# COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE: GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING EFFECTIVENESS

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## ABSTRACT

Communication is the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another. Communication in the workplace is critical to establishing and maintaining quality working relationships in organisations. This paper discusses the communication process, barriers to communication, and provides guideline for administrators to improve communication effectiveness.

*Key words:* Communication, Effectiveness, Administrators, Workplace, Guidelines

## Introduction

Fundamental and vital to all administrative functions, communication is a means of transmitting information and making oneself understood by another or others (Sanchez & Guo, 2005). Communicating effectively is an art and must be practiced effectively at workplace for better output and successful achievement of goals of an organisation. Communication is a major challenge for administrators because they are responsible for providing information, which results in efficient and effective performance in organisations. The study of communication is important, because every administrative function and activity involves some form of direct or indirect communication. Whether planning and organising or leading and monitoring, administrators communicate with and through other people. This implies that every person's communication skills affect both personal and organisational effectiveness (Brun, 2010; Summers, 2010). It seems reasonable to conclude that one of the most inhibiting forces to organisational effectiveness is a lack of effective communication (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Good communication skills are very important to ones success as an administrator (Yate, 2009). It is therefore essential for administrators to endeavour to become effective communicators. This paper discusses the communication process and the importance of communication in the workplace and provides guidelines on how administrators can improve their communication skills and effectiveness.

## Communication

Communication can be defined as the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another (Keyton, 2011). It is the creation or exchange of thoughts, ideas, emotions, and understanding between sender(s) and receiver(s). It is essential to building and maintaining relationships in the workplace. Although administrators spend most of their time communicating (sending or receiving information), one cannot assume that meaningful communication occurs in all exchanges (Dunn, 2002). Once a memorandum, letter, fax, or e-mail has been sent, many are inclined to believe that communication has taken place. However, communication does not occur until information and understanding have passed between sender and the intended receiver.

To make oneself understood as intended is an important part of communication. A receiver may hear a sender but still not understand what the sender's message means. Being constantly engaged in encoding and decoding messages does not ensure that an administrator is an expert in communication. Understanding is a personal matter between people, and different people may interpret messages differently. If the idea received is not the one intended, communication has not taken place; the sender has merely spoken or written.

## Communication Process

Two common elements in every communication exchange are the sender and the receiver. Figure 1 reflects the definition and identifies the important elements of the communication process (McShare & Von Glinow, 2003)
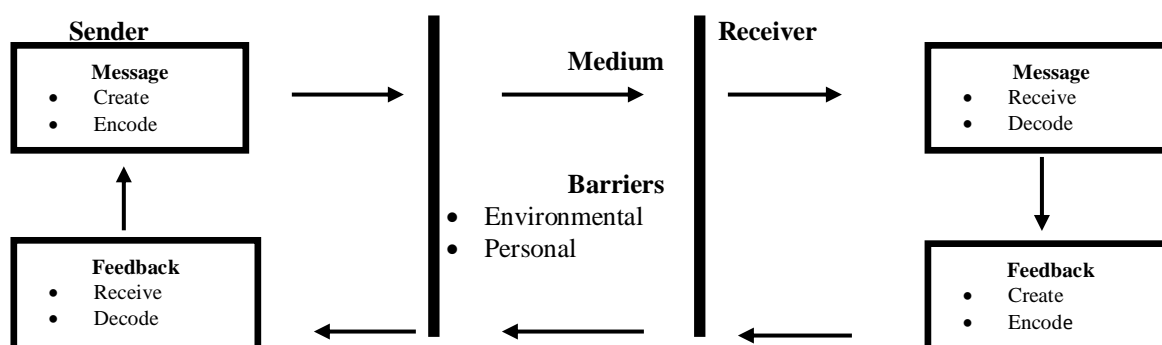


*Figure 1:* The Communication Process

Figure 1 illustrates the communication process. The sender initiates the communication. A sender uses words and symbols to put forth information into a message for the receiver, the individual(s) receiving the message. In the workplace, the sender is a person who has a need or desire to convey an idea or concept to others, the sender is a person, department, or unit of an organisation or system who originates the message. The sender encodes the idea by selecting words, symbols, or gestures with which to compose a message. The message is the outcome of the encoding, which takes the form of verbal, nonverbal, or written language. The receiver is the individual to whom the message is sent, the receiver decodes the received message into meaningful information. Accurate decoding of the message by the receiver is critical to effective communication. The closer the decoded message gets to the intent of the sender, the more effective the communication. However, environmental and personal barriers can hamper the communication process. A barrier is anything that distorts the message. Different perceptions of the message, language barriers, interruptions, emotions, and attitudes are examples of barriers.

Finally, feedback occurs when the receiver responds to the sender's message and returns the message to the sender. Feedback allows the sender to determine whether the message has been received and understood. Feedback is the destination's reaction to a message (Certo, 1992). It is an important element of communication since it allows for information to be shared between the receiver and sender in a two-way communication. The elements in the communication process determine the quality of communication. A problem in any one of these elements can reduce communication effectiveness (Keyton, 2011).

## Channels of Communication

A message is sent through a medium or channel, which is the carrier of the communication. Selection of the particular medium for transmitting the message can be critical, because there are many choices. The medium can be verbal, nonverbal, written, computer-aided or electronic. For written media, an administrator or other organisation members may choose from memos, letters, reports, bulletin boards, handbooks, newsletters, and the like. For verbal media, choices include face-to-face conversations, telephone, computer, public address systems, closed-circuit television, tape-recorded messages, sound or slide shows, e-mail, and so on. Nonverbal gestures, facial expressions, body position, and even clothing can transmit messages. People decode information selectively (Keyton, 2010).

### Importance of Communication in the Workplace

There is no denying the importance of communication in the workplace, considering the fact that in an organisation people belonging to different social and professional backgrounds come together to work for the same goals. Often it is seen that administrators do not realise the importance of communication at work and thus do not convey their ideas, organisational goals, vision, etc. very clearly. When administrators in an organisation are unable to create an environment which promotes open and clear communication, it can have negative repercussions on the work culture and the employee productivity. The importance of effective workplace communication is discussed below:

- *Creates job satisfaction*- Organisations which encourage an open and easy correspondence between seniors and subordinates face lesser employee turnover. If the work environment is friendly where the subordinates are encouraged to communicate their ideas to their administrators regarding work-related issues, and their feedback is given due consideration, it motivates the employees to work better and makes them feel valued in the organisation. Thus, effective communication in the workplace helps in building loyalty and trust which eventually attributes to greater job satisfaction.
- *Lesser conflicts*- Open communication in the workplace can help prevent and resolve many conflicts. Workplace conflicts are easily resolved through open and clear communication and mutual discussions; this can lead to personal and professional growth.
- *Increases productivity*- Effective communication at work is the most important issue for the success and failure of an organisation. Every organisation has a set of clearly defined goals, objectives and vision. If an administrator is clear in his/her communication, the subordinates will know exactly what the organisation wants and thus, will be able to deliver the same to the best of their abilities. Thus, the importance of communication skills can be judged from the fact that it leads to better deliverance of work, increasing workplace productivity.
- *Formation of relationships*- Open communication, whether between the employees and administrators or between the management and employees, leads to the formation of better personal and professional relationships. This makes the employees feel genuinely cared and valued for, and they are more likely to remain loyal to the organisation. This creates a friendly environment and promotes a better working relationship which is conducive to the work.
- *Proper utilisation of resources*- If an organisation faces problems, crisis and conflicts due to miscommunication between the staff members, it causes unnecessary delays in the daily work. This leads to wastage of resources and lowers the overall work productivity. So an environment of good communication is a must for any organisation to better utilise its resources and increase productivity.

## Barriers to Effective Communication

An administrator has no greater responsibility than to develop effective communication (Pauley, 2010). Why then does communication break down? On the surface, the answer is relatively simple. The elements of communication as the sender, the encoding, the message, the medium, the decoding, the receiver, and the feedback have been identified. If barriers exist in these elements in any way, complete clarity of meaning and understanding does not occur. According to Shaw (2011) the greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished. As illustrated in Figure 1, several forms of barriers can impede the communication process. Rakich and Darr (2000) classify these barriers into two categories: environmental and personal. Both barriers can block, filter, or distort the message as it is encoded and sent, as well as when it is decoded and received.

- *Environmental Barriers*

Environmental barriers are characteristic of the organization and its environmental setting. Examples of environmental barriers include competition for attention and time between senders and receivers. Multiple and simultaneous demands cause messages to be incorrectly decoded. The receiver hears the message, but does not understand it. Due to inadequate attention paid to the message, the receiver is not really "listening." *Listening* is a process that integrates physical, emotional, and intellectual inputs into the quest for meaning and understanding. Listening is effective only when the receiver understands the sender's messages as intended. Thus, without engaging in active listening, the receiver fails to comprehend the message.

Time is another barrier. Lack of time prevents the sender from carefully thinking through and thoroughly structuring the message accordingly, and limits the receiver's ability to decipher the message and determine its meaning. Other environmental barriers include the organisation's managerial philosophy, multiple levels of hierarchy, and power or status relationships between senders and receivers (Sanchez & Guo, 2005).

Managerial philosophy can promote or inhibit effective communication. Managers who are not interested in promoting intra-organisational communication upward or disseminating information downward will establish procedural and organisational blockages. By requiring that all communication follow the chain of command, lack of attention and concern toward employees is a sign of a managerial philosophy that restricts communication flows. Furthermore, when subordinates encounter administrators who fail to act, they are unwilling to communicate upward in the future, because communications are not taken seriously. Managerial philosophy not only affects communication within the organisation, but also impacts the organisation's communications with external stakeholders.

Power or status relationships can also effect transmission of a message. An unharmonious supervisor–subordinate relationship can interfere with the flow and content of information. Moreover, a staff member's previous experiences in the workplace may prevent open communication due to fear of negative sanctions as a result. For instance, a poor supervisor–subordinate relationship inhibits the subordinate from reporting that the project is not working as planned. Fear of the power and status of the administrator is a common barrier to communication.

Another environmental barrier that may lead to miscommunication is the use of specific terminology unfamiliar to the receiver or when messages are especially complex. Communication between people who use different terminology can be unproductive simply because people attach different meanings to the same words. Thus, misunderstanding can occur due to unfamiliar terminology. Today's complex organisational systems are highly specialised, organisations have staff and technical experts developing and using specialised terminology that only other similar staff and technical experts can understand, and if people do not understand the words, they cannot understand the message.

- *Personal Barriers*

Personal barriers arise due to an individual's frame of reference or beliefs and values. They are based on one's socio-economic background and prior experiences and shape how messages are encoded and decoded. One may also consciously or unconsciously engage in selective perception or be influenced by fear or jealously. For example, some cultures believe in "do not speak unless spoken to" or "never question elders" (Longest et al., 2000). These inhibit communication. Others accept all communication at face value without filtering out erroneous information. Still others provide self-promotion information, intentionally transmitting and distorting messages for personal gain. Unless one has had the same experiences as others, it is difficult to completely understand their message. In addition to frame of reference, one's beliefs, values, and prejudices also can alter and block messages. Preconceived opinions and prejudices are formed based on varying personalities and backgrounds.

Two additional personal barriers are status quo and evaluating the sender to determine whether one should retain or filter out messages. For instance, an administrator always ignores the complaints from the receptionist, because the receptionist tends to exaggerate issues and events. However, one must be careful to evaluate and distinguish exaggerations from legitimate messages. Status quo is when individuals prefer the present situation. They intentionally filter out information that is unpleasant. For example, an administrator refuses to tell staff of an impending dismissal. To prevent disorder, the administrator postpones the communication to retain status quo.

A final personal barrier is lack of empathy, in other words, insensitivity to the emotional states of senders and receivers. Empathy is the ability to put one's self into another's shoes. The empathetic person is able to see the world through the eyes of the other person. Research shows that lack of empathy is one of the major obstacles to effective communication (Eisenberg, 2010).

## Overcoming Communication Barriers

Recognising that environmental and personal barriers exist is the first step to effective communication. By becoming cognisant of their existence, one can consciously minimise their impact. However, positive actions are needed to overcome these barriers. Longest et al (2000) provide us with several guidelines for overcoming communication barriers:

- Environmental barriers are reduced if receivers and senders ensure that attention is given to their messages and that adequate time is devoted to listening to what is being communicated.
- A management philosophy that encourages the free flow of communication is constructive.
- Reducing the number of links (levels in the organisational hierarchy or steps between the sender and the receiver reduces opportunities for distortion.
- The power/status barrier can be removed by consciously tailoring words and symbols so that messages are understandable; reinforcing words with actions significantly improves communication among different power/status levels.
- Using multiple channels to reinforce complex messages decreases the likelihood of misunderstanding.

Personal barriers to effective communication are reduced by conscious efforts of senders and receivers to understand each other's values and beliefs. One must recognise that people engage in selective perception and are prone to jealously and fear. Sharing empathy with those to whom messages are directed is the best way to increase effective communication.

- Use techniques that extend beyond traditional organisational lines to facilitate communication. For instance, the use of diagonal communication that flows through task forces or committees enhances communication throughout the organisation.
- Use management processes that are cross-organisational rather than confined to functional or department procedures. Implementing management processes in the areas of planning, controlling, and managing information systems facilitate communication.
- Use human resources policies and procedures (job training and job rotation) to enhance cooperation among members in organisations.
- Use management processes to resolve conflicts in an equitable manner to produce effective communication.

## Improving Communication Effectiveness

Once environmental and personal barriers are dealt with, a way is paved for improving communication in the organisation. Effective communication being a two-way process requires effort and skill by both sender and receiver. Administrators will at times assume each of these roles in the communication process. In view of this, guidelines for improving communication effectiveness, including senders' and receivers' responsibilities are discussed below:

### Sender's Responsibilities

Several communication theorists (Cheney, 2011; Keyton, 2011; Tourish, 2010; Lunenburg, 2010) have proposed ten guidelines of good communication, which are particularly applicable to the sender. These guidelines, together with a basic understanding of the communication process itself, should provide a good foundation for developing and maintaining an effective set of interpersonal communication skills, which administrators can use when communicating with various stakeholders.

1. ***Administrators need to clarify their ideas before communicating.*** The more systematically administrators analyse the problem or idea to be communicated, the clearer it becomes. This is the first step toward effective communication. Many communications fail because of inadequate planning. Good planning must consider the goals, attitudes, and needs of those who will receive the communication and those who will be affected by it.

2. ***Administrators need to examine the true purpose of each communication.*** Before administrators communicate, they must ask themselves what they really want to accomplish with their message (obtain information, initiate action, or change another person's attitude?) Administrators need to identify their most important goal and then adapt their language, tone, and total approach to serve that specific objective. Administrators should not try to accomplish too much with each communication because the sharper the focus of their message, the greater its chances of success.

3. ***Administrators need to consider the total physical and human setting***. Meaning and intent are conveyed by more than words alone. Many other factors influence the overall impact of a communication, and administrators must be sensitive to the total setting in which they communicate: the circumstances under which an announcement or decision is made; the physical setting, whether the communication is made in private or otherwise; the social climate that pervades work relationships within the department and sets the tone of its communications; custom and practice, the degree to which the communication conforms to, or departs from, the expectations of the audience. Administrators should constantly be aware of the total setting in which they communicate. Like all living things, communication must be capable of adapting to its environment.

4. ***Administrators need to consult with others, when appropriate, in planning communications***. Frequently, it is desirable or necessary to seek the participation of others in planning a communication or in developing the facts on which to base the communication. Such consultation often lends additional insight and objectivity to the message. Moreover, those who have helped plan the communication will give it their active support.

5. ***Administrators need to be mindful, while communicating, of the overtones as well as the basic content of the message.*** The administrator's tone of voice, expression, and apparent receptiveness to the responses of others all have tremendous impact on those the administrator wishes to reach. Frequently overlooked, these subtleties of communication often affect a listener's reaction to a message even more than its basic content. Similarly, the administrator's choice of language particularly his/her awareness of the fine shades of meaning and emotion in the words used predetermines in large part the reactions of the listeners.

6. ***Administrators need to take the opportunity, when it arises, to convey something of help or value to the receiver.*** Consideration of the other person's interests and needs, trying to look at things from the other person's point of view frequently points up opportunities to convey something of immediate benefit or long-range value to the other person. Staff members are most responsive to administrators whose messages take staff interests into account.

7. ***Administrators need to follow up their communication.*** An administrator's best efforts at communication may be wasted, and he/she may never know whether he/she has succeeded in expressing his/her true meaning and intent if he/she does not follow up to see how well he/she has put his/her message across. An administrator can do this by asking questions, by encouraging the receiver to express his/her reactions, by follow-up contacts, and by subsequent review of performance. An administrator needs to make certain that every important communication has feedback so that complete understanding and appropriate action result.

8. ***Administrators need to communicate for tomorrow as well as today.*** Although communications may be aimed primarily at meeting the demands of an immediate situation, they must be planned with the past in mind if they are to maintain consistency in the receiver's view. Most important, however, communications must be consistent with long-range interests and goals. For example, it is not easy to communicate frankly on such matters as poor performance or the

shortcomings of a loyal staff member, but postponing disagreeable communications makes these matters more difficult in the long run and is actually unfair to staff and the organisation.

9. ***Administrators need to be sure that their actions support their communications***. In the final analysis, the most persuasive kind of communication is not what administrators say, but what they do. When administrators' actions or attitudes contradict their words, others tend to discount what they have said. For every administrator, this means that good supervisory practices such as clear assignment of responsibility and authority, fair rewards for effort, and sound policy enforcement serve to communicate more than all the gifts of oratory.

10. ***Administrators need to seek, not only to be understood, but to understand and be a good listener.*** When an administrator starts talking, he/she often ceases to listen, at least in that larger sense of being attuned to the other person's unspoken reactions and attitudes. Even more serious is the occasional inattentiveness an administrator may be guilty of when others are attempting to communicate with him. Listening is one of the most important, most difficult, and most neglected skills in communication. It demands that the administrator concentrate not only on the explicit meanings another person is expressing, but also on the implicit meanings, unspoken words, and undertones that may be far more significant. Thus, an administrator must learn to listen with the inner ear if he/she is to know the inner person.

*Receiver's Responsibilities*

Communication depends on the ability not only to send but also to receive messages. So the ability to listen effectively greatly enhances the communication process (Lunenburg, 2010). But many of us are not good listeners. Effective listening skills can be developed, however. Kneen (2011) proposes ten guidelines for good listening:

1. ***Stop talking.*** You cannot listen if you are talking.
2. ***Put the talker at ease.*** Help a person feel free to talk. This is often called a permissive environment.
3. ***Show a talker that you want to listen.*** Look and act interested. Listen to understand rather than to oppose. Listening requires two ears, one for meaning and one for feeling.
4. ***Remove distractions.*** Stay focused and pay attention.
5. ***Empathize with talkers.*** Try to help yourself see the other person's point of view.
6. ***Be patient.*** Allow plenty of time. Do not interrupt a talker. Do not start for the door or walk away.
7. ***Hold your temper.*** An angry person takes the wrong meaning from words.
8. ***Go easy on argument and criticism.*** These put people on the defensive, and they may clam up or become angry. Do not argue: Even if you win, you lose.
9. *Ask questions.* This encourages a talker and shows that you are listening. It helps to develop points further.
10. ***Stop talking.*** This is first and last, because all other guides depend on it. You cannot do an effective listening job while you are talking. Nature gave people two ears but only one tongue, which is a gentle hint that they should listen more than they talk. Administrators who do not listen have less information for making sound decisions.

## Conclusion

Communication in the workplace is critical to establishing and maintaining quality working relationships in organisations. As a process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another, effective communication in the workplace is important because every administrative function and activity involves some form of direct or indirect communication. Consequently, to improve the effectiveness of communications, administrators must develop an awareness of the importance of sender's and receiver's responsibilities and adhere to active listening skills. Effective communication skills in the workplace will improve an administrator's ability to be a strong leader. Administrators should therefore create an environment wherein problems, plans, issues, opinions, thoughts and ideas pertaining to work, are discussed and handled in a professional, proficient manner through positive and effective communication.

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