Communication Theory

Overview

Project communications requires skill[1]. To make communication effective, careful thought has to be given to the choice of media and message, how the message will be delivered (and who will deliver it) and the best writing, or presentation style to use based on the personality of the person you wish to communicate with, the *receiver*. Effective communication has four key ingredients; all communication must be clear, concise and easily understood by the receiver, credible communication is also honest and complete (ie, ethical[2]).

The following are always determined for an effective communication[3]:

Step 1: Identify the Message - What information needs to be communicated and why?

Step 2: Target the Audience - Who needs this information?

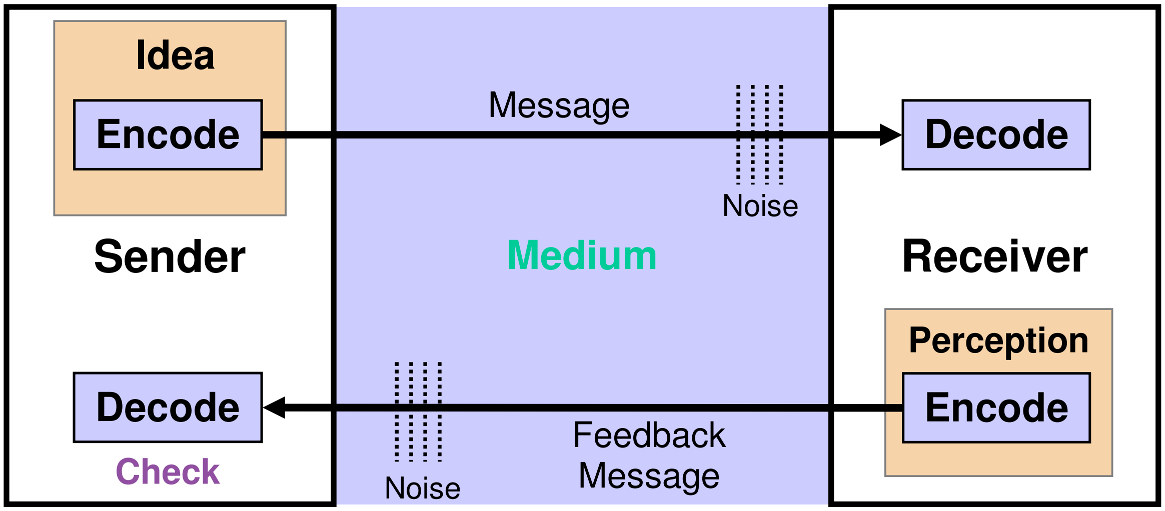
Step 3: Decide on the Timing - When is the information needed by the receiver for the best effect?

Step 4: Determine the Format - What is the best way to communicate the information?

Step 5: Communicate and review - Do the communication and review to see if it worked.

The sender-receiver model

The sender-receiver model is the simplest communication model and underpins most others. The *sender* has an idea or concept he/she wants the receiver to appreciate. Before any useful outcome can be achieved from the communication, the *receiver* has to accurately understand the sender's idea! This means the message has to be effective in the *receiver's* space; if the message does not engage the *receiver*, the *sender* is wasting his/her time.



The elements in this model are:

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[1] A number of posts focusing on communication have been published on the Mosaicprojects's Blog. To view the summary see: https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/category/stakeholder-management/communication/

[2] For more on ***Ethics*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1001_Ethics.pdf

[3] For more on ***effective communication*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1020_Three_types_stakeholder_communication.pdf

- **Encode:** To translate thoughts or ideas into a form of language that can be understood by the *receiver*; eg, written English, spoken French or a drawn diagram.
- **Message:** What is sent: the output of encoding
- **Medium:** The method used for sending the message (face-to-face, telephone, email)
- **Noise:** Something that interferes with the sending or understanding of the message (distance, culture, language differences)
- **Decode:** The translation of the message by the *receiver* from the medium into their thoughts.

A single communication is complete once the feedback-message has been decoded by the *sender* and checked for accuracy against the original idea. Once this loop has been closed both people have a common understanding of the idea. This does not require agreement or concurrence, but if there is to be a disagreement, it helps if everyone has the same basic understanding of the issue or idea in dispute.

Effective communication requires both the *sender* and the *receiver* to be engaged. The *sender* needs to check that the 'message' has been received and validate the feedback: *"Can we just summarise our discussions to make sure that I have not left anything out?"* The *receiver* needs to check that he/she has absorbed and understood the content of 'message' *"Can I just summarise our discussions to make sure that I am clear on the details and objectives?"* This is active listening and feedback[4].

Dimensions of communication

Communication can be categorised in a number of different ways. The four primary considerations are:

Written or Oral

- Written messages are read[5], the effectiveness of the communication is influenced by the document's design[6].
- Oral messages are heard. The communication is heavily influenced by what the *receiver* sees (if the *sender* and *receiver* can see each other). Body language and facial expressions can count for more than 50% of the message received. Paralingual influences, including the pitch, tone and phrasing of the voice counts for another 30% of the message. These influences and the immediacy of visual feedback make oral communications much richer in context then written communication.

Formal or Informal

- Formal communications are relatively infrequent and usually have pre-planned legal or governance[7] implications. The communication can be oral or written using any appropriate medium including, letter, email, telephone, etc. Some typical formal communications include:
    - A formal presentation to stakeholders (typically scripted[8]) that the stakeholders can rely on for decision making, eg, a presentation to the project review board who will use the information to assess the on-going viability of the project.
    - A contract instruction emailed to a supplier changing a specified requirement.
    - A telephone agreement with a sales organisation changing your insurance policy (usually recorded to ensure a record of the new contact).

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[4] For more on ***Active Listening*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf

[5] For more on ***Writing Skills*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1010_Writing_Skills.pdf

[6] For more on ***Document Design*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1065_Page_Layout.pdf

[7] For more on ***Governance*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1033_Governance.pdf

[8] For more on ***Presentation Skills*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1009_Presentation_Skills.pdf

- Informal communications are all of the other communications that are not formal. This includes all conversations, discussions and meetings. Plus most written communications.

Directions of communication

- Upwards. To senior managers and others with authority over the project.
- Downwards. To project team members, suppliers and contractors.
- Outwards. To people and organisations outside of your organisation that are not involved in the work of the project or program as a supplier (included in 'horizontal').
- Sidewards. To peers and colleagues, usually within the organisation (included in 'horizontal').

Internal or External

- Internal communications are to people within the organisation. Typically, you have some 'rights' in respect of these communications.
- External communications are to people outside of the organisation. Typically, you have less rights to require feedback, etc.

These different classifications individually or in combination help with the development of the overall communication plan.

Structure the communication for effect

Good communication in any medium engages the receiver so they want to hear the message! This requires a structure:

You need a good 'headline' – the key point of the message that you keep coming back to. In blogs and email this is the subject line. In formal letters the heading. In reports the opening statement. This needs to tell the whole story at a very high level.

You need a concise story – the next 3 to 5 PowerPoint slides, the next 3 to 5 paragraphs – these need to answer the key questions of Who, What, When Where and Why simply and concisely[9]. In reports this is the executive summary. Most executives won't read beyond this so it needs to be good!

If necessary, add supporting details and arguments in an indexed and logical fashion – the skill is to make any one piece of supporting information easy to find.

You also need to design the information in a way that is usable by the receiver. Your intended audience almost certainly **do not** see the situation in the same way you do; therefore, structuring a message based on what you think they 'need to know' probably wont work. Firstly, you need to understand what the intended audience believes the situation to be! Their beliefs and perceptions are their reality and if you want a change, you need to start from their baseline - not yours.

To most people, and particularly with senior executive teams detailed data and statistics are largely irrelevant - you need to paint a clear picture to encourage a decision. Pictures and diagram used sensibly and ethically really do replace 'a 1000 words' and are far more likely to be received, understood and as a consequence achieve your desired action.

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[9] For more on ***Effective Explanation*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1090_Effective_Explanations.pdf

Barriers to communication

The purpose of any communication is to create understanding leading to appropriate responses or actions by the *receiver*. However, the understanding is formed in a person's mind and no two minds are the same[10]. Even simple words in a language can have very different meanings to two people[11]. Each person's brain will filter and sometimes distort information based on the synapse developed over their lifetime; this can be thought of as the brain's hardwiring and affects both conscious and unconscious thought processing.

To manage and survive the permanent state of sensory overload the brain is subjected to by the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, the brain classifies most of the information as unimportant at 'this-moment' and relegates it to the subconscious; it is effectively ignored until something out of the ordinary occurs. Those elements that are of importance are then processed as efficiently as possible by the brain using pattern matching and 'packaging'.

Pattern matching allows the brain to respond quickly and simply to a stimulus based on previous similar occurrences. Subtle differences are ignored.

Similarly detail within the 'package' is ignored unless an additional stimulus makes looking within the 'package' important. An example is looking for your car in a carpark; you can match the pattern of 'your car' when you see a small part projecting out from behind others….but you ignore details such as dust on the paintwork. The eye sees all of the detail all of the time, the brain filters out the extraneous information and simply deals with the 'package' of 'your car' and the process of getting from where you are to where it is effectively and safely. Stereotypes based on cultural differences are a form of packaging that is particularly damaging to communication; there are no positive stereotypes! But everyone has a predetermined view of 'engineers', 'technicians', 'senior managers', etc.

Effective communication needs both the *sender* and the *receiver* to be aware of this problem and work to minimize its effect – you can never totally remove these hard wired processes.

How we send and receive messages is also affected by the objectives of the communication, how we feel (right now), other conscious and unconscious thoughts (our personal reality), cultural differences, personal preferences, and the personality and communication style of *sender* and *receiver*. Other potential 'barriers' to the effective receipt of the message include environmental and personal distractions, particularly lack of interest and fatigue.

For effective communication, particularly across cultures we must be aware of these potential 'barriers' and plan to reduce their effect. This requires the gathering of information about each of the stakeholders you need to communicate with, including their relative importance, influence and level of support and receptiveness. From this understanding an effective communication can be designed that has the best chance of working effectively for you in the *receiver's* reality.

Effective communication

Effective communication is central to:

- Interviewing stakeholders for requirements and presenting reports to management
- Negotiating scope, budgets, deadlines and resource allocations[12]
- Advising team members or senior managers[13]

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[10] For more on the effect of ***Cognitive Biases*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1069_Bias.pdf

[11] See ***Communication or Confusion***: https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2010/02/05/communication-or-confusion/

[12] For more on **Negotiation** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1024_Negotiating.pdf

[13] See ***Advising Upwards***, a new book by Dr. Lynda Bourne: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/shop-advising-upwards.php

- Conducting and participating in meetings (provided effective meeting management techniques are used[14])
- Resolving conflict[15]; motivating the team[16]; influencing others.

All of these activities are enhanced by effective communication. However, for a communication to be effective, at least two of these elements need to be present.

- **Power:** if a communicator is perceived to be powerful (important), the message being communicated will be seen to have importance. Power comes from a range of sources including technical expertise.
- **Credibility:** built by making all communications accurate, timely and complete, as well as consistent, open and auditable. Errors are managed (and credibility least damaged) by openly identifying the problem and correcting it. Secrecy destroys credibility.
- **Relevance:** Appropriate to the audience, subject-matter and environment. The relevance of the information to the recipient is enhanced through additional characteristics including being timely and presented in a concise and consistent format.

Power is useful if you have it and can reduce the effort needed to tailor individual messages for each recipient (although effective leaders do this anyway), the receivers want to understand your message. For the rest of us, relevance requires understanding the receiver's needs and credibility simply has to be earned.

Practical communication ideas for different media:

1. **Voice mail and other recorded greetings:** Smile when you record it - you want to sound pleasant. Listen to the difference when you record the message while wearing a happy face—it might surprise you.
2. **Email subject line:** Never leave it blank. Think of the subject as a headline, a short, catchy, specific subject will get a quicker response than a meaningless phrase such as 'following up' or worse a blank space.
3. **Email message body:** In a business-related email, leave out the emoticons, jokes, 'funny links', etc; especially when the message is being sent to your superiors or more than one person. All business emails are retained and may be read by a complete stranger sometime next year.
4. **All communication:** Ask or notice if the recipient has a preferred way to be contacted. Some live and breathe through texting. Email is best for others. And others still want calls. Your message will be received more effectively if it comes in on the channel your audience prefers.
5. **Phone calls:** When on a phone call, be present. It's obvious—and disrespectful—when callers are distracted and multitasking. If it's not a good time to talk, just say so, and arrange another time to speak.
6. **Conference calls:** Thankfully, many conference calls are muted by the moderator or administrator. But if the one you're on is not muted automatically, do so anyway. It is so annoying to hear someone munching or typing, on a conference call. Even background noise can be distracting.
7. **Conversations in person or on the phone:** Allow the other person to finish their sentence. It's polite and civil, and helps keep conversations that way, too.
8. **Interrupting:** But if necessary to interject—and sometimes it is—use a trick like: "So allow me to stop you there…" Or, "To clarify, I'd like to ask…" Or, "OK, so to respond to your point…"
9. **"I'll have to get back about that":** No problem. Just make sure to do. And promptly.

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[14] For more on running ***effective meetings*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1075_Meetings.pdf

[15] For more on ***Managing Conflict*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1041_Managing_Conflict.pdf

[16] For more on ***Motivation*** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1048_Motivation.pdf

Cultural dimensions of communication

In the 1960s and 1970s, two theorists, Geert Hofstede and Edward Hall, independently developed paradigms for the organization and identification of cultures that can be summarized in five dimensions that are applicable to all cultures. These dimensions that are present to a greater or lesser extent are:

- **High/Low Context**: determined by the emphasis that a culture places on the message versus the preamble and framework surrounding a communication event.
- **Power-Distance**: the extent to which people accept unequal power distribution in a society.
- **Collectivist-Individualist**: the extent to which people prioritize or weigh their individuality versus their willingness to submit to the goals of the group.
- **Feminine-Masculine**: the extent to which a culture exhibits traditionally masculine or feminine values.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance**: the extent to which a society willingly embraces or avoids the unknown.

High/Low Context: Context is best defined as the framework needed to allow a communication event to be effective: body gestures; tone of voice; physical distance between the people; societal norms (such as the time needed to develop a relationship before starting on the 'business'); geographic place of communication; and other external factors.

High-context cultures assign primary importance to the framework surrounding a message and secondary importance to the message itself. High-context cultures are relationship based and need more time to make decisions and perform transactions than low-context cultures. There are a lot of *read-between-the-lines* scenarios and close connections among group members. Everybody knows what every other person knows - most information is intrinsically known (implicit) rather than explicit. In general, high-context cultures use more symbols and non-verbal cues in communication. Meaning is embedded in a situational context and credibility is assigned to informal networks of family, friends and associates over institutions, bureaucracies and governments.

Low-Context cultures assign primary meaning to the objective communication message and secondary meaning to the context. The emphasis is on speed, accuracy, and efficiency in communication ('just the facts please' a *lean* message is preferred). Low-context cultures are logical, linear, action-oriented, and communication is expected to proceed in a rational and explicit way. The mass of information is explicit and formalised; concrete meaning (not abstract) is expected.

Within the frame of context one finds a subset of cultural categories based on time. All cultures either have a monochromatic or polychromatic sense of time. In monochromatic culture, time is perceived in a linear fashion. Hence the expressions *'time marches on'*. Low-context cultures tend to be monochromatic. Monochromatic cultures organize themselves around a calendar and emphasize punctuality. High-context cultures tend to be polychromatic. In polychromatic cultures, there are many things going on at once and punctuality is less important. In some polychromatic societies, the past is not something to be forgotten but rather past events continue to evolve and develop in the present time.

Power-Distance: Power-distance is the extent to which people accept unequal power distribution in a society. A high power-distance society believes in strict authority and hierarchy and has low egalitarianism. Less powerful citizens of such societies tend to accept this unequal power distribution. A low power-distance society emphasizes egalitarianism and shared power. The leader in such a society is a *first-among equals*. This dimension particularly affects the way low-power individuals can communicate bad news and problems to high-power individuals.

Collectivist-Individualist: This dimension refers to the extent to which people prioritise or weigh their individuality against their willingness to submit to the goals of the group. In individualistic cultures, the needs of the individual over the needs of the group is emphasised. Individual achievement and success are celebrated as are making one's mark in the world, standing out, and being unique. The opposite situation holds in collectivist cultures, where group success is more important than individual achievement and one's willingness to support the group and larger societal goals and one's allegiance to group goals is more important than individual pursuits.

Feminine-Masculine: This dimension encompasses the extent to which a culture exhibits traditionally masculine attributes (assertiveness, competitiveness, toughness, ambition, achievement, material possessions, success) or feminine attributes (family, cooperation, tenderness, nurturing, caring for others, preserving the environment, quality of life) and the extent to which gender distinctions are maintained.

Uncertainty Avoidance: This dimension reflects the extent to which a culture willingly embraces or avoids the unknown. A culture with high uncertainty avoidance values predictability, structure, and order. A culture with low uncertainty avoidance values risk taking, ambiguity, and limited structure. People from high uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to have low tolerance for conflict and value security over risk.

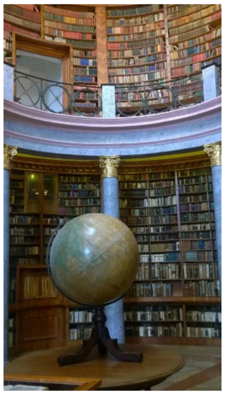
Cognitive habits (how a person develops an understanding of a situation) tend to correlate with cultural dimensions. The perception of locus of control (the degree to which a person believes events result from internal or external forces) correlate with at least two dimensions. In places where uncertainty avoidance and power distance are low, people tend to have an internal perception of locus of control (it's my fault – I made this happen); conversely, regions with high levels of the two dimensions have a correspondingly external perception of locus of control.

All of these factors affect the way a message can be communicated effectively; a good understanding and appropriate use of the cultural dimensions outlined above will help make your communication more effective. Culture should not change the content of the message but should influence the way the message is communicated.

Convincing a Sceptic

Changing the pre-set opinion of an executive to accept a new idea is tough, especially if she's a sceptic. To help overcome her cynicism, you need to expand on the concepts of *power*, *credibility* and *relevance* by including some or all of the following ideas:

- Co-present with a trusted source. Sceptics are highly suspicious of any information that challenges their worldviews. You can increase your chances of success by sharing the stage with someone the executive believes in – build the value of your ideas on the credibility the co-presenter has established with the executive.
- Demonstrate endorsements. You need as much credibility as you can garner. Ask others in positions of power, who support your idea, to let the executive know.
- Stroke egos. Some sceptics respond to flattery so authentically move ownership of the idea into their space. You can do this by starting sentences with phrases such as *"You've probably seen this data already…"*



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