

Communicating in the Workplace

Administrative Accounting and Bookkeeping Program

Handout: The Communication Process

Thoughts untangle themselves over lips and through pencil tips.

— Dr Howard Hendricks

Communicating effectively is a vital skill for any leader, but it's one we tend to take for granted. Too many people think that having good language skills makes them effective speakers. Communicating clearly and persuasively, however, takes more than a mere knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. It is a separate skill.

In fact, you can be an effective communicator even if your language skills aren't great. Take Jean Chrétien, one of Canada's most effective speakers and that rare thing — a beloved politician. Born with a speech impediment, he was, as Prime Minister, famously inarticulate in both official languages. And yet, despite his lack of technical fluency in English (or even in his native French), garbled syntax, and heavy accent, he was more effective than another public figure of his day at reaching out to the average citizen and rallying them to his vision. In consequence, this unlikely leader governed Canada for more than ten years, through three consecutive parliaments.



I believe that good language skills (grammar and all that) are useful — and a good thing in themselves. But they're not sufficient to make you a great communicator. What, then, is the key? I think there's a lot of truth in Dr Kendrick's famous observation that: "Thoughts untangle themselves over lips and through pencil tips".

That is, so long as your thoughts, plans, and ideas exist only in your mind, they are free to swirl around in a very unformed (and tangled) state. They may seem clear—we *know* what we want to say! But, as soon as you try to put your thoughts into words (speak them through your lips or write them with a pencil tip) you realize just how vague, unordered, and half-baked they are. And how different is the act of thinking something to yourself and communicating it to another person.

You'll have noticed this when you sit down to write a reasonably complex email (a plan of action, for example, or an answer to a detailed question). You sit at the computer, thinking you know exactly what you want to say, only to realize you're not sure where to even start. The thoughts that seemed so clear in your mind turn out to need a lot of effort to shape them into a clear and well-organized message.

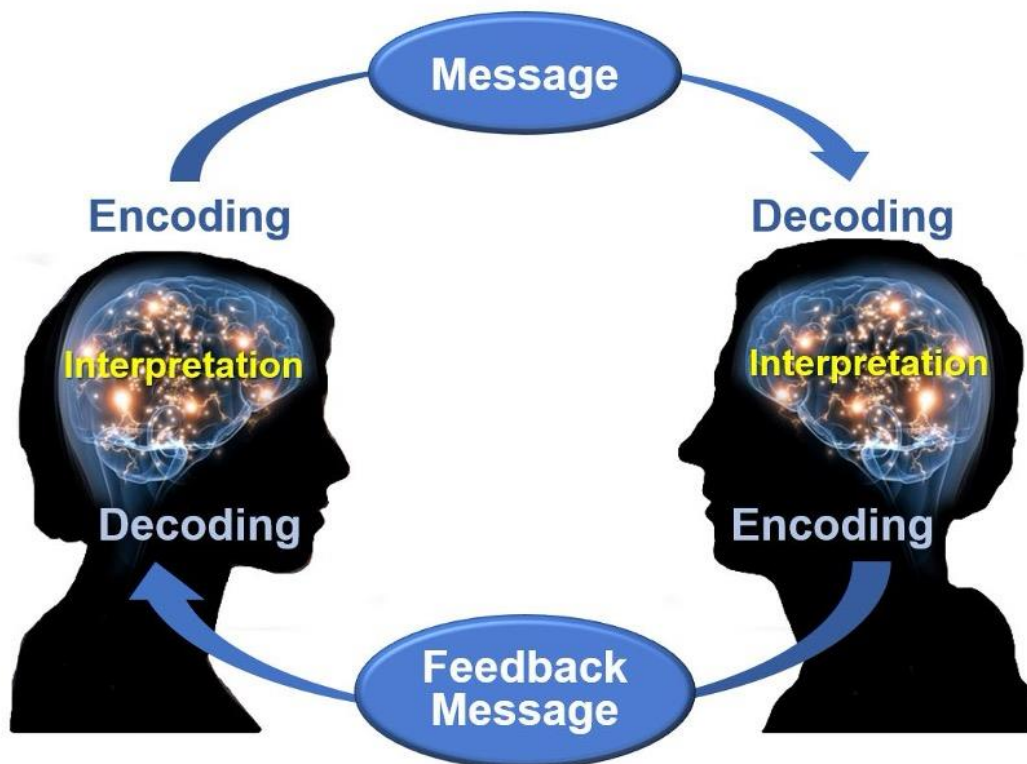
The Communication Process

The truth is that communicating with another human is a multistep process that requires focus and conscious work. Becoming aware of this is the first step in strengthening your communication skill. Fortunately, because this is a skill, anyone can improve with study and practice. So, let's break down the communication process into individual steps.

1. **Idea:** the communication process starts with an *idea*: a thought, concept, or action in your head that you want to share with someone else.
2. **Encoding:** to achieve this, you need to express your idea in words. Depending upon how clearly you've thought it through, this can be surprisingly difficult. As discussed, that's because most of our thoughts, no matter how clear they seem in our heads, are incredibly vague and unformed. It's only when we try to speak them through our lips or write them with a metaphorical pencil tip (computer) that we're forced to organize them into a logical order and fill in the gaps that our mind has intuitively leapt across.
3. **Message:** having encoded your idea into a message, you must choose a *channel* to carry it. Depending upon the nature of the message, location of the receiver, etc, this could be a telephone call, an email, a face-to-face conversation, and so on.

4. **Decoding:** upon receipt of your message, the receiver *decodes* it. In this reversal of the encoding process, your recipient attempts to interpret your words in a way that makes sense to them. Obviously, there's a giant scope for error here. Receivers often radically misunderstand our meaning as they evaluate our message based upon their own prior knowledge, understanding of the language, and a wide variety of cultural and other factors.
5. **Encoding:** If the receiver isn't sure they've interpreted your message correctly, they *should* try to clarify it with a question. This too needs to be encoded into spoken or written words.
6. **Feedback:** This feedback message is sent back to you over a channel (usually the same as the source message).
7. **Decoding:** Again, you need to decode their feedback into concepts you can understand before attempting to rephrase and re-send your idea. Which will initiate another round in the communication process.

This can be diagrammed as follows:



Obviously, there's a lot going on here! No wonder we're so often frustrated when trying to tell another person about something that seems obvious to us, but which they keep

misunderstanding. The fact is that even when the receiver genuinely attempts to understand your meaning, many obstacles can get in the way. A few factors that can derail effective communications are:

- The sender (you) could be unclear in your mind.
- You might have chosen an inappropriate channel.
- There could be physical obstacles such as a bad telephone connection or trying to converse in a noisy room.
- Personal obstacles including cultural and language differences or medical conditions such as ADHD could be interfering.

Choosing a Channel

Which channel you select is the first and most important decision you make when attempting to communicate with others. Most people, however, don't consciously recognize this as a choice at all; they just default to whichever channel is handiest: perhaps a face-to-face conversation, if the person is nearby, or an email if they're not.

In our personal lives, this often results in ineffective communication and wasted time. In the world of work, it is responsible for the current plague of distracting emails and time-wasting meetings infesting most offices.

One important consideration when choosing a channel is that some are:

- *Synchronous* (everyone is connected at the same time), while others are
- *Asynchronous* (not everyone is connected simultaneously).

Face-to-face conversations and Zoom conferences are synchronous, for example. Since everyone is on call together, and can react immediately, they are excellent for discussions or reaching an agreement. Email, on the other hand, is asynchronous, making it inappropriate for lengthy discussions or quick, routine enquiries. While the sender composes and sends a message when it's convenient for them, it arrives in the inboxes of their unconnected recipients as an unplanned interruption of whatever else they're doing.

Other distinctions are that some channels go between individuals (phone calls) while others connect groups. Some are harder or easier to use. Choosing a channel that works well is an important step in communicating successfully.

Face-to-Face

A face-to-face conversation has many advantages. You and the other person being in the same location makes it easy to negotiate whether the present is a good time to talk. And, because this is a synchronous form of communication, it works well for any topic that requires a lot of back-and-forth. Which makes it good for brainstorming, an in-depth discussion, or a negotiation.

A face-to-face conversation also lets you use your full range of non-verbal cues. You can show your enthusiasm (or doubt) about a topic by your body language, tone of voice, volume, or facial expressions. This makes face-to-face a great channel for when you want to persuade the other person.

The only real disadvantage of face-to-face is that there's no written record. So, any decisions or agreements reached face-to-face should be followed up with some sort of written confirmation. Usually, this takes the form of a confirmatory email or text, but it could also be an appointment in a shared calendar, an entry in a shared task list, or an update to a shared tracking note or timeline for a project.

Phone

A telephone call has many similarities to a face-to-face conversation. It's also a synchronous channel, making it good for any topic or negotiation that will require a lot of back-and-forth. And you can even use some of your persuasive tools: volume, expression, and tone of voice.

Telephone conversations have two disadvantages compared to face-to-face ones.

- Unless you negotiate a time to call, they can be disruptive to a receiver when they're in the middle of some other task. Unlike with face-to-face conversations, you can't easily see if they're busy, or ask whether they're available, without interrupting them. A few of my friends have started sending a text before they call to ask when I'm available. This is certainly less obtrusive than the ring of an unannounced call.
- Also, as the receiver can't see you, your full persuasive arsenal of body language isn't available. (FaceTime mitigates this to some extent, but not everyone is comfortable with video calls!)

Email

For the right kind of message, email is an incredibly powerful tool. It's incredibly quick and easy to use, links everyone directly, and preserves a written record automatically. I'm old enough to remember when written communication consisted of formal letters that you wrote on foolscap to be typed by the secretarial pool — which then signed by the boss before they were sent (if you

were lucky!). That was more painful than email, I assure you! So, how has email become such a burden, with everyone spending so much time in their overstuffed inboxes that they barely have time for their real work? This is a topic (and channel) we'll explore more deeply later in the course.

Texts / Instant Messaging

Texting is technically an asynchronous communication channel, but it is so quick and lightweight it's often used for the sort of messages we'd normally use a phone call or face-to-face conversation for. These include:

- Urgent or Time-Sensitive Notifications (“the client call is starting early—join now”).
- Logistical Coordination (“running 10 minutes late to the meeting”).

On the other hand, texting should not be used for ongoing collaboration or decision-making that require a lot of back-and-forth.

Group Discussion Boards / Chats

Business collaboration tools such as Slack, Basecamp, or Microsoft Teams, include discussion boards and group chat features. In many offices these have become a popular channel for team communications. They're often seen as a solution to the problem of Email Overload but, because they are also an asynchronous channel, they share many of email's characteristics.

Meetings

Meetings are a synchronous communication channel, like a face-to-face conversation but for a whole group. This makes them tremendously effective for brainstorming sessions, discussions, getting feedback, and collaborative decision-making. There's nothing else nearly as effective for these purposes.

“Too many meetings!” has become a common complaint in many workplaces, but I believe this is because there are too many *ineffective* meetings. An ineffective meeting being one that doesn't produce a decision or agreement. Because ineffective meetings don't achieve their aim, they spawn a whole series of follow-up meetings—that wouldn't have been necessary if the original had achieved its purpose. This is especially wasteful because a useless meeting costs the time the meeting took *multiplied* by the number of people present. Again, this is a topic, and a channel, we'll explore more deeply later in the course.

Barriers to Effective Listening

Finally, even when you choose the appropriate channel, your recipient could be experiencing barriers that keep them from listening (receiving) your message effectively:

- **Physical Barriers:** your recipient may be sick or uncomfortable, or unable to hear you clearly.
- **Personal Barriers:** your recipient's values may conflict with what you're saying, or they may have a mental condition (such as ADHD that makes certain kinds of communications difficult for them).
- **Cultural Barriers:** may cause misunderstandings because of different expectations and assumptions.
- **Language Problems:** the recipient may not be fluent enough in the language to understand you.
- **Thought Speed:** we think faster than another person can talk, making it easy for a listener's attention to wander.
- **Distractions:** abound in the modern world, especially when everyone has a smartphone or active computer screen nearby,
- **Grandstanding:** many recipients (people in general) would rather speak than listen.
- **Inappropriate channel:** the channel you're sending over may not be appropriate for your message: using a text for a complicated instruction, for example, or an email for a quick confirmation.

We'll discuss how to overcome these in the next reading.

Finis: Key Takeaways

Communication is a multistep process that takes effort and skill to be effective. The communication process includes the following steps:

- Idea,
- Encoding,
- Message,
- Decoding,
- Encoding,
- Feedback, and
- Decoding.

Choosing the appropriate channel is important to effective communication. Each has their strengths and drawbacks:

- Face-to-face,
- Phone,
- Email,
- Texts / Instant Messaging,
- Meetings, and
- Online (Zoom) Meetings.

Barriers to effective listening can also impede communication. These include:

- Physical Barriers,
- Personal Barriers,
- Cultural Barriers,
- Language Problems,
- Thought Speed,
- Distractions,
- Grandstanding, and
- Inappropriate channel.