



Chapter

6

Communicating in a Noisy World



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After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- 1 Define communication and explain its importance in today's culture.
- 2 Discuss the implications of the new communications age.
- 3 Analyze the channels of communication available to the supervisor.
- 4 Identify and discuss the barriers to effective communication.
- 5 Describe ways to overcome communication barriers.
- 6 Explain how supervisors can better manage meetings with their own managers.

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YOU MAKE THE CALL!



James Matthews is the departmental supervisor in the water maintenance department in the city of Middletown. Middletown is a medium-sized community that has renovated itself in the twenty-first century by aggressively pursuing new industry and businesses and by providing economic incentives to support expansions of the existing firms. The town has built a new high school and a new elementary school and demolished many structures and homes that had fallen into disrepair. However, the cost to city residents for services and taxes is now much higher than that of comparable cities. Nevertheless, the city is viewed to be a great place to live.

Three months ago, James was promoted to day shift supervisor. His management style is MBWA ('Management by Wandering Around'). He is in his office from 8 to 4 Monday through Friday. But the employees know that as he wanders around he may show up at any of the four shifts—weekdays (7 A.M. to 3 P.M.), evenings (3 to 11 P.M.), mornings (11 P.M. to 7 A.M.), or weekends (7 A.M. to 7 P.M. or 7 P.M. to 7 A.M.). Seventy-five percent of the workforce is on the day shift with the remainder evenly divided among the skeletal crews in the evening, morning, and weekend shifts. Backup crews supplement these skeletal crews as needed.

James believes that he is familiar with all employees and knows their strengths and weaknesses. His employees know that he is willing to help out when needed even though he prefers to let employees work out their problems on their own.

One of his first actions was to move Alphonso Robas from evening shift supervisor to the day shift position and promote George Harris to the position of evening shift supervisor. About a month ago, James heard through the grapevine that Thomas Smith, an employee on the evening crew, had threatened Harris during a virtual confrontation witnessed by several employees. When James discussed the incident with Harris, Harris felt that he had resolved the disagreement. Harris further explained that Smith appeared to have some personal problems that were negatively affecting his work performance, and in the discussion about performance, Smith became angry. But Harris assured James that as he was extremely busy with his new supervisory responsibilities and the increasing workload of the evening shift, he had not bothered James with the incident.

Late yesterday (Wednesday), James again heard through the grapevine that Smith had been overheard to say, "I will shoot Harris!" Immediately, James went to Harris and divulged what he had heard through the grapevine. Harris assured him that the grapevine had blown the situation out of proportion. James was concerned and called Deborah Barnes, the director of human resources, but she would not be in her office till Friday. He pondered what actions he should take.

Shortly after midnight on Thursday, a ringing cell phone woke James from a sound sleep. The call was from the hospital emergency room police informing him that George Harris had been shot in the water maintenance parking lot and was pronounced dead at the scene.

A subsequent call from the desk sergeant informed James that Thomas Smith had strolled into the jail, admitting the shooting, and turned himself in. Smith, a 25-year city employee, had alleged waiting in the parking lot with a .22-caliber handgun. Police reported that Smith shot Harris three times, twice at close range and once—the fatal shot—while standing over Harris, who had fallen on the ground. Smith told police that Harris "was ruining his life and giving him a hard time."

Later on Friday, when James interviewed several employees, he realized that he did not know his workers as well as he thought. Not only were both Smith and Harris separated from their wives, but most employees knew more about the situation than he did. They knew both Smith and Harris had argued not about work-related issues but about women.

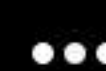
The local newspapers detailed additional information. Smith's attorney announced that a set of mitigating circumstances would weigh in his client's favor when the case went to trial. Smith had turned himself in almost immediately and had no past criminal record. Even though Smith and Harris had been friends for many years, Smith had accused Harris of having a relationship with his wife and had been hostile toward him since becoming a supervisor. Smith claimed that Harris was "obsessive" about Smith's wife and had sent her flowers on the day of the murder.

Now James is having trouble sleeping at night and wonders what he might have done to have prevented this tragedy.

Disclaimer: The above scenario presents a supervisory situation based on real events to be used for educational purposes. The identities of some or all individuals, organizations, industries, and locations, as well as financial and other information may have been disguised to protect individual privacy and proprietary information. Fictional details may have been added to improve readability and interest.

YOU MAKE THE CALL!





1 Define communication and discuss its implications for effective supervisory management.

Communication

The process of transmitting information and understanding

Communication Has Changed in the Twenty-First Century

Communication is the process of transmitting information and understanding from one person to another. Effective communication means a successful transfer of information, meaning, and understanding from a sender to a receiver. In other words, communication is the process of imparting ideas and making oneself understood to others. While it is not necessary to have agreement, there must be mutual understanding for the exchange of ideas to be successful. Simply stated, there is no managerial function a supervisor can fulfill without effectively using his or her information-giving and -getting skills.

Most supervisory activities involve interacting with others, and each interaction requires skillful handling of the information process. Communication links all the managerial functions. Supervisors must explain the nature of work, instruct employees, describe what is expected of them, and counsel them. Supervisors also must report to their managers, both orally and in writing, and discuss their plans with other supervisors. All these activities require communication.

Noted author Peter Senge believes that people who develop and exchange information are not merely talking about the learning organization; they use the information as a springboard for experiments and initiatives. With each effort people make, they create a new facet of the overall image of what the learning organization can be. According to Senge:

If there is one single thing learning organization does well, it is helping people embrace change. People in learning organizations react more quickly when their environment changes because they know how to anticipate changes that are going to occur (which is different than trying to predict the future) and how to create the kinds of changes they want.¹

Sharing information takes effort on everyone's part, and the organization's effectiveness depends on good communication. Think of your own experiences. Who do you trust? Why? Does your answer, in part, revolve around the person's ability to communicate effectively? I suspect so. I would guess that your trustworthy person is one who has the ability to communicate honestly, openly, candidly, and in a timely fashion—and leave the door open for questions you might have. Remember, as the *Titanic* was rapidly sinking, the captain of the ship was telling everyone not to panic, to believe there was no problem, and to implicitly trust the ship's staff. Now, more than ever, mutual respect and trust is at the heart of effective communication.

Yet, in an era when more messages are being sent and received, the primary objective in every organization is “doing a better job of communicating.”

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION REQUIRES TWO-WAY EXCHANGE

The significant point is that communication always involves at least two people: a sender and a receiver. For example, a supervisor who is alone in a room and states a set of instructions does not communicate because there are no receivers. While the lack of communication is obvious in this case, it may not be so obvious to a supervisor who sends an e-mail message. Once he or she hits the “Send” button, the supervisor may believe that communication has taken place. However, this supervisor has not really communicated until and unless the e-mail has been



**FIGURE 6.1** Communications does not take place unless information is transferred successfully

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received and the information and understanding have been transferred successfully to the recipient (see Figure 6.1).

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that effective communication includes both sending and receiving information. Understanding is a personal matter between people. If an idea received has the same meaning as the one intended, then we can say that effective communication has taken place. If, however, the idea received by a listener or reader is not the one intended, then communication has not been effective. The sender has merely transmitted spoken or written words. This does not mean that the sender and receiver must agree on a message or an issue; it is possible to communicate and yet not agree. Author and Professor Chip Heath developed key principles for making an idea “sticky.” Heath says, “A sticky idea is one that people understand when they hear it, that they remember later on, and that change something about the way they think or act.”²

One should always pause, think, and ponder the impact of a message on the intended receiver. Regardless of the medium used, say what you mean, and mean what you say. For some more thoughts on the importance of communication skills, see Figure 6.2.

FIGURE 6.2 Thoughts on the importance of communication

“Developing excellent communication skills is absolutely essential to effective leadership. The leader must be able to share knowledge and ideas to transmit a sense of urgency and enthusiasm to others. If a leader can’t get a message across clearly and motivate others to act on it, then having a message doesn’t even matter.”¹

“It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.”²

“Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they have to say something.”³

“Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.”⁴

“The trouble with talking too fast is you may say something you haven’t thought about yet.”⁵

“If you have brilliant ideas, but you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere.”⁶

Sources: (1) Gilbert Amelio, former president and CEO of National Semiconductor Corporation and currently director of AT&T. (2) Mark Twain. (3) Plato. (4) Mother Teresa. (5) Ann Landers. (6) Lee Iacocca. The quotes were accessed March 2011 from “Power Performance: Motivational & Inspirational Corner: America’s System for Success,” Power Performance (www.motivational-inspirational-corner.com); and “Leading Thoughts,” Leadership Now (www.LeadershipNow.com).





An analysis of supervisory activities would likely show that more than half the supervisor's day involves giving and getting information. The supervisor's effectiveness depends on the ability to create an environment that fosters communication. Fortunately, the skills of communication can be developed. By using some of the techniques and suggestions in this chapter, we hope you will become a more effective communicator and, ultimately, a more effective manager.

2 Discuss the implications of the new communications age.

A New Era in Communications

A few short years ago, no one could talk about using social media to post tweets, photos, and other information. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and other social networks were not around. Figure 6.3 pokes fun at this new phenomenon, but ask someone in her forties: "What type of social media did you use to connect with your friends when you were 20?" A *USA Today* article reported that with all the use of social sites, "2010 was the year we stopping talking."³

Would you be surprised to know that Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg doesn't have an office? In early 2004, the 19-year-old Harvard sophomore used his dorm room to start a Web service. From humble beginnings, an institution was born that has changed the way we communicate. He "took a dream" and became a billionaire. Zuckerberg was described as "one who approaches conversation as a way of exchanging data as rapidly and efficiently as possible, rather than as a recreational activity undertaken for its own sake. He is formidably quick and talks rapidly and precisely, and if he has no data to transmit, he abruptly falls silent."⁴

The following question arises: Will Facebook and other social media sites decrease the need for face-to-face communications? Look at the technology at your school. Do you have the ability work in the classroom or access information from virtually anywhere? Some of you may be taking this course online and may have found that you have the ability to communicate with your instructor and fellow students from almost anywhere in the world. Just a few short years ago, that would not have been possible. Technology now facilitates a continuous flow of information.

One survey contends that employees are overloaded with a constant stream of information. Corporate social media users received over 100 messages a day in 2013. In the business setting social media users spend approximately 2.22 hours a day on e-mail and more than 30 minutes each on social networking sites and

FIGURE 6.3 Everyone has problems communicating



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instant messaging.⁵ The level of information flow beyond just the workplace is astounding. The number of tweets sent out per day on Twitter has grown from 100 million in 2010 to 500 million 2014.⁶ Over 350 million photos are uploaded to Facebook every day, and the YouTube video database increases by 100 hours of video every minute. The Internet provides access to over two zettabytes (2 zettabytes=2 trillion gigabytes) of information.⁷

As information flow has increased and social media has emerged, it has been said that the technology creates new costs in companies due to unnecessary interruptions because it is assumed by some bosses that users take time away from their work to tweet friends and check their Facebook pages.⁸ However, as more and more businesses turn to social media as the best way to connect with an increasingly digital audience, workers are spending as much if not more time using social media to connect with markets, customers, and other stakeholders than they are connecting with friends, and in some cases the two blend together.⁹ In fact, when one of the authors did an Internet search of the question, “How many tweets should I post per day,” a majority of the first hundred hits were related to how often businesses should tweet out branding or engaging messages each day. (The recommended number of tweets ranged from 4 to 37, and the average suggested number of Facebook posts was 2.) Social media has become a key communication tool for organizations.

Have you noticed that sometimes when you open up a Web page, there is a pop-up advertisement that is targeted at you? The concern over privacy issues and tracking of Internet users has become an important issue for many organizations. The story of WikiLeaks caused many to rethink their computer security systems. The ability to access and download messages and information and make it available worldwide caused many organizations, including the U.S. government, to rethink how to create a cyber-defense system. Even so, in 2013 the nine largest Internet security breaches resulted in the theft of over 400 million usernames and passwords and at least 50 million e-mail addresses. In late 2010, Walgreens Co., McDonald’s, and Twitter all reported unrelated security breaches on the very same day. “Hackers gained access to a list of Walgreen’s customers’ e-mail addresses and sent them spam directing customers to enter personal data into outside Web sites. Private information that customers supplied McDonald’s when signing up for on-line promotions was breached when a subcontractor improperly handled the data.”¹⁰ If such things could happen to major corporations, are you not vulnerable, too? What have you done to secure your system?

Channels of the Communication Network

In every organization, the communication network has four primary and equally important channels: (1) the formal, or official, channel of communication, (2) the informal channel, usually called the grapevine, (3) the Web or social networks, and (4) body language. The formal and informal channels carry messages from one person or group to another in organizations—downward, upward, and horizontally. The proliferation of social networks has not only opened new opportunities for enhancing the ability of supervisors to communicate with employees, but has created numerous problems. Supervisors should realize that their behavior on the job is an important means of communicating. **Body language** is the observable action of the sender or the receiver. Your body language may be worth a thousand words.

3 Analyze the major channels of communication available to the supervisor.

Body language
All observable actions of the sender or receiver





FORMAL CHANNELS

Formal communication channels are established primarily by an organization's structure. Vertical formal channels can be visualized by following the lines of authority from the top-level executive down through the organization to supervisors and employees.

Downward Communication

The concept of a downward formal channel of communication suggests that upper-level management issues instructions or disseminates information that managers or supervisors at the next level receive and pass on to their subordinates, and so on down the line. The downward channel is most often used by high-level managers to communicate. Downward communication, which helps to tie levels together, is important for coordination. Managers use it to start action by subordinates and to communicate instructions, objectives, policies, procedures, and other information. Generally, downward communication is informative and directive and requires subordinates to act. Downward communication from a supervisor involves giving instructions, explaining information and procedures, training employees, and engaging in other types of activities designed to guide employees in performing their work.

Unfortunately, in practice downward communication leaves much to be desired. Think back to your own experiences. Have your managers been "open and honest" when communicating with you? If you answered, "It depends," you are probably in a majority. Recall your first day in this class. The instructor no doubt handed you a syllabus that detailed the expectations, assignments, and other relevant information needed for you to be successful. No doubt, he or she gave you a printed copy, noted where updates would be posted in your electronic course room, and then clarified the information. You were even given an opportunity to ask questions. Information was provided about office hours so that you could meet face to face, and an e-mail address was provided in case you had any questions or concerns. The instructor, like the effective supervisor, used multiple channels of communication to help you be a success.

The very best supervisors use open, honest, sincere, and genuine communication, which guides employees down a path of excellence. Employees, like students, want to be told what they need to know, how they can learn it, what constitutes a job well done, and how they will be evaluated.

UPWARD COMMUNICATION

Upward communication is equally important to the official network. Supervisors who have managerial authority accept an obligation to keep their superiors informed and to contribute their own ideas to management. Similarly, employees should feel free to convey their ideas to their supervisors and to report on activities related to their work. Managers and supervisors should encourage a free flow of upward communication.

Upward communication usually involves informing and reporting, including asking questions, making suggestions, and lodging complaints. This is a vital means by which managers can determine whether proper actions are taking place and can obtain valuable employee insight into the problems facing a unit. For example, employees may report production results and also present ideas for increasing production.





Jetta Productions/Iconica/Getty Images

Frequently, no one knows the problems and possible solutions to those problems better than the employees who are doing the work

Supervisors should encourage upward communication from employees and give ample attention to the information being transmitted. Supervisors must show that they want employee suggestions as well as the facts, and then those supervisors must evaluate information promptly. It has become clear that often no one knows problems—and possible solutions—better than the employees doing the work.¹¹ To tap into this important source of information, supervisors must convey a genuine desire to obtain and use the ideas suggested by employees. Many supervisors have told me that they don't know how to do this. The information in the accompanying "Supervisory Tips" box provides some ideas for improving getting-and-giving skills by using **MBWA (management by walking around)**, which involves going where the action is and asking others what you can do to help them be the best they can be. The key word is "probe." Ask questions such as, "How can we improve . . . ?" "What can we do better?" "What if . . . ?" and "What will make it work?" Effective supervisors develop rapport with their employees and other stakeholders, really listening to ideas and suggestions and acting on suggestions. A supervisor with effective information-getting skills usually wins the respect and admiration of colleagues and associates.

Most supervisors acknowledge that it is often easier to converse with their subordinates than with their managers. This is particularly true when supervisors must tell their managers they failed to meet schedules or they made mistakes.

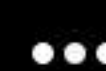
Nevertheless, it is a supervisor's duty to advise upper management whenever there are significant developments and to do so as soon as possible, before or after such events occur. It is quite embarrassing to a manager to learn important news elsewhere; this can be interpreted to mean supervisors are not abreast of their responsibilities.

A supervisor's upward communication should be sent on time and in a form that enables the manager to take necessary action. The supervisor should assemble and check facts before passing them on, though this may be quite difficult at times. A natural inclination is to "soften" information a bit so that things do not look quite as bad in the manager's eyes as they actually are. When difficulties

MBWA (management by walking around)

Going to where the action is. Ask employees, customers, and others what you can do to help them to be the very best they can be





SUPERVISORY TIPS

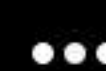
Management by Walking Around (MBWA) Improves Communication

The most effective leaders have always led from the front line, where the action is.¹ Today, every leader who hopes to succeed must likewise lead from the trenches. Getting out and about (commonly known as “management by walking around,” or MBWA) deals with gathering the information necessary for decision making, making a vision concrete, engendering commitment and risk taking, and caring about people.² But I do not know how to wander. How do I begin?

1. Get away from your workstation, your desk; get out of your cubicle and start talking with employees. Meet on their turf and try to learn something about them: Why did they decide to work here? What are their interests? Where do they want to be three years from now? What can you do to enable them to be the best they can be? In short, to get the job done the right way the first time, you need to know where they are coming from and be able to link that knowledge to buy-in to the goals of the organization.³
2. Learn about their problems and concerns. Ask for their ideas and suggestions on how to fix their problems.
3. Developing a climate of mutual trust and respect is critical to getting everyone committed to the common purpose.
4. MBWA means more than walking to where your employees are. It is not enough to advertise an open-door policy. It means being available to answer any questions that might arise. Accessibility is a crucial part of developing an effective corporate culture. It is important for you to stay in touch with everyone.
5. Tell people that you want feedback and be prepared to receive it. The technique of probing—asking the right questions and encouraging everyone to ask questions, listening to those affected by problems, learning all the facts, walking the talk—and acting on and incorporating suggestions as part of the process can lead to a more productive organization.
6. As you walk around, catch people doing something right. Tell them how good you feel about what they have done and encourage them to do more of the same. Make sure you link good performance to rewards people value.
7. Remember:
 - Be available to provide guidance and direction. Set aside a certain time when everyone knows you are accessible and able to listen to their ideas, suggestions, or concerns.
 - Do not walk around just for the sake of walking around. Have a purpose.
 - Walk around at different times and in different ways.
 - Look for opportunities to chat in informal settings, over coffee or at lunch.
 - Your work group is made up of individuals. Tailor the message to each person.
 - Tell people you want feedback and go out of your way to get it.
 - To be a good walker, you have to be a good listener. Stop what you are doing and listen.
 - When you can't answer a worker's question on the spot, get back to them with an answer within a specified period of time. Tell them when you will get back to them, and do it. This is one way to build credibility, trust, and loyalty.
 - Effective communication is the key to your success.

Sources: The authors' list would include (1) What are characteristics of a great leader? Most major business publications have developed their own methods of determining who fits that description. Our list would include Mohandas Gandhi, Alfred Sloan, Sam Walton, Jack Welch, General Colin Powell, and Colleen Barrett. Business publications such as *Fortune*, *BusinessWeek*, *Time*, and *Fast Company* publish their lists. (2) MBWA was developed by executives of Hewlett-Packard in the 1970s. Noted author Tom Peters popularized the concept in the book *In Search of Excellence: Lessons Learned from America's Best Run Companies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). In a subsequent book, Peters strongly advised that managers need to become highly visible and do a better job of listening to subordinates: *Thriving on Chaos* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), pp. 423–440. (3) D. Michael Abrashoff, commander of the *USS Benfold*, sits down with his new crew members and tries to learn something from them. For more on Abrashoff's leadership style, see Polly LaBarre, “The Agenda—Grassroots Leadership,” *Fast Company* (April 1999), pp. 114+.





arise, however it is best to tell the manager what is really going on, even if it means admitting mistakes. High-level managers depend on supervisors for reliable upward communication, just as supervisors depend on their employees for the accurate, upward flow of information.

HORIZONTAL COMMUNICATION

A third direction of formal communication that is essential for efficient organizational functioning is lateral, or horizontal, communication between departments or people at the same levels but in charge of different functions. Horizontal communication must be open and freely flowing to coordinate functions among departments.

Horizontal communication typically involves discussions and meetings to accomplish tasks that cross departmental lines. For example, a production manager may have to contact managers of the marketing and shipping departments to ascertain progress on a delivery schedule for a product, or someone from the human resources department may meet with a number of supervisors to discuss how a new medical leave policy is to be implemented at the departmental level. Still another example is the cashier who pages the stock clerk to inquire when a particular item will be available. Without an open communication environment—upward, downward, and sideways—it would be virtually impossible to coordinate specialized departmental efforts toward a common purpose.

INFORMAL CHANNELS—THE GRAPEVINE

Informal communication channels, commonly referred to as the **grapevine**, are a normal outgrowth of informal and casual groupings of people on the job, of their social interactions, and of their understandable desire to communicate with one

Grapevine

The informal, unofficial communication channel



Especially during periods of economic uncertainty, the grapevine carries bits of distorted information that flow quickly through the organization

RF Image Source/Getty Images





another. Every organization has its grapevine. This is a perfectly natural element because it fulfills employees' desire to know the latest information and to socialize. The grapevine offers members of an organization an outlet for imagining, as well as an opportunity to express apprehensions in the form of rumors.

UNDERSTANDING THE GRAPEVINE

The grapevine can offer considerable insight into employees' thoughts and feelings. An alert supervisor acknowledges the grapevine and tries to take advantage of it whenever possible. The grapevine often carries factual information, but sometimes it carries half-truths, rumors, private interpretations, suspicions, and other bits of distorted or inaccurate information. Research indicates that many employees have more faith and confidence in the grapevine than in what their supervisors tell them.¹² In part, this reflects a natural human tendency to trust one's peers to a greater degree than people in authority, such as supervisors or parents.

The grapevine cannot be predicted because its path today is not necessarily the same as its path yesterday. Most employees hear information through the grapevine, but some do not pass it along. Any person in an organization may become active in the grapevine on occasion; some individuals are more active than others. Some people feel that their prestige is enhanced if they can pass along the latest news, and they do not hesitate to spread and embellish upon that news. Rumors serve, in part, as a release for emotions, providing an opportunity to remain anonymous and say whatever is wanted without being held accountable.

The grapevine sometimes helps clarify and supplement formal communication, and it often spreads information that could not be disseminated as well or as rapidly through official channels.

THE SUPERVISOR AND THE GRAPEVINE

The supervisor should realize that it is impossible to eliminate the grapevine. It is unrealistic to expect that all rumors can be stamped out, and the grapevine is certain to flourish in every organization. To cope with the grapevine, supervisors should tune in to it and learn what it is saying. Supervisors should also determine who leads the grapevine and who is likely to spread its information.

Many rumors begin in the wishful-thinking stage of employee anticipation. In Team Skill Builder 6-2, you will read about the dilemma of Alice, a project engineer. She and others have a problem with their supervisor's communication skills. Suppose that she and the other employees start passing information (a rumor) through their communication networks that their boss, Mike, is on his way out. Nobody knows for certain where or how the rumor started, but the story spreads rapidly because many want to believe it. If such a story is spreading and the upper management is listening, they may investigate to see what the problem is. Action may or may not be taken. The best cure for rumors is to expose the facts to all employees and to give straight answers to all questions. Of course, morale suffers when hopes are built up in anticipation of something that does not happen.

Other frequent causes of rumors are uncertainty and fear. If business is slack and management is forced to lay off some employees, stories multiply quickly. The grapevine becomes more active during periods of insecurity and anxiety than at other times.

Often, rumors are far worse than reality. If a supervisor does not disclose facts to employees, those employees will make up their own "facts," which may be worse than reality. Thus, much of the fear caused by uncertainty can be





eliminated or reduced if the truth of what will happen is disclosed. Continuing rumors and uncertainty may be more demoralizing than even the saddest facts presented openly.

Rumors also arise from dislike, anger, and distrust. Rumors spread through the grapevine can be about such topics as the company, working conditions, or the private or work life happenings of its members. The Web has accelerated access to the “truth” and “untruth.” Think about some of the e-mails that have been forwarded to you. At first glance, they may even seem to be credible. Just take a trip to www.snopes.com to see some of the rumors that are spreading rapidly. Rumors, like gossip and storytelling, ease the boredom of organizational life and, in extreme cases, harm people. Occasionally, an employee grows to hate a company, supervisor, or fellow employee. This employee could fabricate a sensational story about the target of animosity.¹³

Rumors often start small but are spread quickly by a few who embellish those rumors. Others may be shocked to hear such rumors, and their trust and respect for the people in the rumors may erode. Unfortunately, there is no one best way for repudiating rumors and rebuilding credibility. If you mention a rumor without refuting it, some people may speculate that the rumor is at least partly true. Again, the best prescription is to state the facts openly and honestly. When supervisors lack all the information, they should admit it, try to assess the real situation, and report the situation to employees. One of the best ways to stop a rumor is to expose its untruthfulness. Supervisors should remember that the receptiveness of a group of employees to rumors is directly related to the quality of the supervisor’s communication and leadership. When employees believe their supervisors are concerned about them and make every effort to keep employees informed, employees tend to disregard rumors and to look to their supervisors for answers.

The supervisor should listen to the grapevine and develop skills to address it. For example, an alert supervisor knows that certain events cause undue anxiety. In this case, the supervisor should explain immediately why such events have occurred. When emergencies occur, changes are introduced, or policies are modified, the supervisor should explain why and answer all employee questions as openly as possible. Otherwise, employees will make up their own explanations, and often these explanations will be incorrect. In some situations, supervisors do not have the facts. In these cases, supervisors should seek appropriate high-level managers to explain what is bothering employees and to ask for specific instructions as to what information may be given, how much may be told, and when. Also, when something happens that might cause rumors, it is helpful for supervisors to meet with their most influential employees to give them the real story. Then, those employees can spread the facts before anyone else can spread the rumors.¹⁴

The Web and Social Networks

How often have you heard someone say, “It must be true, I found it on the Web”? Not surprisingly, much information is passed along as “fact,” even though it lacks credibility.

Many people know of allegations, rumors, gossip, and old wives’ tales that have found their way into homes and offices via the Internet. Not surprisingly, most of these pieces of information are passed along as “fact,” even though they lack truth and scientific accuracy. Think about the e-mail messages you received this week: Were they fact, allegations, rumors, gossip, or old wives’ tales? How





many contained information that you could use to be a better student or a more valuable employee, or that added value to your toolbox?

Think of the e-mails that you sent this week. What was your purpose in sending them? Do you know the following people: The person who is texting when he or she should be listening to the lecture? The person whose cell phone goes off during a church service? The person who is not paying attention when driving because he is texting or using his mobile device? A person's date at a concert who is posting on Facebook? I know that you are not one of these people and that you always check your smartphone at the door. Not long ago, one of the authors of the text was at a wedding, and the ushers had baskets at the entrance to collect the devices. They didn't collect many, but it caused people to make sure theirs were turned off.

The headline story in *USA Today*, "2010: The Year We Stopped Talking," said that Americans are more connected than ever—just not in person.¹⁵ Mobile device research shows the depth of this situation in the new era: 91 percent of Americans have cell phones or wireless; 56 percent of the cell phone users have smartphones; 5.1 trillion mobile text messages sent in the past 12 months; 93 percent of the global population has access to mobile networks.¹⁶ As a supervisor, your access to relevant information in a timely fashion is critical, but the communications overload can have implications for how you manage your life and the lives of those you supervise. *Remember, success comes by letting people know how you want them to communicate to you and learning how they want you to communicate to them.*

Your Body Language Is Communication

The supervisor's body language communicates something to employees, whether it is intended or not. Gestures, a handshake, a shrug of the shoulder, a smile, or

We may think it's easy to read a person's body language but different gestures can mean different things





even silence—all have meaning and may be interpreted differently by different people. For example, a supervisor’s warm smile and posture slightly bent toward employees can send positive signals to employees. Particularly in an uncertain and sometimes chaotic world, smiling may be somewhat difficult, but it is definitely more effective than scowling. Conversely, a scowl on a supervisor’s face may communicate more than 10 minutes of oral discussion, a printed page of information, or a quickly sent text message.

One of the problems with text messages and other modern communications media is that we are not able to read the true meaning because there is no body language or tone of voice to reinforce the important points of the message. We believe that one of the greatest advantages of face-to-face oral communication is that it can provide the sender an immediate opportunity to determine whether the communication is understood.

Body language is not universal. The messages sent by different expressions or postures vary from situation to situation and particularly from culture to culture. Touching, like the pat on the back, may be perceived differently by different people. The shaking of hands or hugging may not be appropriate for some. Think for a moment about the last time someone told you that they “loved you.” What type of body language accompanied that verbal message? If they sent you a text proclaiming the same thing, did they include a little picture of a heart or other symbol to reinforce the meaning of the message? What could the person have done to make the message more meaningful?

Regardless of the channel the supervisor uses, his or her goal is to convey the message in a timely manner that is easily understood. To reiterate, the supervisor must always remember that effective communication takes place only when the meaning received by the intended audience is the same as that the sender meant to send. You must become familiar with the many barriers to effective communication. To that end, the next section seeks to clarify other barriers and provides suggestions on how to overcome them.

Barriers to Effective Communication

Human differences and organizational conditions can create obstacles that distort messages between people. These obstacles can be called **noise**. Misunderstandings, confusion, and conflicts can develop when communication breaks down. These breakdowns not only are costly in terms of money but also create dilemmas that hurt teamwork and morale. Many supervisory human-relations problems are traceable to faulty communication. The ways supervisors communicate with their subordinates constitute the essence of their relationships.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION—TMI¹⁷

In today’s business world, employees and supervisors are inundated with hundreds of bits of information every day. Many messages are long and wordy, which can cause misunderstanding and lost productivity. The typical written message is loaded with words that have little or no bearing on the message’s purpose. Giving employees too much information results in information overload and causes employees to complain of being overwhelmed with irrelevant and redundant messages. How long does it take before employees consider all messages to be junk mail and discard them? Regardless of the medium used, you should use the **KISS technique**—keeping it short and simple means using as few words and sentences as possible.

4 Identify and discuss the barriers to effective communication.

Noise

Obstacles that distort messages between people

KISS technique

An acronym that stands for *keep it short and simple*





With the advent of electronic forms of communication, it seems that employees should have all the information they need to do their jobs. On the one hand, companies want employees to have access to the best and latest information and resources to do a better job. On the other hand, Web use can become time-consuming for some employees and, if left unchecked, can impede productivity.

How much are employees using the Internet for personal use? Numerous studies have reported that U.S. workers are wasting at least two hours a day at work.¹⁸ Increasingly organizations are developing policies and systems for monitoring employee Internet use, although design of such policies is becoming more and more difficult as social media becomes a critical element in organizations' efforts to engage and retain stakeholders.

LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY DIFFERENCES

People differ greatly in their abilities to convey meanings. Words can be confusing, even though language is the principal method used to communicate. Do you know of anyone who had to call an organization's customer-service center? Where was the person on the other end of the line? They may have been in another part of the world where the native language was not common for the person on the other end of the line, and vice versa. What was the reaction: patience, understanding, or frustration? Have you ever heard someone say, "Why can't we all speak the same language?"

In regions of the world that speak common languages, differences in cultures, accents, dialects, and word meanings can be profound.¹⁹ Within the organization, an accounting department supervisor, for example, may use specialized words that may be meaningless when conversing with a computer technician. Similarly, if an information technologist uses technical terms when interfacing with the accounting department supervisor, the latter could be confused. This communication problem stems from the inappropriate use of what is known as **jargon**, or the use of words that are specific to a person's background or specialty.

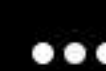
Jargon

Words that are specific to an occupation or a specialty

Another consideration relates to the number of languages that may be spoken in a work environment. Some Hispanic or Latino workers may speak Spanish fluently but have difficulty with English. A native of Southeast Asia may speak Vietnamese but very little English. Technology provides a variety of solutions to address language needs. Productivity software, such as Microsoft Word, can now translate organizational materials into multiple languages, although it is always a good practice to have a native speaker review the translation for accuracy. Also, organizations are increasingly providing multi-lingual websites on which users can choose to have content displayed in their preferred language, which, according to recent research, results in increased time spent on these sites, sometimes twice as long as if sites are only presented in English.²⁰ Avis Rent-A-Car, GE, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are just a few such organizations. Supervisors should take steps to identify and use tools that can help remove language barriers.

Another communication problem lies in the multiple meanings of words. Words can mean different things to different people, particularly in English, which is one of the most difficult languages in the world. The ways some words





are used in sentences can cause people to interpret messages in ways other than intended. *Roget's Thesaurus*, a book of synonyms, identifies words with the same or similar meanings. When a word has multiple meanings, the desired meaning must be clarified because receivers tend to interpret words based on their perceptions, experiences, and cultural backgrounds.

The question is not whether employees *should* understand words; it is whether employees *do* understand. Supervisors should use plain, direct words in brief, simple statements. When needed, supervisors should restate messages to clarify the intended meaning or context.

STATUS AND POSITION

An organization's structure, with its multilevel managerial hierarchy, creates a number of status levels among members of the organization. **Status** refers to the degree of responsibility and power afforded by a person's professional or social position. Status can affect attitudes the members of an organization hold toward a position and its occupant. The statuses of executive-level positions and supervisory-level positions, supervisors and employees, differ. Differences in status and position become apparent as one level tries to communicate with another. For example, a supervisor who tries to convey enthusiasm to an employee about higher production and profits for the company may find the employee indifferent. The employee may instead be concerned with achieving a higher personal wage and security. By virtue of their positions in the company, the supervisor and the employee represent different points of view, and these views may be obstacles to understanding.

When employees listen to a supervisor's message, several factors come into play. First, employees evaluate the supervisor's words in light of their own backgrounds and experiences. Second, they also consider the supervisor's personality, position, and status. It is difficult for employees to separate a supervisor's message from the feelings they have about the supervisor. As a result, employees may infer nonexistent motives in a message. For example, union members may be inclined to interpret a management statement in very uncomplimentary terms if they are convinced management is trying to weaken their union or change current practices and procedures.

Obstacles due to position and status also can distort the upward flow of communication when subordinates are eager to impress management. As was described in Chapter 5's discussion of followers, some employees may screen information passed up the line; they may tell their supervisor only what they think the supervisor likes to hear and omit or soften unpleasant details. This problem is known as **filtering**. By the same token, supervisors are eager to impress managers in higher positions. They may fail to pass on important information to their managers because they believe the information portrays their supervisory abilities unfavorably.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

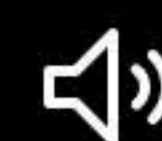
Some people prefer things as they are; they do not welcome change in their work situations. It is normal for people to prefer their environments to remain unchanged. If a message is intended to convey a change or a new idea—something that will upset work assignments, positions, or the daily routine—employees may be inclined to resist the message. Why? People don't resist change, they resist

Status

The degree of responsibility and power afforded by a person's professional or social position

Filtering

The process of omitting or softening unpleasant details





being changed. If they have no input into the change process, employees will generally greet the change with suspicion.

Receivers usually hear what they want to hear. If a message is not consistent with their personal beliefs and values, the listeners may ignore it, reject it as false, or find a convenient way of twisting it to fit their own vantage point.

In today's economy, many receivers are insecure or fearful; these barriers become even more difficult to overcome. Employees become so preoccupied with their own thoughts that they attend only to those ideas they want to hear, selecting only those parts of the message they can accept. Employees brush aside, fail to hear, or explain away bits of information they do not like or that are irreconcilable with their biases. Supervisors must be aware of these possibilities, particularly when a message is intended to convey some change that may interfere with the normal routine or customary working environment.

PERCEPTUAL BARRIERS

Barriers arise from deep-rooted personal feelings, prejudices, and physical conditions. The perception that all people in a group share attitudes, values, and beliefs is called **stereotyping**. Stereotyping influences how people respond to others. It becomes a barrier to effective communication as people are categorized into groups because of their gender, age, or race instead of being treated as unique individuals. Managers must be aware of stereotyping because it can impede communication.

Georgetown University professor Deborah Tannen has written several books on interpersonal communication and public discourse. In her *New York Times* best-selling book *You Just Don't Understand—Women and Men in Conversation*, Tannen illustrates a common problem. In our society, if a woman's and a man's conversational styles differ, women—not men—are usually told to change. Consider one example from her book, which occurred between a couple driving home from a function:

The woman had asked, "Would you like to stop for a drink?" Her husband had answered truthfully, "No," and they hadn't stopped. He was later frustrated to learn that his wife was annoyed because she had wanted to stop for a drink. He wondered, "Why didn't she just say what she wanted? Why did she play games with me?" The wife was annoyed, not because she had not gotten her way but because her preference had not been considered. From her point of view, she had shown concern for her husband's wishes, but he had no concern for hers.²¹

Tannen concluded: "Both parties have different but equally valid points. In understanding what went wrong, the man must realize that when she asks what he would like, she is not asking an information question but rather starting a negotiation about what both would like. The woman must realize that when he answers 'yes' or 'no' he is not making a nonnegotiable demand. Men and women must both make adjustments."²² It is sad that neither party worked toward what was really important and targeted that goal with specific inquiries. Imagine how the conversation could have gone from the man's perspective: "No, I'm not really thirsty. But if you'd like to do that, it would be okay with me." Being considerate of other people and keeping an open mind go a long way toward improving understanding. Messages can be misunderstood because people perceive the situation or circumstances (i.e., the world) differently. Tannen's

Stereotyping

The perception that all people in a group share attitudes, values, and beliefs





example clearly illustrates the importance of “saying what you mean and meaning what you say.” You probably noted that either party could have paused and asked the other person questions to gain an understanding of what was really important to them.

INSENSITIVE WORDS AND POOR TIMING

Sometimes, one party in a conversation uses so-called killer phrases. Comments like, “That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard!” “You do understand, don’t you?” or “Do you really know what you’re talking about?” can kill conversation. Often, the receiver of the killer phrase becomes silent and indifferent to the sender. Sometimes, the receiver takes offense and directs anger back to the sender. Insensitive, offensive language or impetuous responses can make understanding difficult. These exchanges happen in many workplaces. Often, the conflict that results impedes organizational goals.

Another barrier to effective communication is timing. Employees come to the workplace with “baggage”—events that happened off the job. It can be difficult to pay attention to a sender while anticipating a test, for example, or if an argument started at home before work is still simmering. An employee can pretend to listen politely but receive little to nothing. When other issues demand attention, responsiveness to work information will fail to meet the other party’s expectations.

INABILITY TO CREATE MEANING

Communication begins when the sender encodes an idea or a thought. For example, when managers set out to draft responses to issues, they address several questions, including:

- What conclusion have I formed about this issue?
- What claim do I want to make?
- What evidence or reasons can I offer in support of my claim?
- What data can I provide to back up my claim?²³

Decoding is the receiver’s version of encoding. During decoding, receivers put messages into forms they can interpret. To analyze a manager’s position on an issue, an employee must find and weigh management’s claim, evidence, and data, but the employee can ask more: “Does the manager’s choice of words influence how I feel about this issue?” “Do I agree with management’s basic premise or with the assumptions underlying management’s position?” Often, the receiver’s interpretation of a message differs from what the sender intended.

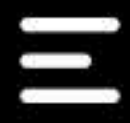
One of the authors recently saw a promotional piece on laundry detergent. The label read, “New and Improved.” He wondered what it really meant and pondered the following: (1) If it’s new, how can it be improved? (2) If it’s improved, how can it be new? Have you ever wished that other people would say what they mean and mean what they say? We have.

Differences in perception can lead to misunderstanding



IS122/Image Source/Alamy





5 Describe ways to overcome communication barriers.

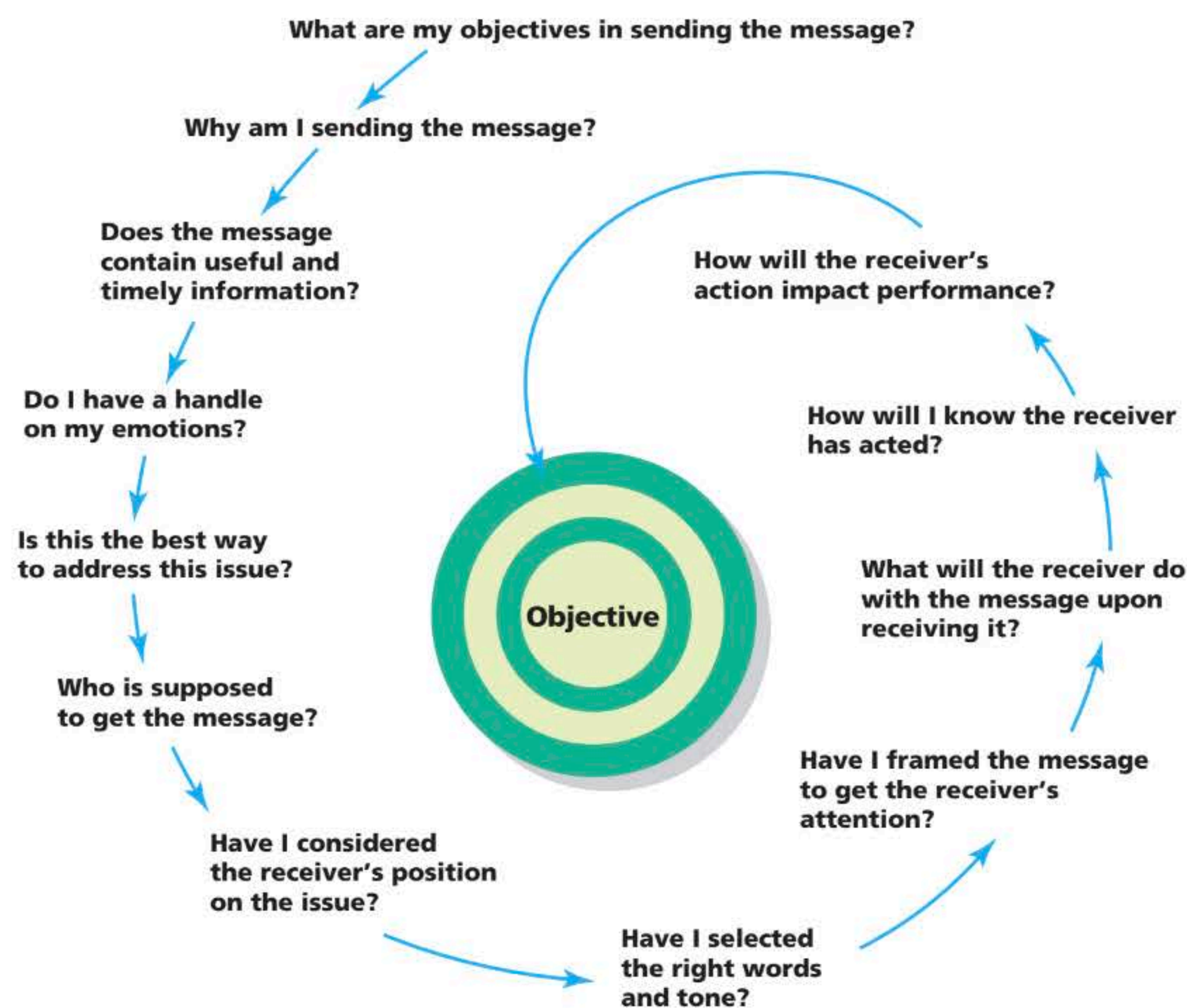
Overcoming Barriers to Effective Communication

Most techniques for overcoming communication barriers are relatively easy and straightforward. Supervisors will recognize them as techniques they use sometimes but not as frequently as they should. A supervisor once remarked, “Most of these techniques are just common sense.” The reply to this comment is simply, “Yes, but have you ever observed how uncommon common sense sometimes is?” The lesson is, “If you do not know, find out then follow up.” In short, supervisors must proactively ensure that communication is effective.

PREPARATION AND PLANNING

A first major step toward becoming a better communicator is to avoid speaking or writing until the message to be communicated has been thought through to the point that it is clear in the sender’s mind. Only when supervisors can express their ideas in an organized fashion can they hope for others to understand. Therefore, before communicating, supervisors should know what they want and should plan the steps needed to attain their objectives (see Figure 6.4). Regardless

FIGURE 6.4 Steps to achieving communication objectives



Sources: From ideas in Curtis Sittenfeld, “How to WOW an Audience—Every Time,” *Fast Company* (August 1999), pp. 86+; Carol Leonetti Dannhauser, “Shut Up and Listen,” *Working Women* (May 1999), p. 41; Sean Morrison, “Keep It Simple,” *Training* (January 1999), p. 152; Douglas Stone, Bruce Patten, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Viking, 1999); Paul A. Argenti, “Should Business Schools Teach Aristotle?” *Strategy & Business* (Third Quarter, 1998), pp. 4–6; and A. Blanton Godfrey, “Quality Management: Getting the Word Out,” *Quality Digest* (June 1996), p. 7.





of the method of communication used, supervisors must consider many elements before sending messages.

For example, when supervisors want to assign jobs, they should first analyze those jobs thoroughly so that they can describe them properly. An employee's ability to do a job depends on determining what information is important. Therefore, the supervisor needs to plan the method of communication—visual (body language), vocal (tone of voice), verbal (words), and emotional (feelings). When supervisors must give their bosses bad news, those supervisors should study the problems until they can explain the problems easily. Supervisors may even want to try to see the problems from their bosses' points of view. Supervisors should write down all important points to ensure they are covered.

A point of caution: Supervisors should only raise problems with their bosses after having formulated suggestions on how to solve or prevent problems.²⁴ When communication is to involve disciplinary action, supervisors should investigate the cases sufficiently and compile all relevant information before issuing penalties. Clearly, communication should not begin until supervisors know what they should say to achieve their goals.

USING FEEDBACK

Among the methods for improving communication, feedback is by far the most important. In communication, **feedback** is the receiver's verbal or nonverbal response to a message. Feedback can be used to determine whether the receiver understood the message and to get the receiver's reaction to that message. The sender can initiate feedback by using questions, discussion, signals, and clues. Merely asking the receiver, "Do you understand?" and receiving "Yes" as an answer may not suffice. More information is usually required to ensure that a message was received as intended.

A simple way to obtain feedback is to observe the receiver and to judge that person's responses based on such nonverbal clues as expressions of bewilderment or understanding, raised eyebrows, frowns, and eye movement. Of course, this kind of feedback is possible only in face-to-face communication, which is one of the major advantages of this form of communication.

Perhaps the best feedback technique for ensuring that the sender's message is understood is for the sender to ask the receiver to paraphrase or play back the information just received. This approach is much more satisfactory than merely asking whether the instructions are clear. The process of restating all or part of the person's basic idea in the receiver's own words, rather than "parroting back verbatim" the sender's message, shows that communication has taken place. For example, the receiver might say, "Let me see if I understand correctly. Your understanding of the situation is thus and so." When the receiver states the content of the message, the sender knows the receiver has heard and understood the message. The receiver may then ask additional questions and request comments that the speaker can provide immediately. Do not ask questions that can be answered "yes" or "no." Phrase questions that force the other person to clarify and elaborate their position(s).

The feedback technique also applies when a supervisor receives a message from an employee or a higher-level manager. To clear up possible misunderstandings, a supervisor can say, "Just to make sure I understand what you want, let me repeat in my own words the message you just gave me." An employee or a manager will appreciate this effort to improve communication. A similar technique to paraphrasing is reflective feedback. This technique is used when the supervisor

Feedback

The receiver's verbal or nonverbal response to a message



**FIGURE 6.5** Why didn't you understand my instructions the first time?

reflects the feelings (emotions) expressed by the sender. To illustrate, the supervisor might say, "You feel _____ because _____."

When a supervisor receives a written message and doubts any part of its meaning, that supervisor should contact the sender to discuss and clarify the message. In an amusing way, Figure 6.5 indicates that the teacher's original instructions were not received as intended. In a clear and direct way, the expectations are clarified.

TIMELY AND USEFUL INFORMATION

Clearly, employees must be able to gather information. The key is that the information is pertinent and timely and helps employees do their jobs. Supervisors should begin by asking, "What information do my employees need to do their jobs?" The answer should be the foundation for gathering and giving information. Employees must know what is expected and what is and is not allowed. Figure 6.6 presents the six pillars for successful communication.

DIRECT AND CLEAR LANGUAGE

Another sound approach to effective communication is to use words that are understandable and as clear as possible. Supervisors should avoid long, technical, complicated words. They should use language that receivers can understand easily. Jargon, or "shop talk," should be used only when receivers are comfortable with it.

A CALM ATMOSPHERE

As mentioned earlier, tension and anxiety are serious barriers to effective communication. When supervisors try to communicate with employees who are visibly upset, the chance for mutual understanding is minimal. It is much better to communicate when both parties are calm and unburdened by unusual tension or stress. One of the best ways for supervisors to create the proper atmosphere for communicating with employees is to set times to meet in quiet rooms. This usually enables both parties to prepare to discuss problems calmly and unhurriedly.

Similarly, if supervisors want to discuss something with their managers, they should make appointments for times and places that allow calm, uninterrupted



**FIGURE 6.6** The six pillars for successful supervisory communications

discussion. How (the tone), when (the time), and where (the place) are as important as the message.

TAKING TIME TO LISTEN

Listening is a very important part of the supervisor’s job, whether in one-on-one conversations or in meetings. The ability to listen is critical to success as a supervisor. Therefore, supervisors should work to develop their listening skills every chance they get.

Figure 6.7 lists some helpful suggestions for supervisors to use for improving their listening skills. A supervisor should always listen patiently to what the employee has to say. Intensive listening helps reduce misunderstanding, and, by listening, the supervisor can respond in ways that are appropriate to the employee’s concerns. Supervisors should provide feedback by restating employees’ messages from time to time and by asking, “Is this what you mean?”

One of the worst things supervisors can do is to appear to be listening while their minds are elsewhere. Supervisors can avoid this situation by politely stating, “Right now is not a convenient time for us to have this discussion. It needs my full attention, and if we can reschedule this meeting for 10 in the morning, you will have my undivided attention.” Attentiveness to the speaker goes a long way toward building trust.

To ensure that they have understood the message, supervisors must confirm it by restating in their own words what they have heard. In this way, they get



**FIGURE 6.7** The do's and don'ts of effective listening**DO'S OF LISTENING**

- Do adopt the attitude that you will always have something to learn.
- Do take time to listen, give the speaker your full attention, and hear the speaker out.
- Do withhold judgment until the speaker is finished. Strive to locate the main ideas of the message.
- Do try to determine the work meanings in the context of the speaker's background. Listen for what is being implied as well as what is being said.
- Do establish eye contact with the speaker. Read body language. Smile, nod, and give an encouraging sign when the speaker hesitates.
- Do ask questions at appropriate times to be sure you understand the speaker's message.
- Do restate the speaker's idea at appropriate moments to make sure you have received it correctly.

DON'TS OF LISTENING

- Don't listen with only half an ear by "tuning out" the speaker and pretending you are listening.
- Don't unnecessarily interrupt the speaker or finish the speaker's statement because of impatience or wanting to respond immediately.
- Don't fidget or doodle while listening. Don't let other distractions bother you and the speaker.
- Don't confuse facts with opinions.
- Don't show disapproval or insensitivity to the speaker's feelings.
- Don't respond until the speaker has said what he or she wants to say.
- Don't become defensive.

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confirmation of the accuracy of the message, and both sender and receiver are on the same page of the playbook.

REPETITION OF MESSAGES

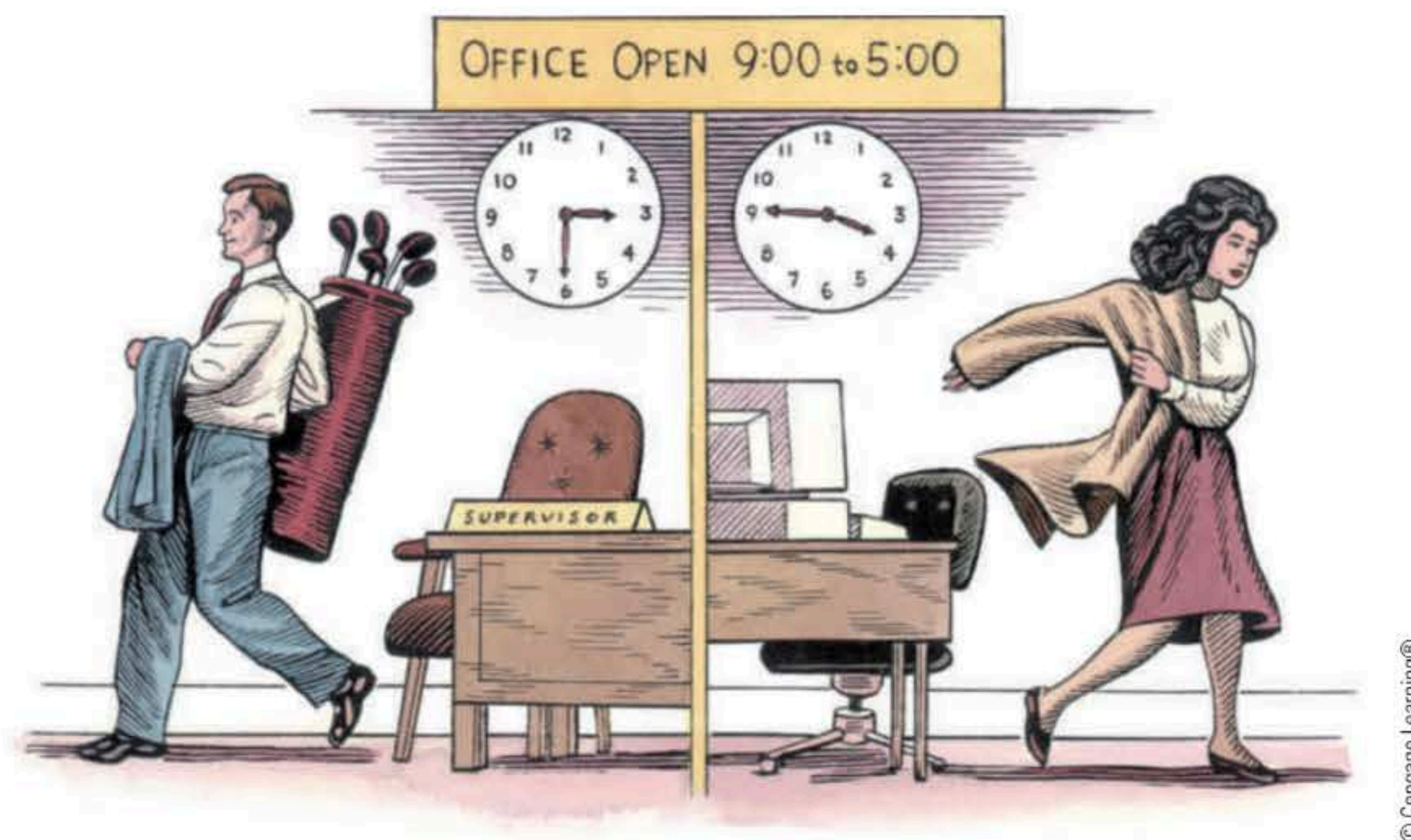
It often helps to repeat a message several times, preferably using different words and different methods. For example, a new health insurance program for employees might be sent by snail-mail to employees' home, sent by e-mail, discussed in a message on the company Web site, or posted on the bulletin board in the employee break room. After the posting and distribution of the plan changes, ideally the human resource department representatives and top management will hold small-group discussions on the changes and the implications for the employees.

The degree of repetition should depend largely on the content of the message and the impact on the intended receivers. However, the message should not be repeated so much that it gets ignored because it sounds too familiar or boring. When in doubt, some repetition probably is safer than none.

REINFORCING WORDS WITH ACTION

To succeed as communicators, supervisors must complement their words with appropriate and consistent actions. Supervisors communicate a great deal through their actions; actions do speak louder than words (see Figure 6.8). Therefore, one of the best ways to give meaning to messages is to act accordingly. When verbal



**FIGURE 6.8** A supervisor communicates by actions as much as by words

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announcements are backed by action, the supervisor is more credible. However, when a supervisor says one thing but does another, employees will eventually behave similarly.

Managing Meetings with the Boss

Every manager has someone higher in the organization to whom they report. It is critical that supervisors understand the importance of communicating “up the organization.”²⁵ For example, supervisors may want to report the most recent department/team meetings at their manager staff meetings. Supervisors should communicate not only the issues and items impacting their departments but also the positive contributions of their team members and other members of the organization.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, all managers should develop a climate that encourages a free flow of upward communication. However, in reality, the responsibility for upward communication typically falls on the supervisor. Increasingly, in an era of intense competition replete with organizational mergers, restructurings, and facility closings, supervisors must take the responsibility for keeping upper management informed and for managing the relationships with their own bosses. Supervisors also must be prepared to contribute suggestions, ideas, and opinions on a timely basis.

How many times have you heard someone say, “Treat others the way you want to be treated”? The same holds true for the supervisor’s relationship with upper management. Most upward communication occurs in meetings between supervisors and their managers. Supervisors should try to build bonds with their bosses. Supervisors must clearly understand what their bosses expect of them, and the bosses must know what their subordinates need from them to achieve the organization’s objectives. Each interaction that the supervisor has impacts the boss’s perception of the supervisor, and vice versa. Obviously, how supervisors manage upward is vital to their careers. The following

6 Explain how the supervisor can do a better job of managing up!





list provides insight on how the supervisor can more effectively manage meetings with the boss:

1. *Respect the boss's time.* Remember that “every boss has a boss” and, as such, has time demands of which you are not aware. Many bosses advocate an open-door policy, so be careful not to burden your boss with trivial issues or issues you can handle yourself. Choose a time when the boss is not busy and can give you and the issue undivided attention. A good approach might be, “I need about five minutes of your time to discuss ____ What would be a convenient time?” If the boss says, “two o'clock,” be a few minutes early. It may sound basic, but think of the impression you make when you are late.
2. *Check your motives.* Is a meeting the best way to address the issue or problem and achieve your purposes? If the answer is no, the meeting may not be worth having. Don't barge in on the boss when you are angry and upset.
3. *Analyze the boss's listening style.* Some bosses are analytical listeners who like to hear the facts and draw their own conclusions. Others may be emotional listeners who want you to start with how you feel about the message, then present the factual information, and close with your suggestion or conclusion. Turn yourself 180 degrees, put yourself in the boss's shoes, and try to see the situation from his or her perspective. This will help you outline a plan.
4. *Plan your agenda.* To ensure you cover what you want in the meeting with the boss, have in front of you a few notes on the important points or issues. Managing upward successfully begins with preparation and planning. When planning the agenda, remember the KISS technique.
5. *Do not go to the boss “naked.”* An effective manager encourages subordinates to develop alternatives, solutions, or suggestions to problems. No one wants a problem or an issue simply given to them to solve. You should start with a review of the situation and end with your suggestions. Bring suggestions on how to resolve the problem or prevent the situation from happening again. One manager the author knows only wants you to bring a problem to her after you have discussed it with others who have a stake in the outcome and have developed at least two viable options for solving it. You want to leave the boss with the feeling that you are on top of things, and this is one way to do it.
6. *Commit to the truth.* In *The Fifth Discipline*, author Peter Senge calls honesty a commitment to the truth, which he argues is necessary for the discipline of personal mastery.²⁶ We could not agree more. A meaningful relationship is built on mutual trust and respect. Explain your position on the issues objectively using facts, figures, and examples.
7. *Advertise success.* Make certain that upper management knows the successes of your work group and others you rely on to succeed. The supervisor who, in a meeting, tries to claim all credit loses respect.
8. *Learn to say no.* Upper managers can impose unrealistic workloads or deadlines. There may be tremendous pressure from above to “buy in.” Do not over commit your team. The supervisor who does not learn to say “no” loses the respect of subordinates and ends up looking bad to the boss.
9. *Do not keep information from your boss.* Do not tell bosses only what they want to hear. Supervisors sometimes fail to pass along information because it might reflect unfavorably on them.
10. *Anticipate problems.* When you need the boss's help, ask for it in a timely fashion. The best time to get the help you need is at the beginning. A common





- error supervisors make is to wait until they are overwhelmed by a project or job assignment or when failure is imminent.
11. *Meet periodically to clarify expectations.* In our fast-paced world, job requirements change rapidly. You must take responsibility for knowing what is expected from you. You may have to ask your boss to help you understand. Conversely, you need to analyze your job expectations and take the initiative to ensure that your boss knows what you need from him or her in order to succeed.
 12. *Do not be a complainer.* As mentioned above, it is essential to apprise the boss of problems, but do not complain constantly. The supervisor who only approaches the boss to complain becomes part of the problem, not part of the solution.
 13. *Do not put the boss on the defensive.* Supervisors can become upset or angry. They can attack the boss by demanding, pointing fingers, or venting their anger. These behaviors and words are an aggressive attack on the boss. Many people lack the ability to cope with attacks on them, and they attack back with vigor. The encounter then becomes antagonistic rather than favorable. In a favorable environment, colleagues focus on understanding the issues from the viewpoint of the other person and strive to reach agreement and to develop follow-up steps. Attack the problem, not the person.
 14. *Leave on a positive note.* Get an agreement on a course of actions. Summarize the meeting in writing so that you have documentation that on a specific date, at a specific place, with specific individuals present, a specific issue was discussed and, from your perspective, the outcome was as you have stated. What is said and done day to day on the job is an important part of communication.
 15. *Make a resolution.* Treat the boss as though you are a dedicated and competent employee, ready to make a difference. Resolve to manage upward effectively.

In conclusion, communication with the boss must be a two-way street. Most of us find it easy to tell others what to do, when to do it, and what they should have done. At the same time, we are used to receiving instruction and guidance from higher-ups. For many, it is not easy to go to the boss with our concerns. In many ways, it is like the teenager who will come to friends before going to their parents when they have a problem or concern. But the effective manager, like the great parent, sets the stage for the upward, honest, and open communication.

SUMMARY

1. **Effective communication means that information transfers successfully and understanding takes place between a sender and a receiver. The ability to communicate effectively is one of the most important qualities of supervisory success.**

Communication is a two-way process—getting and giving information. Communication succeeds only when the receiver understands the message. The receiver doesn't have to agree with the message, just understand it as the sender intended.

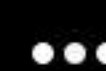
2. **As the communication world has become more complex, it has become common for people to spend more and more time on the Web or texting.**

Now it is more important for people to seek ways to receive and manage information. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and other social media sites have changed the way people can stay connected. Yet, the technology has created challenges for employees and employers alike. Numerous security breaches have taken place, and information that should have been secure has been compromised.

3. **Four channels of communication are relevant to the supervisor: formal, information, the Web, and body language.**

Formal channels of communication operate downward, upward, and horizontally. These





communication channels primarily serve to link people and departments to accomplish organizational objectives. Supervisors communicate downward to their employees, but equally important is the supervisor's ability to communicate upward to management and horizontally with supervisors in other departments.

Every organization company has an informal channel called the grapevine. The grapevine can carry rumors as well as facts. MBWA is one technique for getting information and staying in touch with the employees. Supervisors should stay in touch with the grapevine and counteract rumors with facts, when necessary.

Employees and employers alike use the Web and various social networks to connect with each other and those outside the organization.

Body language—one's actions, gestures, or posture—is a powerful means of communication. Often, body language conveys more than written or spoken words.

- 4.** Human differences and organizational conditions can create obstacles, called noise, which distort messages between people. TMI is just as bad as too little information. Information overload has become a major problem in today's society. Web sites and social networks contain lots of information, but not all of it is factual.

Not every employee has English as his or her primary language. Most supervisors are not fluent in a language other than English. And some of us have dialects that are confusing to others. Also, the use of jargon that receivers do not understand can impede communication. Because words have different meanings, the sender must ensure the receiver understands the intended meaning.

People at different status or position levels in an organization bring different points of view to interactions, which can distort meaning. People may filter out unpleasant information when communicating with their managers. Also, people's natural resistance to change can cause them to avoid hearing messages that upset the status quo or conflict with their beliefs.

Individuals perceive the world from the context of their backgrounds and prejudices. Perceptual barriers between sender and receiver, such as biases and stereotyping, can impede communication, as can conversation-killing phrases and poor timing.

The receiver's inability to properly analyze the content of a message causes misunderstanding. Misunderstanding may lead to suspicion and a lack of trust. Both sender and receiver share responsibility to ensure that information is successfully transferred.

- 5.** To overcome communication barriers, supervisors should adequately prepare what they wish to communicate. During face-to-face communication, the receiver's verbal and nonverbal responses, called feedback, can help the supervisor determine whether the receiver understood the message. Asking the receiver to restate the message is one feedback technique that helps verify understanding. For written communication, the supervisor can obtain feedback by asking a colleague to comment on the message before it is sent and by discussing the message with receivers after it is sent.

Clear, direct language the receiver can understand facilitates communication. Also, both parties should agree on a time to talk when they are not overly stressed and have time to really listen to each other. Repeating the message in various words and formats can improve understanding if not done to excess. Also, to be effective, words must be reinforced with consistent actions.

Someone told me to remember that I was given two ears, two eyes, and only one mouth. There must be a reason for that. Listen to what is said and how it is being said, closely watch their body language.

- 6.** Most people are not comfortable managing up. In today's fast-paced world, it is essential that supervisors keep higher management abreast of the developments and problems in their work areas. The tips for managing upward in this chapter blend practical applications with common sense. Supervisors who effectively manage meetings with higher management gain credibility and likely accomplish organizational goals.

KEY TERMS

Body language (p. 211)
Communication (p. 208)
Feedback (p. 225)
Filtering (p. 221)
Grapevine (p. 215)

Jargon (p. 220)
KISS technique (p. 219)
Management by Walking Around
(MBWA) (p. 213)
Noise (p. 219)

Status (p. 221)
Stereotyping (p. 222)

