

Mechanics of Effective Communication

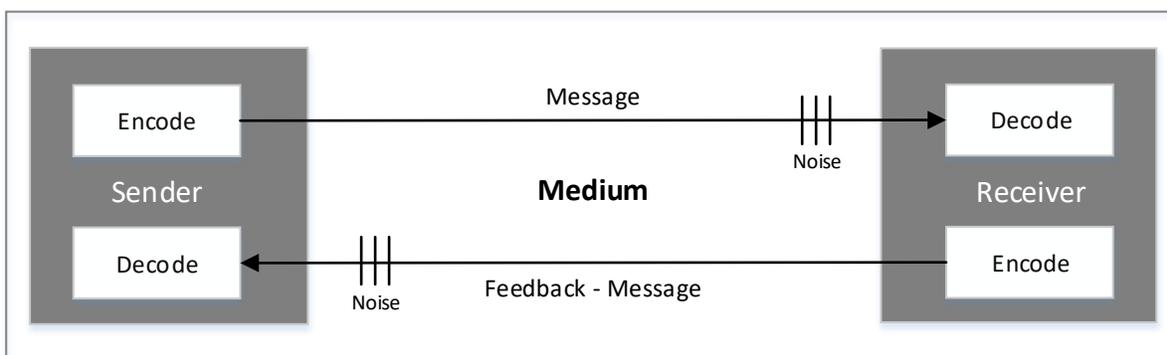
“You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, you won't get you anywhere.” - Lee Iacocca

The Art of Effective Communication has been noted as a critical success factor in far too many endeavors to list. In fact, few things may influence your success and your career more than communication – that is to say, your ability to clearly and succinctly articulate your message to your intended audience. As an entrepreneur, employee or parent, you may need to convey important information or persuade a listener to take some action (e.g. “buy my product or service!” or “clean your room!”)

The importance of ‘proper’ communications is often overlooked due to its assumed simplicity. We all believe that we know how to communicate – we’ve been doing it our entire lives. However, if you frequently find yourself party to misunderstandings, disputes, unintended outcomes, or just want to improve your communication skills, this article is for you.

Communications under a Microscope.

The Diagram below shows a simple 2-way communication model. On one end is a “sender” – the individual who desires to share some piece of information. The sender must translate or “encode” the information they want to share into a “message.” The sender must also choose a “medium” to transmit the message. Typical media include face-to-face conversation, phone calls, e-mails, facsimile, text message, official letters, memos, bulletin boards, radio or television, etc. It’s important to remember that each of these media has a proper place in effective & efficient communication and each is also subject to its own particular “noise” or interference in the message. Noise can be anything that makes the transmission of your message difficult. Examples include language barriers, media etiquette (think typing in all caps), cultural differences, education, inconsistent body language, biases and sometimes just physical noise. On the other end of the spectrum is the listener who must receive the entire communication and interpret or “decode” the message they believe the sender intended to convey. In a perfect communication model, the receiver would encode their own confirmation message or “feedback”, at which point the roles are essentially reversed. At this point, the communication cycle is complete.



Categories of Communication.

As illustrated in the previous section, the number of media we may choose to convey our message is both broad & diverse, each having its own set of pros and cons. Recognizing that the communication process generally starts with the sender's desire to convey some piece of information, it is important to select the most appropriate media for the specific message. Key considerations when selecting the most appropriate media might include the importance, sensitivity and/or complexity of the message itself, the receiver(s) preference, the intended / desired result, etc. Thankfully, our selection can be simplified (to an extent) by identifying three main categories of media at our disposal: Push Communications, Pull Communications, and Interactive Communications.

1. Push Communications.

In Push Communications, a message is delivered from a sender directly to a receiver. (e.g. email, mail, fax, voicemail, etc.)

In push communications, it can be confirmed that the message was sent, but not that it was received or understood. This is used when the recipients need information but no immediate response is required (e.g. the message is neither urgent nor sensitive.)

2. Pull Communications.

In Pull Communications, the message is made available by the sender. However, the key difference is that the receiver must make a conscious effort to receive it. (e.g. website, bulletin board, this blog, etc.)

Pull communications are ideal when the message to be transmitted is purely informational, does not affect the project, and is neither urgent nor sensitive.

3. Interactive (“2-Way”) Communications.

In Interactive Communications (also called “2-Way Communications”), the sender and the receiver are engaged in a dynamic 2-way conversation. (e.g. 1-on-1 discussions, meetings, phone calls, video conferences, etc.)

Interactive communication is the most effective option to ensure the message is received and understood. Interactive communication should be used when an immediate response is required and/or when the communication is sensitive, very important and/or likely to be misinterpreted.

Always keep in mind that communication is not complete until the sender confirms that the listener has received and accurately understood the intended message.

Components of Communication.

To be successful, communications should be two things: 1.) **Efficient** providing ONLY the information needed, ONLY when needed (think about a long newsletter sent twice weekly) and 2.) **Effective** providing the RIGHT information to the RIGHT person(s) in the RIGHT format at the RIGHT time. In order to make sure your message is both efficient and effective, good communication must often be thought out beforehand. A good communication plan considers 3 things:

1. What information is needed.

The golden rule of communication: always keep the listener / audience in mind. Think about what information they need, and know exactly what message you are trying to convey and what your main points are. This will allow you to keep focused and get straight to the point. Having a plan focused on your listeners' interests will also prevent you from sidetracking and keep your audience engaged.

2. When it is needed.

When sending a message, it is important to be timely and aware of your listener's desired frequency. For some people, daily communication may be overkill, while monthly communication may not be frequent enough. Take the guess work out and ask the listener how often they prefer to be communicated with. Also, timeliness is key – a message sent too late to respond may as well have never been sent.

3. How it will be delivered.

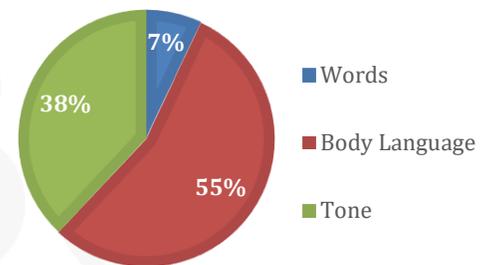
Choosing an appropriate medium of communication is equally important to the effectiveness of your message. Keeping the three models of communication in mind (mentioned above) when deciding how to communicate with someone will go a long way. For example, you don't want to fire someone via a sticky note, just like it isn't necessary to have one-on-one meetings to wish employees "Happy Holidays".

It is important to remember that good communication skills come from both sides– whether you're the receiver or the sender. It is equally important to be a good and attentive listener when communicating. Good listening means asking clarification questions and clearing your mind of distractions; these distractions could be anything from thinking what to say next to what's going on outside.

5 Types of communication:

In addition to understanding the various categories and components noted above, effective communication requires a basic awareness of five types of interpersonal communication:

1. **Informal Written** - emails, texts, memos, etc.
2. **Formal Written** - letters, contracts, etc.
3. **Informal Verbal** - hallway conversations, ad hoc, discussions, etc.
4. **Formal Verbal** - presentations, meetings, conference calls, etc.
5. **Non-Verbal** - body language *(see Mehrabian's rule below)



Mehrabian's Rule.

While his research has been called into question in recent years, I would argue that Albert Mehrabian's "7-38-55" rule is still as important today as ever. It suggests that when communication occurs between two people, on an inter-personal level, the words used only account for 7% of the message which the receiver understands as the *true* meaning of the message. Mehrabian argues that the lion's share of the message is transmitted, 38% by the tone of our voices (pitch, volume, speed, etc.) and an overwhelming 55% by our body language (arms folded, fists clutched, smiling, frowning, eyebrows raised, furrowed brow, etc.)

Summary.

Last but not least, when communicating in writing, always double-check for correct spelling, grammar and punctuation! Make sure you are writing in complete sentences which are arranged in a logical and deliberate order. Always re-read before sending and, if necessary, ask someone else to review your message. Always be aware that emails, letters, and memos can serve as permanent records. **Never** send an angry email and always stay classy – keep it above board.

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