

## Foundations of Communication

### Introduction

Exceptional communication is on every manager's list of necessary employee abilities and is vital to successful leadership in today's fast paced and multigenerational workplace. The ability to convey a message in a manner that everyone around the table or across the organization understands requires awareness of communication basics and processes as well as practice to achieve desired results.

### Communication in the workplace today

From cave paintings and multiple alphabets to texting and mass media bombarding us daily, we have come a long way in the history of communication.



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### Communication Through the Ages – copyright clear

Communication has a much greater scope than it did as recently as a generation ago and has changed dramatically since the Baby Boomers hit the workplace in the mid 1960's.

At work when I say something is "sick" ...I really have to take into account that it will mean two completely different things depending on the generation of the co-workers who participate in the conversation.

When we talked about "outlook" a few decades back, it was usually in the context of a conversation about planning for the future. Now when we refer to "outlook" it usually means Microsoft Outlook® messaging software, where most of us spend an inordinate amount of our day connecting, scheduling and planning with our co-workers, friends and family.

### **Why do we need to communicate in the workplace?**

An organization that encourages open and honest communication can maintain morale through difficult times. It can stimulate creativity and innovation as needed to grow the business or solve problems as well as create culture that suits the vision of the company.

Here are a few reasons to advocate for outstanding workplace communication:

- Managers and leaders can relay information about any changes that need to happen in the day-to-day business of the organization.
- Good communication increases the effectiveness and efficiency of operations.
- Positive news is shared quickly.
- Bad news can be relayed and handled in an environment that promotes open communication.
- Managers can attain employee commitment and trust.
- All employees know how the organization is performing and achieving goals.
- Communication can reduce or eliminate rumors that may be forming.
- Accomplishments of individuals, teams or pods can be celebrated.
- Transparency of senior leadership initiatives is demonstrated.

*Can you think of any other reasons?*

Occasionally, too much communication can be a distraction, but the risk of that is often outweighed by the sense of belonging and ownership that drives employee engagement. Further, an organization that promotes strong communication is ready and able to meet challenges and opportunities because the ground rules for effective communication were established under ideal conditions.

### **What's happening around the water cooler?**

Water cooler conversation has certainly changed its appearance over the last few decades. The need to connect with coworkers is still an important part of daily workplace interactions. In some cases, it still does happen close to an actual water cooler. In other companies, the water cooler is a metaphor for the break room with a full kitchen, video game lounge or employee rest area. The virtual water cooler is an instant messaging program or web based forum site where people can enjoy camaraderie and humor while they work.

In 2008, the consulting firm, Challenger, Gray and Christmas, Inc. estimated during *March Madness*, a peak time of year for college basketball, up to 1.7 million dollars was lost due to reduced productivity around 'water cooler' basketball conversations.

Dr. Alex Pentland, a professor of Media Arts and Sciences at MIT disagrees with Challenger et al. An in-depth study conducted at MIT (Pentland and Waber) showed that employees with the highest rates of social interactions with co-workers were more productive than their counterparts.

When people chat at work they talk about social things for the most part. When they talk about their lives, family, sports and the commute to work, they convey their attitudes about the things they care about. What others learn from those conversations are the things that people care about that are going to transfer to the workplace. Attitude about job roles and attitude towards other people, as well as perceptions around work/life balance, are also revealed.

"It's a bad thing to keep people chained to their desks because they are actually out collecting information"  
...Dr. Alex Pentland

### Define communication

Whenever people come in contact with each other, some form of communication takes place. Communication has extensive meaning and is dependent on the context in which it is used. For the purpose of this course, the definition below provides a high-level overview with clarification related to the workplace.

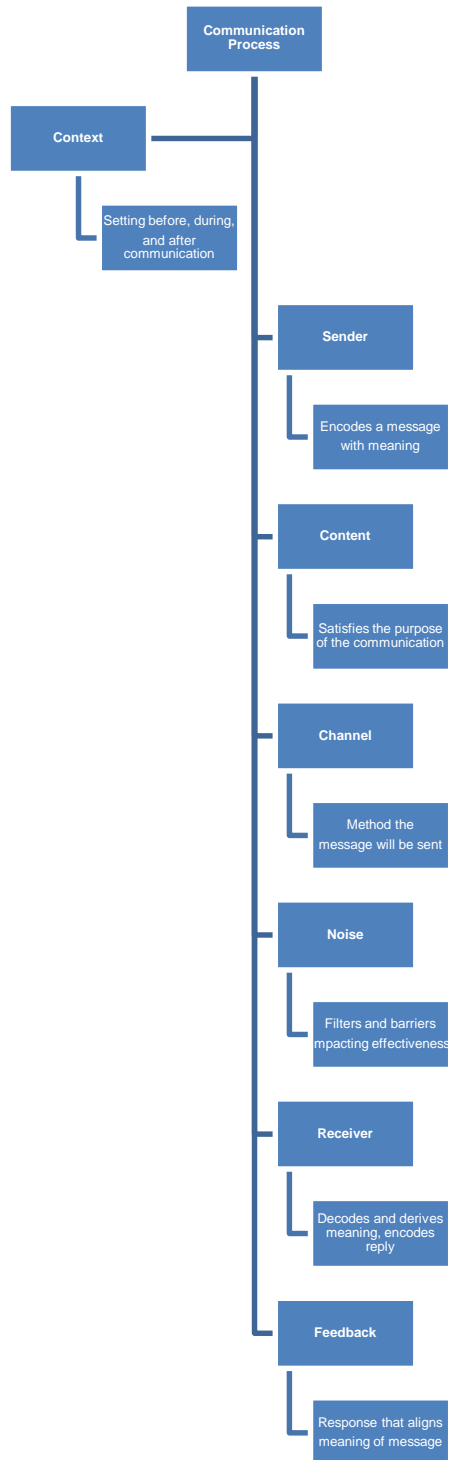
#### Definition of Communication

Communication is the process of sharing ideas, opinions, information or meaning through speech, writing, pictures, symbols or signs.

Business communication is conveying and sharing meaning and understanding in regards to goals of an organization or industry.

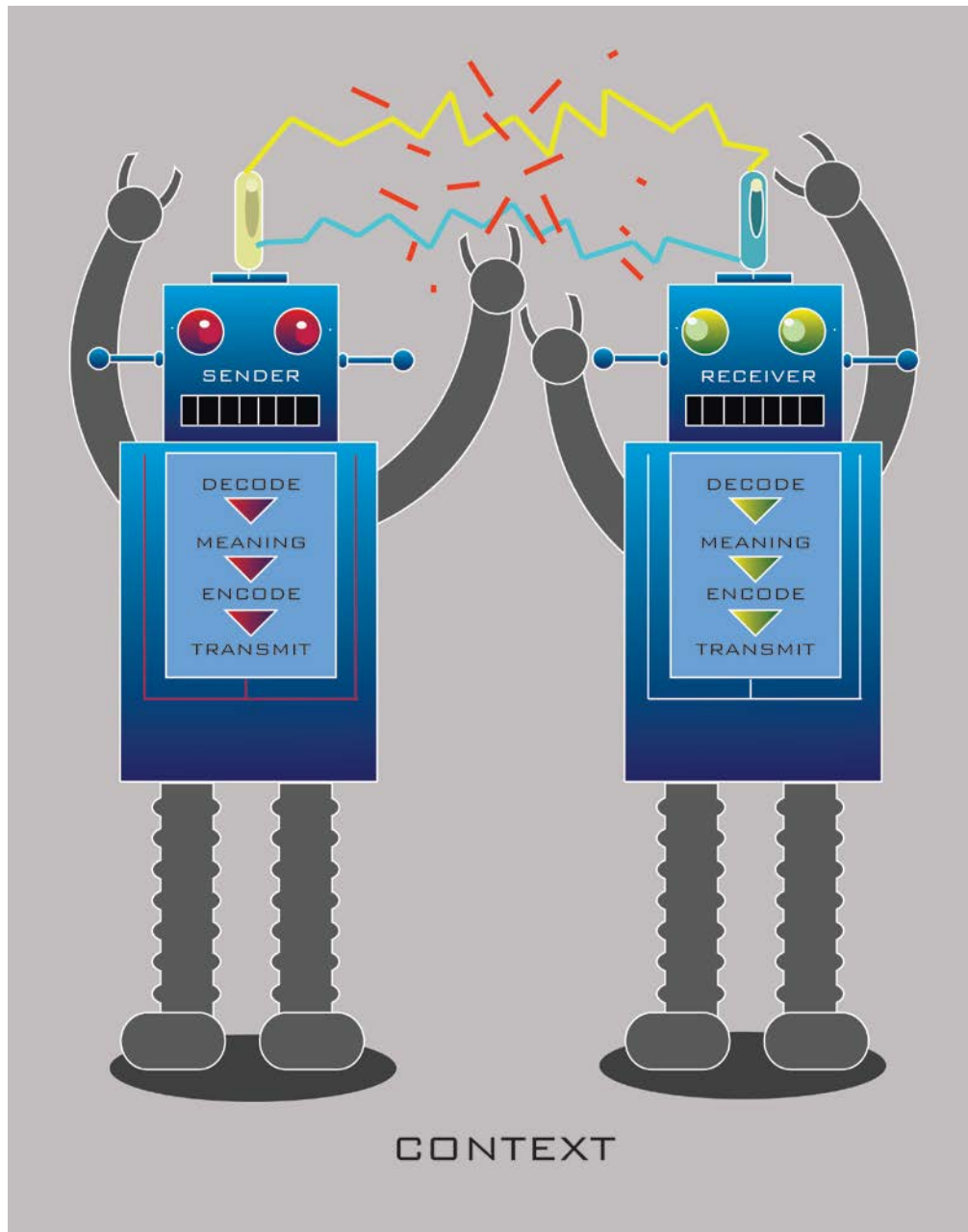
The purpose of communication is to:

- Develop understanding
- Share ideas
- Describe goals
- Define problems
- Build rapport
- Meet needs
- Clarify perceptions
- Exchange information
- Entertain
- Create culture
- Negotiate
- Satisfy social obligations
- Influence
- Maintain self-concept



## Communication Process

Communication Loop © Evan Blair



### **Sender**

The sender develops a message with the intention of minimizing confusion and misunderstanding. The message is drafted by choosing words, images and sounds that will best capture intent. Encoding refers to the activity of putting ideas and feeling for a message into an organized set of symbols, which become the medium to deliver the message.

### **Content**

The content of the message relates to the purpose of the message. It is the subject matter of the exchange and answers the question of what the message is about. The quantity of information or ideas in the message can impact the quality and delivery of the message. This includes not saying enough or saying too much.

### **Channel**

A channel is any medium that will be used to transfer the message. The type channel used for communication can vary and be a combination of auditory and visual mediums. Channels can be verbal through phone, face-to-face, voice message and use online tools such as Skype, Ventrilo and Mumble, as well as other voice transmission methods. Visual channels are mediums through which a receiver can see or read such written documents, hard copy and electronic, containing formal and informal business messages. Communication can also use the senses of touch, taste and smell, depending on the application. Examples include reading a book in Braille, and conducting a cooking lesson. All of these channels have varying strengths depending on the purpose and intention of the message.

### **Noise**

Noise refers to anything that may dilute, change or alter the original message. Noise includes external factors such as receiver distractions. Internal noises are the thoughts and feelings that may distract either the sender or the receiver from the communication process. Retrospection on past experiences and daydreaming are a few examples. Semantic noise is the unintended use of words that may hinder the process. An example may be the use of a word that is not politically correct. The receiver may not hear much after the use of that word.

### **Receiver**

The receiver goes through a process, filtered by their own life experience and perception that decodes the message and attempts to derive meaning and relevance. An ambiguous message will be influenced by mental models of the world. Factors such as knowledge, skill, beliefs and prior interactions will also impact understanding of the message intent.

### **Feedback**

Communication is a dynamic process and feedback will be returned to the sender through a variety of methods, from verbal and written to nonverbal signals and gestures. Feedback is an indicator to the sender of how effective their original message was in hitting the mark. The sender must decide if they believe the receiver got what was intended or if another message must be sent to clarify or redirect meaning.

### **Context**

All of the above happens within context; that is, the setting and everything that surrounds the communication process. Context can be physical, historical, cultural, psychological and social.

**Physical context** is the actual location, anywhere from a coffee shop to a gas plant operations area. Chatting on a manufacturing floor has a different atmosphere than sitting across the desk from a manager in their office. Temperature, lighting conditions, décor, as well as noises and smells can influence the physical context.

**Historical context** can easily impact communication and includes timing and any background information available to either or all parties. Any previous communication on the topic will also impact historical context. Industry experience and seniority, for example, are also factors for historical context.

**Cultural context** is the relevance of language and of ethnic and organizational culture. Any other principles, values or philosophies that are held by a collective can become part of the cultural context of a message. This could include lifestyles as well as customs and activities that bring groups of people together under some common interest.

**Psychological context** refers to the thoughts and feelings each party brings to the process. State of mind, from happy and relaxed to frustrated and stressed, can impact the psychological context. When one party is tired, sick, hungry or cold, their resulting mood may impact the context of the communication.

**Social context** is influenced by the relationship the communicators have with each other. Social context will be different between friends and family members or co-workers and new acquaintances. People may hold diverse understanding based on the varying ages of the participants in a communication process. How words are chosen as well as how meaning is shared is dependent on social perceptions.

### **Additional things to consider:**

If any one of the steps in the communication process fails, what we get is miscommunication. Miscommunication can occur at any time.

Even when we are saying nothing, we may be communicating. In fact, purposefully trying not to communicate might in fact be conveying a great deal. Ask anyone who

has ever been on the receiving end of the “silent treatment”. Nothing is said but a whole lot is communicated.

For business communication to be effective, we need to be clear on the meaning of each encounter and become reasonably assured that the exchange will move us forward. Ideally, the purpose of the communication will be agreed upon and each or all of the participants will be satisfied when the encounter is complete.

We learn how to communicate from birth. Depending on our life experience, personality and a multitude of additional factors, we learn and develop skills that can enhance our abilities.

What innate or learned skills do you think contribute to a person becoming an excellent communicator in the workplace?

### **Points to remember**

#### **First steps on the road to better communication:**

- Choose the best words, sights and sounds
- Choose an appropriate medium
- Recognize barriers
- Understand filters
- Attain clarity
- Be positive