Introduction

Communication occurs whenever we share meanings or messages. We communicate socially, of course, but we also communicate in business and in virtually everything we do as human beings.

At times, we communicate informally, but sometimes we must communicate formally. Employers always expect their employees to communicate professionally, whether they are in their offices or at business social occasions.

Both the employer and employee should know how to communicate effectively whether engaged in social or business settings.

Communication in a professional atmosphere involves a number of aspects. All professionals should fully understand the legal liabilities they face if they engage in unethical communication; at the same time, they must understand the technological changes that influence daily communication. They must also be aware of cultural mores and communicate appropriately in a growing global economy. All professionals must possess strong communication skills in order to be successful in the workplace.

Professionalism

Professionalism is so much more than just clocking in and out and getting the work done. Professionalism is creating a product and communicating with others in a way that the company can be proud of and hold up as an example to all.

Employee professionalism involves dependability, accountability, good etiquette, ethical decision-making, clear and accurate communication, and a positive attitude (Thill & Bovee, 2015).

The Communication Process

Communication refers to the sending and receiving of messages. The act of communicating includes how messages are constructed, the meanings behind symbols, and the way words, thoughts, and actions are interpreted.

You can refine your communication skills only if you understand the communication process. Whether you are sending or receiving messages, you always have to do your best to ensure that those messages are sent and received as intended. Miscommunication too often leads to negative outcomes, such as failure to negotiate a business deal or having a lawsuit filed against your company.

The communication process always involves the following aspects:
1. Participants
2. Environment
3. Distractions
4. Message
5. Meaning
6. Channel
7. Feedback

**Participants:** Participants include a *sender* and a *receiver* who share information and ideas.

The *sender* is the person who initiates a message, verbally or nonverbally. When communicating verbally, the sender is responsible for ensuring that the message is communicated so that it can be understood. The sender also constantly transmits nonverbal messages, some intentionally, but others often unintentionally, such as gestures, posture, or eye movements. For example, the sender might deliberately send a nonverbal message by looking at an employee and gesturing with the head to indicate that they need to speak privately right away.

Most importantly, however, the sender must ensure that the receiver will interpret the message as the sender intends—in other words, the meaning must be shared equally by both parties. A message might be received, but it may not be understood. Assigning meaning is influenced by a variety of factors, including one’s culture, language, and experiences over the years. When communicating in the business world, the sender should endeavor to keep the relationship between the sender and the receiver on a professional level, whether the message is negative, positive, or neutral.

Another participant is the *receiver*—the person or persons who will receive the message. The receiver is responsible for listening carefully to the message—or reading the message, as the case might be—and asking questions, if necessary, to clarify any meanings that might not be clear. The receiver is equally responsible for keeping the relationship between the sender and the receiver on a professional level, whether the message is negative, positive, or neutral.

**Environment:** *Environment* is both the *time* and *place* where communication occurs. The time of day can be very important when communicating in the business world. If your manager prefers to hold meetings in the afternoon, you might not be successful if you are persuading the manager to listen to you at 9 a.m. It is often the case that other cultures have specific preferences for meetings that include time, place, dress, and other factors that you must be aware of to be a successful communicator.

The place where the communication occurs is equally important. For example, while most business meetings are held in an office setting, it can be enormously refreshing and good for morale to take employees off-site to hold meetings. The off-site team meeting can be a great place to rebuild team spirit, reenergize the employees, and work on big strategies and big-picture items for the coming year. Sometimes getting out of “the box” truly can help people think “outside the box.”
**Distractions:** Distractions are literally anything that interferes with or changes the meaning of a message. Often the terms *distractions* and *barriers* are used interchangeably to mean “things that interfere with the sending and or receiving of communication signals, which are verbal or nonverbal communications.”

- External distractions are those things that attract our attention away from the message or speaker. They include any noises, such as music or something falling as well as people passing nearby as you send or receive a message.
- Internal distractions consist of our feelings and other internal stimuli that take our thoughts away from the message or speaker. Internal distractions might range from being hungry, too warm, or worried to having a fever or taking a medication with particular side-effects.
- Semantic distractions are words or ideas that are emotionally laden and cause us to stop listening or perceiving a message, verbal or nonverbal. Such distractions might include an unknown word, an expletive that is unexpected, a curse word, or a racial epithet that is perceived as unacceptable.

**Message:** Messages are the meanings that are conveyed through verbal and nonverbal communications as well as visual images (Verdeber & Verdeber, 2010). These meanings come from thoughts and concepts the sender wishes to communicate to the receiver or receivers.

These meanings can only be communicated, however, when both parties—senders and receivers—share an understanding, or rather an interpretation, of the messages that represent those meanings (Verdeber & Verdeber, 2010).

**Meaning:** While the word *meaning* is understood to be the content and point of a communication, there are two very different types of meaning. *Denotative meanings* refer to structured or dictionary definitions, but *connotative meanings* refer to the feelings or associations each individual has about a word.

For example, the words *cheap* and *frugal* might be applied to someone who is conservative with money, and the words share denotative a meaning; however, their connotative meanings are virtually opposite because *cheap* means stingy and is very negative, while *frugal* carries a connotation of being a good manager of money and is certainly positive.

Meanings are continually created as ideas, feelings, and activities change. As a result, the sender must present ideas clearly, and the receiver must try to understand those ideas accurately. In this case, *understanding* might mean considering a variety of optional meanings for a word and reaching a conclusion about the sender’s intentions.

Our associations with the meaning of words change based on the following:

- what we think,
- what we read,
- where we travel,
- the friends we make, and
other life experiences.

**Channel:** A channel is the method used to send the message. We generally use our five senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch—to communicate. In the broader sense, a channel of communication is the particular medium chosen for the communication.

We use sight and sound most often in the business world as we communicate. Technology, however, offers us a great variety of communication options from the cell phone to tools such as Skype and Adobe.

**Feedback:** Feedback might be defined as the messages sent back to the sender or the receiver’s response to a particular message.

**Understanding the Communication Model**

Every aspect of the communication model will change the tone and wording of your message, whether you are aware of it or not. Therefore, it is important to understand how each aspect affects your communication in the professional world. In Units V and VI, you will learn more about communicating upward, downward, or horizontally in organizations. Your success at sending effective messages will depend on how you communicate when interacting with managers, coworkers, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders.

**Communication Skills**

As mentioned previously, once you understand the communication model, you can begin to work on your communication skills. The term communication skills broadly refers to a set of skills and an inclusive knowledge base that represents a variety of learned behaviors. First, communication skills include a dexterous use of language that is represented by a large, flexible vocabulary, an awareness of formal Standard English, as well as how and when to deploy it. Further, these skills include a knowledge of syntax so that sentences and paragraphs are structured for the maximum rhetorical effect, whether in argumentation or any other mode. Communication skills also include a sensitivity to all aspects of body language both as sender and receiver of that very subtle medium of communication that always trumps the words of every speaker. Finally, part of the package of communication skills will also include those interpersonal skills that foster the ability to function and work in a group setting toward the achievement of any number of goals. Therefore, the communication skills package is functional and dynamic and extends far beyond basic language skills. We will look more at communication skills in Unit II.

**Why Study Professional Communication?**

What we think, do, say, and write always enhances or diminishes our professional image. When we communicate in the professional world, it is important to ensure that our messages are fully understood. Our responsibility is always to send messages that are interpreted as we intend them to be. Cultural, linguistic, or other differences must never distract from or obscure our messages.
In the professional world, we communicate with people in our organization and all the people who do business with or make contact with that organization. While you may not communicate directly with all of them, you should be prepared and have the ability to do so.

Every employee should be able to prepare and organize messages that will produce the desired outcome. Putting ideas together logically will persuade customers and clients to do business with a company that emphasizes and encourages good communication. Whether it is the chief executive officer or the assistant who answers telephones for the company, everyone must always present themselves as ethical and trustworthy. A company’s communication skills are tested every day as the employees interact with customers, clients, and each other.

**Potential Communication Barriers**

*Barriers to communication* refers to an infinite series of phenomena, and each in its own way may inhibit the flow of successful communication messages in any of their manifestations. First, we think of potential barriers to oral communication. Some of these might be loud noises, a failure of a communication system, or even an ailment such as laryngitis or an acute earache. A second barrier might be anything that frustrates communication through body language, and these might include blindness, talking across the walls of a cubicle, differences in communications between cultures, and simply a misreading of signals—something that is very common. Finally, what are some of the barriers to interpersonal communication? These might be as varied as not liking someone’s looks, dress, or appearance; misunderstandings based on accents or regional dialects; and conflicting personality types in group dynamics.

Therefore, there is no such thing as a complete list of barriers to communication because they can be as clear as a jumbo jet taking off or as subtle as hunger or fever.

What we need to know is that communication is very fragile and that, as senders or receivers, part of our communication package must be a sensitivity to the many barriers that we face on a daily basis, an ingenuity and preparedness in dealing with them, and a constant awareness that incoming and outgoing messages face constant challenges by the infinite barriers to communication in our daily lives.

While we are faced with a barrage of communication barriers on a daily basis, it might be helpful to place some of them into two major categories in order to understand what we are talking about.

1. **Word choice:** The words that you decide to use must be well thought out. To avoid this diction or vocabulary barrier, you must ensure that you follow these rules:
   a. Use words that are easy to understand: “We are committed to the termination of your relationship with this organization at the earliest possible time,” is wordy for “We are going to fire you immediately.”
   b. Do not use jargon: When the plumber says, “Bring me a two-inch elbow and four two-inch Ts,” you might not know what he is talking about any more than when the surgeon says, “Your grandmother has an epidural hematoma.”
c. Do not use slang: Saying someone is “green,” that we are waiting for the “5 0,” or “it’s all good,” might be understood in some limited groups, but the general meaning is elusive, as is the case for all slang

2. Appearance of the message/sender: If your message contains spelling, punctuation, or structural errors, readers are likely to form negative stereotypes of the sender and the organization represented by the sender and often simply ignore the message.

You must also consider how you structure your message. Packing all your ideas into one paragraph can send a nonverbal message that you do not care if your message is understood. A busy person receiving such a message might set it aside to be read later but may never get the time to read it. On the other hand, a lengthy, two-page e-mail may cause confusion, among other problems, due to the large amount of content in a medium that is truly supposed to be used for messages that are brief, concise, and clear.

As you communicate, barriers (or distractions) may arise that lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of your message. At times, a variety of barriers are capable of preventing people from sending or receiving messages effectively. We will learn more about barriers and distractions in Lesson 4 of this unit.

References


Check for Understanding
(Answer Key can be found below the Review)

Select the best definition for these critical communication terms:

1. Communication refers to:
   a. the sending and receiving of messages.
   b. the various forms of media.

2. Participants refers to:
   a. a sender of a communication signal of any kind.
   b. a receiver of a communication of any kind.
   c. both a sender and a receiver of a communication.
3. Environment:
   a. refers to the place where the communication takes place.
   b. does not refer to the time where communication takes place.

4. Distractions are:
   a. specifically, noises that interfere with communication.
   b. anything that interferes with or changes the meaning of a message

5. Messages are:
   a. verbal utterances.
   b. visual images, nonverbal behaviors, and verbal utterances to which we attribute meanings.

6. A barrier to communication may be:
   a. words that are easy to understand.
   b. slang.

7. A true barrier to communication is:
   a. anger.
   b. a large vocabulary.

Review

1. The act of communicating includes how messages are constructed, the meanings behind symbols, and the way words and thoughts are interpreted.
2. Meanings are continually created as ideas, feelings, and activities change.
3. Distractions are anything that interferes with or changes the meaning of the message.
4. Potential barriers to communication include word choice and appearance of the message/sender.

Answer Key

1. A - This is correct but only a part of a longer complex definition of the term.
2. C - Both senders and receivers are participants in the communication process.
3. A - In fact, environment is the time and the place where communication takes place.
4. B - In this case, hundreds of things beyond noise can disrupt our communication signals.
5. B - This is a complete definition of messages in the communication context.
6. B - Because slang has a limited use among those who are aware of its meaning, introducing it to someone unaware of that meaning would present a communication barrier and should be avoided, particularly in formal Standard English.
7. A - Anger and hostility can close communication but are common distractions we deal with too often.