Communicating in the Workplace

Administrative Accounting and Bookkeeping Program

Handout: The Communication Process

Thoughts untangle themselves over lips and through pencil tips.

— Dr Howard Hendricks

Communicating effectively is a vital skill for any leader, but it's one we tend to take for granted. Too many people think that having good language skills makes them an effective speaker. However, communicating clearly and persuasively goes beyond a mere knowledge of grammar and vocabulary; it's a skill in itself.

In fact, you can be a great communicator even if your language skills aren't that good. An excellent example is Jean Chrétien, one of Canada's most effective speakers and that rare thing—a beloved politician. Born with a speech impediment, he was, as Prime Minister, famously inarticulate in both official languages. And yet, despite his lack of technical fluency in English (or even in his native French), garbled syntax, and heavy accent, he was more effective than another public figure of his day at reaching out to the average citizen and rallying them to his vision. In consequence, this unlikely leader governed Canada for more than ten years, through three consecutive parliaments.

I believe that good language skills (grammar and all that) are helpful, and a good thing in themselves. But, obviously, they're not sufficient to make you a great communicator. What, then, is the key? I think there's a lot of truth in Dr Kendricks' famous observation that: "Thoughts untangle themselves over lips and through pencil tips".

That is, so long as your thoughts, plans, and ideas exist only in your mind, they are free to swirl around in a very unformed (and tangled) state. They may seem clear—we *know* what we want to say! But, as soon as you try to put your thoughts into words (speak them through your lips or write them with a pencil tip) you realize just how vague, unordered, and half-baked they are.

You can see this for yourself whenever you try to write a reasonably complex email that conveys a plan of action or answers a detailed question. You sit at the computer, thinking you know exactly what you want to say, only to realize you're not even sure where to start. The thoughts that seemed so clear in your mind almost always need a lot of effort before you can turn them into a clear and properly organized message.

The Communication Process

The truth is that communicating with another human is a multistep process that takes focus and effort to be effective. Becoming aware of this is the first step in strengthening your communication skills (and in appreciating the time and effort it takes to communicate your message clearly and well). Fortunately, because this is a skill, anyone can improve with study and practice. So, let's break down the communication process and look at each step individually.

1. **Idea**: the communication process starts with an *idea*: a thought, concept, or action in your head that you want to share with someone else;

2. **Encoding**: to achieve this, you need to express your idea in words. Depending upon how clearly you've thought it through, this can be surprisingly difficult. As discussed, that's because most of our thoughts, no matter how clear they seem in our heads, are incredibly vague and unformed. It's only when we try to speak them through our lips or write them with a metaphorical pencil tip (computer) that we're forced to organize them into a logical order and fill in the gaps that our mind has intuitively leapt across;

3. **Message**: having encoded your idea into a message, you must choose a *channel* to carry it. Depending upon the nature of the message, location of

the receiver, etc, this could be a telephone call, an email, a face-to-face conversation, and so on;

4. **Decoding**: upon receipt of your message, the receiver *decodes* it. In this reversal of the encoding process, your recipient attempts to interpret your words in a way that makes sense to them. Obviously, there's a giant scope for error here. Receivers often radically misunderstand our meaning as they evaluate our message based upon their own prior knowledge, understanding of the language, and a wide variety of cultural and other factors;

5. **Encoding**: If the receiver isn't sure they've interpreted your message correctly, they *should* try to clarify it with a question. This too needs to be encoded into spoken or written words;

6. **Feedback**: This feedback message is sent back to you over a channel (usually the same as the source message; and

7. **Decoding**: Again, you need to decode their feedback into concepts you can understand before attempting to rephrase and re-send your idea. Which will initiate another round in the communication process.

This can be diagrammed as follows:
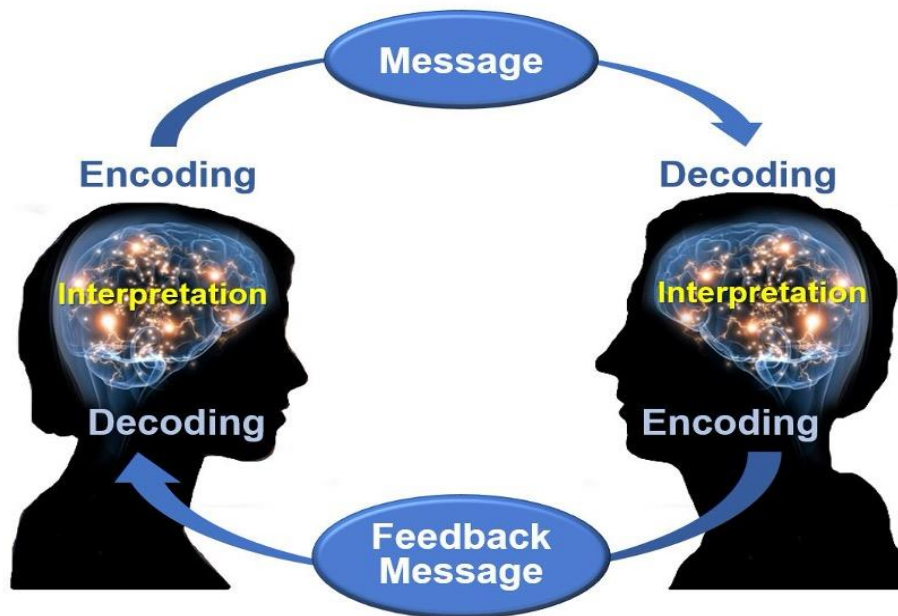
Obviously, there's a lot going on here! No wonder we're so often frustrated when trying to tell another person about something that seems obvious to us, but which they keep

misunderstanding. The fact is that even when the receiver genuinely attempts to understand your meaning, many obstacles can get in the way. A few factors that can derail effective communications are:

- The sender (you) could be unclear in your mind.

- You might have chosen an inappropriate channel.

- There could be noise in the channel (a bad telephone connection; trying to converse in a noisy room).

- Cultural and language obstacles could be getting in the way.

Choosing a Channel

Which channel you select is the first and most important decision you make when attempting to communicate with another human. And yet, most people don't consciously recognize it as a choice at all. They just default to whichever channel is handiest: a face-to-face conversation if the person is nearby, an email if they're not. In our personal lives, this leads to plenty of ineffective communication and wasted time. Worse—in the world of work—it is responsible for the current plague of too many distracting emails and too many time-wasting meetings.

Face-to-Face

A face-to-face conversation has many advantages. You and the other person being in the same location makes it easy to negotiate whether the present is a good time to talk. And, because this is a *synchronous* form of communication (that is, both of you are connected at the same time), it works really well for any topic that requires a lot of back-and-forth. Which makes it good for brainstorming, an en-depth discussion, or a negotiation.

A face-to-face conversation also lets you use your full range of non-verbal cues. You can show your enthusiasm (or doubt) about a topic by your body language, tone of voice, volume, or facial expressions. This makes face-to-face a great channel for when you want to persuade the other person.

The only real disadvantage of face-to-face is that there's no written record. So, any decisions or agreements reached face-to-face should be followed up with some sort of written confirmation. Usually, this takes the form of an email or text, but it could also be

an appointment in a shared calendar, an entry in a shared task list, or an update to a shared tracking note or timeline for a project.

Phone

A telephone call has many similarities to a face-to-face conversation. It's also a synchronous channel, making it good for any topic or negotiation that will require a lot of back-and-forth. And, you can even use some of your persuasive tools: volume, expression, and tone of voice.

Telephone conversations have two disadvantages compared to face-to-face ones.

1. Unless you negotiate a time to call, they can be disruptive to a receiver when they're in the middle of some other task. Unlike with face-to-face conversations, you can't easily see if they're busy, or ask whether they're available, without interrupting them. A few of my friends have started sending a text before they call to ask when I'm available. This is certainly less obtrusive than the ring of an unannounced call.

2. Also, as the receiver can't see you, your full persuasive arsenal of body language isn't available. (FaceTime mitigates this to some extent, but not everyone is comfortable with video calls!)

Email

For the right kind of message, email is an incredibly powerful tool. It's incredibly quick and easy to use, links everyone directly, and preserves a written record automatically. I'm old enough to remember when written communication consisted of formal letters that you wrote on foolscap to be typed by the secretarial pool —which then signed by the boss before they were sent (if you were lucky!). That was more painful than email, I assure you! So, how has email become such a burden, with everyone spending so much time in their overstuffed inboxes that they barely have time for their real work? This is a topic (and channel) we'll explore more deeply later in the course.

Texts / Instant Messaging / Chat

Texting is technically an asynchronous communication channel, but it is so quick and lightweight it's often used for the sort of messages we'd normally use a phone call or face-to-face conversation for. These include:

- Urgent or Time-Sensitive Notifications ("the client call is starting early—join now").

- Logistical Coordination ("running 10 minutes late to the meeting").

On the other hand, texting should not be used for ongoing collaboration or decision-making that require a lot of back-and-forth.

Meetings

Meetings are a synchronous communication channel, similar to a face-to-face conversation but for a whole group. This makes them tremendously effective for brainstorming sessions, discussions, getting feedback, and collaborative decision-making. There's nothing else nearly as effective for these purposes.

"Too many meetings!" has become a common complaint in many workplaces, but I believe this is because there are too many *ineffective* meetings. An ineffective meeting being one that doesn't produce a decision or agreement. Because ineffective meetings don't achieve their aim, they spawn a whole series of follow-up meetings—that wouldn't have been necessary if the original had achieved its purpose. This is especially wasteful because a useless meeting costs the time the meeting took *multiplied* by the number of people present. Again, this is a topic, and a channel, we'll explore more deeply later in the course.

Barriers to Effective Listening

Finally, even when you choose the appropriate channel, your recipient could be experiencing barriers that keep them from listening (receiving) your message effectively:

- **Physical Barriers:** your recipient may be sick or uncomfortable, or unable to hear you clearly.

- **Personal Barriers:** your recipient's values may conflict with what you're saying.

- **Cultural Barriers:** may cause misunderstandings because of different expectations and assumptions.

- **Language Problems:** the recipient may not be fluent enough in the language to understand you.

- **Thought Speed:** we think faster than another person can talk, making it easy for a listener's attention to wander.

- **Distractions**: abound in the modern world, especially when everyone has a smartphone or active computer screen nearby,

- **Grandstanding:** many recipients (people in general) would rather speak than listen.

- **Inappropriate channel:** the channel you're sending over may not be appropriate for your message: using a text for a complicated instruction, for example, or an email for a quick confirmation.

We'll discuss how to overcome these in the next reading.

Finis: Key Takeaways

- Communication is a multistep process that takes effort and skill to be effective.

- The communication process includes the following steps:
  1. Idea,
  2. Encoding,
  3. Message,
  4. Decoding,
  5. Encoding,
  6. Feedback, and
  7. Decoding.

- Choosing the appropriate channel is important to effective communication. Each has their strengths and drawbacks:
  1. Face-to-face,
  2. Phone,
  3. Email,
  4. Texts / Instant Messaging,
  5. Meetings, and
  6. Online (Zoom) Meetings.

- Barriers to effective listening can also impede communication. These include:
  1. Physical Barriers,
  2. Personal Barriers,
  3. Cultural Barriers,

4.   Language Problems,

5.   Thought Speed,

6.   Distractions,

7.   Grandstanding, and

8.   Inappropriate channel.