

1. Introduction – Effective Communication Skills

1.1 The Importance of Communication

In a survey conducted by the Katz Business School at the University of Pittsburgh, organizations rated communication skills as the most important factor used in selecting their management staff. The study found that oral and written communication skills were important in predicting job success, as was the ability to communicate well with others in the workplace.

A University of Pittsburgh study found that the most important factor in selecting managers is communication skills.

This makes sense when you think about it. If you can communicate well, you can get your message across to others in an effective way and they then have accurate instructions to complete their assigned tasks. If you are not able to communicate well, the messages you send get lost in translation. Communication breakdowns result in barriers against your ability to develop both professionally and personally.

Even though communications skills are so important to success in the workplace, there are many individuals who find these skills to be a stumbling block to their progress. They struggle to convey their thoughts and ideas in an accurate manner, making it difficult to progress and nearly impossible to lead well.

However, there is hope for anyone who finds communicating to be difficult. These skills can be practiced and learned. It takes learning about how communication works, how to communicate exactly what it is you want to say, what mode of communication is best, and what factors are influencing the ability for you to send and receive messages with acumen.

1.2 What Is Communication?

When asked to define communication, how would you respond? Most people will relate to the forms of communication – talking or listening. But communication goes beyond that. Communication involves getting information from one person to the other person. Yet even this is not a complete definition because communicating effectively involves having that information relayed while retaining the same in content and context. If I tell you one thing and you hear another, have I communicated?

Communication is the art and process of creating and sharing ideas. Effective communication depends on the richness of those ideas.

So if we look at communication from another angle, it involves the perception of the information as much as the delivery of that information. In other words, we can define communication as the art and process of creating and sharing ideas. Effective communication depends on the richness of those ideas. In order to be effective at communicating, there are a number of skills that you can rely. Which skill you choose will depend upon your situation, the recipient of your communication, and the information that you need to convey.

1.3 What Are Communication Skills?

Imagine you are on one side of a wall and the person you want to communicate with is on the other side of the wall. But there's more than the wall in the way. The wall is surrounded by a moat that is filled with crocodiles and edged by quicksand. These barriers could be things like different cultures, different expectations, different experiences, different perspectives, or different communication styles, to name just a few.

Communication skills are the tools that we use to remove the barriers to effective communication.

You might experience only one of these barriers at a time, or you might find yourself facing them all. Getting your message to the other person requires that you recognize these barriers exist between you, and that you then apply the proper tools, or communication skills, to remove those barriers preventing your message from getting through.

Of course, communication is a two-way street. The person on the other side of those barriers will also try to send messages back to you. Your ability to understand them clearly could be left to a dependence on their ability to use communication skills. But that's leaving the success of the communication to chance. Instead, you can also use your own communication skills to ensure that you receive messages clearly as well.

Finally, there isn't only one point in your communication with another person at which you have to watch out for barriers. To be successful at communicating, it's important to recognize that these barriers to communication can occur at multiple points in the communication process.

1.4 The Communication Process

The communication process involves multiple parts and stages. These are:

The communication process is composed of several stages, each of which offers potential barriers to successful communication.

- Source
- Message
- Encoding
- Channel

- Decoding
- Receiver
- Feedback
- Context

At each of these stages, there is the potential for barriers to be formed or problems to arise. As we look at ways to limit the barriers to communicating effectively, remember that you may have to apply them at more than one occasion during your communications process. The steps in the process are represented in Figure 1 and explained further in the following information.

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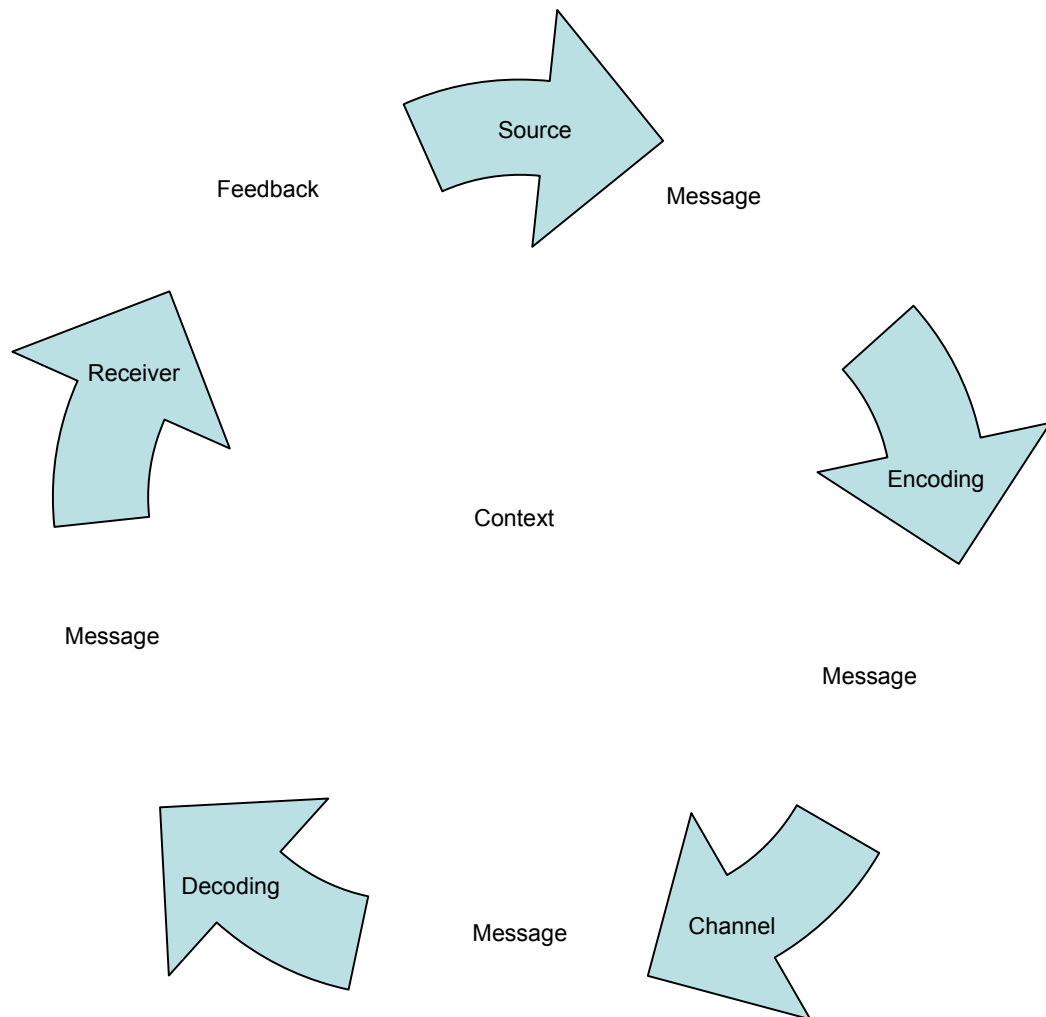


Figure 1: The Communication Process

1.4.1 Source

The source of the communication is the sender, or for our purposes, you. In order to be a good source, you need to be clear about the message that you are sending. Do you know exactly what it is that you want to communicate? You'll also want to be sure you know why it is that you are communicating. What result is it that you expect? If you cannot answer these questions, you will be starting the communication process with a high chance of failure.

The source of the message is the sender. The sender must know why the communication is necessary and what result is needed.

1.4.2 Message

The message is simply the information that you want to communicate. Without a message, there is no cause for communicating. If you cannot summarize the information that you need to share, you aren't ready to begin the process of communication.

The source of the message is the sender. The sender must know why the communication is necessary and what result is needed.

1.4.3 Encoding

Encoding is the process of taking your message and transferring it into a format that can be shared with another party. It's sort of like how messages are sent via a fax. The information on the paper has to be encoded, or prepared, before it can be sent to the other party. It has to be sent in a format that the other party has the ability to decode or the message will not be delivered.

In order to encode a message properly, you have to think about what the other person will need in order to understand, or decode, the message. Are you sharing all the information that is necessary to get the full picture? Have you made assumptions that may not be correct? Are you using the best form of sending it in order to ensure the best chance of the message being properly received? Are there cultural, environmental, or language differences between you and the other party that could cause miscommunication?

Encoding is the process of taking your message and transferring it into the proper format for sharing it with your audience. It requires knowing your audience and ensuring that your message provides all of the information that they need.

Of course, to encode a message properly, you have to know who your audience is. You need to have an understanding of what they know and what they need to know in order to send a complete message. You need to use language they will understand and a context that is familiar. One simple example of how you can do this is being sure to spell out acronyms. We sometimes forget that not everyone is familiar with the acronyms that we may use on a regular basis.

1.4.4 Channel

The channel is the method or methods that you use to convey your message. The type of message you have will help to determine the channel that you should use. Channels include face-to-face conversations, telephone calls or videoconferences, and written communication like emails and memos.

The Channel is the method of communication that you choose such as face-to-face, by telephone, or via email.

Each channel has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, you will find it difficult to give complex, technical information or instructions by using just the telephone. Or you may get bad results if you try to give criticism via email.

1.4.5 Decoding

Decoding happens when you receive the message that has been sent. The communication skills required to decode a message successfully include the ability to read and comprehend, listen actively, or ask clarifying questions when needed.

Decoding is the process of receiving the message accurately and requires that your audience has the means to understand the information you are sharing.

If the person you are attempting to communicate with seems to be lacking the skills to decode your message, you will need to either resend it in a different way or assist them in understanding it by supplying clarifying information.


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1.4.6 Receiver

Since you have thought out your message, you've certainly also thought about what you want the desired result to be on the part of your listener. But it's important to realize that each person that receives your message will be listening to it through their own individual expectations, opinions, and perspectives. Their individual experiences will influence how your message is received.

You have expectations for a response from the receiver when you send a message. You can increase the chances of getting this result by addressing your audience's concerns or addressing specific benefits as part of your communication.

While you can't always address each person's individual concerns in a message, part of planning for your communication is to think ahead of time about what some of their thoughts or experiences might be. For example, if you are releasing a new product and want to convince customers to try it, you would want to be certain to address the specific benefits to the customer, or what improvements have been made since the last version was released.

1.4.7 Feedback

No matter what channel you have used to convey your message, you can use feedback to help determine how successful your communication was. If you are face-to-face with your audience, you can read body language and ask questions to ensure understanding. If you have communicated via writing, you can gauge the success of your communication by the response that you get or by seeing if the result you wanted is delivered.

Feedback lets you gauge how successful you were at communicating. It also offers a chance to adjust your communication process for the future.

In any case, feedback is invaluable for helping you to improve your communication skills. You can learn what worked well and what didn't so that you can be even more efficient the next time you communicate with that person or the next time you need to communicate a similar message.

1.4.8 Context

The context is the situation in which you are communicating. It involves the environment that you are in and that in which your audience is in, the culture of your organization(s), and elements such as the relationship between you and your audience. Your communication process will not look the same when you are communicating with your boss as it will when you are communicating with a friend. The context helps determine the tone and style of your communication.

Context involves things such as your relationship with your audience, the culture of your organization and your general environment.

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