capable of transmitting more information and are more likely to generate a common understanding than are media that are low in richness. The various media available to organizational members can be categorized into four general groups based on their information richness (see Fig. 13.2).<sup>27</sup>

**Face-to-Face Communication.** Face-to-face communication is the medium highest in information richness, for at least two reasons. The first is that it provides the receiver not only with a verbal message but also with a nonverbal message conveyed by the sender's body language and facial expressions. The nonverbal part of the communication provides receivers with additional information they can use in decoding the message. When Joan Schmitt, an engineer for a construction firm, met with her supervisor Fred Johnston to discuss the plans for a Brazilian project the company was bidding on, Johnston got up from behind his desk to sit in a chair next to Schmitt's as she described her proposal. His action provided Schmitt with information: He respected her and wanted her to feel that they were on equal footing in their discussion of the bidding. Similarly, when Johnston mentioned that the newly hired and inexperienced son of the owner of the firm was to be a member of the team preparing the bid, his failure to look her in the eye and his pursed lips conveyed that he was not pleased with this situation.

The second reason why face-to-face communication is highest in information richness is that it allows receivers to provide senders with instant feedback. Senders can clarify ambiguous information immediately, and the communication process can be cycled through as many times as needed until a common understanding is reached. At the engineering firm, Fred Johnston was quite familiar with the Brazilian clients for whom the bid was being prepared and thought it best that they be more involved in the bidding process than was normally the case. He suggested, for



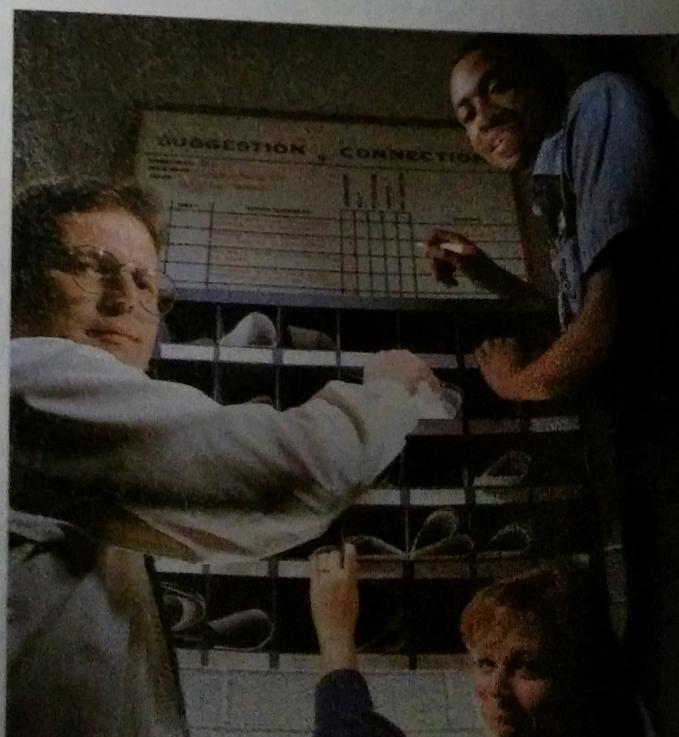
example, that the clients have more input into materials specifications and quality parameters than was usual. Joan Schmitt was taken aback by Johnston's suggestion. She wasn't sure why it was important and wasn't sure how to carry it out. After a twenty-minute discussion, however, Schmitt realized that what Johnston was suggesting was not unreasonable or difficult and made sense given the clients' desire to have more input into the details of the building's construction than was customary.

**Verbal Communication Electronically Transmitted.** Verbal communication that is electronically transmitted over telephone lines is the communication medium next highest in information richness. Telephone conversations do not provide the receiver with nonverbal information from body language and facial expressions, but they still are a rich source of information. The receiver can hear the message, interpret the tone of voice in which it is delivered, hear clearly which parts of the message the sender emphasizes, and get a sense of the sender's general demeanor while communicating. Because this type of verbal communication is personally addressed to the receiver, the receiver is likely to pay attention to it. When Johnston was talking on the telephone with the Brazilian clients about the building they wanted, for example, he could sense their enthusiasm and was pleased that they sounded comfortable talking with him.

Telephone conversations also allow for instant feedback so misunderstandings can be cleared up quickly. Although not in common use because of its high cost, AT&T's "video" telephone allows callers to see on a screen the person they are talking to. That image adds to the information richness of this medium.

Also in this category of electronic verbal media is communication using voice mail and answering machines. Voice mail is a communication system that allows senders to leave oral messages for receivers who can retrieve these messages even when they are away from their offices. Answering machines are similar to voice mail in function but are based in individual offices, not organized into a company-wide system. Communication by means of voice mail and answering machines allows receivers to gather information from the sender's tone of voice and inflections in the sender's verbal communication, but they do not permit immediate feedback. Voice mail and answering machines are particularly useful media when receivers are frequently away from their offices (as is often the case for salespeople, building contractors, professors, and insurance agents). When using voice mail or answering machines to communicate with a receiver, the sender needs to make sure that the receiver monitors this medium by calling in frequently to receive messages.

*At the Childress Buick/Kia car dealership in Phoenix, Arizona, managers found that one of employees' biggest complaints was that they never knew what was "going on around here." So Rusty Childress created a team to find new ways to communicate with employees. One team suggestion was that department heads should regularly summarize recent departmental activities in a written memo placed in each employees' mailbox.*



Communication by means of company TV systems, which we discussed earlier, combines elements of verbal communication electronically transmitted with elements of face-to-face communication. This medium relies on electronic transmission of messages but, because of the presence of visual images, enables receivers to interpret facial expressions and body language. Communication over this medium, however, is not personally addressed to particular receivers, and as a result the audience may pay less attention to the message than the sender was hoping for.

**Personally Addressed Written Communication.** Written communications (such as letters and memos) that are addressed personally to the receiver are next in information richness. Personally addressing the communication helps to ensure that the receiver will pay attention to it, and writing for one person allows the sender to write the message in such a way that the receiver is most likely to understand it. Feedback is not instantaneous, but this may not be always be a disadvantage. In some situations it is important for receivers to have time to reflect on a message and formulate a response.

Electronic mail (E-mail) is included in this category of media. Electronic mail allows people to communicate with each other through their personal computers. Senders transmit messages to receivers by typing the message on their personal computer and addressing it to the receiver's electronic address. For this form of personal communication to be effective, receivers have to check periodically to see whether they have any electronic messages. Though popular and increasing in usage in companies large and small, electronic mail is posing some difficult ethical issues for organizations and their members, as indicated in Insight 13.4.

#### **INSIGHT 13.4: ETHICS**

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##### *The Ethics of E-Mail*

### **Impersonal Written Communication.**

Lowest in information richness is written communication that is not addressed to a particular receiver. This form of communication is used when a sender needs to communicate with a large number of receivers simultaneously, such as when a company president wants to let all members of an organization know that rumors of an impending layoff are unfounded. Because this type of medium is impersonal, receiving feedback is unlikely. For this reason, it is especially important for the sender to use language that all receivers will be able to interpret correctly, so a common understanding can be reached.

This kind of medium is also useful when a large amount of information needs to be communicated, such as the monthly sales of a company's products by state, enrollment in a large state university by college and major, and the specifications and instructions for using a complicated printing press to print newspapers. When information is complicated (like the printing press instructions), some form of written communication is a necessity so that receivers can go back and review the information as needed.

**Summary.** The four categories of communication media were presented in order of decreasing information richness.<sup>30</sup> As in most attempts to classify things, however, there are exceptions to this categorization scheme, and some media do not fit neatly into one of the categories. Sometimes, for example, written communication can convey just as much (and perhaps more) information and have the same potential for creating a common understanding as verbal communication. Also, as you will see a little later in this section, some communication media (such as computers that can be used for electronically mediated group meetings) are not easily categorized into one of the four types.

## *Tradeoffs in the Choice of Media*

Because face-to-face communication is highest in richness, it always be used first.