



Effective Communication

Introduction

The art of getting your message across is a valid part of your job. Good communication is the lifeblood of companies. It takes many forms, such as speaking, writing and listening. Effective communication will help you handle information and improve relationships.

Effective communication hinges on people understanding your meaning and replying in terms that move the exchange forward – preferably in the direction that you want it to go.

What is communication?

Communication is defined as **“the imparting, conveying or exchange of ideas or information by speech, writing or signs”**. Communication only exists in relation to someone else - it is always a two-way process. In recent years much research has been done which shows that we are spending more and more of our time on what is called the “communication process”. The latest study put it at 80% of our waking hours. Communication is about more than passing on information. It is about one mind interacting with another and when the interaction is successful, motivation and action will follow.

The ability to communicate effectively is critical to your success. Unfortunately, in many organizations the lack of effective communication is the main complaint of employees towards their managers. Communication lies at the heart of the management task, as it is the key to making things happen.

Key communication considerations

The Destination of Information

Does information go to the right people? Is one group favored at the expense of another? Are particular groups bypassed and if so why?

Are there any obvious blockages in the communication system? (for example, the consultative committee might be kept well informed, but its members never pass anything on.)

The Reliability of Information

Can members of the group rely on the information they are given? Are there occasions when it turns out to be inaccurate or just plain wrong? Remind the group that this is not an easy question. We all have an in-built tendency to distrust the information we get from those in authority over us.

The Consistency of Information

Do different parts of the organization ever get different messages about the same subject? Why does this happen? Does it matter?

The Speed of Information

Does information seem to pass much more quickly through certain structures or parts of the organization than others? Why does this happen? Is it a problem?

Good News vs. Bad News

Is it the case that information about, for example, company performance only seems to be made known when there is bad news to put across?

Responsibility

Whose job is it to make sure that all employees are properly informed? Does the group see this as part of their own function as managers? How is their responsibility (or lack of it) defined? Are there groups in the organization who do not take enough responsibility as communicators?

Methods of communication

- The management chains
- Representative structures
- Impersonal media
- Informal media
- The grapevine

The strengths and weaknesses of each of these methods are as follows:

The Management Chain

Information passed through the various links in the management chain carries authority. Because it comes from the receiver's immediate boss, it is personal and easy to respond to.

If delivered verbally, the information can be discussed and, if necessary, clarified without any delay. A message, however, passed through many people can easily be distorted or even lost altogether. The success of using the management chain to pass information depends very much on the quality of its individual links.

Representative Systems

In large organizations, these systems can provide a direct and speedy link in both directions between senior management and the workforce. Because comparatively small numbers of people are involved, they offer the opportunity not only for passing information, but also in some instances for consultation and negotiation.

Impersonal Media

These include everything from notice boards to the latest in corporate videos. They cover a huge spectrum of quality. Notice boards can be eye-catching displays of essential information or they can be covered in the curled-edge safety notices of yesteryear. Videos can bring the remote messages of senior managers to life or they can be huge ego trips for senior management team.

All impersonal media have the advantage that they are available to everyone and, because they are mostly in written form, they are less liable to distortion. Notices, newsletters, emails and so on also provide a permanent record of what has been communicated. Their main disadvantage is that they cannot answer back. Though their message will be the same to everyone this does not mean that they cannot be misinterpreted. They can give offence if used in the wrong setting ('You'd think he'd have the decency to tell us face-to-face, not send us a b...y email!) and it needs a lot of hard work and imagination to prevent the devices themselves becoming part of the wallpaper and ignored.

Informal Networks

In the best organizations, people communicate all the time, in all directions. Information does not get stale; people develop an understanding of other people's problems and point of view. Personal and business relationships are improved; flights of fancy get checked against the reality of the situation. The unity of the organization across levels and functions can be strengthened by good informal networks. No organization can survive without informal networks or prosper without good ones.

The main disadvantage of informal networks lies in their very informality. Where records are needed these networks do not provide them. The information they spread does not go to everyone. Problems can arise if important pieces of information skip levels of management.

The Grapevine

Whether the grapevine has advantages or not depends on where you are sitting. Senior managers deplore it but to many employees it is the only way of finding out what is going on. And it certainly acts fast. Its main problem is accuracy. People have a habit of trying to improve the story they are given or of filling in the missing bits with little judicious guesswork. The grapevine can have extremely "bitter fruit" and can result in malicious gossip and dangerous rumor that can distort what may be a true story.

Listening Skills

Your success as a communicator in any context depends critically on your listening ability. You need to exploit your knowledge of the art of listening to make your audience listen to you.

There are seven important principles you need to follow to be a really effective listener.

Stop talking, especially that internal, mental silent chatter and answering back when you are listening to a speaker. Let the speaker finish, hear them out. This is particularly important when you're in a thoroughly familiar situation. The temptation is to complete the speaker sentence for them and work out a reply, assuming you know what they're going to say, instead of listening to what they are actually saying.

Relax, research shows that tension reduces the effectiveness of your ability to listen and take things in properly. A good listener must be relaxed.

Put the speaker at ease by showing that you're listening. The good listener doesn't look over someone's shoulder or write when the speaker is talking. If you do have to take notes on what is being said, explain what you are doing. Blame your poor memory and make it clear that you're not talking shows how important what they're saying is. You have to be careful here because we all rely in the expression on another person's face to tell us how we are faring in a conversation. People get nervous when the person they're talking to looks away or concentrates on what they're writing instead of nodding reassuringly.

Remember that your aim in listening is to understand what the speaker is saying, not to win an argument. That comes later!

Be aware of your personal prejudices and make a conscious effort to stop them influencing your judgement. Don't make assumptions about the person talking on the basis that they have a beard, grey hair, short skirt or whatever.

Be alert to what the speaker is not saying as well as what they are. Very often what's missing is more important than what is there. Again, ask yourself what it would mean if you had left out what they have just failed to say?

To do your job properly, you'll need to spend at least half your time listening to what other people say. It's an active process, never more important than when you're meeting someone for the first time – when your objectives should be to say as little and learn as much as possible in the shortest time!

Listening levels

Peripheral listening is the kind you do unconsciously. For example, an experienced engineering supervisor may pick up anything out of the ordinary from the background noise of the machine for which they are responsible, even if it is in the middle of a conversation.

Attentive listening is what we all do too much of the time. We look as if we are listening, but in fact we are only concentrating with half an ear.

Protective listening is often what we should be doing. This means really concentrating on the core of the message and trying to put ourselves in the speaker's shoes to understand not only what is being said, but why it is being said. Some aids to better more protective listening are as follows:

Get the surroundings right

Make sure you are comfortable and can see the speaker properly. Set aside other work and give the speaker undivided attention. Remove any distractions – close the door, turn off the radio. Comfort, freedom from interruptions, level eye lines all help to make listening easier.

Concentrate and Persist

Some distractions can't be removed and have to be ignored. Sometimes messages get across better in a noisy factory than a quiet office because speaker and listener have to make a real effort to communicate.

Look Interested

The quickest way to alienate a speaker is to look as if you wish they would go away and take their boring, unimportant message with them. If you put their backs up in this way it will affect their delivery and make your job of understanding what they are saying much more difficult.

Judge Content not Delivery

Some people are bad speakers. Unfortunately, they may have something crucial to say. The listener must consciously dig for the content under the poor delivery. Quite simply, some people with important things to say are sometimes simply not very good at expressing themselves.

Decide What Matters

Try to get at the core of the message.

Take Notes

Even in very informal discussions do not be afraid to take a few simple notes.

Use the Speed of Thought

We can all think about four times faster than we can talk. The extra time that gives listeners can be used for anticipation, summarizing, reading between the lines, thinking through, noting questions for later and so on.

Suspend Prejudice

Don't allow the fact that you disagree with someone to make you turn a deaf ear to what they say. It is precisely in these situations that you need to listen best.

Ask Questions to Test your Understanding

This not only helps you, but also shows you are listening.

Practice Makes Perfect

Listening, like a sporting activity, gets better with practice. There are ways of doing this on training courses, but you can also practice, as they say in the advertisements, in the comfort and privacy of your own home. Even if you don't have a video, there are programmes on TV and radio, like the news and the weather, which are broadcast two or three times in an evening more or less unchanged. You can try out your listening skills against the first broadcast and check your results with the second.

Questioning skills

Questions are used in all forms of verbal communication from the passing of the simplest pieces of information to the most highly charged negotiations.

The three most important purposes of questioning are:

1) To gather information

Effective communication is based on a shared understanding of the subject. Questions are used to bring about this state.

2) To seek clarification

Even in simple discussions it is all too easy for misunderstandings to arise. People hear something different from what you think you have said. You lose the train of an argument entirely because you have not really understood one of the earlier points made. When this sort of thing happens, questions are used for clarification.

3) To establish commitment

First line manager jobs are about getting things done and for this reason they rarely see communication as an academic exercise. It normally results in action of one sort or another and managers not only have to make sure that they have been understood, they also have to question for commitment. Hence the use of questions like:

"Are we all agreed then?"

"So, you will take care of that"

This leads us on to the different types of questions you may well wish to use in situations you face as a manager or supervisor. The situations you use the questioning techniques in may well vary as will your end objective.

There are numerous definitions of these questions, however, to illustrate them, we can use the following examples.

Different circumstances call for different types of questions.

1)Open questions

These prompt open-ended responses, rather than a simple “yes” or “no”. They are particularly valuable for encouraging discussion. They are therefore often used at an early stage in interviews or with people who are reticent. For example:

“What problems are we up against?”

“How can we speed the lineup, what do you think?”

2)Closed questions

These prompt a very specific response, often either “yes” or “no”. They are used to nail down particular pieces of information.

For example:

“Can the machine be fixed by the end of the shift?” “What is the absenteeism figure for this department?” “How much does the new machine cost to buy?”

3)General questions

When talking to a group it is sometimes useful to pose an open question to all of them, for example:

“How do you feel about the new shift system?” “What are your opinions on?”

4)Directed questions

Early in a group discussion, general questions can sometimes produce nothing but an awkward silence. When that happens, the group leader can direct the questions to a particular individual, for example:

“Tom you mentioned earlier that..... what do you think about?”

5)Reflective questions

These are particularly useful when questioning for clarification. The questioner simply takes what has been said, perhaps by someone who is struggling to find a way through an argument, and reflects it back to them in a way that helps move the discussion forward, for example:

“Are you saying that we should do more maintenance at the weekends?”

6)Leading questions

These tend to put words in people’s mouths and should therefore be avoided, for example

“I suppose there is not much we can do about meeting the deadline at this late date?”

7) Rhetorical questions

These questions are asked without any expectation of getting an answer. They can be very effective if used as an orator's device when speaking to a large audience but at work they are often emotionally charged and so must be used rarely and with care, if at all, for example:

"Is this what you call a decent day's work?"

Passing on information

Managers spend much of their time delivering and receiving messages in person. This can be the most critical – and satisfying – arena of communication. Honesty and feedback are both essential if you are to achieve clarity and progress.

The workforce's need to obtain information and the ability of its managers to provide all types of information in the right way are crucial elements in any organization. Start by finding out which areas people most want to know about. Job security, working conditions, rewards, location and benefits are all important and you should communicate any changes affecting these as soon and as directly as possible.

Giving Feedback

Feedback is essential to communication – to check that you have understood the other person's message and to react to what they have said and done. It can be difficult to give negative feedback but remember that it is bad management to avoid doing this. When giving negative feedback, follow these simple rules to avoid antagonism:

- Show an understanding of exactly what went wrong, and why
- Draw out ways in which poor performance or behavior can improve
- Use questions rather than assertions to let the staff member know what you think and why
- Aim to express your negative opinion honestly, but in a positive manner
- Above all, take negative feedback away from the personal zone by being objective, not personal

Helpful Hints & Tips

- ✓ Encourage your company to improve all types of communication
- ✓ Good communicators make much better managers
- ✓ Wherever possible, use visuals to communicate
- ✓ Know which questions to ask – it will help you get the right answers
- ✓ Use silence confidently as a tool to encourage hesitant speakers
- ✓ Think about the words you hear, not the person saying them
- ✓ Keep an open mind about what people say
- ✓ Put promises in writing as soon you can to avoid misunderstandings
- ✓ Ask a specific question if you want to hear a specific answer
- ✓ Write a list of questions before you start a meeting
- ✓ Speak in as natural a tone as possible to create a warm environment
- ✓ Emphasize key notes with highlighter pens

- ✓ Let staff know what efforts you are making to relay information
- ✓ If in doubt whether you should pass on information, do so
- ✓ If you say you will return a call, make sure you do
- ✓ Visualize the reader when you are writing a letter or report
- ✓ Avoid over briefing your staff, so they have a chance to use their own initiative
- ✓ Ask all those invited to a meeting to come well prepared
- ✓ Remember that a “good” meeting is one that has produced results
- ✓ Listen to your staff
- ✓ Be aware of your staff’s problems, because they do affect performance
- ✓ Check regularly that your staff are getting the training they require
- ✓ Be ruthless, cut out all unnecessary words from your report
- ✓ Keep vision and mission statements short and action orientated