



Module 5

Communications

Introduction

Effective communication is vital for the success of managers. Everything a manager does involves communicating. Communication is considered one of the key activities of managing as it occurs in each of the four elements of management: planning, organising, leadership and control. For instance, management needs to communicate while planning and organising. Similarly good leadership depends on constant communication between leaders and subordinates. Good communication is conducive to good relations not only within the organisation, but also, ultimately, between the business and its environment. In this module you will study communication in detail.

This module highlights the meaning, importance and types of communications within organisations, explain communication flows in organisations, and barriers to communication. The impact and management of cross-cultural communication is also examined.

Upon completion of this module you will be able to:



Outcomes

- *explain* the communication process and its importance.
- *identify* the different types of communication.
- *understand* and *provide* examples of communication flows in an organisation.
- *recognise* barriers to communication.
- *adopt* various approaches to improving communication.

Terminology



Terminology

Communication: Communication is the process of transmitting or exchanging information and meaning between two people. It encompasses both *interpersonal communication* (communication between two or more people) and *organisational communication* (all the patterns, networks, and systems of communications within an organisation).

Downward Communication: Downward Communication flows from the top of the organisation towards the bottom. Managers often use this approach to provide instructional

and procedural information to employees.

Grapevine:	An informal network in the organisation through which unofficial information (including rumours) are passed from one person to another. This is a word of mouth communication.
Horizontal Communication:	Horizontal communication occurs between departments or functional modules. This communication occurs among members within the same work group or often at the same levels.
Noise:	Anything that represents a barrier to communication is known as noise. Noise interferes with the effectiveness of communication. It disrupts or interferes with the transference of messages throughout the communication process.
Receiver:	The person to whom communication is directed is known as the receiver.
Sender:	The person who initiates the communication process is known as a sender.
Upward Communication:	Upward communication flows from lower levels of the organisation to higher levels. Often, established communications such as performance reports, employee attitude surveys and grievance procedures flow upward from lower levels.

Commitment to communication

Cirque Du Soleil is no ordinary circus. If you have ever been lucky enough to see a Cirque du Soleil show, you know that it is more sophisticated, more athletically challenging, and more beautiful than your basic elephants-and-clowns Big Top extravaganza. Just as extraordinary is how this global organisation so successfully manages its 2,100 employees, who represent 40 different nationalities and more than 15 languages.

Most of the employees are attached to the tours, with 500 employees at the company's international headquarters in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The company also has offices in Las Vegas, Amsterdam and Singapore, and even employees assigned to a permanent office tend to travel a lot. Add to this the company's use of 1,800 temporary employees (temps) a year to support tours as ushers, and security and ticket personnel, and you have the potential for mayhem.

However, just as impressive as the Cirque du Soleil show, is how the company uses communication to keep employees informed and involved in the company. Communications play a huge role in letting employees



know what jobs are available, encouraging employee feedbacks, and keeping employees educated about the company.

How is this done? All jobs are posted on the Internet and in company bulletins. If the company needs a secretary in Europe, it will post the job in every project and office it has, even the tour in Hong Kong. An employee-written newspaper flourishes without corporate censorship. A worldwide video club allows employees in different locations around the world to exchange videotapes. Employees in the Las Vegas finance department can tape themselves on the job and swap tapes with workers in the casting department in Montreal to keep the community feeling close. And if an employee in the secretarial pool at headquarters has never seen a show, she might find herself flying to a tour stop in Chicago.

Communication becomes a global conversation between employees and executives through the company's three publications, *Hand to Hand*, *The Ball*, and *the Nouvel-Experience*. These publications keep employees informed about new projects and tours and provide news from around the globe. One of the publications even has a column called 'Culture Shock', in which employees describe their experiences in different countries.

To stay in touch with employees around the world, personnel from human resources travel to different venues to talk to employees one-on-one and to get an idea of what's going on in the everyday life of the company. At *Cirque du Soleil*, the lines of communication are always open from country to country.

Source: Flynn (1997, February, p. 50); Flynn, (1997, August, pp. 38-45)

Value of communication

Communication defined

Communication is the process of transmitting or exchanging information and meaning between two people. The person who initiates the communication process is known as a sender. The person to whom communication is directed is known as the receiver. It is important that the sender encode the message. Encoding is the determination of the method of conveying meaning to others. How might you deliver this message? This might include decisions about choice of language (including body language), and your decision might depend on who the receiver is and what information you are transmitting (for example, their status relative to yours and the purpose of the message and the environment in which it is delivered will likely influence your choices). You must select a form of transmission, which involves sending the message over a specific channel. You might communicate your thoughts face to face, by written memo, or by email.

The choice of transmission is often an important decision, depending on the information being sent. Your organisation might use email as the most common method to transmit information. Email, however, is unlikely to be the ideal choice of medium to conduct a performance

appraisal. An interesting statistic to keep in mind is that 60 per cent of meaning in a face-to-face communication is transmitted non-verbally!

Through a process of decoding, the receiver makes sense of the information that was sent. We often know whether the receiver has decoded information accurately when he or she provides some feedback to the sender. Feedback is two-way communication that allows the sender to determine if the meaning of that communication was correctly received. Effective communication occurs when the intended persons receive the right information in an efficient manner, and when the intended meaning of the source and the perceived meaning of the receiver are virtually the same.

Why is communication important?

Substantial research emphasises the importance of communication. One of the reasons we must communicate effectively is that ineffective communication can lead to substantial conflict. A number of studies have identified some interesting findings: studies of production workers indicate that they are involved in somewhere between 16 and 46 communication episodes per hour. In higher levels, communication is even more frequent. First level supervisors of production jobs spend 20 to 50 per cent of their time in verbal communication. If written communication is added these figures increase to somewhere between 29 and 64 per cent. Finally, if we move even higher to middle and upper management, 66 to 89 per cent of managers' time is spent in verbal communication (this refers to face-to-face meetings and telephone).

As you can see, for many members of organisations, particularly those in management, the majority of their time is spent communicating with others. Ineffective communication will often result in negative outcomes ranging from minor inefficiencies to pervasive conflict and an unattractive work environment.

Types of communication

The primary distinction in communication within organisations is made between two types: formal and informal communication channels. Formal communication channels follow through the hierarchy of authority. This hierarchy typically provides a preferred route for information passing between levels within the organisation. Typically, official types of communication with respect to policies and procedures are sent through formal channels within the organisation. Personal or social messages tend to take place through the use of informal channels. These are typically not structured in accordance with the hierarchy of authority. Often information through informal channels skips across vertical chains of command and helps to ensure that important communication occurs between the right people.

One informal channel most familiar to us is commonly referred to as the grapevine, through which unofficial information (including rumours) are passed from one person to another. We think of the grapevine as word of



mouth communication. Information through this channel can also be communicated electronically, with written notes, or through faxes. Surprisingly, information passed through the grapevine is, for the most part, accurate. One study shows that at least 75 per cent of non-controversial, organisationally related grapevine information is correct.

In some circumstances, a grapevine is desirable in an organisation, particularly when formal communication is lax. It also contributes to individual needs. If you recall in Module 2, basic human needs include a sense of belongingness, security, or a need for affiliation. The grapevine tends to satisfy these needs, and allows people to feel 'in the know'. The obvious downfall to the grapevine is the quality and accuracy of information. A rumour is an unverified belief that is in general circulation, and often rumours spread very fast and far, and can therefore have detrimental consequences.

In addition to spoken or written information, non-verbal communication is an important source of information. Much can be communicated through body language, such as facial expressions, eye contact, and physical gestures. Physical space arrangements also affect non-verbal communication and intended messages. The study of the way physical space is utilised is known as proxemics, and it has been determined that this is an important component of communication.

Physical proximity between people differs across cultures as well. In Arab, Latin American and South European countries people tend to stand close together. North Europeans and North Americans prefer to stand further apart. A CEO who places his or her desk in an open space among all members within the organisation communicates a message to employees that is likely distinct from the CEO who has a private office with a door that is typically closed.

Communication flows in organisations

There are three primary directional flows of communication: downward communication, upward communication and horizontal communication.

Downward Communication flows from the top of the organisation towards the bottom. Managers often use this approach to provide instructional and procedural information to employees. Often downward communication uses formal communication channels to transmit information.

Upward communication flows from lower levels of the organisation to higher levels. Often, established communications such as performance reports, employee attitude surveys and grievance procedures flow upward from lower levels.

Horizontal communication occurs between departments or functional units. This communication occurs among members within the same work group or often at the same levels. Given the nature of cross-functional teams that are often employed in organisations today, horizontal

communication becomes very important because of their interdependent nature. On occasion, horizontal communication is a source of interpersonal conflict, particularly when vertical communication flows are breached.

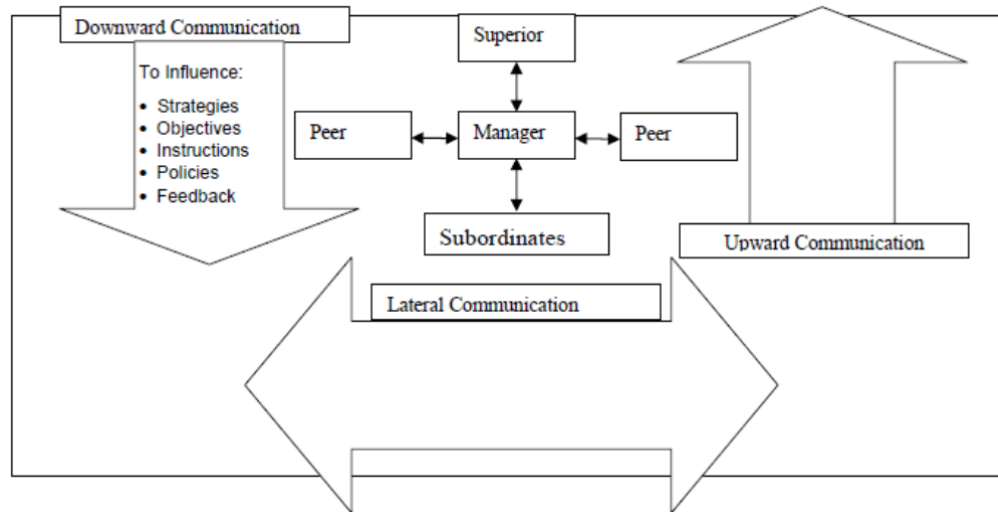


Figure 5.1 Directional Flows of Communication

Source: Diagram adapted from Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn (2000)

Barriers to communication

Anything that represents a barrier to communication is known as noise. Noise interferes with the effectiveness of communication. It disrupts or interferes with the transference of messages throughout the communication process. Here are a number of examples of noise:

Physical distraction

Read the following conversation between a manager and his employee, George:

“OK, George, let’s hear your problem.” (Phone rings, boss picks it up, promises to deliver the report, “just as soon as I can get it done”).
 “Now, where were we – Oh, you’re having a problem with marketing. They...” (The manager’s secretary brings in some papers that need immediate signatures; he scribbles his name and the secretary leaves)...
 “You say they are not cooperative? I’ll tell you what, George, why don’t you...” (Phone rings again, lunch partner drops by).”...take a stab at handling it yourself... I’ve got to go now.”

While people sometimes have no choice other than multi-tasking, it can result in information overload, or poor communication, or worse, miscommunication. Also what happens, if you are communicating with someone where there are a number of interruptions, is that the person



with whom you are communicating feels rushed or pressured, and therefore might choose not to transfer information.

Gender distinction barriers

Research by Tannen has shown there are differences between men and women in the way they communicate. Men choose to communicate in a way that maintains status and independence. Women tend to communicate in a way that facilitates relationship building. They have a preference for connection. Often women use what is defined as rapport talk, and communicate in a way that avoids putting other people down. Tannen's research has identified a number of key distinctions between males' and females' communication:

- **Getting credit:** Men tend to receive more credit for their contributions because they communicate their own accomplishments more often.
- **Confidence and boasting:** Men sometimes tend to be boastful about their capabilities, while women downplay their capabilities. Sometimes this results in men being perceived as more confident.
- **Asking questions:** Typically, men ask fewer questions as they feel it might reflect negatively on them.
- **Apologies:** Women are more likely to say 'I'm sorry' as a way of showing concern, whereas men often perceive it as a sign of weakness.
- **Feedback:** Women might buffer negative feedback by beginning with statements of praise. Men tend to be much more straightforward.
- **Compliments:** It is more common for women to exchange compliments than men.
- **Managing up and down:** Men and women communicate up and down in the organisational chain of command differently. Men tend to spend more time communicating with their superiors, associating themselves with those levels, while women who are in power positions tend to downplay their superiority.
- **Indirectness:** Women in positions of authority tend to be less direct when giving orders. Often this can lead to misunderstandings.

While research has reported these distinctions, it is important to make note of the fact that these distinctions cannot be generalised between all men and women. In addition, it is probable that in some circumstances, culture influences male and female communication distinctions as well. In general, there are a number of cross cultural communication issues and challenges that are discussed below.

Cross-cultural distinctions

Another barrier to communication emerges from cultural distinctions. The most obvious cross-cultural communication barrier is language. Even when two parties speak the same language, sometimes the meanings of specific words are quite different for two countries (for example, Americans take the elevator, the English take the lift). One of the things that must be considered when trying to establish brand or product names is that translations can result in a negative image for an organisation. Consider the following international blunders:

- The Chevrolet Nova car did not sell in Puerto Rico, because it sounded like no va, which means ‘it doesn’t go!’
- An early translation of Coca Cola into Chinese meant ‘bite the wad tadpole’. Coca Cola has since found and trademarked a new Chinese name that means refreshing and delicious.

Source: Warner (1996, February 12)

- The soft drink Fresca was marketed without a change of brand name. The company later discovered that Fresca is slang for lesbian in Mexico.

Source: Adapted from Ricks (1983)

Groups and individuals can do a number of things to reduce misperceptions and misinterpretations across cultures. These four rules are useful to keep in mind:

1. **Assume differences until similarity is proven:** it is likely safe to assume that people from different countries are not similar to us when considering style and interpretations of communication.
2. **Emphasise description rather than interpretation or evaluation.** If you take some time to observe and interpret a situation from the multiple perspectives of the cultures associated with the communication, you are less likely to interpret meaning based on your own culture and background.
3. **Practice empathy:** The best way to do this is to try and understand the receivers’ values, experiences and frames of references by placing yourself in their shoes.
4. **Treat your interpretations as a working hypothesis:** If you feel you have developed some understanding of communication from a foreign culture, it is likely in your best interests to treat this interpretation as a hypothesis – something that might need fine tuning as time goes on.

How can we improve communication?

So much of our progress and success in organisations is dependent upon effective communication. Organisations have identified effective communication skills as a critical component of any manager’s job, and good communicators tend to create environments that foster effective



working relationships. A number of basic principles of effective communication are discussed below.

- **Take time:** It is difficult to establish good communications with any party or parties without cultivating a relationship based on trust and respect first. As discussed above, a number of barriers to communication resist eradication. They therefore must be managed continually.
- **Be accepting of others:** It is very likely that others we communicate with do not interpret or evaluate information the same way we do. It would be arrogant to assume that they would interpret or evaluate it as we do, and even worse to react in a way that suggests any interpretation other than our own is wrong. It is important as managers that we be open to diverse understandings, and to view them as an opportunity to learn and develop our own sensibilities and interpretative perspectives.
- **Try to separate the people from the problems:** If you recall the rational decision-making process, problem identification should be approached objectively. It is often easier to identify a person or group of people as the problem but this may lead you down the wrong path in terms of finding an appropriate solution. The other thing to keep in mind is that, however the problem is defined; it is likely dependent on maintaining a workable relationship with at least some of the people you view to be the source of the problem!
- **Communicate your feelings:** Many of you have likely worked with people who behave in a way that is inconsistent with what they 'espouse' to be important to them, or to the organisation. So, if you suggest that strong work ethics is important in your department, but take long lunches each day and tend to be late or generally unreliable for 'important' meetings, it sends a message to others very quickly. This jeopardises your credibility as a manager and also threatens the communication process and relationships with others in the organisation.
- **Listen actively:** Research has shown that executives believe the communication skills they find most critical to their success and progress in an organisation are listening skills. Listening is particularly challenging when communicating with people from other cultures where there is a lack of common native language. There are other variables that affect our listening under those circumstances, such as attitudes, beliefs, values, previous experiences or organisational roles. It is the listener's responsibility to ensure that messages are received in the way they were intended. Should there be distortions, they should be clarified as soon as possible. In order to be an effective active listener, one must accept the person for what he or she is, without making judgments of right or wrong, good or bad, logical or illogical. In addition, it is useful to paraphrase the content of what is communicated back to the speaker in order to ensure that they have understood correctly. This is respectful and useful in

maintaining a progressive and successful working relationship. Your body language is also important: ensure that you maintain eye contact, that you are sitting up and leaning forward in a way that shows you are paying attention. It is critical that you demonstrate to the speaker that you understand their feelings. This can be done again through paraphrasing. Finally, an active listener asks questions. This serves two purposes: it confirms that you are listening, and it helps to clarify meaning.

- **Be timely and specific with your feedback:** Often we must communicate information to others that is difficult (a poor performance evaluation for example). While it might be easier to put it off, it is disrespectful to the recipient, and certainly does not foster a trusting relationship. Be sure to provide feedback (whether it is positive or negative!) in a timely manner, and be explicit. Without detail, often the listener is confused or misled (imagine suggesting to a subordinate that “the quality of their work is not as high as expected” – this adds no value to the listener without specific examples).

Source: Adapted from Brownell (1992, December 16); Osland, Kolb & Rubin (2001, p. 158); Johns & Saks (2001, pp. 330-331)



Module summary



Summary

Communication is one of the important interpersonal processes in organisations. Effective communication allows employees, groups, and organisations to achieve their goals and perform at a high level. In this module, you have learned that communication flow moves in one of three directions. Downward communications are the most common, an example of which is job instruction or policies. An upward flow can be just as important and may involve the use of suggestion boxes, group meetings or grievance procedures. Horizontal communications serve an important coordinative function. Anything that represents a barrier to communication is known as noise. There are several examples of noise that exist in organisations (such as physical distraction, gender distinction barriers, and cross-cultural distinctions). Improving communication is an ongoing process. Specific techniques for doing this include taking your time, being accepting of others, trying to separate the people from the problem, communicating your feelings, listening actively and being timely and specific with your feedback.

Case study 5.1



Case study

Who's in Charge?

The president of Janice Tani's firm asked her, as chief executive of the marketing division, and her staff (three male MBAs) to set up and close an important contract with a Japanese firm. He thought his choice especially good as Janice (a Japanese American from California) knew the industry well and could also speak Japanese.

As she and her staff were being introduced, Janice noticed a quizzical look on Mr Yamamoto's face and heard him repeat 'chief executive' to his assistant in an unsure manner. After Janice had presented the merits of the strategy in Japanese, referring to notes provided by her staff, she asked Mr Yamamoto what he thought. He responded by saying that he needed to discuss some things further with the head of her department. Janice explained that was why she was there. Smiling, Mr Yamamoto replied that she had done an especially good job of explaining, but that he wanted to talk things over with the person in charge. Beginning to be frustrated, Janice stated that she had authority for her company. Mr Yamamoto glanced at this assistant, still smiling, and he arranged to meet with Janice at another time.

Case Study Question

Why did Mr Yamamoto keep asking Janice about the executive in charge?

Case study 5.2



Case study

Shaping up the Office

Ronald, an ambitious young executive had been sent to take over the sales branch of his American company in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He spent a few weeks learning the routines with the departing manager and was somewhat disturbed by the informality and lack of discipline that seemed to characterise the office. People seemed to indulge in excessive socializing, conversations seemed to deal more with personal than business matters, and not one seemed to keep to their set schedules.

Once he had formally taken over, he resolved to do something at a general meeting. He told them bluntly that work rates and schedules would have to be adhered to and hoped that a more business-like atmosphere would prevail. Over the next few months, he concentrated on improving on efficiency, offering higher bonuses and incentives to those who worked well and private warnings to those who did not. By the end of the first quarter he felt he had considerably improved the situation and



was therefore somewhat surprised to find sales figures had significantly dropped since his takeover.

Case Study Question

What reason would you give to Ronald for this drop in sales?

Case study 5.3



Case study

Archimax Systems Ltd. (Optional Submission)

Please read case study 5.3, 'Archimax Systems Ltd.' given in the case study handbook of your study material and analyse it, using the written case format provided in the handbook. Your paper should be no longer than eight pages.

Assessment



Assessment

1. “Ineffective communication is the fault of the sender.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Discuss.
2. How might managers use the office grapevine for their benefit.
3. Describe various barriers to effective communication. For each barrier, describe one action that a manager could take to reduce the problem caused by the barrier.
4. What are the similarities and differences of formal and informal communications? What kind of situations call for the use of informal communications? What situations call for formal communications?
5. “In an organisation, communication is always top down and it is only internal to the organisation.” Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons to your answer.



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