

Communicating Effectively for Diverse Audiences and Contexts: Part 1

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Introduction

When my senior leader asked me to give this presentation about choosing appropriate communication methods and strategies for communicating effectively, I immediately thought back to the last blunder we just had. As fellow managers with Allied Products, undoubtedly you all will remember when we first acquired manufacturing operations in Mexico and we had just hired on our first manager to be stationed in the new Mexico manufacturing facility. I remember a phone call the manager had with our manager responsible for shipping raw materials for the manufacturing processes. During the phone call the managers were discussing shipment of raw materials and the Mexico manager said “send them to US”. Well, the shipment manager heard “send them to the U.S.” and never bothered to double check that what he heard was correct. I’m sure you all can recall that disaster and how it took three weeks to correct that issue. Perhaps we’ve all heard communication is key, and this is an excellent example of the truth in that statement. In this short presentation I will be defining communication, examining components of the communication process, analyzing what it takes to have effective communication, examining the role of self-awareness in communication, and discussing how to be a competent sender.

Components of the Communication Process

Communication can be defined as the impartation or exchange of information (Skills You Need, 2022). Arguably, learning to communicate effectively is the most important of all soft skills and life skills. To master effective communication, we must first cover the seven stages of the exchange of information, to wit; the source, encoding, channel, decoding, receiver, feedback, and context (Emerald Works Limited, 2021). Simply put, the *source* is the sender of the information that is intended to be conveyed. The sender’s message then goes through a process of *encoding* as the sender seeks to formulate the perfect words in the perfect sentence structure to prepare the information to be conveyed in such a way that this specific receiver will be able to understand the message given. To bring this concept home, let us consider that the way you would explain something to your spouse will be different than the way you would explain it to a colleague. Knowing the recipient of your message affects how you ought to formulate the words and sentence structure to convey your message. Third, we have the *channel*, perhaps better explained as the sending medium: We have in-person communication, telephone, internet video conferencing, instant messaging, texting, blogging, written letters, work reports, et cetera (Emerald Works Limited, 2021). Fourth, *decoding*, occurs when the *receiver* (the one hearing, reading, viewing, or receiving the message) seeks to understand what has been disseminated (Emerald Works Limited, 2021). The receiver can improve decoding by actively listening. The sender can improve decoding by avoiding technical language, termed jargon (Emerald Works Limited, 2021). The receiver will undoubtedly give the sender some *feedback*, and while it may be verbal feedback, it could also come in the form of nonverbal communication such as a head nod or facial expression. The keen sender will learn to make adjustments in response to the feedback received. The final component of the communication process is the *context*. The context refers to many ambient circumstances surrounding the delivery of the message, perhaps the current political state or applicable culture. Just to give an example of how strongly context can alter a message, consider that in the United States the “okay” hand gesture made with the thumb and index finger could be construed as a sign that one’s terms are acceptable, but in Brazil is just as insulting as giving someone the middle finger in the U.S. (Anderson, et al, 2019).

Self-Awareness in Communication

Communication is so much more than watching the words we use. Being self-aware can positively affect communication and can improve and preserve relationships. Being self-aware as the communication sender may include watching the context, the best channel for delivery of a specific message (for example, not quitting your job through a text message to your boss) and may include being aware of the tone of voice used in a verbal communication or the emotional charge that accompanied a delivered message (Finn, 2020). Being self-aware as a communication receiver may include setting aside assumptions and judgments that may hinder successful communication, practicing active listening, and using the feedback communication step to seek clarification and mutual understanding (Hagan, 2014). Being self-aware can also include considering how the other side may view the communication. Perhaps a sender may consider how the receiver may be understanding the communication. Or, perhaps a receiver may consider how the sender may have actually intended the communication to be received. Communication can be influenced by life experiences, one's values and beliefs, assumptions, bias, fear, or expectations (Finn, 2020). It is critical to be self-aware and think through all seven steps of the communication process to ensure that your message is being received as intended and to ensure that you are receiving the other party's message as intended.

Conclusion

We have all been in circumstances where our message was not understood and where others have said we have misunderstood them. Through understanding this problem and in seeking solutions, through self-awareness, we can improve our ability to exchange information (Skills You Need, 2022). I have reviewed the seven parts of communication, from the source encoding the message, through delivery through the channel, the decoding done by the receiver, and the process of providing feedback and applying context (Emerald Works Limited, 2021). Knowing the mechanics of communication can help us more readily identify breakdowns in communication and where they may have occurred. In accord with Finn (2020), I assert that practicing self-awareness can improve our communications and relationships. Finally, we can hone our skills by practicing active listening, knowing our audience, conveying appropriate body language (including facial reactions), and giving adequate consideration to what we say and how we say it, to be a competent sender (Anderson, et al, 2019).

References

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