Module 7

Read Ahead

Effective Communication, The What
Module 7: Effective Communication, The What

Objectives

After attending the training in Module 7, participants will be able to:

- define effective communication.
- make the connection between organizational communication and interpersonal communication.
- identify characteristics of effective communicators in our society and in our organization.

Introduction

This Module breaks down communication into components and aspects that help us to recognize what it is and when it is truly effective. Communication places an emphasis on the listener. Effective communication does not happen without accurate translation, and the key to accurate translation is trust.

Effective Communication

Effective communication is a key to leadership, but what is it really? Effective communication means different things to different people. Some think talking, others think listening; others include nonverbal cues and examples. All of these are true.

Wikipedia defines communication in the following terms:

- A two-way sharing of messages through various mediums
- Sharing meaning through the use of signs
- A prescribed collective performance that is symbolically meaningful to the participants
- Expression, interaction, and influence; how the interaction of people causes and affects communication; how it is mediated by psychological variables that cause behavior such as emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and personality
- Participation in a common culture and society; shared patterns of action and meaning that make communication possible
- Sharing messages between two people

As you see, two entities are required in order for communication to take place—a sender and a receiver.

There are three primary steps in the process of achieving effective communication—thought, encoding, and decoding.

1. **Thought:** Information exists in the mind of the sender. This can be a concept, idea, information, or feeling.
2. **Encoding:** A message is sent to a receiver in words or other symbols.
3. **Decoding**: The receiver translates the words or symbols into a concept or information that can be understood.

In other words, a thought must be created, shared, and understood. Some would say the key is how well the sender expresses his or her intent and message. Some would say communication is what the listener does, emphasizing the importance of the decoding step. While the players and the process are fairly straightforward and easy to describe, implementing the process and ultimately achieving effective communication can be difficult. While we may not always recognize excellent effective communication, a breakdown in communication is easily recognizable.

In most of our areas of work at ALDOT, what we sometimes see as problems are typically only symptoms. When communication breaks down, planning and design processes are delayed; project lettings are delayed; construction activities are held up; sediment may appear in our neighbor’s pond; and, the situation may end up in the news or in court. Typically, these “problems” can be traced back to a communication breakdown.

Communication breakdowns can happen at an organizational level and at a micro level. The micro level includes interpersonal relationships—those relating to communication between people. Upper level managers and leaders consistently say that they do a fine job of communicating with their employees. However, study after study shows that the people they work with don’t always feel the same way. Managers consistently rate themselves better in communication areas than their employees rate them. It is important to realize that it does not matter how well you think you communicate if those you work with do not understand your intended message and intention.

**Organizational Communication**

John Spence offers these aspects of communication that are valued by successful companies with cultures of effective communication.

- **Honesty**
  Successful companies tell the truth, all the time.

- **Empathy**
  Healthy organizations have respect for teams’ and others’ views, positions (place in life and in the organization), feelings, and understanding. As John Spence says, "Shoot straight with people, but don’t shoot them between the eyes." It is one thing to be honest; it is another to be brutally honest.

- **Courage**
  Strong organizations talk about the difficult things. Courageous communication includes the questioning of authority, and organizations with strong communication values do not just hope bad things go away, wait for problems to fix themselves, or decide that the problem must be someone else’s problem. As a matter of fact, how an organization deals with uncomfortable and challenging subjects can define the culture within.
• **Safety**
  A culture of effective communication does not beat people up for speaking up, making mistakes, or having ideas that might not work. If we want employees to be creative, address and solve problems, and continue forward progress, we must make it safe for them to do so. It is not good enough for a leader to be a safe person to approach; as leaders, we must also see that the communication environment is safe. We may have to defend employees or admonish others on their behalf to make sure safety exists.

• **Intellectual Rigor**
  Although people should be safe, ideas don’t have to be safe, necessarily. We must have the courage to question each other and our ideas. Concepts and ideas should be questioned, examined, and checked regardless of the source. The key is in our empathic communication style.

• **Transparency**
  Great organizations share as much information as they possibly can. Where there is an absence of information, a vacuum forms. This void, if left for too long, gets filled with rumors and assumptions, even in the healthiest organizations.

**Interpersonal Communication**

It is difficult for an organization’s communication skills to exceed the level of communication skill of its employees, beginning with directors, chiefs, managers, and supervisors. Likewise, it is difficult for the employees’ level of communication with clients or customers to exceed that of their leaders. How we treat employees matters. How we treat each other matters. How we treat and communicate with our public matters.

The number one factor that drives superior organizational communication is superior interpersonal communication skills. Organizational communication starts at the interpersonal level. It starts with one person having enough courage and empathy for others that that person wants to share information appropriately.

Some people are more prone to sharing than others. Some are gifted with personalities that give them confidence and a desire to "interact" with others. Many of us, especially engineers, lean in the other direction and would be just fine working by ourselves, not seeing another person on most days—if we could. But we can't. That is not our job. That is not what leaders do.

**The Translation Challenge**

As stated before, communication is a process. The process requires at least two people and a message. The message is sent, and the message is received. In order for effective communication to happen, the message must not only be heard, it should also be understood. That is the only way, other than pure accident, that we can be assured the recipient has received the intended message—the recipient must translate it correctly and understand what it means. Both the sender and the receiver must ensure proper translation.
This translation issue is the main problem in communication, according to Stephen Covey, who says the key to effective two-way communication (accurate translation) is high trust. The challenge is twofold: We must learn to say clearly what we mean. We must learn to listen well enough to actually understand what others mean—not just hear them, but understand them.

Dr. John Maxwell offers the following four basic truths of becoming a more effective leader that may help us with accurate translation:

- **Simplify your message.** It is not just what you say, but also how you say it. Napoleon Bonaparte used to tell his secretaries, “Be clear, be clear, be clear.” Your best keys are simplicity and clarity.
- **See the person.** Become audience oriented. Great communicators believe in people, and this tends to cause people to believe in them. You cannot influence people you are not willing to hang out with.
- **Show the truth.** First, believe in what you say, and, second, live what you say. Being passionate about your subject is attractive and compelling. Look for signs of confirmation.
- **Seek a response.** The goal of communication is action. Every time you speak to someone, give that listener something to feel, something to remember, and something to do.

**Keys to Communication**

In her article “The 7 Characteristics of Effective Communication,” Alessandra Martelli, Communication Alchemist at MTM Translations, says, “Today we’re exploring the 7 characteristics of effective communication, as outlined by University of Wisconsin professor Scott M. Cutlip in his book *Effective Public Relations* (1953). Over time, his listing of features of effective communication has become one of the key concepts in advertising and PR theories and is now known as “The 7 C’s of Communication.”

1. **Completeness**
   To be effective, communication should be complete; i.e., it should include all the information the recipient needs to evaluate its content, solve a problem, or make a decision. Complete communication reduces the need for follow-up questions and answers and improves the quality of the overall communication process.

2. **Conciseness**
   Conciseness is not about keeping the message short but rather about keeping it to a point. Conciseness in communication happens when the message does not include any redundant or irrelevant information. Concise communication prompts a better understanding of the message because the recipient can focus on the key points and does not get distracted by a wealth of minor details.
3. **Consideration**
   When engaging in communication, a sender should always consider and value the recipient’s needs, moods, and points of view. Tailoring the contents and style of the message based on the target audience strengthens the key points delivered because the sender can use argumentations and examples relevant to the recipient’s experience, thus allowing for a more thorough understanding of the message.

4. **Concreteness**
   Effective communication happens when the message is supported by facts and figures. Concreteness in communication is also about providing answers to questions in a timely and consistent manner and developing your argumentations based on real-life examples and situations rather than on general scenarios or theories. Concreteness fosters effectiveness in communication because the recipient gets a more comprehensive overview of the message and its implications.

5. **Courtesy**
   Courtesy in communication implies being respectful of the recipient’s culture, values, and beliefs. Also, it involves the need to adopt a demeanor your audience can easily relate to and understand. Courteous communication has a positive impact on overall communication because it prompts a more positive and constructive approach to the conversation.

6. **Clarity**
   To be effective, communication has to be clear and specific. To achieve clarity, the message should focus on a single objective, thus emphasizing its importance and allowing for a prompt understanding of its contents. Clear communication also requires the adoption of the relevant terminology, thus reducing ambiguities and confusion in the communication process.

7. **Correctness**
   Using grammar and syntax correctly vouches for increased effectiveness and credibility of the message. In fact, grammar and syntax mistakes make it harder for the recipient to decode the message and understand its contents. Incorrect usage has a negative impact on overall communication because it shows that the sender has not taken the time to craft his messages more carefully.

**Quotes**

“Communication is what the listener does.” Peter Drucker

“If I could solve all of the problems myself, I would.” Thomas Edison

“The key to accurate translation... is high trust.” Stephen Covey
References

