Feedback

In this activity you examined the transmission communication model in some detail. To communicate effectively, the code and channel that you choose will be influenced not only by the content of the message but also by the needs of the receiver. If you don’t select appropriate words and non-verbal signals, your audience may well miss the point that you’re trying to make. It is essential to include a mechanism for gaining feedback from the receiver so that you can measure understanding. This may be by simply asking, ‘Is that clear?’

Barriers to communication

Are you ready to listen?

Total Eclipse of Communication
Author unknown

From: Managing Director
To: Executive Director
‘Tomorrow morning there will be a total eclipse of the sun at nine o’clock. This is something which we cannot see every day. So let the work-force line up outside, in their best clothes to watch it. To mark the occasion of this rare occurrence, I will personally explain the phenomenon to them. If it is raining we will not be able to see it very well and in that case the work force should assemble in the canteen.’

From: Executive Director
To: Departmental Head
‘By order of the Managing Director, there will be a total eclipse of the sun at nine o’clock tomorrow morning. If it is raining we will not be able to see it in our best clothes, on the site. In this case the disappearance of the sun will be followed through in the canteen. This is something we cannot see happening every day.’

From: Departmental Heads
To: Sectional Heads
‘By order of the Managing Director, we shall follow the disappearance of the sun in our best clothes, in the canteen at nine o’clock tomorrow morning. The Managing Director will tell
us whether it is going to rain. This is something which we cannot see happen every day.’

From: Section Heads
To: Foreman

‘If it is raining in the canteen tomorrow morning, which is something that we cannot see happen every day, the Managing director in his best clothes, will disappear at nine o’ clock.’

From: Foreman
To: All Operators

‘Tomorrow morning at nine o’ clock, the Managing Director will disappear. It’s a pity that we can’t see this happen every day.’

You will have come across miscommunications at work and in life. This example illustrates how people can distort the message according to what they want or think they should be hearing. During the communication process, our messages may be blocked or distorted. This can happen at various stages of the communication process: the sender may not code the message effectively, the medium may be inappropriate or affected by external factors such as noise, and the receiver may not have the knowledge or skill to decode the message. The problem often lies in attitudes, in other words in the way we deliver a message and the ability or willingness of our audience to receive it.

Edwin H. Friedman a leadership writer, described it like this.

The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change. Communication does not depend on syntax, or eloquence, or rhetoric, or articulation but on the emotional context in which the message is being heard. People can only hear you when they are moving toward you, and they are not likely to when your words are pursuing them. Even the choicest words lose their power when they are used to overpower. Attitudes are the real figures of speech.

So does what we say matter, or is it just the ‘emotional context’ and the way in which we say it? Think about it. You are listening to a great speaker, but you have something else on your mind. It’s very difficult to concentrate. The problem may be that your mind is rightly on something more important or it may be that the so called ‘great speaker’ hasn’t grabbed your attention. A range of factors will come into play, but if people aren’t ready to listen its unlikely that your message will get through.
Coding and decoding

Guirdham (1995) developed a model to illustrate other possible sources of error at each stage of the communication process.

Figure 1.8 Sources of error at each stage in the communication process

This table shows some of the reasons why errors can occur in the communication process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Why errors may occur</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sender: idea</td>
<td>Ideas may not be clearly formulated before coding and transmission begins. For example, you may want to dispute a decision but you haven’t thought about alternative ways forward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sender: coding</td>
<td>You don’t have the right vocabulary to express your thoughts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You use overly complex language or jargon that the receiver cannot understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission: medium</td>
<td>The medium may modify the message. For example, if you communicate by telephone or in writing, the receiver cannot use your non-verbal signals to help interpret your message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission: environment</td>
<td>The environment can distort the message. For example, noise on a telephone line could distort a message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Things happening around the sender or receiver (e.g. other people speaking, coming into the room, etc.) may distract them from the message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiver: decoding</td>
<td>Decoding may distort the message. The receiver may not hear the correct words, or may read written communications too quickly and misunderstand the message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiver: idea</td>
<td>The receiver’s perceptions may distort the message. For example, their beliefs or mindset based on previous experience may create a barrier so that they don’t listen to the message.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.3 Errors in the communication process

In ongoing communication, as messages go backwards and forwards between sender and receiver, the potential for error increases. In group situations, such as meetings, where all the participants have differing perceptions, the scope for errors increases still further. It is not unusual for a group of people to come out of a meeting with very different ideas about what has been agreed.
One way to avoid or at least minimize these errors is to use feedback to check understanding. Continually check back, asking, ‘Does that mean…?’ ‘So do we agree…?’ ‘Can we go back…?’ to confirm that the message has been transmitted accurately.

**Perceptions and context**

Some sources of error are not tied to specific stages in the communication process. For example, both sender and receiver may have differing perceptions or make assumptions. It is therefore important to examine the following main types of barrier.

**Environment**

The environment in which the communication takes place may contain physical or emotional barriers.

Physical barriers include:

♦ interference – distractions, noise, problems with technology

♦ discomfort – circumstances which affect concentration such as being too hot or too cold, feeling ill, etc.

Emotional barriers, such as one person feeling angry or unhappy, can affect the atmosphere in a meeting and distort messages.

**Language**

Language is at the heart of the coding and decoding processes. Problems can arise if the language used is unfamiliar to one of the parties, for example:

♦ Jargon: many professions rely heavily on jargon and have their own ‘language’ that is impenetrable to outsiders. Senders can use jargon as a form of power over those who are not ‘in the loop’.

♦ Acronyms and abbreviations: although these can form an useful shorthand, they exclude receivers who are not familiar with their meaning.

A prime example of the problems that inappropriate language can raise is the use of ‘text language’ in transmitting both phone messages and emails. Although the message may be perfectly comprehensible to someone who texts regularly, it will be meaningless to others who haven’t acquired this skill.

A second problem with language is that we assume words have the same meaning for different people. Our understanding of a word is influenced by our background knowledge, culture and experience.
Culture

Culture can impact on the interpretation of non-verbal signals. Pease and Pease (2004) identify a range of noticeable cultural differences in the ways that people:

♦ greet each other. For example, some cultures kiss while others are satisfied with the briefest of handshakes

♦ use gestures: a potential minefield since even the most seemingly innocuous gesture (to the British!) such as pointing with the forefinger can be offensive to some Asian cultures

♦ use personal space: in general, northern Europeans and Americans are less comfortable with touching than southern Europeans, Indians and people from the Middle East.

Guirdham (1995) says that to work successfully with people of other cultures, you must understand their ways of working. For example, Americans value direct verbal interaction and ‘straight speaking’ whereas the Japanese value spiral logic and indirect verbal interaction. Both the Japanese and Chinese place great importance on ‘saving face’ and ensuring that neither the sender nor receiver of a message is embarrassed. Consequently they may appear to understand a message when they don’t, or to agree with you when they have no intention of complying with your wishes.

Perceptions

The term ‘perceptions’ encompasses a range of thought processes, including the assumptions we make, and our subconscious attitudes that inform our values and beliefs. Differing perceptions can form major barriers in communication. Because perceptions are often ‘invisible’ and subconscious they frequently go undetected. In some cases perceptions are used to manipulate people’s thinking. Our perceptions are influenced by the following.

1 Jumping to conclusions

A father and his son were driving to a football game when their car stalled on the railway tracks. In the distance a train blew a warning. Frantically the father tried to start the engine, but in his panic he couldn’t turn the key. When the train hit the car the father was killed outright. The son was rushed to hospital, needing immediate surgery. As he was wheeled into the operating theatre, the surgeon blanched and muttered ‘I can’t operate on this boy – he’s my son’.

It’s common for people to take a couple of minutes to get the real answer to this riddle. Is the surgeon the boy’s real father? Is it someone else’s father in the car? In reality the surgeon is the boy’s mother.

One of the characteristics of perceptions concerns our need to make sense of our environment and to search for meaning. We use our experience to fill in the gaps in incomplete data. Although this is useful, it can also lead us to jump to conclusions
which can be wildly inaccurate. Think about times when you and a colleague have drawn two very different conclusions from a situation. Why was that?

2 **Unstated assumptions about the other person’s beliefs and intentions**

Our assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once and a while, or the light won’t come in.

Alan Alda, actor

3 **Stereotyping**

Think for a moment about your own stereotypes and how they might affect the way that you communicate, either as sender or receiver of a message by completing the following sentences with three terms that you think most accurately describe each group:

Religious leaders are...
Teachers are...
Artists are...
Engineers are...

Lipmann (1922) describes stereotypes as pictures in the head. He claims that when we meet a teacher or an artist, or someone who fits our stereotype, we assign them personality traits based on the picture and make assumptions about what and how that person thinks.

4 **Assuming that the audience has the knowledge or capacity to understand the message**

5 **Perceived status particularly if we think that the person we’re communicating with is of much higher or lower status than we are**

6 **Values and beliefs**

**The organisation**

The organisation or group in which we operate can be a barrier to communication because of a:

- lack of appropriate communication channels. For example, you know that someone in the organization has the information you need but you don’t know who they are
- culture that discourages informal communication by insisting on putting everything in writing
- culture of individualism that makes it difficult to obtain a corporate view
- culture that discourages individual expression
- culture of conflict that leads to information being distorted or withheld.
It would be impossible to overcome all these barriers: human beings are simply not perfect enough to put their thoughts into words without sometimes distorting them. We can, however, reduce the risk of miscommunication by taking some simple steps.

♦ Be clear in your own mind about what you want to communicate.
♦ Select the right medium and use it appropriately.
♦ Step into the receiver’s shoes and anticipate the impact of your communication.
♦ Use feedback to encourage two-way communication and check understanding.
♦ When possible, communicate directly, face-to-face so that you can use non-verbal signals.
♦ Limit the number of links in the communication chain.

The last point is particularly important within the context of organisational communications. Try to avoid messages being diffused through various levels of management; they may well get distorted as they move downwards or upwards.

Activity 2
Overcome communication barriers

In this activity you will focus on identifying and overcoming barriers that you’ve experienced in verbal communication.

1 Think about a conversation you have had recently with an individual or group of people that didn’t go as well as you wanted it to. You should have been sending the message. For example, you may have been discussing a colleague’s performance with them or delivering instructions.

Here is an example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication I was involved in:</th>
<th>Communication channel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informing team about new efficiency targets that will be rolled out over the next three months</td>
<td>Presentation to group of six team members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2 Reflect on the communication and identify the barriers that may have led to distortion. Use the headings in the table to list these barriers and suggest possible ways of overcoming them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of barrier</th>
<th>Sender</th>
<th>Transmission</th>
<th>Receiver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrier</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrier</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barrier</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Feedback

The number of barriers you identified may have surprised you. It is relatively straightforward to eliminate environmental barriers by choosing the appropriate time and place for the communication. For example, don’t try to have a complex or confidential discussion in a busy corridor or place an order down a crackling phone line.

Eliminating ‘sender’ barriers means thinking though the message in your own mind first. It also means communicating assertively and making sure you choose the appropriate medium. For example, give complex instructions in writing rather than expect people to remember them, use appropriate language that your receiver will understand. Minimising ‘receiver’ barriers from your end involves getting to know the receiver – their attitudes and beliefs – so you can see things from their point of view.
Connections, such as one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many, can be achieved in any number of ways from the traditional report to instant messaging, texts, teleconferencing, video links, intranet broadcasting, pod casting and blogs. The opportunities are endless. Here are two examples about e-government and virtual team working. How well do they work?

Government is more accessible than ever thanks to the web, kiosks, digital TV and call centres. The challenge now is to persuade people to ditch traditional methods of communication and embrace e-channels. Studies have been conducted into the potential benefits of e-government and the benefits include more direct contact with the people who run the country, simple systems to take advantage of your democratic rights, quicker services and cheaper services. But it all takes time. In the meantime services need to be provided for all comers and this means a multichannel approach. A survey carried out by the e-Citizen national project, reported in the Guardian newspaper concluded that:

One piece of good news is that Britons seem to like the idea of being e-citizens. Few, however, have tried it.

Source: http://politics.guardian.co.uk/egovernment/story/0,,1422958,00.html

Virtual working may increasingly be the way more of us work in the future. The following text highlights the difficulties faced by many people in organisations who are working with people they never or rarely see. How does this impact on the way they work and interact?

A study by Cisco Systems shows that virtual teams can take up to four times as long to build trust than face-to-face teams. If you throw different cultures into the mix, it can take those virtual teams up to 17 weeks before they bond and perform as well as a team based in one location.

‘Virtual communication is on the increase,’ says Caroline Shearsmith, occupational psychologist at Pearn Kandola who carried out the study. ‘At the same time, there is resistance against virtual teams, who struggle to develop trust because the virtual communication is depersonalised.’

The study, called The Psychology of Effective Business Communications in Geographically Dispersed Teams, comes on the heels of a 2005 Economist Intelligence Unit survey of retailing and consumer goods companies. The survey found that the second most important factor for improving productivity
over the next 15 years - after more efficient organisational structures - was better communication among the workforce.

Source: Kate Bulkley September 28, 2006
The Guardian http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/insideit/story/0,,1882176,00.html

The conclusion of both of these studies was that a mix of communications media would help bring people together including visual media like video conferencing for teams and texting or messaging for e-government.

**Is technology changing our brains?**

This is the interesting question posed by Susan Greenfield in the House of Lords in April 2006.

She examines the way we communicate and Jackie Ashley, former MP, highlights the following points in an article in the Guardian.

In just a couple of decades, we have slipped away from a culture based essentially on words to one based essentially on images, or pictures. This is probably one of the great shifts in the story of modern humans, but we take it almost for granted.

Susan Greenfield goes on to describe traditional education and learning through books:

She begins by analysing the process of traditional book-reading, which involves following an author through a series of interconnected steps in a logical fashion. We read other narratives and compare them, and so ‘build up a conceptual framework that enables us to evaluate further journeys... One might argue that this is the basis of education ... It is the building up of a personalised conceptual framework, where we can relate incoming information to what we know already. We can place an isolated fact in a context that gives it significance.’ Traditional education, she says, enables us to ‘turn information into knowledge.’

Jackie Ashley MP summarises her worries like this.

The flickering up and flashing away again of multimedia images do not allow those connections, and therefore the context, to build up. Instant yuk or wow factors take over. Memory, once built up in a verbal and reading culture, matters less when everything can be summoned at the touch of a button (or, soon,
with voice recognition, by merely speaking). In a short
attention-span world, fed with pictures, the habit of
contemplation and the patient acquisition of knowledge are
in retreat.

It’s an area for further investigation. But there are others with
different views.

Mark Prensky in *Digital Game Based Learning* describes young people
as ‘digital natives’. They are the Nintendo and MTV generation who:

process information more rapidly than ever before, prefer
graphic to text, and work on several fronts at once, making
them champion multitaskers. As a result today’s new workforce
is eager for new challenges.

Mark Prensky (2001)

Whatever the truth is, it is evident that we need to change and
consider the channels we use to communicate more effectively and
more fully and in doing so we may need our brains to evolve.

**Over connected?**

Many organisations adopted technology with gusto and equipped
their employees with a range of technology to help them keep in
touch. It remains a good idea in principle, especially if it helps to
reduce travelling to meetings, to the office or between offices.
However as we have seen before we are not ‘creatures of logic’, but
‘creatures of emotion’. So what could go wrong? Do we use too
much technology?

*The technology takes over* – people too often neglect to think about
their audience, their message and what really needs to be said and
use the functions of the technology to get them through. How
many long PowerPoint presentations have you sat through?

*We rely on the technology too much* – have you ever sent an email
when a conversation might have been better, quicker and more
effective or replied using ‘reply to all’ when plainly half of the
people didn’t really need to know?

*Technology has a bit of a ‘big brother’ effect* – which we naturally rebel
against. It gets a bit much when people can find out when you are
at your desk through the instant messaging system.

*We begin to resent the intrusion of technology from work into our private
lives.* People are increasingly taking their work on holiday with them
in the form of a Blackberry or mobile phone with internet
connection.
There are then problems with connectedness, but it would be difficult to imagine life now without most of our means of communication. Perhaps the answer is that we need to get better at managing them, so that the communication media doesn’t manage us.

Organisational communications

The conclusion, in the digital world seems to be that multichannel approaches to intra and inter organisational communications are here to stay. Channels need to be carefully chosen to match the purpose and the audience. If you are talking to well ‘connected’ young people – the ‘digital natives’, your choice of media may be more flexible, electronic and fast. They are a group for whom, however, personal contact may hold great significance. Use it wisely for the important and personal messages. Other audiences still prefer personal contact above anything else. There is nothing, and probably never will be anything to replace a face-to-face meeting with a new client or a personal service delivered to the door.

Within many organisations you will find a hierarchy of media-use with face-to-face at the the top. Email is a workhorse in the middle and noticeboards and intranets are seen as repositories for useful information to support knowledge management, but not a means of communicating important and urgent messages. To determine your media you will need to think about how different parts of the organisation communicate with each other, how information is transmitted (sending, coding, receiving and decoding) who you are communicating with (what their preferences for communication styles are), what the message is and how important it is, transactional analysis and perceptions of the sender and receiver and how knowledge is managed so that we can store and dispose of it. The essence is to match the channel to the audience and the message.

Figure 1.9 Matching the channels to the audience

In recent years, changes in organisations have impacted on how communication takes place.

♦ We now accept that people, rather than processes, are the lifeblood of organisations. Without effective communications, people cannot be managed to achieve results so a greater emphasis is paced on developing communications skills and procedures.
The tendency towards flatter, less hierarchical organisations has, in many companies, encouraged less formality and more open communication systems.

The move towards team working and project management encourages greater collaborative skills.

The trend towards outsourcing has led to new patterns of communication with suppliers and customers.

New media (particularly electronic media) has made communication faster and more direct.

Improved global communications mean that virtual teams are possible. They mean that people may be working in different time zones, with different languages and across vast distances, but they will be working on the same project.

When Hewlett-Packard's executive committee decided in June to ask all employees to take a voluntary payroll reduction, the decision was posted immediately on the company's @HP portal, the intranet that binds together nearly 90,000 employees in 150 countries. A tool enabling employees to volunteer for the reduction accompanied the announcement. The first day 10,000 employees signed up; within three days 30,000 had volunteered. Kathy Dolan, director of @HP, believes the portal played a central role in making the program work. Instead of finding out by word of mouth whether people were signing up, employees could check the site to find the current tally of volunteers; as the count steadily increased, it convinced more people to participate. Ultimately, more than 90 percent of HP's employees volunteered for pay cuts.

Source: www.darwinmag.com/read/110101/intranet.html

Shared or collaborative working

The digital age has also brought new ways of working which have revolutionised customer/supplier relationships, which are opening up channels for skills sharing between organisations and which attempt to capitalise on the knowledge and information stored, but often languishing, within an organisation. Collaborative working attempts to break down the barriers of communication and share knowledge more widely. It is a bold move, especially for organisations and individuals who see knowledge as power.

Sharing data and information is a vital component of a true collaborative relationship, enabling:

- those collaborating to add value to data and information by sharing their insights and ideas, discussing options, and raising questions
members of the team to share activities and actions, and track progress.

people to organise and search for information more effectively and efficiently.

An effective collaborative working environment tends to:

- integrate processes
- share tacit knowledge and personal insights
- generate new and better ideas
- use joint problem-solving
- use joint risk identification
- learn faster.

As a manager, one of your key roles is to facilitate communication, not only within your department but also across the organisation and between organisations. The bottom line is that communication is no longer a ‘soft’ skill. It drives individual, organisational and inter organisational performance and if it’s going in a new direction you’ll need to be open to the possibilities.

Activity 3

Your contribution to the information flow in your organisation

Objective

To analyse the way in which you contribute to the flow of information in your organisation.

Task

Ideally information flows around your organisation and is passed freely from senior management through to the most junior of staff – and vice versa.

Describe how information is passed downwards in your organisation from senior management to staff. What mechanisms are used?
In your management role, how do you contribute to this process?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hopefully your notes will illustrate a more integrated system where information flows easily downwards, upwards, and horizontally, from department to department. Consider what the potential is for more knowledge and information sharing in the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
structures that exist, and how the structures could change to facilitate a more collaborative approach.

Your role is particularly important because you act as the intermediary between senior management (who are often the decision-takers) and where decisions have to be interpreted and implemented. This is not always an easy role to fulfil and you may have identified situations where the information flow is impeded or non-existent. In such cases, think of possible solutions such as:

1. regular discussion sessions in which team members are encouraged to talk openly with you. These will be ‘off the record’ rather than related to a formal reporting system
2. informal meetings with managers at your level so that you can compare your experiences and highlight areas of concern
3. open communication between senior managers and staff lower down the hierarchy through forums or using the organisation’s Intranet. Again, the emphasis is on encouraging openness – individuals must feel that they can speak their mind without any comeback.

Don’t forget that an information flow should also allow for other stakeholders (customers, suppliers, shareholders, etc.) to contribute and for their messages to be heard.

♦ Recap

Explore basic concepts and theories of communication

- Communication is a process that involves words and non-verbal signals, a sender, receiver and medium of transmission.
- Communication problems can arise if the sender chooses an inappropriate code or medium for the message and the receiver cannot decode it.

Explore how communication is made up of verbal and non-verbal elements

- We communicate verbally, non-verbally, formally and informally. We adapt our language and mannerisms according to the circumstances in which we are communicating.
- Verbal communication involves active listening, reflecting and summarising, questioning, responding, and giving and receiving feedback.
- Non-verbal communication is made up of the messages we convey using tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and body language.
Assess the factors that commonly create barriers to effective communication

- The main barriers include environment, language, culture, perception.
- Barriers can be overcome by paying attention to the context of communication, selecting the right medium and by trying to see things the way the receiver does.

Examine how communication takes place in your organisation

- As well as understanding the principles of interpersonal communication, managers need to consider how communication takes place within the organisation, how information is transmitted and knowledge is managed.
- Ideally information and knowledge will flow upwards and downwards and horizontally across the organisation.

More @

Providing systematic coverage of all aspects of dealing with people face-to-face, this text demonstrates how basic skills can be applied to work activities and situations.

This authoritative guide, written with great humour and insight, reveals all the secrets of body language to give you more confidence and control in any situation.

Subtitled The Ultimate Guide to Business Communications, this is a comprehensive textbook and reference guide on the essentials of both written and oral communication skills.

Rob Dixon addresses the task of management in terms of the different processes involved, eg. planning, decision-making, communication, and the more specific management functions such as personnel, marketing, and the environment of management and business.

Two excellent websites providing resources on communication and many other management skills:

www.mindtools.com
www.businessballs.com