The Importance of Effective Communication

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

• Define effective interpersonal communication.
• List four categories of damage caused by poor communication.
• Identify three factors that contribute to poor communication.
• Describe how communicators are made.

COMMUNICATION IS THE LIFEBLOOD OF ANY ORGANIZATION

Without consistently good communication any organization will soon suffer the consequences: missed deadlines, incomplete tasks, and unmet goals. When communication is flowing as it should, the organization operates in a productive manner. When it is clogged or slowed down for some reason, its effects are immediate and often dramatically measurable. Like any system, communication in the workplace requires constant maintenance. It cannot be considered "fixed" permanently simply because communication problems were ironed out once in a memo or staff meeting. Things change. In a communication system or chain, things change rapidly. To keep up with that, you must continually build your communication skills.
Think About It ... . . .

How much does effective communication contribute to productive work? The following are a few examples. What others can you add from your workplace?

• Getting customers' orders right in sales meetings.
• Taking messages and accurately relaying them to your supervisor.
• Understanding instructions for a specific procedure.
• Dividing responsibilities in a project team setting.
• Knowing what goals you are working toward in a staff meeting.

Defining Effective Interpersonal Communication

For communication to be effective, the listener must understand the meaning of what was said and be able to express that meaning back to the speaker. A common phrase people attach to sentences is "Do you know what I mean?" It is not enough just to hear the words. The listener must understand the meaning well enough to respond to and act upon it (see Exhibit 1-1). Ineffective communication, then, occurs when the meaning is not understood. It is usually discovered at a later point when the people involved are acting on the communication, and both parties yell simultaneously, "That's not what we agreed upon!"

Interpersonal communication can be defined as communication involving two or more people in which each takes turns being the speaker and the listener. A lecture or seminar is not considered interpersonal because generally one person, the lecturer, speaks and others, the audience, listen. Many business seminars now add interactive elements to their format (question and-answer sessions, for example) to increase the audience's active involvement and learning.

In effective interpersonal communication, all persons involved in the communication do not necessarily have an equal amount of time to speak and listen, as in a debate. The particular situation defines the amount of time each participant is a speaker and a listener. For instance, a worker receiving instructions from his supervisor listens while the supervisor speaks. When the supervisor finishes and says, "Any questions?" the worker then becomes the speaker and the supervisor becomes the listener. The amount of interpersonal communication in that situation is small, but it is vital. The amount of time each party spends speaking and listening is not equal, but that is appropriate to the context. That the supervisor understands the worker's questions and
answers them correctly is the difference between an effective interpersonal encounter and an ineffective one.

On the other end of the spectrum, in terms of the amount of speaking and listening time, is a highly interactive scenario such as a brainstorming session involving a large team (10--15 members) where almost everyone is a speaker as well as a listener, sometimes simultaneously. This situation requires a lot of interpersonal communication skill just to keep up with the ideas that are flying around the table. Different situations or contexts will define the appropriate amounts of speaking and listening time.

Often we think of communication as something that takes place during a long meeting or conference; we believe that it takes a lot of time to communicate. But it doesn't have to. A manager walking down a hallway in her workplace can spot a co-worker and say, "Remember, I need the Hyatt file with the updated budget on my desk by two this afternoon." Her co-worker responds, "Right. The Hyatt file with the updated budget. By two o'clock this afternoon. You got it." The exchange took little time but was very effective. Both parties walked away from the interaction understanding the same things. Some of the interpersonal communication situations you encounter take just as short a time but are just as important to your job performance as a long meeting.

Don't be surprised if you find that between one quarter and one half of your workweek qualifies as interpersonal communication of varying degrees of complexity. Given the amount of time you spend in those situations, even a slight improvement in one area of interpersonal communication skill, such as listening, will have a dramatic effect on your total individual workplace performance.
Think About it ...

Calculate roughly the amount of time you spend in interpersonal communication situations in a typical work week. Use the chart below as a guide.

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<th>Hours</th>
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Formal one-on-one meetings with boss or manager
Informal meetings with boss or supervisor at your desk, on the plant floor, in the hallway
Staff meetings
Project or team meetings
Informal colleague interaction before or after meetings, at each others’ desks, etc.
Working lunches with team or department
Training sessions and conferences
Other interpersonal communication situations
Total time in a typical week

THE DAMAGE DONE BY POOR COMMUNICATION

In some ways the damage that poor communication causes is hard to quantify because its effects are both immediate and long term. Some effects you can retrace and correct; others leave you with mistakes that you cannot rectify but can only learn from.

The damage can be categorized into four areas: lost time and effort, stress, missed opportunities, and crippled risk taking.

Lost Time and Effort

When you have to redo work because of poor communication, such as misunderstood directions on a report, it costs you both time and effort, as well as aggravation and sometimes embarrassment. As a rule, the earlier you find the miscommunication, the less time it takes to redo the work. Unfortunately, miscommunication is often not detected until late in a business transaction, because all involved assume they are operating toward the same end result. For instance, when prices are misquoted verbally from one employee to another and then inserted into a proposal to a customer, the error may not be revealed until the proposal is presented during a sales meeting, reflecting poorly on all those who worked on the proposal. At best you can stall for time to compute the figures over again; at worst you lose the sale altogether. Either way, it is a costly use of time and effort that could have been avoided with better communication.

Stress and Tension in Workplace Relationships

People are more productive within a harmonious workplace environment. Much of the workplace tension that interrupts such harmony can be traced to poor communication. A misunderstanding between coworkers is not easily
forgotten, even if both parties want to move on. It often spills over into future communication between those two people, particularly in workplaces where job definitions require these two people to be in constant communication, such as with a manager and her administrative assistant. It may even affect others in the same workplace who had nothing to do with the original miscommunication. Sometimes we find it easier, though not more productive, to take the frustration out on others than to confront the person with whom we have the communication problem.

**Missed Business Opportunities**

In today's competitive marketplace, speed is a vital component in any organization's strategy to beat the competition to market with a product or service. Another area of damage that results from poor communication is that in the time it takes you to fix a communication-based problem, your prospective customer may sign a contract with your competitor instead of with you. This is a lost opportunity that in all likelihood you cannot retrieve. However, you can improve the communication skills and processes of the organization to reduce the chance of the same thing happening again.

**Crippled Risk Taking**

Within certain boundaries, you should always act in the best interest of the organization, and taking risks is a key component of crucial business processes such as problem solving and innovation. In a workplace experiencing poor communication, little risk taking occurs because the environment is not conducive to it. Rather, people feel that they will be misunderstood and criticized mercilessly if they put forth fresh ideas or new procedures for the consideration of their bosses or their project team. These uneasy feelings are not entirely unfounded. Perhaps their assessment of the situation is due to a company history of poor communication. The result is that people go along with ideas without offering alternatives or challenges to them, negating the vital process for which teams were put together in the first place—to come up with better ideas collectively than employees could on their own.

Taken as a whole, the damage done by poor communication as described in the preceding four areas is potentially devastating to the productivity and morale of any workplace. It is much easier and better to maintain good communication in the workplace than it is to repair damaged relationships. As you learn and work toward improving interpersonal communication in your work life, you will see the damage caused by poor communication reduced significantly, and that will encourage you to make continuous improvement your goal.

**ARENAS THAT FOSTER POOR COMMUNICATION**

There are specific workplace relationships where poor communication tends to become embedded and grow. As a general rule, the more time you spend
working closely with another person or persons, the greater the likelihood that communication problems will arise. Four arenas, along with their particular challenges, are described in the following section: dyads, teams, departments, and the whole organization.

**Dyads**

Dyads (groups of two) such as a manager and his subordinate, or two people of equal status sharing an office or workstation, will experience more chances for communication to break down simply as a result of their organizational and physical proximity to each other. Because they rely so heavily on each other for daily support, technical and otherwise, their relationship is more significant than any other work relationship they have in the organization. Because of this, dyads often find that little miscommunications "snowball" into bigger issues. Dyads have to work especially hard to clear the air about one miscommunication before another one occurs.

**Teams**

More and more organizations are reorienting around working in teams, either product teams or permanent ones. Teamwork is here to stay, and it has its own challenges. Because workers are brought together from different areas of expertise, each one generally has a different point of view about the team's purpose. Each one may feel that her perspective is "right" and, by definition, all other perspectives must be "wrong." Members of a team must use effective communication skills, such as listening, to align their different perspectives, or confusion will reign. Teams have a greater potential for poor communication, largely because there are multiple communication relationships to manage. It is essential that everyone on the team receive the same information with the same degree of timeliness. This is a continual challenge the team must meet to be effective. Additionally, teams provide a greater chance for personality conflicts to thrive, simply because by its very nature a team will have conflict over ideas, direction, and process. The conflict can be productive if it is well managed, but that also means managing different personality types as well.

**Departments**

A department most often miscommunicates the interpretation and implementation of policy and procedures. Obviously, the larger the department, the greater the number of possible interpretations. Most departments encompass several different types of jobs. When a new policy is announced at a departmental staff meeting, the first question each person asks is, "Does this affect me?" Sometimes the employee assumes "no" and stops listening from that point on. However, workplaces are moving increasingly toward cross functional training; an employee is expected to be at least passably adept at several positions. Tuning out new departmental procedures that supposedly affect someone else is a major communication error.
The Whole Organization

Obviously you can be a part of any or each of the preceding three arenas and also be a part of the larger organization. On this level the damage of poor communication is apparent on two different fronts. First, rumors tend to be most damaging at this level, simply because more people hear them, and they often end up taking on a life of their own. Rumors are hard to stop and even harder to trace. They result partly from poor communication. People tend to add their own embellishments or opinions to a rumor before passing it on. If it were passed on without being added to, it would soon die or could be addressed.

Second, it can be hard to communicate the overall goals of the organization at this level. Usually dyads, teams, and departments clearly understand what they do, but they may not know how their job contributes to the organization’s goals. That puts a strain on cross-departmental communication and can even lead to unhealthy competition within an organization.

You probably work in more than one of these arenas, maybe even all of them. Individual interpersonal communication skills are vital to the effective functioning of each arena.

Think About It ...

Which of the preceding arenas do you work in the most? Think of four specific examples of poor communication and the resulting damage that you have witnessed, have been a part of, or both in that arena in the past six months.

THREE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO POOR COMMUNICATION

Change

Most workplaces experience dramatic and continual change ranging from technological advances to a restructure of the entire organization. Change is normal; however its rapid pace takes some getting used to. Change offers a tremendous challenge to interpersonal communication in the workplace. First is the challenge of working with new people (managers and peers) when personnel changes are frequent. When an organization downsizes, those left
have new responsibilities. Different competency expectations arise when new technology is introduced into the workplace. All of these changes demonstrate the need for interpersonal communication skills that are transferable to new situations.

**Time Pressure**

The proverbial time crunch is a way of life in most organizations. This makes each communication exchange even more important. As we saw earlier, time lost to redoing a project because of a communication slip-up cannot be regained. The challenge of communicating in time-pressure situations is to resist the temptation not to fully explain procedures or to ask all the questions you may have about how to carry out a project. In a time-pressure environment, people often use jargon more often with fewer positive results because no one really understands the details, but nobody wants to take the time to ask for a complete explanation.

**Lingering Communication Problems**

If you're like most workers, you've probably had negative communication experiences you would rather forget. However, those situations are bound to repeat themselves if you do not remember them and learn new skills that will reduce or prevent them in the future. For instance, a manager, Sue, told her administrative assistant, Jon, that his part-time helper was being let go and that a new part of his job would be occasional photocopying and filing. Without stopping to clarify exactly what Sue meant by "occasional," Jon blew up at Sue and began complaining about not being treated fairly. What Sue did not know was that Jon's previous manager had defined "occasional photocopying and filing" as taking up several hours a day. Jon let that past negative event cloud his communication with his present manager. He needs to learn the verbal communication technique known as clarification. With clarification he would have avoided a negative communication and having to live with the results.

**Think About It . . .**

Which of the three reasons just discussed do you identify with most, and why? Jot these reasons down now.
COMMUNICATORS ARE MADE, NOT BORN!
Many people look at fellow employees who are good communicators and assume, "They must have always been that way." Not true. Good communicators may have had backgrounds conducive to their skill development in that area. However, as with most skills, certain principles come into play. Good communicators may have now internalized those principles to the point where they don't think about them anymore; they just act upon them. They make it look easy. But these people weren't always that way. There was a time when they were just like most of us, having to consciously think about, plan, and practice improving their communication skills. In reality they are still practicing and improving, just at a different level than most of us. So take heart. As the old saying goes, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." In your journey toward communication improvement, you've made a significant step in the right direction by taking this course. Effective interpersonal communication is a learned skill. You can dramatically and permanently improve your ability in this vital area of workplace skill in a relatively short time. Remember, because you spend so much time in interpersonal communication in several arenas in your workplace, as you improve in one skill, such as becoming able to work more effectively with different personality types, you'll see the results popping up before you all over the place.

ELEMENTS NEEDED TO MAKE A GOOD COMMUNICATOR

Commitment to Improvement

As with any other skill, you must be committed to do whatever it takes to improve in order to see change and progress in your interpersonal communication. You must see the development of this skill as vital to your daily performance and to the overall effectiveness of your dyad, team, department, and organization. Much of your productivity as a functioning member of your organization is related to developing this skill.

Training

The concepts and principles outlined in this course will give you the basic framework within which you can gain basic communication theory, identify problem areas, and learn how to eliminate those problems. Your training, however, must be ongoing. On a regular basis, actively seek out and participate in communication training by attending seminars and using training manuals such as AMA workbooks and guides.
Practice

This course offers you numerous practice opportunities through the exercises that appear in this book. However, by definition you must practice interpersonal communication with other people. You are strongly encouraged to try out immediately in your workplace the techniques and tips you find in this course. As you experience success, you will want to repeat these techniques. Soon they will become a habit, and others will look up to you as a "born" communicator!

Development

With all skills, people tend to plateau in their growth. This is natural and not a problem unless you become complacent and do not try to improve further. Once you see your interpersonal communication skills improve, you may be tempted to say, "Good enough." However, skills you do not continually exercise and hone are soon lost. This is certainly true of communication skills. To maintain continuous development you must periodically set new goals for yourself. If you are not getting enough opportunities to exercise your skills, volunteer for teams or task forces that your organization puts together for special but temporary projects. Maintain a record of your progress, and use it as an incentive for future goals.

Recap

This chapter has focused primarily on the need for effective communication. Interpersonal communication has been defined as an interaction involving two or more people where each alternates the role of speaker and listener, though all participants do not necessarily get "equal time." The damage resulting from poor communication is evident in four areas: lost time and effort, added stress and tension in the workplace environment, missed business opportunities, and stifled risk taking. This communication damage manifests itself in at least four arenas in the workplace, each having its own special challenges: the dyad (often the manager-subordinate relationship), the team, the department, and the entire organization or division.

Three factors contributing to poor communication were given: workplace change, time pressure, and negative communication experiences of the past spilling over into the present. Finally, the fact that communicators are made, not born, was discussed. When you combine commitment with training, practice, and development, you are well on your way to seeing immediate and dramatic improvement in your workplace interpersonal communication skills.
Review Questions

1. Effective communication has not occurred if
   (a) All parties don't have equal time to speak.
   (b) The meaning of the words have not been understood.
   (c) People don't look directly at each other.
   (d) The speaker doesn't use gestures.

2. Interpersonal communication is defined as:
   (a) Communication involving two or more people where each is alternately a
       speaker and a listener.
   (b) Talking about your feelings in a meaningful way.
   (c) Being able to get others to see and accept your point of view.
   (d) Encounters where there is no conflict and everyone agrees.

3. Which one of the following does not describe the damage resulting from poor communication
   (a) Lost time and effort
   (b) Missed business opportunities.
   (c) Crippled risk taking.
   (d) Broken computer equipment
4. Find the true maxims. (There is more than one answer.)
   (a) Even a slight improvement in one interpersonal communica-
       tion skill area will have a dramatic effect on your total
       individual workplace performance.
   (b) The earlier the miscommunication is found, the less time
       it takes to redo the work.
   (c) Negative situations are bound to repeat themselves if you
       do not remember them and learn new skills that can
       reduce or prevent them.
   (d) Co-workers who work together most have the fewest interper-
       sonal communication difficulties.

5. Which of the following are examples of interpersonal communica-
   tion scenarios?
   (a) Being involved in a project team meeting.
   (b) Receiving instructions from your manager about a procedure.
   (c) Talking to a co-worker in the hallway about a new product
       line.
   (d) All of the above.

6. Teams have a greater potential for conflict among their members
   because:
   (a) People generally don't like to be assigned to teams.
   (b) Members are coming from different perspectives, often
       accompanied by different personality types.
   (c) Team leaders are ineffective.
   (d) There are no rules of communication for being on a team.

7. One of the following is not a contributing factor to poor workplace
   communication. Choose it:
   (a) Time pressures.
   (b) A previous negative communication experience.
   (c) A co-worker with no sense of humor.
   (d) Workplace changes.

8. Which of the following is a true statement:
   (a) Communicators are born, not made.
   (b) Effective communication is a learned skill.
   (c) Good communicators don't need to practice once they reach a
       certain skill level.
   (d) Communication improvement is slow and arduous.

9. Find the factors needed in developing effective communication.
   (There is more than one answer.)
   (a) Training.
   (b) A mentor.
   (c) Commitment.
   (d) Voice lessons.
10. Which communication challenges affect entire organizations more than they do departments or teams? (There is more than one answer.)
(a) Working in close proximity to one another.
(b) Personality conflicts.
(c) Communicating goals and cohesiveness.
(d) Rumors.