

The Communication Process

- **Thought:** First, information exists in the mind of the sender. This can be a concept, idea, information, or feelings.
- **Encoding:** Next, a message is sent to a receiver in words or other symbols.
- **Decoding:** Lastly, the receiver translates the words or symbols into a concept or information that he or she can understand.

During the transmitting of the message, two processes will be received by the receiver: content and context. **Content** is the actual words or symbols of the message which is known as *language* - the spoken and written words. We all use and interpret the meanings of words differently, so even simple messages can be misunderstood. And many words have different meanings to confuse the issue even more.

Context is the way the message is delivered and is known as *paralanguage* - it includes the tone of voice, the look in the sender's eye's, body language, hand gestures, and state of emotions (anger, fear, uncertainty, confidence, etc.) that can be detected. Although paralanguage or context often causes messages to be misunderstood (as we believe what we see more than what we hear); they are powerful communicators that help us to understand each other. Indeed, we often trust the accuracy of nonverbal behaviors more than verbal behaviors.

Some leaders think they have communicated once they told someone to do something, "I don't know why it did not get done...I told Jim to do it." More than likely, Jim misunderstood the message. A message has NOT been communicated unless it is understood by the receiver (decoded). How do you know it has been properly received? By two-way communication or feedback. This feedback tells the sender that the receiver understood the message, its level of importance, and what must be done with it. Communication is an exchange, not just a give, as all parties must participate to complete the information exchange.

Barriers to Communication

"Nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood." - Freeman Teague, Jr.

Anything that prevents understanding of the message is a **barrier** to communication. Many physical and psychological barriers exist:

- **Culture, background, and bias** - We allow our past experiences to change the meaning of the message. Our culture, background, and bias can be good as they allow us to use our past experiences to understand something new, it is when they change the meaning of the message then they interfere with the communication process.
- **Noise** - Equipment or environmental noise effect clear communication. The sender and the receiver must both be able to concentrate on the messages being sent to each other.
- **Ourselves** - Focusing on ourselves, rather than the other person can lead to confusion and conflict. Some of the factors that cause this are defensiveness (we feel someone is attacking us), superiority (we feel we know more that the other), and ego (we feel we are the center of the activity).

- **Perception** - If we feel the person is talking too fast, not fluently, does not articulate clearly, etc., we may dismiss the person. Also our preconceived attitudes affect our ability to listen. We listen uncritically to persons of high status and dismiss those of low status.
- **Message** - Distractions happen when we focus on the facts rather than the idea. Our educational institutions reinforce this with tests and questions. Distractions occur when a word is used differently than you prefer. For example, the word chairman instead of chairperson, may cause you to focus on the word and not the message.
- **Environmental** - Bright lights, an attractive person, unusual sights, or any other stimulus provides a potential distraction.
- **Smothering** - We take it for granted that the impulse to send useful information is automatic. Not true! Too often we believe that certain information has no value to others or they are already aware of the facts.
- **Stress** - People do not see things the same way when under stress. What we see and believe at a given moment is influenced by our psychological frames of references - our beliefs, values, knowledge, experiences, and goals.

These barriers can be thought of as **filters**, that is, the message leaves the sender, goes through the above filters, and is then heard by the receiver. These filters muffle the message! The way to overcome filters is through active listening and feedback.

Active Listening

"I think one lesson I have learned is that there is no substitute for paying attention." - Diane Sawyer

Hearing and listening are not the same thing. Hearing is the act of perceiving sound; it is involuntary. Listening is a selective activity which involves the reception **and** the interpretation of sound. It involves decoding the sound into meaning.

Listening is divided into two main categories: passive and active. Passive listening is little more than hearing. It occurs when the receiver or the message has little motivation to listen carefully, such as music, story telling, television, or being polite.

People speak at 100 to 175 words per minute, but they can listen intelligently at 600 to 800 words per minute (WPM). Since only a part of our mind is paying attention, it is easy to go into *mind drift* - thinking about other things while listening to someone. The cure for this is *active listening* - which involves listening with a **purpose**. It may be to gain information, obtain directions, understand others, solve problems, share interest, see how another person feels, show support, etc. It requires that the listener attends to the words and the feelings of the sender for understanding. ***It takes the same amount or more energy than speaking.*** It requires the receiver to hear the various messages, understand the meaning, and then verify the meaning by offering feedback. The following are a few traits of **active listeners**:

- Spends more time listening than talking.
- Does not finish the sentence of others.
- Does not answer questions with questions.
- Are aware of biases. We all have them...we need to control them.
- Never daydreams or become preoccupied with their own thoughts when others talk.
- Lets the other person talk. Does not dominate the conversation.

- Plans responses after the other person has finished speaking...NOT while they are speaking.
- Provides feedback, but does not interrupt incessantly.
- Keeps the conversation on what the speaker says...NOT on what interests them.
- Takes brief notes. This forces them to concentrate on what is being said.

Feedback

“When you know something, say what you know. When you don't know something, say that you don't know. That is knowledge.” - Kung Fu Tzu (Confucius)

The purpose of **feedback** is to change and alter messages so the meaning of the original communicator is understood by the second communicator. It includes verbal and nonverbal responses to another person's message.

Providing feedback is accomplished by paraphrasing the words of the sender, that is, restating the sender's feelings or ideas in your own words, rather than repeating their words. Your words should be saying, "This is what I understand your feelings to be, am I correct?" It not only includes verbal responses, but also nonverbal ones. Nodding your head or squeezing their hand to show agreement, dipping your eyebrows shows you don't quite understand the meaning of their last phrase, or sucking air in deeply and blowing it hard shows that you are also exasperated with the situation.

Carl Roger listed five main categories of feedback. They are listed in the order in which they occur most frequently in daily conversations. Notice that we make judgments more often than we try to understand:

- **Evaluative:** Making a judgment about the worth, goodness, or appropriateness of the other person's statement.
- **Interpretive:** Paraphrasing - attempting to explain what the other person's statement means.
- **Supportive:** Attempting to assist or bolster the other communicator.
- **Probing:** Attempting to gain additional information, continue the discussion, or clarify a point.
- **Understanding:** Attempting to discover completely what the other communicator means by her statements.

Imagine how much better daily communications would be if listeners tried to understand first, before they tried to evaluate what someone is saying.

Nonverbal Behaviors of Communication

To deliver the full impact of a message, use nonverbal behaviors to improve interpersonal communication:

- **Eye contact:** This helps to regulate the flow of communication. It signals interest in others and increases the speaker's credibility. People who make eye contact open the flow of communication and convey interest, concern, warmth, and credibility.

- **Facial Expressions:** Smiling is a powerful cue that transmits happiness, friendliness, warmth, and liking. So, if you smile frequently you will be perceived as more likable, friendly, warm and approachable. Smiling is often contagious and people will react favorably. They will be more comfortable around you and will want to listen more.
- **Gestures:** If you fail to gesture while speaking you may be perceived as boring and stiff. A lively speaking style captures the listener's attention, makes the conversation more interesting, and facilitates understanding.
- **Posture and body orientation:** You communicate numerous messages by the way you talk and move. Standing erect and leaning forward communicates to listeners that you are approachable, receptive and friendly. Interpersonal closeness results when you and the listener face each other. Speaking with your back turned or looking at the floor or ceiling should be avoided as it communicates disinterest.
- **Proximity:** Cultural norms dictate a comfortable distance for interaction with others. You should look for signals of discomfort caused by invading the other person's space. Some of these are: rocking, leg swinging, tapping, and gaze aversion.
- **Vocal:** Speaking can signal nonverbal communication when you include such vocal elements as: tone, pitch, rhythm, timbre, loudness, and inflection. For maximum teaching effectiveness, learn to vary these six elements of your voice. One of the major criticisms of many speakers is that they speak in a monotone voice. Listeners perceive this type of speaker as boring and dull.

Speaking Hints

"Speak comfortable words!" - William Shakespeare

When speaking or trying to explain something, ask the listeners if they are following you. Ensure the receiver has a chance to comment or ask questions. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes - consider the feelings of the receiver. Be clear about what you say. Look at the receiver. Make sure your words match your tone and body language (nonverbal behaviors). Vary your tone and pace. Do not be vague, but on the other hand, do not complicate what you are saying with too much detail. Do not ignore signs of confusion.

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