

1.2 WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define communication and describe communication as a process.
2. Identify and describe the eight essential components of communication.

DEFINING COMMUNICATION

The root of the word “communication” in Latin is *communicare*, which means to share, or to make common (Weekley, 1967). Communication is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning (Pearson & Nelson, 2000).

At the center of our study of communication is the relationship that involves interaction between participants. This definition serves us well with its emphasis on the process, which we’ll examine in depth across this text, of coming to understand and share another’s point of view effectively.

The first key word in this definition is process. A process is a dynamic activity that is hard to describe because it changes (Pearson & Nelson, 2000). Imagine you are alone in your kitchen thinking. Someone you know (say, your mother) enters the kitchen and you talk briefly. What has changed? Now, imagine that your mother is joined by someone else, someone you haven’t met before—and this stranger listens intently as you speak, almost as if you were giving a speech.

What has changed? Your perspective might change, and you might watch your words more closely. The feedback or response from your mother and the stranger (who are, in essence, your audience) may cause you to re-evaluate what you are saying. When we interact, all these factors—and many more—influence the process of communication.

The second key word is understanding: “To understand is to perceive, to interpret, and to relate our perception and interpretation to what we already know.” (McLean, 2003) If a friend tells you a story about falling off a bike, what image comes to mind? Now your friend points out the window and you see a motorcycle lying on the ground. Understanding the words and the concepts or objects they refer to is an important part of the communication process.

Next comes the word sharing. Sharing means doing something together with one or more people. You may share a joint activity, as when you share in compiling a report; or you may benefit jointly from a resource, as when you and several co-workers share a pizza.

In communication, sharing occurs when you convey thoughts, feelings, ideas, or insights to others. You can also share with yourself (a process called intrapersonal communication) when you bring ideas to consciousness, ponder how you feel about something, or figure out the solution to a problem and have a classic “Aha!” moment when something becomes clear.

Finally, meaning is what we share through communication. The word “bike” represents both a bicycle and a short name for a motorcycle. By looking at the context the word is used

in and by asking questions, we can discover the shared meaning of the word and understand the message.

EIGHT ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATION

In order to better understand the communication process, we can break it down into a series of eight essential components:

1. SOURCE

2. MESSAGE

3. CHANNEL

4. RECEIVER

5. FEEDBACK

6. ENVIRONMENT

7. CONTEXT

8. INTERFERENCE

Each of these eight components serves an integral function in the overall process. Let's explore them one by one.

SOURCE

The source imagines, creates, and sends the message. In a public speaking situation, the source is the person giving the speech. He or she conveys the message by sharing new information with the audience.

The speaker also conveys a message through his or her tone of voice, body language, and choice of clothing.

The speaker begins by first determining the message—what to say and how to say it.

The second step involves encoding the message by choosing just the right order or the perfect words to convey the intended meaning.

The third step is to present or send the information to the receiver or audience.

Finally, by watching for the audience's reaction, the source perceives how well they received the message and responds with clarification or supporting information.

MESSAGE

“The message is the stimulus or meaning produced by the source for the receiver or audience.” (McLean, 2005)

When you plan to give a speech or write a report, your message may seem to be only the words you choose that will convey your meaning. But that is just the beginning. The words are brought together with grammar and organization. You may choose to save your most important point for last.

The message also consists of the way you say it—in a speech, with your tone of voice, your body language, and your appearance—and in a report, with your writing style, punctuation, and the headings and formatting you choose. In addition, part of the message may be the environment or context you present it in and the noise that might make your message hard to hear or see.

Imagine, for example, that you are addressing a large audience of sales reps and are aware there is a World Series game tonight. Your audience might have a hard time settling down, but you may choose to open with, “I understand there is an important game tonight.” In this way, by expressing verbally something that most people in your audience are aware of and interested in, you might grasp and focus their attention.

CHANNEL

“The channel is the way in which a message or messages travel between source and receiver.” (McLean, 2005)

For example, think of your television. How many channels do you have on your television? Each channel takes up some space, even in a digital world, in the cable or in the signal that brings the message of each channel to your home. Television combines an audio signal you hear with a visual signal you see. Together they convey the message to the receiver or audience. Turn off the volume on your television. Can you still understand what is happening? Many times you can, because the body language conveys part of the message of the show. Now turn up the volume but turn around so that you cannot see the television. You can still hear the dialogue and follow the story line.

Similarly, when you speak or write, you are using a channel to convey your message. Spoken channels include face-to-face conversations, speeches, telephone conversations and voice mail messages, radio, public address systems, and voice over Internet protocol (VoIP).

Written channels include letters, memorandums, purchase orders, invoices, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, e-mail, text messages, tweets, and so forth.

RECEIVER

“The receiver receives the message from the source and decodes it, analysing and interpreting the message in ways both intended and unintended by the source.” (McLean, 2005)

As a receiver you listen, see, touch, smell, and/or taste to receive a message. Your audience “sizes you up,” much as you might check them out long before you take the stage or open your mouth.

The nonverbal responses of your listeners can serve as clues on how to adjust your opening. By imagining yourself in their place, you anticipate what you would look for if you were them. You too can recognize the interaction between source and receiver in a business communication context.

All of this happens at the same time, illustrating why and how communication is always changing.

FEEDBACK

When you respond to the source, intentionally or unintentionally, you are giving feedback. Feedback is composed of messages the receiver sends back to the source. Verbal or nonverbal, all these feedback signals allow the source to see how well, how accurately (or how poorly and inaccurately) the message was received.

Feedback also provides an opportunity for the receiver or audience to ask for clarification, to agree or disagree, or to indicate that the source could make the message more interesting. As the amount of feedback increases, the accuracy of communication also increases (Leavitt & Mueller, 1951).

For example, suppose you are a sales manager participating in a conference call with four sales reps. As the source, you want to tell the reps to take advantage of the fact that it is World Series season to close sales on baseball-related sports gear. You state your message, but you hear no replies from your listeners. You might assume that this means they understood and agreed with you, but later in the month you might be disappointed to find that very few sales were made. If you followed up your message with a request for feedback (“Does this make sense? Do any of you have any questions?”) you might have an opportunity to clarify your message, and to find out whether any of the sales reps believed your suggestion would not work with their customers.

ENVIRONMENT

“The environment is the atmosphere, physical and psychological, where you send and receive messages.”
(McLean, 2005)

The environment can include the tables, chairs, lighting, and sound equipment that are in the room. The room itself is an example of the environment.

The environment can also include factors like formal dress that may indicate whether a discussion is open and caring or more professional and formal.

People may be more likely to have an intimate conversation when they are physically close to each other, and less likely when they can only see each other from across the room. In that case, they may text each other, itself an intimate form of communication.

The choice to text is influenced by the environment. As a speaker, your environment will impact and play a role in your speech. It's always a good idea to go check out where you'll be speaking before the day of the actual presentation.

CONTEXT

“The context of the communication interaction involves the setting, scene, and expectations of the individuals involved.”
(McLean, 2005)

A professional communication context may involve business suits (environmental cues) that directly or indirectly influence expectations of language and behaviour among the participants.

A presentation or discussion does not take place as an isolated event. When you came to class, you came from somewhere. So did the person seated next to you, as did the instructor.

The degree to which the environment is formal or informal depends on the contextual expectations for communication held by the participants. The person sitting next to you may be used to informal communication with instructors, but this particular instructor may be used to verbal and nonverbal displays of respect in the academic environment. You may be

used to formal interactions with instructors as well, and find your classmate's question of "Hey Teacher, do we have homework today?" as rude and inconsiderate when they see it as normal. The nonverbal response from the instructor will certainly give you a clue about how they perceive the interaction, both the word choices and how they were said.

Context is all about what people expect from each other, and we often create those expectations out of environmental cues.

In a business meeting, who speaks first? That probably has some relation to the position and role each person has outside the meeting. Context plays a very important role in communication, particularly across cultures.

INTERFERENCE

Interference, also called noise, can come from any source. "Interference is anything that blocks or changes the source's intended meaning of the message."(McLean, 2005)

For example, if you drove a car to work or school, chances are you were surrounded by noise. Car horns, billboards, or perhaps the radio in your car interrupted your thoughts, or your conversation with a passenger.

Psychological noise is what happens when your thoughts occupy your attention while you are hearing, or reading, a message. Imagine that it is 4:45p.m. and your boss, who is at a meeting in another city, e-mails you asking for last month's sales figures, an analysis of current sales projections, and the sales figures from the same month for the past five years. You may open the e-mail, start to read,

and think, “Great—no problem—I have those figures and that analysis right here in my computer.” You fire off a reply with last month’s sales figures and the current projections attached. Then, at five o’clock, you turn off your computer and go home. The next morning, your boss calls on the phone to tell you he was inconvenienced because you neglected to include the sales figures from the previous years. What was the problem? Interference: by thinking about how you wanted to respond to your boss’s message, you prevented yourself from reading attentively enough to understand the whole message.

Interference can come from other sources, too. Perhaps you are hungry, and your attention to your current situation interferes with your ability to listen. Maybe the office is hot and stuffy. If you were a member of an audience listening to an executive speech, how could this impact your ability to listen and participate?

Noise interferes with normal encoding and decoding of the message carried by the channel between source and receiver. Not all noise is bad, but noise interferes with the communication process. For example, your cell phone ringtone may be a welcome noise to you, but it may interrupt the communication process in class and bother your classmates.

SUMMARY:

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Communication is simply the act of transferring information from one place to another.

Although this is a simple definition, when we think about how we may communicate the subject becomes a lot more

complex. There are various categories of communication and more than one may occur at any time.

The different categories of communication include:

- **Spoken or Verbal Communication:** face-to-face, telephone, radio or television and other media.
- **Non-Verbal Communication:** body language, gestures, how we dress or act - even our scent.
- **Written Communication:** letters, e-mails, books, magazines, the Internet or via other media and **Visualizations:** graphs and charts, maps, logos and other visualizations can communicate messages.

THE DESIRED OUTCOME OR GOAL OF ANY COMMUNICATION PROCESS IS UNDERSTANDING.

The process of **interpersonal communication** cannot be regarded as a phenomena which simply 'happens', but should be seen as a process which involves participants negotiating their role in this process, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Senders and receivers are of course vital in communication. In face-to-face communication the roles of the sender and receiver are not distinct as both parties communicate with each other, even if in very subtle ways such as through eye-contact (or lack of) and general body language.

There are many other subtle ways that we communicate (perhaps even unintentionally) with others, for example the tone of our voice can give clues to our mood or emotional state, whilst hand signals or gestures can add to a spoken message.

In written communication the sender and receiver are more distinct. Until recent times, relatively few writers and publishers were very powerful when it came to communicating the written word. Today we can all write and publish our ideas online, which has led to an explosion of information and communication possibilities.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

A message or communication is sent by the sender through a communication channel to a receiver, or to multiple receivers.

The sender must encode the message (the information being conveyed) into a form that is appropriate to the communication channel, and the receiver(s) then decodes the message to understand its meaning and significance.

Misunderstanding can occur at any stage of the communication process.

Effective communication involves minimising potential misunderstanding and overcoming any barriers to communication at each stage in the communication process.

An effective communicator understands their audience, chooses an appropriate communication channel, hones their message to this channel and encodes the message to reduce misunderstanding by the receiver(s).

They will also seek out **feedback** from the receiver(s) as to how the message is understood and attempt to correct any misunderstanding or confusion as soon as possible.

Receivers can use techniques such as Clarification and Reflection as effective ways to ensure that the message sent has been understood correctly.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Communication theory states that communication involves a sender and a receiver (or receivers) conveying information through a communication channel.

Communication Channels is the term given to the way in which we communicate. There are multiple communication channels available to us today, for example face-to-face conversations, telephone calls, text messages, email, the Internet (including social media such as

Facebook and Twitter), radio and TV, written letters, brochures and reports to name just a few.

Choosing an appropriate communication channel is vital for effective communication as each communication channel has different strengths and weaknesses.

For example, broadcasting news of an upcoming event via a written letter might convey the message clearly to one or two individuals but will not be a time or cost effective way to broadcast the message to a large number of people. On the other hand, conveying complex, technical information is better done via a printed document than via a spoken message since the receiver is able to assimilate the information at their own pace and revisit items that they do not fully understand.

Written communication is also useful as a way of recording what has been said, for example taking minutes in a meeting.

ENCODING MESSAGES

All messages must be encoded into a form that can be conveyed by the communication channel chosen for the message.

We all do this every day when transferring abstract thoughts into spoken words or a written form. However, other communication channels require different forms of encoding, e.g. text written for a report will not work well if broadcast via a radio programme, and the short, abbreviated text used in text messages would be inappropriate if sent via a letter.

Complex data may be best communicated using a graph or chart or other visualisation.

Effective communicators encode their messages with their intended audience in mind as well as the communication channel. This involves an appropriate use of language, conveying the information simply and clearly, anticipating and eliminating likely causes of confusion and misunderstanding, and knowing the receivers' experience in decoding other similar communications. Successful encoding of messages is a vital skill in effective communication.

DECODING MESSAGES

Once received, the receiver/s need to decode the message. Successful decoding is also a vital communication skill.

People will decode and understand messages in different ways based upon any **Barriers to Communication** which might be present, their experience and understanding of the context of the message, their psychological state, and the time and place of receipt as well as many other potential factors.

Understanding how the message will be decoded, and anticipating as many of the potential sources of misunderstanding as possible, is the art of a successful communicator.

FEEDBACK

Receivers of messages are likely to provide feedback on how they have understood the messages through both verbal and non-verbal reactions.

Effective communicators pay close attention to this feedback as it the only way to assess whether the message has been understood as intended, and it allows any confusion to be corrected.

Bear in mind that the extent and form of feedback will vary according to the communication channel used: for example feedback during a face-to-face or telephone conversation will be immediate and direct, whilst feedback to messages conveyed via TV or radio will be indirect and may be delayed, or even conveyed through other media such as the Internet.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The communication process involves understanding, sharing, and meaning, and it consists of eight essential elements: source, message, channel, receiver, feedback, environment, context, and interference. Among the models of communication are the transactional process, in which actions happen simultaneously, and the constructivist model, which focuses on shared meaning.

EXERCISES

1. Draw what you think communication looks like. Share your drawing with your classmates.
2. List three environmental cues and indicate how they influence your expectations for communication. Please share your results with your classmates.
3. How does context influence your communication? Consider the language and culture people grew up with, and the role these play in communication styles.
4. If you could design the perfect date, what activities, places, and/or environmental cues would you include to set the mood? Please share your results with your classmates.
5. Observe two people talking. Describe their communication. See if you can find all eight components and provide an example for each one.
6. What assumptions are present in transactional model of communication? Find an example of a model of communication in your workplace or classroom, and provide an example for all eight components.

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