

1

The Importance of Effective Communication



Learning Objectives

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

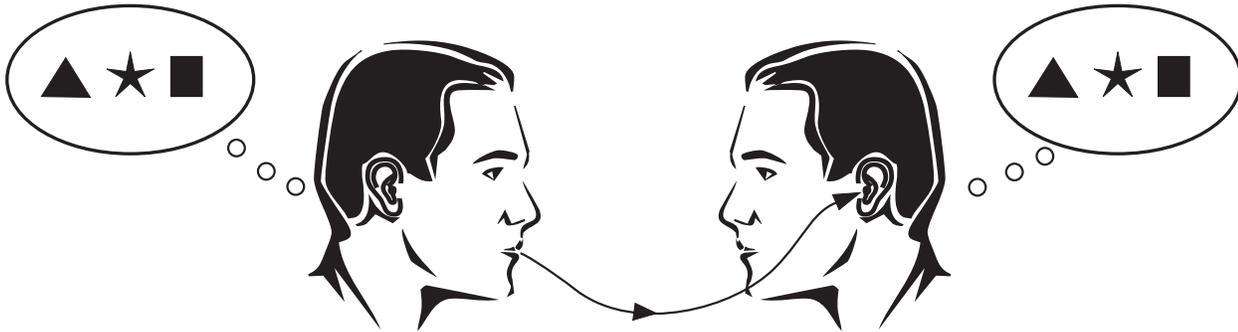
- Define effective interpersonal communications.
- Explain why effective communication is so important in the workplace.
- List three categories of damage caused by poor communication.
- Identify three factors that contribute to poor communication.

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

Communication is a complex activity involving words, body language, voice tone and volume, the topic under discussion, the prejudgments that people bring to the topic, and the “communication history” between participants in the discussion. Communication is *effective* when the recipient of a message understands its meaning and can express that meaning back to the speaker or sender of the message. We normally check for that understanding with words like these: “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 (Exhibit 1-1).

Ineffective communication occurs when the meaning is not understood. This is usually discovered later when the people involved yell simultaneously, “That’s not what we agreed!”

Communication is *interpersonal* when it involves two or more people in an exchange where people take turns being the speaker and the listener. A

E**Exhibit 1-1
An Illustration of Effective Communication**

lecture is normally not considered interpersonal because only one person, the lecturer, speaks while others, the audience, listen. One-way communication is often called “broadcasting.”

Not all parties to an interpersonal communication have an equal amount of time to speak and listen, as they might in a debate. The situation defines the amount of time each participant spends in each role. 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 back-and-forth interpersonal communication in that situation is limited but vital. The amount of time each party spends speaking and listening is not equal, but it is appropriate to the situation. The supervisor’s effort to understand the worker’s questions and answer them correctly makes the difference between an effective interpersonal encounter and an ineffective one.

On the other end of the spectrum of speaking and listening times, we have highly interactive situations, such as brainstorming sessions involving teams of 5–10 people. In this case, almost everyone is both a speaker and a listener, sometimes simultaneously. “That’s my idea of how to improve our customer service. Now, Barbara, tell us yours.” Different situations determine the appropriate amounts of speaking and listening time for each participant.

Effective communications needn’t be time-consuming or involve long meetings. For example, a manager walking down a hallway spots a subordinate and says, “Remember, I need the Hyatt file with the updated budget on my desk by two this afternoon.” Her coworker responds, “Right. The Hyatt file with the updated budget. By two o’clock this afternoon. You’ll have it by then.” The exchange took little time but was effective. Both parties walked away with a shared understanding. In many cases short interpersonal communication encounters like this one are just as important to job performance and business outcomes as are long meetings.

Don’t be surprised if you find that between one quarter and one half of your workweek is spent in interpersonal communication of varying degrees

Exercise 1–1. Interpersonal Communication Log

Calculate roughly the amount of time you spend in interpersonal communication situations during a typical two-day period at work—either on or off the phone. Pick two days and keep a log. Record your findings here.

	Hours	Minutes
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, etc.	_____	_____
Staff meetings	_____	_____
Project or team meetings	_____	_____
Informal colleague interaction before or after meetings, at each others' desks, etc.	_____	_____
Lunches with team or department	_____	_____
Training sessions and conferences	_____	_____
Contact time with outsiders (e.g., customers, suppliers)	_____	_____
E-mail	_____	_____
Other interpersonal communication situations	_____	_____
Total time in the two days	_____	_____

Now, take a look at your findings. You may be surprised by how many hours you've spent communicating with people in two days. Where are most of these communications taking place?

of complexity. Given the amount of time you spend in those situations, even a slight improvement in one area of interpersonal communication skills, such as listening, will have a dramatic effect on your total individual workplace performance.

WHY COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT

Effective communication is an important element of success for every organization, leader, manager, supervisor, and employee. An organization whose people communicate effectively experiences fewer of the misunderstandings that create friction between people, waste time, and cause mistakes. The strategy of this enterprise is clear to all, and each person understands how his or her work contributes to that strategy. Employees listen to customers and, in turn, are clear and persuasive in describing their company's products and services.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS ARE GOOD FOR YOUR CAREER

Good communication skills also give people an edge in getting the jobs they want and help them move up the ladder to better-paid positions. This is

because so little of modern office work involves solitary, repetitive tasks, and so much of it involves collaboration between coworkers and team members. Communication skills are essential in this contemporary working environment, and employers insist on it. Consider the job ad in Exhibit 1–2, which has been slightly altered to disguise the source. Its insistence on communication skills is fairly typical. Notice the use of these terms: “discuss,” “communicating,” “responding to,” “developing working relationships.” (Those terms are in italic type in the exhibit for emphasis.) This company obviously wants someone who can communicate, even though the position itself has an analytical focus. Again, this is typical. For many positions, technical skills are essential but insufficient—employers value people who can figure things out *and* communicate their findings to others!

Communication skills can not only help you get the job you want, they can help you be more successful in the job you have. Take a minute to think about people you know who have been very effective in their work and in their personal relationships. Chances are they know how to use one or several modes of communication to get their ideas across, to advance their missions, to engage others, and to enlist people’s support. When they get down to business they don’t waste time with rambling, idle chatter. Their messages are well thought out and focused on results. Communication skills are an essential element of leadership. Scholars have known for a long time that effective leaders excel at communicating purpose, ideas, and direction to



Think About It . . .

How much does effective communication contribute to productive work? Here are a few examples.

- Getting customer orders right
- 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

Can you think of other ways in which effective communication contributes to your workplace experience? If you can, write them down below.

E**xhibit 1–2
Help Wanted Advertisement***Hiring: Retail Sales Analyst*

Tasty Corporation Sales & Marketing, a division of Colossal Foods, Inc., is the largest U.S. distributor of snack foods. Its customers include major grocery store chains and convenience store franchises. The Retail Sales Analyst position is an entry-level opportunity to learn the snack food retail distribution business. This position reports directly to the National Sales Manager and will be responsible for the following:

- Analyzing data related to shipment and returns
- Monitoring the rate of on-time deliveries of our products
- Analyzing operations to identify distribution throughput opportunities
- Preparing monthly sales reports for the National Sales Manager
- Providing monthly budget updates
- Meeting regularly with regional distribution managers to *discuss* operational improvement
- *Communicating* information on sales activities affecting retail operations
- *Responding* to special requests from senior management and regional sales managers
- Monitoring and *communicating* information relevant to regional retail sales
- *Communicating* internally with managers and personnel in Wholesale Sales
- *Developing working relationships* with key stakeholders in the company and its suppliers
- *Communicating* all issues relevant to retail sales to the appropriate personnel in a timely manner

Basic computer proficiency and working knowledge of Microsoft Outlook, Word, and Excel are required. Candidate must demonstrate strong analytical skills.

others. Though not all leaders would be described as eloquent, effective leaders are all clear and consistent in their communications—a quality that inspires confidence in others.

DAMAGE DONE BY POOR COMMUNICATIONS

Poor workplace communication usually results in damage—either immediate or long term. Some of that damage can be tracked down and corrected; other damage cannot. Damage can be categorized in three areas: lost time and effort, stress, and missed opportunities.

Lost Time and Effort

In a meeting with an installer of work cubicles and office furniture, a manager explained that this particular cubicle would have to be made to accommodate a larger, non-standard desk. “You’ll need an extra three inches on each side,” he said. “Sure,” responded the installer, “an extra three inches.” A week or so later, the installer had put up all the cubicle walls, complete with

 **Exercise 1–2. Check It Yourself**

Not convinced that you'll need communication skills in building your career? Try this exercise: pick up the Sunday newspaper and go to the job postings in the classified ads section. Or go online.

Look for job postings with substantial descriptions of the job and the skills required of applicants. Pick three that describe the kind of job you'd like to have in the future. Now, for each of the jobs you've selected, count the number of times that the word "communication" or "good communicator" is mentioned. Write them down here.

Job posting #1: _____

Job posting #2: _____

Job posting #3: _____

Chances are that most of the desirable jobs you find listed require outstanding communication skills.

shelving and a file cabinet. But when the desk was brought, he found the space three inches too narrow.

In this case, the installer had picked up only part of the contractor's message: "An extra three inches. . . ." He had missed the other half: ". . . *on each side.*" The result was that the entire workspace had to be disassembled and new components ordered. "I cannot get those new cubicle components for another week or ten days," the installer told the unhappy manager. Poor communication in this case had cost time and effort, and aggravated the installer's customer—the company manager.

Tension in Workplace Relationships

People are less productive when the workplace environment is afflicted by tension between employees. In many cases, interpersonal tension can be traced to poor communication, as shown in the following examples.

Brad was embarrassed in front of a customer because of a miscommunication in pricing information he received from Helen.

Laura is upset with Howard because he failed to show up for a department meeting where his participation was essential. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I thought the meeting was on Tuesday."

Misunderstandings between coworkers are not easily forgotten, even if both parties want to move on. Miscommunication can have serious and permanent consequences. The tension often spills over into future communication between the people involved, particularly if their jobs require them to be in constant communication, such as with a manager and her administrative assistant. And tension can be infectious, affecting others who had nothing to do with the original problem.

Missed Business Opportunities

The damage caused by ineffective communication can lead to missed business opportunities. The office cubicle installer in the previous example may find the manager hiring someone else for future installation projects. Furthermore, the installer may not get a good recommendation to future customers, because the manager is still upset about the delay he had to put up with!

The damage done by poor communication is potentially devastating to the productivity and morale of any workplace. It is much easier and better to maintain good communications than to repair damaged relationships. As you focus on improving interpersonal communication in your work life, you will see the damage caused by poor communication reduced. That will encourage you to make continuous improvement your goal.

THREE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO POOR COMMUNICATION

Many factors contribute to poor communication, and covering them all is beyond the scope of this course. However, we will consider three very important factors to watch out for: change, time pressure, and interpersonal conflict.

Change

Workplaces are always experiencing change—technological changes, the arrival and departure of new personnel, and departmental restructuring are just a few. Change is normal and necessary. As the great British economist John Maynard Keynes once remarked to a reporter who asked him why he had changed his view on some matter of public policy, “When the facts change, I change. What do you do, sir?” Keynes was right. When something important in our environment changes, we must respond in an appropriate way.

Change offers tremendous challenges to interpersonal communication. The first challenge is working with new people (managers and peers). People must *learn* how to communicate effectively with their new coworkers. *What* do these coworkers need to know? *How* do they prefer having information delivered to them—verbally, by e-mail, formally or informally? *When* do they need that information—right away, at weekly team meeting, or when a situation requires it?

Organizational change also presents communication challenges. For example, when an organization downsizes and people are laid off, those who remain often must take on added responsibilities, which may require them to communicate in ways for which they have neither training nor experience. For example, their new responsibilities might include standup presentations using PowerPoint slides, which they have never used before.

Time Pressure

Time pressure, a way of life in many organizations, is another source of poor communications.

"I need that report by 9 AM tomorrow."

"Our product development team is coming in from Minneapolis tomorrow for a one-day visit. I've scheduled you to meet with them from 2 until 3. Is that enough time to cover all your business?"

Time pressure tempts us to cut corners—which means we may *not* fully explain or express our points to others. Listeners, too, cut corners. They don't—they cannot—take the time to ask for complete explanations or to check their understanding, to ask, "Is this what you mean?"

Interpersonal Conflict

Conflict is present in every organization to one degree or another.

Jane harbors a personal jealousy of Irene, who has recently been promoted to a position that Jane had hoped to win.

Both Cesareo and Frank have submitted competing marketing proposals to their boss, and each is working behind the scenes to get his pet plan adopted. In the process each is running down the value of the other's proposal.

Lloyd truly resents Karen, one of his direct reports. Karen is so bright, so competent, and so full of fresh ideas that she's making him look bad. He worries that one day he'll be fired and his job will be given to Karen.



Think About It . . .

How does time pressure affect your communications with others, or they with you? Can you think of a mistake or missed opportunity that has resulted from that pressure? Record your answers below.

Conflicts such as these on the previous page can put a damper on effective communication between coworkers and between bosses and their subordinates.

There are no easy, universal solutions to the communication problems caused by change, time pressures, and conflict. But if you recognize them for what they are, you will be half way to a solution.



This chapter has focused on the need for effective communication. Interpersonal communication has been defined as an interaction involving two or more people, who alternate in the role of speaker and listener—though all participants do not necessarily get “equal time.” The damage resulting from poor communication is evident in three areas: lost time and effort, added tension in the workplace environment, and missed business opportunities.

Three factors contributing to poor communication are: workplace change, time pressure, and interpersonal conflict.



Review Questions

1. Effective communication has occurred when: 1. (b)
 - (a) all parties had equal time to speak.
 - (b) all parties understood the message.
 - (c) people looked directly at each other.
 - (d) the speaker used gestures.

2. "Interpersonal communication" refers to: 2. (a)
 - (a) communication involving two or more people and 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 usually results from poor workplace communication? 3. (a)
 - (a) Lost time and effort
 - (b) Promotion of the wrong people
 - (c) Risk avoidance
 - (d) Greater outsourcing

4. Communication between people in the workplace will be challenged whenever that workplace experiences: 4. (c)
 - (a) a year or more of bad performance.
 - (b) sensitivity training.
 - (c) interpersonal conflict.
 - (d) a take-over bid.

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5. Communication skills are important to organizational success because so much of the modern office work involves:
- (a) repetitive tasks.
 - (b) command-and-control management.
 - (c) conflict.
 - (d) collaboration between coworkers.
5. (d)