

Models of Communication and the New Rules of Communication in the Work-from-home Environment

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Introduction

Effective communication is not simply the key to success of any endeavor or undertaking. It is also one of the main prerequisites for development of humanity on the whole. Before people started to use a language, primitive as it might have been, to truly communicate with each other, they were largely living out their lives without evolving as a sapient species.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *communication* is “the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else.” Encyclopedia Britannica has *communication* as “the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols.” The word “exchange” seems to be an integral part of any definition of “communication.”

There are several fundamental works that support the current communication theory on the whole. One of the central components of the theory are communication models, which describe the flow of communication, its means, participants and other elements playing a part therein.

Some of the most prominent communication models are:

- Shannon and Weaver model of communication;
- Berlo model of communication;
- Shramm model of communication.

These models, especially the top one, which is one of the communication models to be developed in the context of the modern scientific research curriculum, have been diversified and expanded upon with the aim to create models of communication applicable to specific cases (marketing communication, speech delivery etc.).

The success of any instance of communication hinges on the level of communication skills the participants have. The skills can be grouped into

- verbal, i.e., skills that define how well a person can speak and/or write, convey the message, subsequently influence people, if any influence is implied in the message;
- non-verbal, i.e., skills that shape everything around and about what is being said, the various aspects of the body language, in the first place.

This report covers the aforementioned communication models, describes the crucial aspects of the skills that make communication effective, presents and a communication case and analyzes the ways to improve the outcomes thereof.

Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication

Shannon and Weaver model, often called “mother of all models”, is a basic yet fundamental model of communication that enables analysis of communication as the process of sending and receiving messages. This specific context – “sending and receiving messages” – comes from the fact that Shannon, who was the key author in the duo, described the information theory and the model in a couple of articles published in the *Bell System Technical Journal*, a professional journal of the telecom community.

Claude Shannon was an American mathematician, electrical engineer, and cryptographer. He is called “the father of information theory.” The theory in general and the origins of the model in particular were outlined in the two-piece series of articles “A Mathematical Theory of Communication”, which Shannon published in 1948.

Warren Weaver was an American scientist and mathematician who put much effort into popularization of science in the United States of America. The work that put his name into the Shannon and Weaver model of communication is one of the examples of that effort: in 1949, Shannon’s paper was republished as “The Mathematical Theory of Communication”, and the same book that contained that piece also included an article by Weaver that was much shorter than the original paper and effectively explained the implications thereof for the general public.

Shannon and Weaver model of communication is a linear model that enables analysis of how messages are sent and received. The factors considered in the model also allow explaining the reasons why and how messages can be warped while en route and misinterpreted at reception.

In his work, Claude Shannon explained the goal of the model as follows: “The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing a message sent from one point, either exactly or approximately, to another point.” Therefore, the model, being linear, factors in the following constituents:

- sender,
- message,
- transmission,
- noise,
- channel,
- reception,
- receiver.

A simplified form of the Shannon and Weaver model is shown on the figure below.

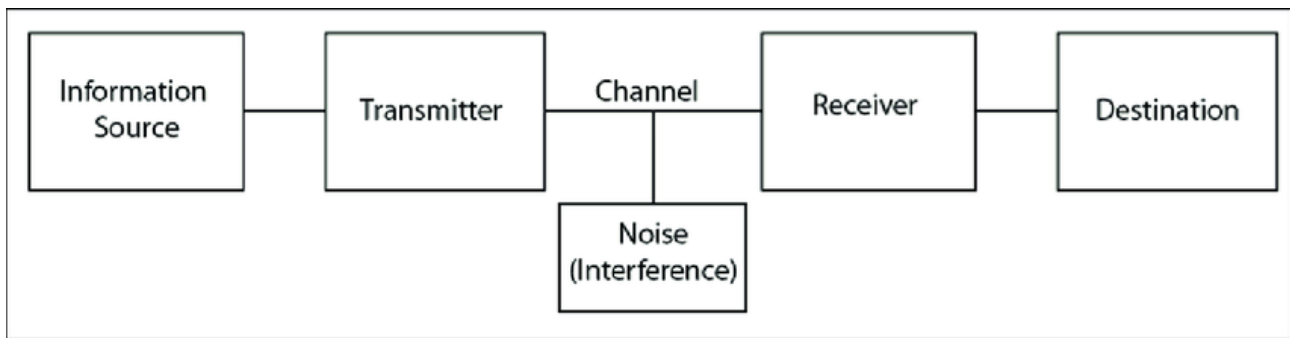


Figure 1. Simplified representation of the Shannon and Weaver model of communication

Shannon and Weaver model reflects the pattern seen in communication enabled by a telephone, with the sender being the person speaking into a phone, the message – what is being said, transmission – the process or “moving” the message, noise – interference that can warp the message, the phone itself a channel and the person listening a receiver.

This model, as simple as it is, is justly referred to as the “mother of models”, for in the years after, a number of new models of communication were built thereon, some expanding the basic foundation and some applying it to specific scenarios of communication.

Shramm Model of Communication, Berlo Model of Communication

One of the best known models of communication stemming from the Shannon and Weaver model is the Shramm model of communication.

Wilbur Schramm was an American scholar who largely established communications as a field of study in the United States. In 1954, he suggested his own model of communication that put three factors into play:

- encoding,
- decoding,
- feedback.

In Shramm’s opinion, encoding and decoding are instrumental to effective communication. Without proper encoding and decoding, it is impossible to exchange information. Feedback, the reaction and reply from the receiver of the message is another factor that Shramm found crucial for successful communication. He believed that communication is a two-way process.

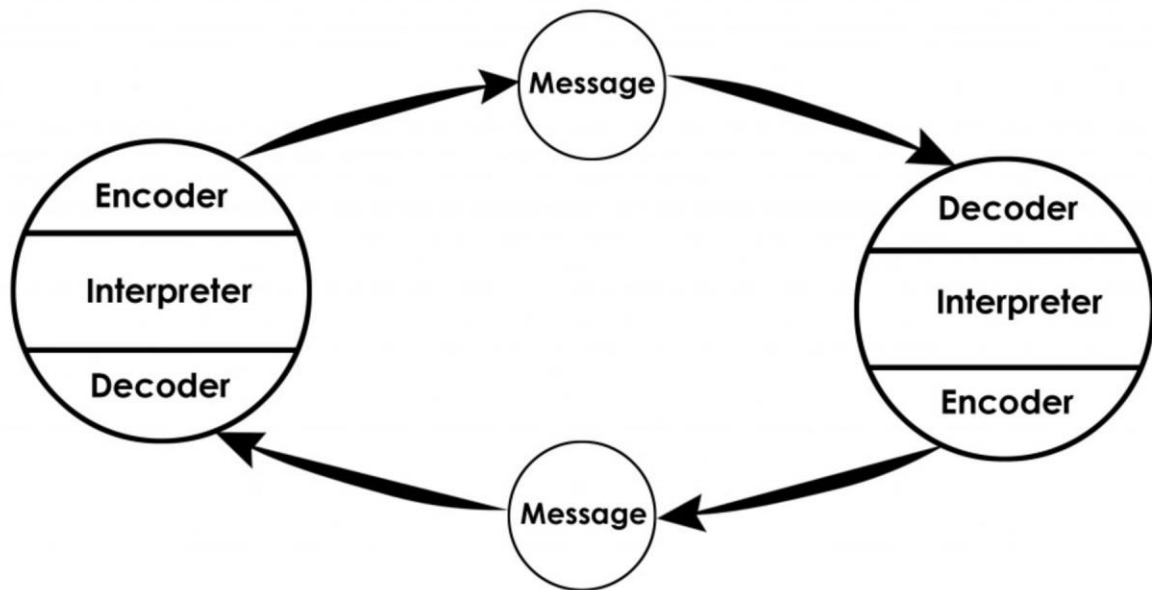


Figure 2. Shramm model of communication

In 1960, David Berlo, an American communications theorist, made the basic Shannon and Weaver model of communication more universal and thus applicable to communication in general, beyond just the realm of cable or radio-enabled transmissions. First off, he simplified it and kept only the following components:

- Sender,
- Message,
- Channel,
- Receiver.

This set of components gave the Berlo model its second name, the SMCR model. Secondly, David Berlo introduced new dimensions to each of the components, thus largely expanding the applicability of the model and making it a better tool for analysis of cases of communication. The figure below shows those dimensions.

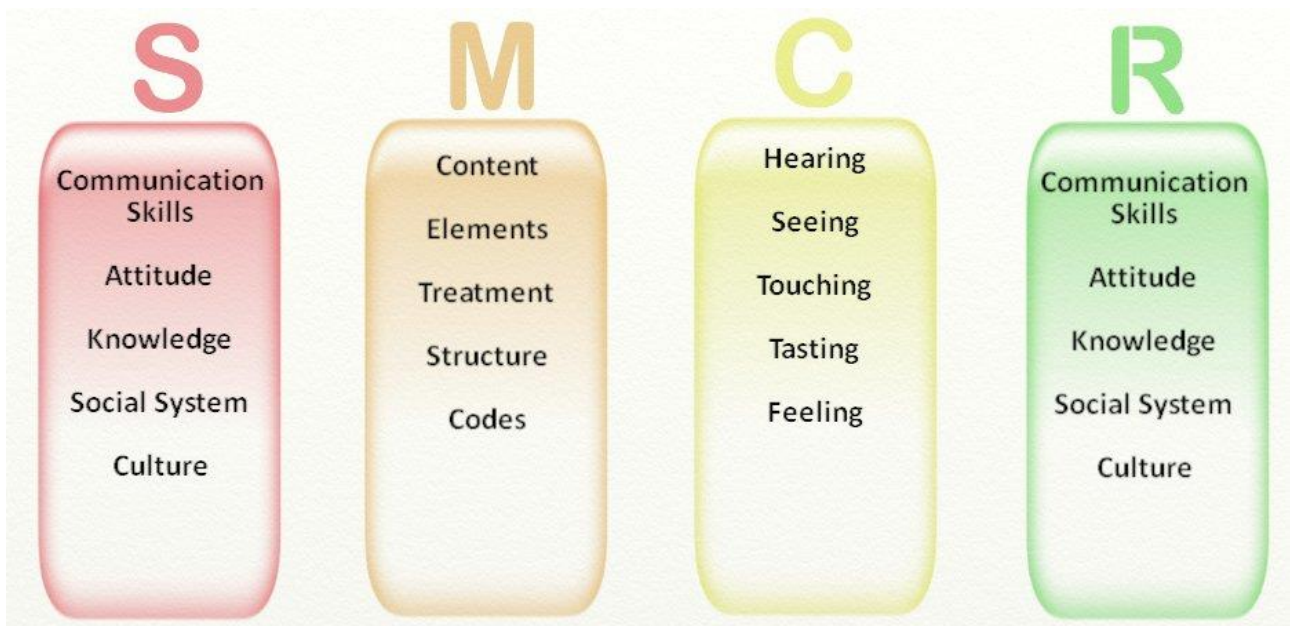


Figure 3. SMCR model of communication

David Berlo highlighted the importance of communication skills of both parties involved in communication.

Communication Skills

Essentially, communication skills are divided into verbal and non-verbal.

Verbal communication skills are

- Speaking/writing
- Listening

The ability of a person to get a point across, pass a piece of information or a message is determined by the level of this person's speaking/writing skills. David Berlo mentions communication skills in the same list with attitude, knowledge, social system and culture. All these factors influence the choice of words, expressions, length of sentences, ultimate clarity and result of a communication instance.

In most cases, it is essential to make the statement clear, concise and toned in line with its meaning. However, some conversations do not have understanding as their ultimate goal, which translates into intended ambiguity and wordiness. Leading a conversation with a specific goal in mind and attaining this goal, be it understanding or confusion or protraction, requires high level of speaking/writing skills, which can be developed through

- reading (both fiction and non-fiction);
- listening (radio, podcasts, TV, entertaining and educational content);
- practicing (role-playing exercising included).

In the models of communication described above listening comes second, but its importance should not be perceived as dwarfed by that of speaking/writing. As a communication skill, listening is no less vital to the overall success of a communication instance than speaking/writing, because feedback, a crucial part of communication according to Shramm, largely depends on listening.

Same as with speaking/writing skills, the decision on the type of listening process selected for a given conversation depends on the ultimate goal the “receiver” participant has for this conversation. The two main types of listening distinguished are passive listening and active listening.

Passive listening generally means the receiver gives no feedback to the source of talker. In public speaking, presentation scenarios, when one speaker addresses a mass of people, most of the listeners switch to the passive listening mode. In person-to-person communication cases, passive listening may mean showing no signs of paying attention to what is being said, giving no response nor reaction of any sort to the message conveyed.

Active listening, on the contrary, implies involvement of the listener that is expressed explicitly. Depending on the goals of a conversation, active listening may include various forms of encouragement of the speaker (including clarification requests and questions designed to keep the communication going), expressed empathy and support. Active listening largely relies on non-verbal communication skills, since the expression of the receiver’s involvement does not necessarily takes the form of spoken words.

Listening skills, crucial for success of communication, can be developed through

- reading with the aim to extend erudition, which facilitates on-the-fly analysis of what is being said;
- concentration exercises, which help stay focused.

Non-verbal communication skills are

- controlled modulation of tone and pitch of voice;
- body language.

Controlling modulation of tone and pitch of voice is a skill that enables a person who mastered it to be more persuasive, add urgency or any other aspect to the message delivered. Also, tone and pitch of the voice are the tools that can be used to keep the audience, be it just one person or many, engaged and involved.

In written communication, tone and pitch can be compared to choice of words and length of the sentences. As with verbal communication skills, mastery of tone/pitch and words/length choice means the ability to select the mode fitting the purpose of a communication instance.

Controlled modulation of tone and pitch of voice requires general ability to control oneself and maintaining awareness of the environment, both of which can be trained. The written

communication counterpart of this skill relies on the level of education, literacy and the amount of books read, both fiction and non-fiction.

Body language is less of a skill and more of a trait. Some people support what they are saying with gestures, postures, movements of hands more than others. However, controlling your body language is a skill that can be learned.

Body language is an essential “spice” that largely determines how the message will be perceived, how much “weight” the receiver will assign to it. However, the use of body language should be appropriate to the situation, otherwise, following the “spice” analogy, it can spoil the result of the conversation.

Since body language is more of a trait, it can be developed only partially. The development implies learning to control yourself in conversation, being aware to which degree you let body language into the conversation and if it is appropriate in the given context.

Communication in the Work-from-home Environment: a Case

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many companies all across the globe to switch to the work-from-home mode. While this mode proved to be a viable alternative to gathering all employees in the office, it does have its challenges, and communication is one of them.

Let us consider a case of morning planning meetings that set the agenda of a small web design company. These meetings, moderated by the company’s CEO, are held to gather progress reports, analyze the current situation with the aim to prevent missed deadlines and plan future sales.

The meetings are enabled by an online communications platform that allows audio and video feeds. However, not all participants are willing to share the video, and the meetings typically default to audio-only.

As a result, they are full of awkward pauses and ultimately lack the effectiveness of in-person meetings. There are few clarifications requested, and whoever is speaking rarely receives any encouragement, which may in fact be given but never reaches the audience because of the “mute your microphone when not speaking” policy.

If looked at through the lens of models of communication described above, this case:

- clearly lacks feedback,
- allows no active listening
- and totally discounts the supportive role of body language.

The remedial actions are designed to mitigate the problems listed afore. Firstly, the “mute” policy has to be abolished, although this means appearance of background noise. Secondly, active listening is promoted through constant reminders to express the support/opinions vocally and

without restrictions. Thirdly, a switched-on camera becomes a must with very few exceptions allowed, thus letting at least some body language into the conversations.

Conclusion

Communication as activity is key to the very evolution of the human race. Studying its patterns and dependencies is, therefore, vital for our development.

As a field of study, communication emerged in the middle of the past century. The key persons who contributed to its establishment are Claude Shannon, an American mathematician, Warren Weaver, an American scientist and mathematician, Wilbur Schramm, an American scholar, and David Berlo, an American communications theorist. Shannon developed the model of communication that became the “mother of all models”, Weaver described it in a way appealing to the general public, and Schramm and Berlo developed their models based on the Shannon and Weaver model.

Communication as a process that has a goal hinges on the communication skills of the participants of this process. The skills are verbal and non-verbal:

- speaking/writing and listening (verbal);
- controlled modulation of tone/pitch of voice and body language.

The skills can be developed through some activities and exercises.

In some cases, there are external factors that hinder communication and prevent the participants of a conversation from reaching the goals set. Such factors, like lack of proper feedback and body language manifestations in online meetings, should be recognized and countered with appropriate measures.

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