



# EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS



Communication takes place when one person transmits ideas or feelings to another person or to a group of people. Its effectiveness is measured by the similarity between the ideas transmitted and those received. If they are the same, there has been good communication. If they are different, communication has failed. As a supervisor, you know that you use communication constantly in your job. In fact, you probably spend most of your time as a communicator. Every day the supervisor is engaged in a variety of communication activities: writing memos, writing letters, writing reports, talking on the telephone, interviewing job applicants, conducting staff meetings, giving directions and training employees. Take, for example, the following personnel management responsibilities which require good communications:

**SELECTION INTERVIEW.** Questions to the interviewee must be stated clearly so that the supervisor can listen and respond to the answers given. The supervisor must be sure the interviewee understands what kind of information is needed and why.

**PERFORMANCE EVALUATION.** Performance standards must be understood by employees, so employees know what is expected of them. During appraisal and counseling sessions, both the employee and supervisor must be able to communicate their goals and expectations.

**TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT.** On-the-job training requires good instruction from the supervisor. The supervisor listens for employee's self-development goals, and must be able to counsel the employee.

**GRIEVANCES.** Grievances and complaints require skill in listening actively to determine whether there are any hidden messages being communicated by the employee. The supervisor's attitude plays an important part here, and communicates interest or lack thereof.

**RECOGNITION.** Recognition of employee accomplishments and a sincere interest in employee welfare, communicate an awareness of employee efforts. Your ability to communicate effectively is directly related to your success or failure as a supervisor.

## Questions for Improving Communications:

To improve your communications effectiveness, think about the following questions before you begin the communications process.

**WHAT IS MY PURPOSE IN SENDING THIS MESSAGE?** Thinking about your reason for sending your message will help you make the message clearer. What effect do you want to cause a certain performance or effect a change in performance in the receiver?

**HOW AM I GOING TO SEND THIS MESSAGE?** The "how" in the question refers both to the code (words) which you use and the channel or medium (means) by which you send your message. Supervisors should study all they can about the art of clear speech and readable writing in order to make themselves better communicators. "Body language" is part of the "how" when you are sending a message. The tone of your voice, the position in which you sit or stand, whether or not your eyes meet the other person's eyes are all part of the "message" you are conveying.

**WHEN AM I GOING TO SEND THE MESSAGE?** Choosing the right moment for sending a message is crucial to successful communications. If you send the right message at the wrong time, your message may not get through. Choose an hour when you know you will be free from constant interruptions to discuss a personal performance problem with a subordinate.

**HOW WILL I KNOW THAT THE MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED?** Get feedback on the messages you send out. Whatever ways you use for getting feedback, be they tactful (preferable) or blatant (avoid if possible), be sure to get some response from those to whom you direct your communications. Then you can alter your original communication; orders, instructions, request or whatever, based on the feedback you received.

**AM I LISTENING TO THE MESSAGE(S) BEING SENT TO ME BY OTHERS?** Listening well is as vital to good communication as speaking well. Supervisors who don't listen miss a lot. For one, they miss valuable feedback coming in response to the messages they send out. They often misunderstand directives which their own supervisors are giving them. They fail to hear a lot of important information which could help them do a better job. Learn to be a good listener.

## Employee Involvement

Experts in the field of management studies continually point out two particular aspects of communication that the supervisor should pay attention to:

- First, employees should be encouraged to participate in making decisions that affect them and their work. This can happen by keeping opportunities open for employees to make suggestions, by systematically seeking employee advice, and by generally creating an atmosphere in which employees can feel comfortable to speak up regarding management actions.
- Second, supervisors should strive to keep employees informed on all matters that will make it easier for them to do their work with understanding and efficiency. Although you cannot always consult with your employees before taking action or making decisions that affect them, you can do the next best thing: give adequate forewarning and explanation of changes as soon as possible.

## Communicating Upward

Most of the communication that takes place is that from supervisor to employee or from higher-level management to the supervisor. Sometimes not enough communication from subordinates to upper management takes place, although such communication can be of great value. What can you, the supervisor, do to improve the upward flow of communication?

- First, you can feed more information to your supervisors in management. Management has a right to know when employees are dissatisfied or when they have strong feelings about a proposed change in policy. Even though it may be unpleasant, keep your superiors informed about any discontentment with management which your employees voice.
- Second, encourage your employees to speak freely to you. Solicit their suggestions as to how the work and working atmosphere could be improved. When employees communicate their feeling to you, seriously consider what action might be taken.



## Barriers to Communication

A barrier to communication is anything which causes the message which the receiver has in mind not to be the same as the message transmitted from the mind of the sender. There are many barriers to effective communication, but three stand out as the most important. To establish good communication you need to find ways of eliminating these barriers both in yourself and in your employees.

**THE BARRIER OF FAILURE TO LISTEN.** If the person to whom you are speaking is not listening, it makes little difference how well you phrase your statements, communication will not get through. It isn't always the employee who makes communication fail by not listening. Sometimes it is the supervisor who fails to listen. As a result, the supervisor does not hear what employees, bosses, and co-workers have to say. Listen to what others are saying to you.

**THE BARRIER OF SEMANTICS.** Most people choose words that have a certain meaning to them, yet those same words may have a different meaning to someone else. The semantics barrier exists whenever the receiver of a message attaches a different meaning to the words of a message than was attached by the sender. "As soon as possible" is a much used phrase which is likely to be interpreted differently by different people. When giving an employee a task to do, be a bit more specific. State how soon you want the task done. Give a date. Or get the employee to say how soon it will be possible to have it ready.

The semantics barrier is also raised with the overuse of abstractions. Abstract words stand for ideas that cannot be directly experienced. They stand for things that do not call forth mental pictures in the mind of the receiver. Concrete words refer to objects that human beings can experience directly. Good communicators avoid using too many abstract words. They say exactly what they have to, nothing more and nothing less. Gear your communication to the vocabulary of the receiver. Don't use jargon and trade terms in written communications unless you are absolutely sure your reader will understand them. Make your meaning clear. Use concrete expressions.

**THE BARRIER OF EMOTIONAL DISTORTION.** People often filter out through their emotions things which are said to them which they don't want to hear. This emotion blinds them to the full meaning of what is said.

If any of the signs are present, emotion is probably preventing others from hearing your message:

- (1) People are on the defensive and can hardly wait for you to stop talking so that they can present a rebuttal of what you say.
- (2) Employees keep making excuses for their actions when those actions are criticized by you.
- (3) People constantly misinterpret what you say to them.

Try to anticipate what is likely to cause employees to be emotional. Also, repeat your message as often as necessary to make certain that it is understood clearly by all employees in the work group.

Get feedback from employees (and others with whom you communicate) to see if your message was understood.

Try to empathize with the person with whom you are communicating. Put yourself in the other person's place, on the receiving end.

## Tips on Issuing Directives

In today's nonauthoritarian, participative style of management, "orders" are usually called "instructions," "directives," or "requests." In speaking with your employees, you should use such phrases as, "Will you do this?" "Don't you think it would be a good idea to do that?" "I'd like to have you do this." Try to issue orders or instructions as directly as you can.

**BE SPECIFIC**—Say exactly what you want done. Give reasonable deadlines. Explain in detail if necessary.

**BE CONCISE**—Don't make the order too long. Don't issue too many orders at one time, or you will confuse the employee.

**BE FORCEFUL**—If you are too apologetic or diffident when giving orders, your employees may not respect your orders.

**GET FEEDBACK**—Once again, you should get feedback to check whether the employee understood the directive.

**FOLLOW UP ON THE DIRECTIVE**—After a reasonable period of time, ascertain whether your instructions were carried out. This is an extremely important duty which many supervisors fail to perform.

## When Communicating, Remember to:

- Use words familiar to the employee.
- Use specific terms rather than general phrases.
- Ask for feedback.
- Adjust volume to the situation so that your employees can hear what you have to say.
- Don't create artificial sound barriers (finger tapping, hand over mouth).
- Speak clearly
- Match facial expressions to the content of your message. Avoid conflicting message.
- Avoid expressionless face when purpose is to convince others of your viewpoint.
- When listening, use positive facial expression to show interest, attention, or understanding. Use no facial expression when you don't want to communicate your thinking.
- Avoid aimless gestures that detract from the meaning of your message.
- Use positive gestures to emphasize your words.
- Be aware of gestures of others. These are possible indications of reactions to what you are saying.
- Adjust posture to fit the situation.
- Avoid those postures that detract from your meaning.
- Be aware of your receiver's posture as an indication of understanding, but don't allow it to unduly influence you.

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