

Managing Business Communication • part 1

Business communication: An overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Describe** the benefits of effective business communication.
- **Identify** and explain common business communication problems.
- **Describe** ways to create a climate of communication.
- **Explain** communication networks and paths of communication.
- **Explain** the communication process model.

This first article in a three-part series provides an overview of business communication, and discusses the benefits of good communication, common communication problems, creating a climate of communication, communication networks, paths of communication and the communication process model.

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Effective communication facilitates performance management, innovation, client interaction and teamwork. Managers must spearhead a coordinated effort to make communication a priority. They should also foster a climate of free-flowing communication by encouraging trust, openness and positive reinforcement.

Benefits of good communication

Business managers spend approximately 50% to 80% of their time communicating with others (such as their supervisors, peers or direct reports) within their organizations.

Well-developed communication skills allow managers and staff to interact effectively as they develop goals and discuss projects, assignments and routines, all of which must reflect the mission of an organization. Effective managers have regular, one-on-one sessions with employees in order to listen to them and understand their points of view. They encourage employees to participate in developing department mission statements and project goals that are meaningful to all involved. This inspires loyalty and commitment to achieving goals, and leads to creative and alternative solutions to work problems.

Open communication enhances employees' knowledge and satisfaction. For example, a manager informs the staff of a potential problem with a customer, solicits their ideas on how best to prevent the problem and provides respectful feedback on the importance of their contributions. This reinforces the staff's self-esteem and thus encourages greater productivity.

Managers and supervisors can use various forms of communication to prevent misunderstandings and mistakes. For example, clearly agreeing upon and clarifying expectations, roles and responsibilities of team members and outcomes of tasks, through team meetings, discussions, graphs, charts and timelines, help

projects get off to a good start.

Many managers also need to communicate with geographically dispersed teams or individuals. By using e-mail, conference calls and telephone conversations to discuss assignments and expectations, managers keep remote workers feeling like a part of the company.

Mastering communication skills allows managers and supervisors to delegate tasks appropriately and assists them in:

- Clearly indicating the expected outcome for a task.
- Providing all necessary guidelines for accomplishing the work.
- Identifying available resources.
- Setting up standards that will be used to evaluate performance, including specific times when evaluation will take place.
- Specifying what will happen if the outcome is met and what will happen if it is not met.

Common communication problems

Some major communication problems in business include:

Message overload. In today's business organizations, workers may receive more than 200 messages in one day via e-mail, faxes, voice mail, personal digital assistants and other channels of communication. A large percentage of these messages are useless or distracting to the recipients.

Different ways of learning. Some managers mistakenly believe that simply explaining situations and/or providing staff with written directions will automatically result in

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understanding. However, the same approach may not be successful with everyone because individuals learn differently. Effective managers use these insights to identify and build on the strengths of individuals.

Some terms used to categorize learning styles include:

- *Visual/verbal*, which means the learner prefers to read information.
- *Visual/nonverbal*, which refers to the use of graphics or diagrams to present information.
- *Auditory/verbal*, which denotes a preference for listening to information.
- *Tactile/kinesthetic*, which represents a learner who prefers physical, hands-on experience or who understands by touching or moving.

Problems with feedback. Common communication mistakes made by managers include the following:

- Providing insufficient feedback.
- Providing inaccurate feedback.
- Neglecting to solicit feedback about their own performance and communication style.

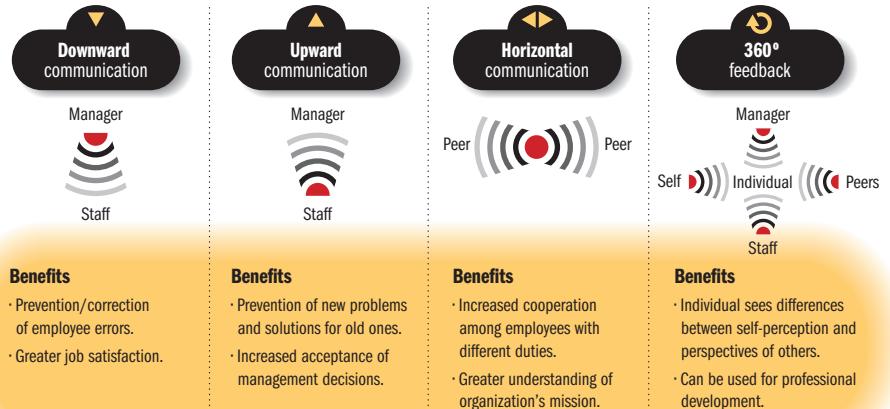
Positive, specific feedback from managers helps employees develop greater self-awareness, leading to improved work performance and an ability to take direction well and willingly. In contrast, giving general, negative feedback can create animosity and prolong poor work habits. Discussions should conclude with a focus on the future – how employees can improve their performance – rather than recriminations for past mistakes.

Making decisions without employee input. In some cases, managers do not ask supervisors and workers for their advice regarding major purchases that will affect them. This oversight may result in receiving equipment or technology that is not properly configured for the group that will be using it, which can be costly for the company.

Creating a climate of communication

Effective communication develops as an intentional effort made by managers and staff, and flourishes only in an environment where positive interaction is valued, fostered and nurtured by all concerned. Effective managers know that frequent interaction and communication with

Formal communication*



*Adapted from Adler

employees provides insight into their talents, skills, goals and day-to-day work issues. This insight, in turn, can help a manager foster employee growth and manage work productively. Positive interaction inspires loyalty and helps develop improved work relationships.

To create a climate of communication, managers must ensure that they and their staff have the skills and knowledge to communicate effectively. In some cases, this may require formal training. However, the most important aspect of staff training should come on a daily basis from managers who lead through example while making communication issues a priority.

Involving the staff in decisions about the goals and methods of communication will also help create a climate of communication. Managers and their staff should develop a consensus on how disagreements should be handled, how communication should flow between managers and staff and between staff members, and what information should be available and when.

Communication must become a habit for managers and staff members, with systems in place to support it, such as:

- Regularly scheduled group meetings.
- Regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings.
- Newsletters.
- Staff briefings.
- Informal social gatherings.
- Team lunches and other activities.

Communication networks

Except for the smallest organizations, people need systems for managing the flow of information. These may be either formal or informal.

Formal communication networks. Formal communication networks define who should talk to whom or who reports to whom. Formal communication may be downward or upward (sometimes referred to as vertical), or horizontal.

Downward communication refers to communications from superiors to those who report to them. These may be used to communicate the following: job instructions, job rationale, procedures and practices, performance feedback, and company missions.

Upward communication refers to messages going from subordinates to superiors and is used to convey the following: updates of what subordinates are doing, unsolved work problems, suggestions for improvement, and how subordinates feel about each other and their jobs. Managers are responsible for improving and encouraging upward communication. Some helpful methods include: open-door policies, establishment of grievance procedures, periodic interviews, group meetings and a suggestion box. However, these methods are only effective when managers are sincerely interested in hearing from their staff and truly value their ideas.

Horizontal communication consists of messages between colleagues at the same

level of the organization – for example, in the pharmaceutical industry, between health-care representatives in different districts or between district managers from different regions. Horizontal communication may be used for purposes such as task coordination, problem solving, sharing information, conflict resolution or building rapport.

Downward, upward and horizontal communication can be combined in what is called a 360-degree feedback survey. The term 360-degree refers to the full circle of feedback received from people above, below and around an individual. After multiple people evaluate an individual, a confidential report is generated about his or her communication, sales and/or management skills.

Informal communication networks.

Informal communication networks are patterns of interaction based on friendship, shared interests and proximity. Some consider informal networks to be the most important means of communication in an organization. Functions of informal networks within organizations may include:

- Confirming a formal communication.
- Expanding on information conveyed formally.
- Expediting messages that arrive more slowly via formal channels.
- Contradicting formal messages (for example, a friend in accounting may disclose that the deadline for purchases on this year's budget is not as firm as what was conveyed in the comptroller's recent memo).
- Circumventing official channels (for example, a tennis partner who works in duplicating might give priority to a rush job instead of putting it at the bottom of the pile).
- Supplementing formal communications.

Informal networks are faster and sometimes more dependable than formal channels. In fact, networking – the process of strategically meeting people and maintaining contacts to get career information, advice and leads – has been recognized as a key skill in the development of managers. Those who informally network tend to be successful and progress more in their careers compared with those who do not.

Paths of communication

The most appropriate paths of communication depend on the importance of the

information being communicated and the size of the organization. For example, if information relates to a significant change affecting the future of a large company, the message should not be delivered to front-line workers from the top executives. Establishing a direct communication line to staff only results in weakening the ties between the staff and their direct supervisors. Instead, results of research have shown that workers want to hear about major company changes from the managers closest to them.

When communicating smaller – but still important – changes involving day-to-day operations, the usual path of communication may cascade from upper management to middle management to direct managers/supervisors and then to staff. However, this is not always an effective path if middle managers have weak communication skills.

The communication process model

Communication is a complex process, and it is difficult to establish why some attempts at communication are successful while others fail.

The communication process involves the following:

- The person sending the original message encodes it, selects a channel and transmits the message.
- The recipient then decodes the message, encodes a feedback message, selects a channel and transmits a response to the original message.
- Finally, the original sender decodes the feedback message.

Encoding refers to the process of choosing words and sometimes graphics that clearly convey the message. Nonverbal methods (for example, body language and tone of voice) are also chosen to reinforce the verbal message.

The channels of communication may be:

- Two-way, face-to-face communication, including: conversation, group meeting or videoconference.
- Two-way, not face-to-face communication, such as: telephone, teleconference, voice mail, electronic mail or online discussion.
- One-way, not face-to-face methods, including: fax, letter, memorandum, report or proposal, or Web page.

Many problems occur at the decoding stage, when the receiver tries to interpret the sender's message (both verbal and nonverbal) with as little distortion as possible. Also, using an inappropriate channel can result in misunderstandings and affect relationships.

The feedback message is the one sent by the recipient of the original message for the purpose of clarifying any misunderstandings, and may be verbal or nonverbal.

The desired outcome for the communication process is a clear, easily understood message that fosters a positive business relationship between sender and receiver. **PR**

The next article in the series will discuss effective business communication.

ARTICLE SUMMARY

- There are numerous benefits of good communication.
- Major communication problems in business include: message overload, different ways of learning, problems with feedback and making decisions without employee input.
- Effective communication develops as an intentional effort made by managers and staff, and flourishes only in an environment where positive interaction is valued, fostered and nurtured by all concerned.
 - Frequent interaction with employees helps managers foster employee growth and manage work productively.
 - Managers and their staff must have the skills and knowledge to communicate effectively.
 - Staff should participate in decisions about the goals and methods of communication.
 - Effective communication must become a habit for managers and staff members, with systems in place to support it.
- Formal and informal communication networks manage the flow of information in most organizations.
- The most appropriate paths of communication depend on the importance of the information being communicated and the size of the organization.
- In the communication process, an original message is encoded, transmitted by the sender and decoded by the recipient.
 - Many problems occur at the decoding stage, when the receiver tries to interpret the sender's message.
 - Using an inappropriate channel can result in misunderstandings and affect relationships.