

Communication

Communication is a core management skill. But what does it mean to communicate effectively and is there one best way that will work in every situation? What skills do we need? How can we communicate about technical matters whilst, at the same time, help our people to feel valued and motivated? Communication skills and knowledge vary considerably between individuals, as do communication problems in different organisations. For this reason, in presenting the topic of communication, we have covered a range of sub-topics from interpersonal skills to the use of new technology.

When people are asked about what is done well and less well in their organisation, the most frequent criticism is about communications. They often criticise the quality of senior managers' communications with those at lower levels of the organisation. But communication can be managed well and the materials here should help you to achieve this.

Theories of communication

1. A magazine advertisement for a broadband service claims that it will enable 'much faster communication' between your computer and the internet. It states a precise data transfer rate as a measure of this 'improved' communication.
2. At a company's annual shareholder meeting the audience watches a video, hears speeches and receives brochures. After the meeting the director and the head of corporate communications congratulate each other. 'We're really communicating the message to stakeholders,' the director says.
3. Two people are sitting in adjacent seats on an aeroplane. One person is talkative; the other person pretends to sleep to avoid a conversation.
4. Danja didn't like Tabitha but it was important not to show it in front of her boss, Sam. When the three of them met Danja smiled at Tabitha as she greeted her. In an instant, Sam saw that Danja's smile wasn't genuine. 'Those two don't get along with each other,' she thought.

In the first example, the communication is not 'human': computers and servers exchanging information have no awareness that they are sending or receiving electronic symbols and no understanding of where the data came from (or went to). They cannot understand what it means. In the second example, the company seems to be 'communicating' a one-way flow of information from the company to the shareholders. Was anyone listening, watching, reading? In the third example, the 'sleeper' is saying nothing but is communicating the message: 'I don't want to talk to you now'. The person is simply using non-verbal communication. The example also shows that it's hard not to communicate – even silence communicates something! In the fourth example, Danja communicated the message she intended not to. So, the view of communication we are proposing is wide. It is very inclusive and allows consideration of issues such as interpretation, intention, context and meaning.

We all communicate but the basis for improving communication skills is knowing something about how communication 'works'. A general definition of communication is 'social interaction through messages'. As the examples show, people use the term communication in many ways ranging from the speed of transmission of information through a channel, to interactions that involve intention and understanding.

Understanding communication

Interpersonal communication is complex. Generally, we communicate far more meaning than just the words we speak, and what is understood by the person with whom we are speaking may not be what we intended. Understanding how *misunderstanding* can occur equips us better to improve our own communication. We consider three main approaches to understanding verbal (and written) communication which provide insight.

The first of these three approaches is that of John Austin (1962) who introduced the idea of language use as 'speech acts' in which it is possible to distinguish between:

- the literal or 'dictionary meaning' of words (locution)
- the intention of the speaker (illocution)
- how the utterance was received by the listener, or the consequence for the listener (perlocution) which may or may not be unintended.

Austin proposed that language is not a fixed system of rules with sentences delivering 'facts' whose truth or falsity can be judged. His idea was that language involves actions, context, situation and audience. The same words can be used for different purposes (intentions) – so the illocution can be hidden within the locution. Consider the statement: 'Tom is very thorough'. Depending on context, the statement can be meant positively ('Tom's good at his job') or negatively ('Tom is being very slow; anyone else would have finished the job a long time ago'). Speakers' intentions are said to fall into one of five categories:

- to describe something
- to influence someone
- to express feelings or attitudes
- to make a commitment
- to try to achieve something.

(Source: Deaux et al., 1993).

Here is an example of Austin's distinction, adapted from a study of managers' communications and people's reactions at a Californian ski resort by Guild (2002). It is also an example of how misunderstanding can occur (in this case, through poor communication by senior managers). The senior managers had to reduce the number of seasonal workers because of lack of snow. However, the managers gave as their reason, not 'lack of snow' but 'to maximise shareholder value'. This 'message' upset the employees who remained after the staff reduction because the company had often communicated to them its core values such as 'people are important' and 'we are responsive to our customers and each other'. The reaction of the remaining staff was that the company was 'greedy'. When snow returned three weeks later, and the company tried to re-employ some of the staff who has been dismissed they declined, even though they had not found other work. As a result, customer service suffered.

Here, the locution – what was said by the senior managers – was: You are being dismissed because we need to maximise shareholder value.

The illocution – what was meant by the senior managers – was: The lack of snow is resulting in an unsustainable reduction of income so we need to reduce staff (costs).

The perlocution – the unintended consequence or by-product for the staff – was: Remaining staff were upset; their view of the company changed from one that cared about staff to a company that was greedy. A further consequence was that dismissed workers refused to be re-employed by the company, harming customer service.

This approach provides insights into the ways in which we convey our messages, their consistency with prior messages and the need to consider the context and the knowledge, needs, concerns, values and situation of the message recipients. The example reveals one of the typical ways in which recipients of messages construct different meanings from those which managers intended to communicate.

A second approach to understanding communication is known as 'politeness' theory, originated by Erving Goffman (1967). Goffman's view was that a person needs to live up to his or her self-image, thus needs to 'save face' – that is, maintain self-respect. At the same time, a person needs also to maintain the 'face' of other people. Goffman maintained that face saving constituted the 'traffic rules of social interaction'. Everyone plays the game, which is based on a working acceptance of what people say rather than a 'real' acceptance. A person may want to save face because of pride or honour, or because of the status power he or she can exert over others. A person might want to save the 'face' of another person because of emotional attachment to the other person, because of the moral rights of the other person, or simply to avoid hostility. Each person's sub-culture and ethnic culture will have their own face-saving practices.

Essentially, Goffman sums up for us the meaning of 'tact': we might confess to a personal failing to avoid having to be inconsistent, that is, act in a friendly way while feeling negative to the person; we might suggest things, or use humour, or be ambiguous rather than choosing words which would be untactful. By doing this we are not seen to have 'officially' communicated the message. And recipients also can behave as if they haven't 'officially' received the message. For example, we may invite another person to speak at a meeting – 'You first' – conveying a 'modest' view of ourselves while complimenting the other person. In some group situations, a person will be dependent on others for supporting his or her 'face' and in some circumstances, a group may come to share 'a face'.

The implication is that we change our language based on our understanding of listeners to gain their cooperation. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest there are two types of face: positive and negative.

Positive face is the need to be liked and is conveyed when we compliment others or show concern for them. A key feature of negative face is recognising that another person does not have to do what we want them to do. Using these ideas, it's possible to distinguish between the ways in which we might make a request:

'Write this report by Wednesday.' This is a bald directive that takes no account of the listener's 'face'.

'It would be great if you could write that report by Wednesday.' This is positive politeness which attempts to minimise threat to the listener's 'face'.

'I know you're busy, but we're going to need that report on Wednesday. Will you be able to do it by then?' This is negative politeness: the speaker knows he or she is imposing on the listener so the speaker acknowledges the autonomy of the listener.

'We're going to need that report by Wednesday.' This is also negative politeness, but the statement is not direct; the listener is being asked indirectly to do something. Such statements allow the listener the greatest autonomy.

The words we choose when we speak are said to be based on three factors: social distance between the speaker and listener, the relative power of the speaker, and the degree of imposition he/she is making (a consideration whenever requests are made). There will be cultural and gender differences, of course, in how 'politeness' is judged and performed; context and situation are likely to have an impact too.

An example of such behaviours is provided by Bremner (2006). It centres on a Middle Eastern university (where English is spoken) where a project was mounted to produce information on all courses in a common format. The project involved many staff: administrators, course writers, proposers of new courses and teams developing the courses. The study of email messages exchanged showed the ways in which those who hold power feel able to use language; the difficulties faced by those without power when making requests; and how the choice of words can affect the way a writer is perceived.

Consider the following messages and 'politeness' interpretations.

Text 1

'Thank you for the great job you did during Stage One of the [...] for the new courses. As discussed at the last workshop [...] in order to facilitate the success of Stage Two a workshop has been planned [...]. Helen and Patrick join me in inviting you to this very important workshop. [...] It is imperative that those involved in stage Two [...] attend this workshop.

We know that this is an extra commitment but need your assistance and support [...]. Could you please make the necessary arrangements to ensure that your classes are covered. [...] We look forward to seeing you on [...].'

Comment

The message, from the university's second in command, thanks and invites the people to whom it is addressed. It makes requests for support and commitment and for arrangements to be made. However, there is little doubt that attendance at the workshop is mandatory, made clear by the word *imperative*. It is little short of a 'bald directive': Do this! Note also the use of *we* and *you/your*: they are designed to make the message seem inclusive, but don't really succeed – not helped by the formal language used elsewhere in the message. The writer of Text 1 has power, he can be confident that his demands will be met regardless of how 'nice' he is.



Text 2

'Hello everyone again.

I'm coming under some pressure a little further up the line to provide an update on the status of the [project]. I'd be very grateful if you could send me [...].

Sorry to hassle you on this, but as there is a deadline [...] for getting the first section of all courses on, the sooner I have an idea of what's going on the sooner I can provide help where needed.

If you have already responded, thanks. If you haven't, or if I'm writing to the wrong person, please update me/ask me to remove your name from the list. That way you can avoid these increasingly desperate calls for information.

Thanks a lot.'

Comment

This message was written by the manager of the project coordinator, neither of whom had power over academic colleagues. By the time this message was sent, deadlines were being missed, the task was more time consuming than had been expected and there was growing resistance to it among the academics. The text states that senior managers require this but note how the writer tries to separate himself from the senior managers' command ('... send me...') with the use of the words '*I'd be grateful if...*' – The writer attempts to be closer to the recipients of the message than to the senior managers. Note the use of informal language and the use of *I* and *you*; there is none of the 'forced inclusiveness' used in Text 1.

Often we use politeness strategies without much thought. However, by consciously considering the use of negative strategies, our requests are more likely to be accepted when we have little status power to insist.

The third approach to looking at discourse focuses on conversation between people as part of actions which are 'situated' in time, place and context. Such conversations are known as 'talk-in-interaction'. The central tool of the approach is conversation analysis which aims to reveal what a conversation is 'doing' as it develops. It was developed by Harvey Sacks, in the 1960s and 1970s and elaborated by Emanuel Schegloff and others. Sacks believed conversation, far from being disorganised, is highly structured. He considered, among other things, turn taking; how participants organise topics and how, in group settings, the next speaker is 'chosen'.

Gibson (2008) describes conversation as incrementally and progressively produced and subject to the 'rule' of one person speaking at a time. Conversation 'options' change as the conversation progresses: questions need immediate answers; the moment to make a complaint passes quickly; what can be said *right now* is constrained by what was said before. Speakers must also choose what they say from a number of things they *could* say, and quickly: hesitation invites someone else to speak. Moreover, the speaker can both select the next speaker, by posing a question to a particular person, and what the next speaker will talk about. In this way, obligations and expectations are set up.

A problem with the approach, according to Gibson, is that it does not respond to several factors we have argued to be important:

- non-verbal aspects of communication (a criticism which can be made of the other approaches too)
- what participants are like, including their formal status
- the relationships between participants
- how all these affect the content and course of conversation.

Gibson's idea is useful to managers. It asks us to think about features of conversation, the demands and constraints on participants, and the choices we have. It also suggests the skills required both to ensure the participation of others and to direct conversation when required.

All three approaches – those of Goffman, Sacks and Gibson – remind us of issues in communication such as:

- more than *facts* are communicated: values and opinions (including prejudices) may be part of communication content, and are likely to shape communication behaviour in a variety of other ways
- how others interpret what we say, based on their current knowledge and understanding, and what they will do as a result
- how status power is communicated through language
- the nature of the language used
- communication is a kind of 'game' in which everyone is allowed to save face
- participants in a conversation shape the nature of the conversation.

Activity

- Allow 30 minutes for this activity

Here you are presented with a problem-solving activity. We ask you to identify a situation in which you would like to improve communication and work out what you need to do to make the improvement.

This activity is designed to build awareness of how you communicate by assessing a request you have made in writing to a more junior person. The requests may have been made by memo form or by email. We would prefer a written message so that you can see exactly the words that you used. If your requests are generally made verbally, recall what you said as accurately as possible. The request should be more

substantial than, for example, 'would it be convenient to move our Thursday meeting from 10:00 to 14:00?' but no more than 250 words long.

Identify three main features of the language used and record them in the proforma provided below. The main features are likely to be the degree of empathy used and 'politeness' factors, dependent on factors such as social distance, relative power and degree of imposition. Then say how the request might have been improved. The locution (what you said) and the illocution (what you intended) will be clear to you. However, if you had feedback on the perlocution – how your request was received and interpreted, then use this feedback to inform your suggested improvement.

Features of a request to a direct report/more junior person	
Who the request was made to, and their status, that is, their level in the hierarchy relative to your position:	
The wording of the request:	
Three key features of the language used in the message:	
1.	
2.	
3.	
How I would improve the message:	

This activity should have helped you to gain insight into the language you use, even if you couldn't see many ways of improving the request you made. One way of improving the wording of a request is to take the one you wrote to a more junior person and re-draft it to a more senior person, then analyse the differences.

A completed version of the table would be an output that you would save for inclusion into an assignment later in the course.

Problem-based activity

Of course, completing an activity is only a small part per se of solving a problem. You are asked to complete much larger activities which entail more reading and reflection about a particular problem. We ask you to consider what action you might take to improve a situation.

By getting you to take further steps such as drawing conclusions, making recommendations, identifying strengths and weaknesses and considering their implications, we lead you to a solution for that particular problem. The course sets out a model for this type of problem solving which you will be asked to use throughout the course. An example of a completed pro-forma for this activity is shown opposite.