

Lecture 1: Introduction to Business Communication

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1. The Purpose of the Course. This course is designed to improve the students' communication skills through achieving a better understanding of:

- the role of communication in human society
- the nature of communication in human society
- the process of communication in human society
- the importance of feedback in communication
- barriers to effective communication
- specificity of communication in organizations
- forms, media, and channels of communication in organizations

The focus on the principles and conventions of business communication will also help us improve our basic interpersonal communication skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The all-important role of analytical thinking as the underlying factor in any form of effective communication will be highlighted.

2. Definition of Communication. *Communication* is a complex process often involving reading, writing, speaking and listening. It may be verbal and non-verbal (or a mixture of both), and it uses a variety of media (language, mass media, digital technology, etc.). Broadly speaking, communication is a transfer and reconstruction of information. More specifically, we may define *communication as the transmission and reception of ideas, feelings and attitudes – verbal and non-verbal – that produce a response.*

3. Communication Theory. There are two major theories of communication: behavioral & mathematical.

- **The Behavioral Theory** covers both verbal and non-verbal communication. First set forth by Dr. Jurgen Ruesch, a psychiatrist, it postulates that *communication is based on social situations* in which individuals find themselves. Our participation in communication with others must conform to established behavioral patterns involving
 - *social situations* (culture, social class, time & place, etc.)
 - *roles* (sex, professional, religious, etc.)
 - *status* (authority, respect, social/class standing, i.e. in the caste system in India)
 - *rules* (protocol, ethics, or code of behavior)

- **clues** in non-verbal communication (gestures, touch, voice inflections, rate of delivery, etc.)

This theory identifies communication networks such as

- *intrapersonal*, i.e., communication with oneself,
- *interpersonal*, i.e., communication between individuals,
- *group interaction*, such as between clans, or organizations, and
- *cultural*, i.e., between distinct cultures, such as Islamic and Christian, or African, Anglo-Saxon and Spanish, etc. in America.

The Mathematical Theory is largely based on the work of Claude Shannon & Warren Weaver who were not social scientists but engineers working for Bell Telephone Labs in the United States. Their goal was to ensure the maximum efficiency of telephone cables and radio waves. They developed a model of communication, which was intended to assist in developing a mathematical theory of communication. Shannon and Weaver's work proved valuable for communication engineers in dealing with such issues as the capacity of various communication channels in 'bytes per second'. It contributed to computer science, and in making 'information' 'measurable' it gave birth to the mathematical study of 'information theory'.

Their original model consisted of five elements:

- An *information source*, which produces a message;
- A *transmitter*, which encodes the message into signals;
- A *channel*, to which signals are adapted for transmission;
- A *receiver*, which 'decodes' (reconstructs) the message from the signal;
- A *destination*, where the message arrives.

A sixth element, *noise*, is a dysfunctional factor: any interference with the message traveling along the channel (such as 'static' on the telephone or radio) which may lead to the signal received being different from that sent.

The strengths of Shannon and Weaver's model are its

- Simplicity
- Generality, and
- Quantifiability.

Such advantages made this model attractive to several academic disciplines. It also drew serious academic attention to human communication and 'information theory', leading to further theory and research.

Weaknesses of the transmission model of communication: The transmission model tends to over-simplify and misrepresent the nature of human communication, reducing it to a process of "transmitting information." It fails to recognize that human communication is about *meaning* rather than *information*.

The transmission model fixes and separates the roles of 'sender' and 'receiver', whereas human communication often involves *simultaneous* 'sending' and 'receiving' (not only talking, but also 'body language' and so on). In Shannon and Weaver's model the source is seen as the active decision-maker who determines the meaning of the message; the

destination is the passive target. It is a linear, one-way model, ascribing a *secondary* role to the 'receiver', who is seen as absorbing information. There was no provision in the original model for *feedback* (reaction from the receiver). Feedback enables speakers to adjust their performance to the needs and responses of their audience. A 'feedback loop' was added by later theorists, but the model remains linear.

For the purposes of this course, however, we shall make use of the modified version of the transmission model of communication, highlighting some important behavioral aspects and implications of human communication.

4. The Process of Communication. Communication begins with *an impulse* (or motivation) to pass on *a message* made up of bits of information. In the process of *encoding*, units of information are selected and organized for transmission. *Input* is the sum of experiences that build up in the human brain or computer. *Output* is the *encoded message* transmitted by the *information source* (an individual person or group of people).

The interpretation of the message is referred to as *decoding*. *Feedback* is the response, or message that the recipient (*decoder*) returns to the sender (*encoder*).

Graphic presentation of this model of the process of communication:

Impulse – input/encoding/output – relaying through potential distortion on both sides – decoding – feedback

Example: When Peter calls Jenny on the phone and says, "Would you like to stop at the Big Rooster's today?" he is drawing on his pleasant past experiences with Big Rooster's roast chicken and potato chips. He has *encoded a message* and transmitted it to Jenny, using the English language as the *medium* and the telephone lines as *channel* of communication.

Jenny, in turn, has received the message, *decoded* (= translated) it, and on the basis of her *information source* (= *input* = *sum total of experiences*), gives Peter *feedback* (response) by saying, "I dislike the Big Rooster thoroughly. How about the Chinese instead?"

5. Feedback in Communication. Feedback in the communication process is the response that gives us some indication of how effectively we communicate. It is the gauge of efficiency in communication.

Example:

If a thirsty man asks for water in a culturally appropriate way, using proper means and channels of communication, he will get the desired feedback (water to quench his thirst). Thus, the purpose of his communication will have been achieved.

6. Effective Communication. We communicate with other people around us from the day we are born until death. Most of our communication, however, will be ineffective if we do not understand the processes involved and acquire special communication skills in order to enhance our effectiveness.

What is *effective communication*? Human communication is effective, if:

- the input (a sum of information or experiences built up in the encoder's mind) is translated into an encoded message in such a way that the output (encoded message sent) most accurately represents the input (1:1 output-input ratio),
- the encoded message is easily decoded, or translated by the decoder, and
- an adequate (= desired, predictable, calculated) feedback (response to the encoded message) is sent back and duly received.

Prerequisites for effective communication:

1. Knowledge of

- subject matter
- decoder(s)
- environment
- human psychology

2. Communication Skills. *Skill* means “practiced ability, expertness.” If you are good at something – whatever this activity may be - because you approach it intelligently, have mastered and habitually employ the techniques, then you have a skill, i.e. driving, swimming, or typing. *Communication skills* means intelligent and practiced ways of sending and receiving messages – talking and writing, listening and reading. This involves an understanding of how the process works, and sensitivity to variable factors, as well as mastery of the techniques.

- **Language skills:** *oral* (i.e., clear pronunciation, suitable vocabulary, correct grammar/syntax, fluency, expressive delivery), *written* (correct spelling, suitable vocabulary, correct grammar/syntax, good writing or typing, suitable style, etc.), and *visual/non-verbal* (understanding of/control over “body language”)
- **Analytical thinking:** ability to extract and prioritize information; ability to choose the appropriate medium & channel of communication; ability to analyze the reactions of the decoder(s), etc.

3. Personality traits, such as charm, self-confidence, relaxed, easy-going and friendly manner, sensitivity, perceptiveness, emotional stability, objectiveness and patience, open-mindedness and flexibility.

4. Motivation, practical benefit, personal interest, etc.

5. Necessary infrastructure, such as telephone, fax, public address system, microphone, computer networks, the Internet, e-mail, visual aids, electricity supply, etc.

6. Physical/mental health and fitness, i.e., communication with a deaf, dumb, or delirious man will be impeded, just as it will be if the encoder / decoder is exhausted physically or drunk/drugged.

Thus, good interpersonal communication skills and conducive attitudes (willingness to communicate) are the basic requirements for effective communication.

7. Barriers to Communication: on one or both sides (encoder's and decoder's):

- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of interest or attention
- Lack in communication skills (language use, analytical thinking)
- Lack of charm, self-confidence, sensitivity, perceptiveness, objectiveness and patience; tense, uneasy personality, inflexibility
- Bias, prejudice, or preconceived ideas
- Distractions
- Competition for attention
- Differences in perception
- Attitudes
- Lack of motivation
- Physical/mental handicaps
- Stress

All of the above barriers to communication may be classed into two broad categories:

- **Distortion** resulting from inadequate use of language (incorrect grammar, syntax, overuse of technical/obscure words, ambiguity, etc.) and other communication skills (analytical approach to/understanding of decoders and the context/environment within which communication is taking place, choice of appropriate medium and channel of communication).
- **Noise, or interference:**
 - **Physical noise** – actual noise that may drown the communication
 - **“Technical noise”** – a failure in the channel of communication (breakdown of technology/equipment, etc.)
 - **“Social noise”** – personality differences due to upbringing; difference in perceptions/mentality due to diverse cultural, religious, educational, etc. backgrounds, bias due to age, sex, social class, status, etc.
 - **“Psychological noise”** – excessive/uncontrolled emotions (anger, fear, etc.), prejudice, stress, nervous tension, etc.

Summary:

1. Human communication is a very complex dynamic process of human interaction subject to a multitude of environmental, cultural, etc., factors, as well as potential distortion.
2. For the purposes of this course we shall make use of the modified version of the ‘information transmission’ theory, bearing in mind, however, the implications of the behavioral theory.
3. Transmission model of communication: impulse – input/encoding/output – relaying through potential distortion on both sides – decoding – feedback.
4. The concept of *effective communication* in this context signifies a most accurate transmission of *meaning* in the process of human interaction from the encoder to the decoder that receives an adequate response (feedback).