

Human Relations in Administration

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Understanding Communication

How prevalent is miscommunication in the workplace? You may not be surprised to learn that the relationship between miscommunication and negative outcomes is very strong. Data from a NASA study suggest that deficient interpersonal communication was a causal factor in approximately 70% to 80% of all accidents over the last 20 years (as cited in Baron, n.d.).



A photograph of employees sharing high fives and smiles in the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the California Institute of Technology.

Success on complicated missions at NASA depends on strong communication.

NASA/JPL-Caltech

Poor communication can also lead to lawsuits. For example, while malpractice suits are commonly filed against doctors based on the outcome of their treatments, a study of malpractice suits found that a primary influence on whether or not a doctor is sued is the doctor's communication style. While the combination of a bad outcome and patient unhappiness can quickly lead to litigation, a warm, personal communication

style leads to greater patient satisfaction. Simply put, satisfied patients are less likely to sue (“Communications Skills Cut Malpractice Risk,” 1997).

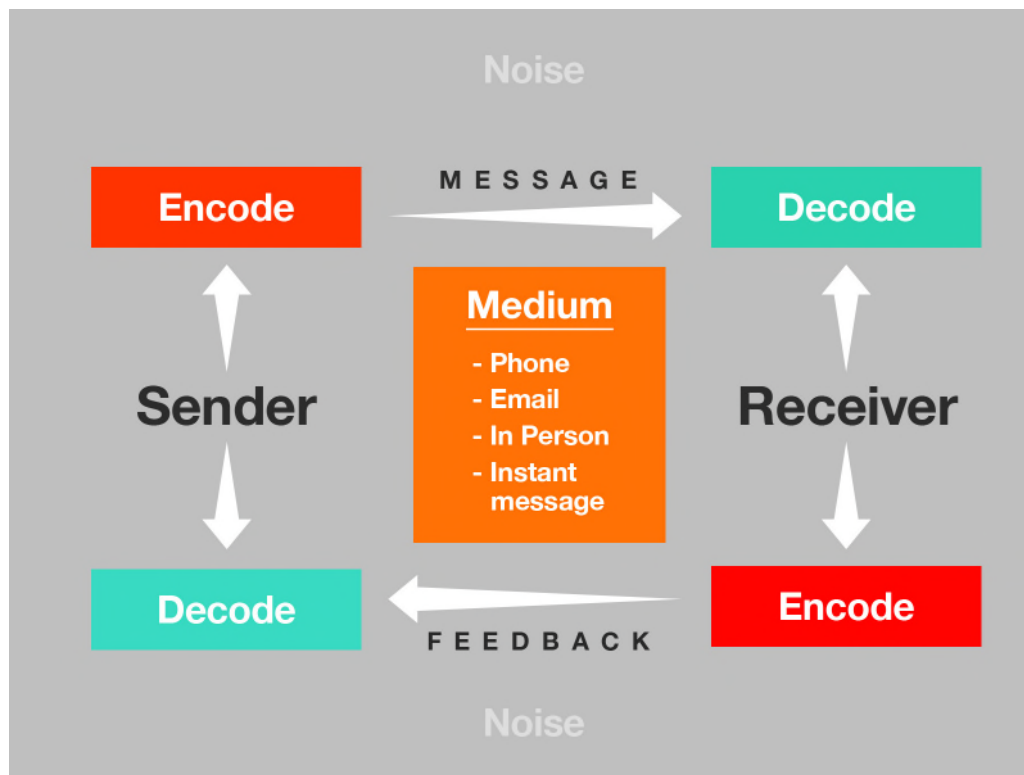
In business, poor communication costs money and wastes time. One study found that 14% of each workweek is wasted on poor communication (Armour, 1998). In contrast, effective communication is an asset for organizations and individuals alike. Effective communication skills, for example, are an asset for job seekers. In one study, recruiters at 85 business schools ranked communication and interpersonal skills as one of the most important skills they were looking for, with 89% of the recruiters saying these skills were important (Alsop, 2006). On the flip side, good communication can help a company retain its star employees. Surveys find that when employees think their organizations do a good job of keeping them informed about matters that affect them, and when they have access to the information they need to do their jobs, they are more satisfied with their employers (“What Are the Bottom Line Results,” 2003). Good communication increases a company’s market value. It is understood that when you foster ongoing communications internally, you will have more satisfied employees who, in turn, will be better equipped to effectively communicate with your customers. Research finds that organizations that are able to improve their communication integrity also increase their market value by as much as 7% (Meisinger, 2003). We will explore the definition and benefits of effective communication in our next section.

The Communication Process

Communication fulfills three main functions within an organization: coordinating efforts, transmitting information, and sharing emotions and feelings. All of these functions are vital to a successful organization. The coordination of effort within an organization helps people work toward the same goals. Transmitting information is a key part of this process. Sharing emotions and feelings bonds teams and unites people in times of celebration and crisis. Effective communication helps people grasp issues, build rapport with coworkers, and achieve consensus. So how can we communicate effectively? The first step is to understand the communication process.

We all exchange information with others countless times each day by phone, by email, through social media, by printed word, and in person. Let us take a moment to see how a typical communication works, using the graphic below as a guide.

The Process Model of Communication



Graphic of a flowchart. The word "encode" is written in the top left and the bottom right of the flowchart. The word "decode" is written in the top right and the bottom left of the flowchart, so the flowchart forms a square shape. Starting from the top left corner of the flowchart and rotating in a clockwise position, we see the following: An arrow labeled Message points from the word Encode on the left to the word Decode on the right. A double pointed arrow is between the word Decode and the word Receiver below. Another double pointed arrow is between the word Receiver and the word Encode below. An arrow labeled Feedback points from the word Encode on the right to the word Decode on the left. A double pointed arrow is between the word Decode and the word Sender above. Another double pointed arrow is between the word Sender and the word Encode above. (this is the word Encode we started with, in the top left corner). In the center of the square-shaped flowchart, there is a box with the word Medium placed above a list of the following words: phone, email, in person, instant message. The word "noise" is written in faded text above and below the flowchart.

Clint McFarlin/Soomo Learning

Checkpoint Question

Which of the following organizational processes does communication fulfill?

- the containment of information
- the reinforcement of individuality
- the bonding of teams

- the polarization of goals

Correct. Communication creates shared emotions and feelings that bond and unite teams of people in coordinated efforts. In addition to this, communication can also create rapport, transmit information, and facilitate consensus.

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A sender, such as a manager, coworker, or customer, originates the message with a thought. For example, the manager's thought could be something like this: "We need to complete this report this week. We took more time than we promised to the client."

The sender encodes the message, translating the idea into words.

The manager may communicate this thought by saying, "James, I can't believe we are not done with this report already. Our relationship with the client is on the line. Please make sure that this gets done."

The medium of this encoded message may be spoken words, written words, or signs.

The receiver is the person who receives the message.

The receiver decodes the message by assigning meaning to the words.

James may translate the manager's message as, "I need to stay late and finish this report tonight. I need to let my sister know that I can't attend her birthday dinner tonight."

The meaning that the receiver assigns may not be the meaning that the sender intended, because of factors such as noise. Noise can be external in the environment (such as distractions), or it can be internal within the receiver. For example, the receiver may be extremely nervous and unable to pay attention to the message. In our example, James may have interpreted his deadline as being shorter than the manager intended because of his lack of experience with the manager's communication style, past conflicts about timeliness, or a desire to make a good impression. Noise can even occur within the sender: The sender may be unwilling to take the time to convey an accurate message, or the words that are chosen can be ambiguous and prone to misinterpretation. In the next scene, James may learn that he sacrificed a family get-together and his evening for a task that could have waited for a few days, which could damage his morale and his trust in the manager.

Miscommunications like these happen in the workplace every day. But how do they occur? It helps to think of the communication process. The arrows pointing the way from the sender to the receiver and back again can (and often do) fall short of their target.

Checkpoint Question

Anthony has finished the emergency meeting and sits down at his desk, exhausted. After logging in to his computer, he sees an instant message from one of his coworkers who was not at the meeting: “What is going on? Everything ok?” Anthony responds quickly and carelessly: “No worries, g2 wrk nw.” Anthony’s message to his coworker is unclear because of which communication issue?

- encoding
- medium
- feedback
- decoding

Correct. Anthony is having an encoding issue, as he is not being clear in his communication with his coworker. It could be that he is instructing his coworker to “go back to work now,” or that he has “got to work now.”

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Checkpoint Question

Sally is struggling in her Freshman Composition class and sends the following text to her father, complaining about the situation: “OMG, I h8 my prof. He is so mean and I can’t w8 2 get outta there.” Sally’s father calls her, noticeably upset because he has not understood the text and thinks she is in trouble. Sally did not consider her audience when she wrote the message. What kind of communication error did Sally make?

- sending
- decoding
- encoding
- feedback