LEARNING PLAN 7: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE ORGANIZATION

OVERVIEW

Communication is an integral part of the managerial functions. In planning and organizing, managers compose and distribute memos and reports, and explain the organization's plans and structure to others. In leading, managers communicate the organizational mission and goals to employees in order to help motivate them to achieve them. In the controlling function, data are gathered and compared to standards, and successful outcomes or areas for improvement are communicated orally or in writing.

As you can see, most of a manager's working day must be spent communicating with people in order to perform the managerial functions effectively. This unit will help you improve your verbal communication, nonverbal communication and listening skills, and your understanding of formal and informal communication channels in the organization.

COMPETENCIES

APPLY WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS.

This learning plan addresses the following learning objectives to help you master the competency:

a. Identify the elements of effective communication and listening.
b. Identify examples of nonverbal communication.
c. Relate the concept of channel richness to different types of communication in the workplace.
d. Distinguish between various formal and informal organizational communication channels.
e. Identify individual and organizational barriers to communication.
f. Identify ways to overcome the barriers to communication in an organization.
Have you ever experienced a situation in which ineffective communication caused a real problem? Most of us have seen this in the workplace or other setting. How quickly things can go wrong in what we often assume is a simple process. It is actually quite intricate, and in this section, we will look into these issues in greater detail.

Communication is generally thought of as the exchange of information between two or more people using the means of shared symbols or signs. The reason for communicating is to share information or experience. Because organizations are the combined efforts and activities of two or more people with at least one common purpose, the effective and efficient interchange of information is critical to the success of the organization. Managers must understand the strengths and weaknesses of various communication methods and be able to eliminate or mitigate barriers to communication. Therefore, we need to appreciate the components of communication and put best practices into place in the work environment.

THE COMMUNICATION MODEL

What we assume to be a simple and quick process actually has several distinct steps even in this narrowing to the most basic level. Initially, there is an intended meaning that the sender wishes to convey to another person or persons. To send this message, the sender must encode the message so that it can be transmitted. Typically, this involves placing the message into some form of language. Next, the message is transmitted to the receiver via a channel. The receiver takes the encoded message and decodes it and then evaluates the message for its content and determines the intended meaning. Feedback is the process where the recipient of the message communicates back to the sender with a reply. This is not depicted in the diagram, but this feedback goes through the same steps of encoding and decoding.
At first glance, things look reasonably straightforward, but we all know that problems with communication can and do occur. So, why do they occur? The reasons are several. Let’s start with the intended meaning and accept that there is a thought \( X \) that the sender wishes to convey to another person. The sender must encode message \( X \) in some form of language or symbol. In this case, let’s say she chooses to use an e-mail and the English language. The sender has a series of life experiences and patterns of understanding that influence, or bias, the way that she sees the world and phrases the message. The choice of words and the tone of the e-mail will all be affected by these characteristics of the sender. The sender will encode the message in a way that the meaning is clear to the sender but perhaps not to the recipient. Next, the message must be transmitted. The transmission channels introduce a concept called NOISE that can interfere with the content of the encoded message. Noise can change the intended meaning and serves as the second potential source of miscommunication. The receiver then receives the message, which may already have been altered by noise, and then decodes it using the receiver’s own set of perceptual filters and life experiences in a similar way that the sender’s experiences affected the encoding of the message. Once the message is decoded, the receiver interprets the meaning of the message. I hope that by this point you are recognizing the numerous steps along the way at which things can go wrong! Perhaps the stage of feedback is one of the most important because it lets the sender know if the recipient has interpreted the message as it was intended.

LISTENING

A good manager must listen almost as much as he or she talks! ACTIVE LISTENING refers to taking certain actions to ensure that you are receiving the message as it was encoded. This process requires good eye contact, alert body posture, and the use of frequent verbal or non-verbal encouragement. Nodding, saying "I see," etc., are ways to show understanding and to encourage the speaker to continue. Trying to focus only on the words being said reduces the NOISE that can come from our minds wandering to other things.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Also known as BODY LANGUAGE, NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION by both the sender and receiver of the message can affect its successful transmission. Things like facial expressions (smiling, frowning, raising eyebrows), stance or posture, and even physical distance can convey more than the actual words being spoken! Imagine you are asking your supervisor for a raise. She doesn't say a word, but nods her head and makes a slight frown while you are speaking. Does the nodding mean she agrees with you, or merely that she is listening? What about the frown? Are you going to get that raise? The more adept you are at "reading" nonverbals, the more effective of a communicator you can be. In this situation, nodding probably is meant to show she is listening to you, but the frown is not a good sign! By reading this, you can adjust your message or ask questions to determine what the barriers to your request might be.

Non-verbal cues observed in this photo:

- Smiling
- Leaning Forward
- Eye Contact
- Physical Proximity
COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The transmission and feedback conduits that we have just discussed and reviewed are often referred to as communication channels. In the distant past, people had really only one method or channel for communication and that was face-to-face. As written language developed and means of printing became available, other methods such as letters, bulletins, memos, and other written approaches came into common usage. The telephone, an invention that some originally thought would have no common use, has become a much-used communication channel. More recently, we have become users of electronic vehicles such as e-mail. Generally, the channels that more closely tie the sender and the receiver are viewed as richer and more personal. Face-to-face communication is considered the richest channel because the sender sees immediately how the message was received and whether or not it was understood.

However, this is not always possible because it is resource-consuming when attempting wide distribution of content. Less personally rich channels such as reports and memos can be widely distributed but sacrifice the personal interaction in the communication process and are at risk for undetected miscommunication and the absence of corrective influence from nonverbal cues. Choosing the proper channel for a particular message is part of the challenge of effective communication. There is no one best way, as there are advantages and disadvantages to each. E-mail is an efficient method of conveying information to many people at once who may be at different locations. However, sometimes the tone of a message can be misconstrued. E-mail is considered by many as an informal medium, thus messages are sent in a conversational, informal style. Since the reader has no visual or auditory clues, humor or sarcasm often are misinterpreted. People often forget that all e-mails can be saved, and don’t put the thought into them that they would with a written report, letter, or memo.

Sometimes, the best way to convey information is to combine two channels. For example, a manager who must share a new, unpopular policy with employees may wish to call a meeting to present the information to everyone at once. He or she may then wish to hand out the information in written form to all attending, for their future reference.

FLOW OF COMMUNICATION

Communications flow in three basic directions: upward, downward, and horizontally. Let’s take each of these in turn. These are sometimes referred to as formal communication pathways. Each of these concepts and terms assumes the organization to be a hierarchy, often in the shape of a pyramid.

Upward communication is the flow of information from lower levels in the hierarchy to the upper levels. Some would characterize this as communicating with the boss. This type of communication can encompass many different things from within the company like communication about employee morale, operations performance, or concerns about overall company success. The key to this form of communication is that it originates at lower levels from within the organization and travels upward to higher branches within the company based on its desired importance. Upward communication is a very
good form of feedback to management and provides crucial information to them for future decisions. An example of this would be employee concern over product quality.

*Downward communication* is the process whereby information flows from the senior levels of the organization down to the staff and employees. It also includes communication from managers or supervisors to employees. Downward-driven communication is the opposite of upward-bound information flow. Typically, it is management providing guidance to the organization. This might take place at different levels within the organization to some extent. However, it is always a higher level directing lower levels with information. This communication mechanism follows the top-down management approach. Examples of this include communication about a new initiative the company is undertaking, or a change in the dress code.

*Horizontal communication* is the conduit that transfers information across similar levels of the organizational hierarchy and may be a stand-alone or an effort to further distribute messages from upward or downward communication. Horizontal communication is unlike the other two forms — upward and downward — in that it is communication across the organization. Horizontal communication is typically performed when dealing with operational-type issues or broad organizational-based issues that impact the performance of the company as a whole. Examples of horizontal communication would be disseminating information about changes to Human Resource policies for the firm, or a cross-functional planning meeting.

The channels just mentioned are formal channels in the organization. In addition to these, there exist informal channels. Probably the most familiar to us is the organizational *grapevine*, sometimes called the *rumor mill*. While this is a source of information, we need to be aware of the effects of encoding, decoding, transmission, noise, and meaning that can affect these informal information sources. Many organizations have had success by implementing formal rumor response programs. Nonetheless, informal information sources can provide managers with valuable insight into how communication is being decoded and interpreted for meaning as a quality check to make sure the message was received as it was intended.

*Management by Walking Around (MBWA)* is one method for management to increase communication in the workplace. This is where management will stroll through the working environments of the company asking simple questions to workers in the operational areas to determine the true cause of issues they are investigating. This often allows them to get to the bottom of issues quicker and uncover other areas of concern within the company.
There are many barriers to communication both inside organizations and outside them. Some of these will be covered here:

- **Physical barriers**, which are time, environment, comfort, needs, and physical medium.
- **Cultural barriers** to include ethnic, religious, and social differences within organizations.
- **Perceptual barriers**, which are views on what is said and how it differs from your own mindset.
- **Motivational barriers** can be construed as mental impacts of decisions on the organization and why we choose a specific course.
- **Emotional barriers** are those personal feelings that impact communications at the moment.
- **Slang or other verbal barriers** include differences in languages spoken from one culture to another or references to cultural events that are not known by all.
- **Modes** are also barriers to communications because not everyone has access to every type of mode. Lack of access for a particular mode can break down communication as a result.

So how do we overcome these? There are many ways to overcome these barriers; we will explore some of these methods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to Communication</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical barriers</td>
<td>Physical barriers can be broken down by literally removing them. Closed doors, separate locations, even large desks can act as barriers to communication. Being aware of these, and trying to see your workplace or workspace through others’ eyes can increase awareness of possible barriers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural barriers</td>
<td>Cultural barriers are best combated by increasing training and learning about various cultures that the enterprise works and intermingles with. Cultures vary in their attitudes towards power. The main sources for miscommunication here are the life experiences and the language and symbol differences between the sender and the receiver. Nancy Adler (cite year?) states that cross-cultural misperception occurs because:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual, Motivational and Emotional barriers</td>
<td>Perceptions and motivational and emotional barriers can be approached through a collective of training, communications, and assistance with employees of the firm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modes</td>
<td>Mode barriers can be easily overcome through upfront validation of modal communication means to ensure that everyone has a consistent path of communication to use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slang or other verbal barriers</td>
<td>Verbal or slang barriers can be approached through increased training and awareness programs to create a consistent culture in which everyone can communicate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

How open should organizational communication be? So far, the discussion has been pointing toward fully open communication. However, Eisenberg and Whitten have examined this in detail. They tell us that there is a difference between fully open communication and communication that is open and unambiguous. Please review their article in greater detail in the attached readings. The message seems
to be that unfiltered open communication might have matching disadvantages to its advantages. The authors advise that we need to approach open communication from a contingency perspective in which personal information is protected and the greater good is sheltered as we go about our business of organizational communication.

**SUGGESTED READINGS**


**Okun, S. (1975). How to be a better listener. Nation's Business, 63(8), 59-61.**


**Tobias, L. L. (1990, October). Improving communication. Executive Excellence, 7(10), 17-18.**

**TERMINOLOGY**

**Communication**: The exchange of information.

**Decode**: The process of taking the encoded message that was transmitted and preparing it for the receiver.

**Downward communication**: Communication from upper levels in the organizational hierarchy to the lower levels.

**Encoding**: The process of preparing the message in a form that can be transmitted.

**Feedback**: The message that is received by the sender of the information from the recipient. This helps the sender determine if the message was received and understood.

**Grapevine**: The informal channels of communication in the organization.

**Message**: The information that is sent in the process of communicating.

**Nonverbal communication**: Communication that occurs without a written or spoken message. Often known as body language.

**Semantics**: The study of meaning.

**Upward communication**: Movement of information up the organizational hierarchy.