Chapter 12
COMMUNICATION

Chapter 12 explains the nature of interpersonal communication in organizations, and should also help the reader become a more effective communicator. The chapter is based on the premise that understanding communication as well as good communication skills is required for success in managerial work. Presented first is a basic version of the communication process, followed by a description of nonverbal communication. Next is a description of formal and informal communication channels. Extensive attention is paid to a description of major communication barriers, including cross-cultural differences and how they can be overcome. The chapter concludes with a brief description of organizational politics. The subject of politics would fit many places in the text, and is included here because organizational politics affects interpersonal communication.

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the steps in the communication process.
2. Recognize the major types of nonverbal communication in the workplace.
3. Explain and illustrate the difference between formal and informal communication channels.
4. Identify major communication barriers in organizations.
5. Develop tactics for overcoming communication barriers.
6. Describe how to conduct more effective meetings.
7. Describe how organizational (or office) politics affects interpersonal communication.

Chapter Outline and Lecture Notes

Poor communication is the number one problem in virtually all organizations and the cause of most problems. Communication problems can be expensive, and good communication skills can enhance sales.

I. THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Communication is the process of exchanging information by the use of words, letters, symbols, or nonverbal behavior. Sending and receiving messages accurately is complex and difficult.

A. Steps in the Communication Process

Two-way communication involves four major steps, and each step is subject to interference or noise.

1. Encoding the Message Encoding organizes ideas into a series of symbols, such as words and gestures, designed to communicate with the receiver.
2. Communication Media The message is sent over a communication medium such as voice, e-mail, instant message, Web log, or telephone.
3. Decoding the Message In decoding, the receiver interprets the message and translates it into meaningful information. Communication barriers are most likely to surface at the decoding step.
4. Feedback  Without feedback, it is difficult to know whether a message has been received and understood. If the receiver takes action as intended by the sender, the message has been received satisfactorily.

Many missteps can occur between encoding and decoding a message. Noise, or unwanted interference, can distort or block the message.

II. NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS  
A substantial amount of communication occurs through nonverbal communication, the transmission of messages by means other than words. Nonverbal communication supplements verbal communication; its purpose is to express the feeling behind a message. Six categories of nonverbal communication are as follows:

1. Hand and body gestures. Included here are frequent movements to express approval and palms spread outward to indicate perplexity. Gesturing should not be eliminated because it is a natural part of speech and thinking, and off-loads some of the mental effort.

2. Facial expressions and movement. A facial look and movements may show approval, disapproval, or disbelief.

3. Posture. Posture can reveal attitude, such as leaning toward a person to show a favorable attitude toward the message. Tilting your head and leaning in indicates you are concerned and engaged in the message.

4. Body placement. The placement of one’s body in relation to someone else is widely used to transmit messages, such as moving close to indicate acceptance. A speaking coach says that to effectively relate to an audience, you need a kinesthetic connection (effective movement of the body). This would include other forms of nonverbal communication as well as moving around effectively.

5. Voice quality. The way something is said can be more meaningful than what is said. Another aspect of voice quality is a person’s accent. Regional accents can sometimes

6. Clothing, dress, and appearance. Dress can communicate how willing an employee is to conform to organizational standards.

Another application of nonverbal communication is to assist in screening airline passengers who could be a security threat. Unusual behavior and odd gestures might signal potential problems. Screening possible security threats by nonverbal communication rather than cultural stereotypes is much more acceptable to defenders of civil liberties.

Many nonverbal signals are ambiguous, such as a smile indicating warmth or nervousness.

III. ORGANIZATIONAL CHANNELS AND DIRECTIONS OF COMMUNICATION  
Messages travel over different channels and follow different directions.

A. Formal Communication Channels  
Formal communication channels are the official pathways for sending information inside and outside the organization, usually revealed by the organization chart. With e-mail it has become easier for lower-ranking people to communicate with top management. Other formal channels include newsletters, meetings, and memos. Management by walking around could be classified as formal or informal. The
suggestions for management by walking around presented in Exhibit 12-2 are helpful for managerial communication.

B. Informal Communication Channels

**Informal communication channels** are the unofficial networks used to supplement the formal channels, and usually rise out of work necessity.

1. *Networks Created by Leaders*  Leaders make extensive use of informal networks to accomplish goals. *Operational networking* is aimed at doing one’s assigned task more effectively. Some of this networking is part of the formal channel. *Personal networking* engages people from outside the organization in a person’s effort to develop personally and advance. *Strategic networking* focuses networking on attaining business goals directly.

2. *Chance Encounters*  Unscheduled and informal contact between managers and employees can be an efficient and effective informal communication channel. Spontaneous communication events may occur at many places on the work premises.

3. *The Grapevine and Rumor Control*  The *grapevine* is the informal means by which information is transmitted in the organization. Rumors and gossip are the two major components of the grapevine. Rumors are typically about something people wish to happen, or dread. Gossip is part of the human condition, and is fueled by the need for affiliation. Information travels rapidly over the grapevine, and three-fourths of its information is true.

   Rumors can also create productivity and morale problems. Good employees may leave in response to rumors about layoffs. Severe negative rumors, especially about product defects or poisonings, must be neutralized to prevent permanent damage. Rumors about the financial health of a company are also damaging. Rumors can be combated by enhancing formal communication because employees seek more information during times of intense rumors. For example, explain why you cannot comment or give full information.

C. Communication Directions

Messages in organizations travel in four directions: downward, upward, horizontally, and diagonally. A *communication network* is a pattern or flow of messages that traces the communication from start to finish. *Downward communication* is the flow of messages from one level to a lower one. *Upward communication* is the transmission of messages from lower to higher levels. Companies have developed mechanisms to facilitate upward communication, including (1) the open-door policy, (2) town hall meetings, (3) complaint programs and hotlines, and (4) Web logs.

*Horizontal communication* is the sending of messages among people at the same organizational level. *Diagonal communication* is the transmission of messages to higher or lower organizational levels in different departments.
D. **Organizational Learning as Part of Communication in Organizations**
An important output of communication channels is to transmit information to other workers so as to advance knowledge and learning throughout the organization. A **learning organization** is skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge. It also modifies its behavior to reflect new knowledge and new insights. Managing knowledge and sharing information are also important. **Knowledge management** is the ways and means by which a company leverages its knowledge resources to generate business value. In addition to the specialized work of the *chief knowledge officer* in a learning organization, managers must also manage knowledge. A problem is that many workers jealously guard their best ideas.

IV. **BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION**
Barriers exist at every stage in the communication process, and they are considered to be noise or interference. Barriers are the *throughput* in the communication process. Messages the most likely to be distorted are those that are complex, emotional, or clash with the receiver’s mental set.

A. **Low Motivation and Interest**
The most basic fact about communication is that the message must appeal to a need of the receiver.

B. **Inappropriate Language**
Language can be inappropriate and can therefore create barriers for many reasons. Two factors of particular significance in a work setting are *semantics* and *difficulty level*. Contrary to popular sentiment, there are times when a low difficulty level is inappropriate. Jargon works well with insiders, and typically not well with outsiders.

C. **Defensive Communication**
A general communication barrier is **defensive communication**—the tendency to receive messages in such a way that our self-esteem is protected. *Denial* of contrary information is part of defensive communication.

D. **Insufficient Nonverbal Communication**
If verbal communication is not supplemented by nonverbal communication, messages may not be convincing.

E. **Information Overload**
**Information overload** occurs when an individual receives so much information that he or she becomes overwhelmed. A message must have high impact to get around the overload problem. E-mail is exacerbating the problem of information overload. Many managers receive about 150 messages each day. Yet many workers at all levels are learning to manage e-mail better.

F. **Poor Communication Skills**
Many messages fail to register because the sender lacks effective communication skills. The plain language movement instructs workers in government, the sciences, business, and the legal profession. Many messages left on voice mail systems are articulated so poorly that the receiver lacks enough information to act, including
understanding the return phone number or electronic address. Poor listening is another communication problem.

G. Electronic Communication Problems
Information technology has created several new communication barriers, as exemplified by the impersonality of e-mail. Most managers use e-mail as a substitute for face-to-face interaction with group members. The nuances of human interaction are usually lost in e-mail exchanges. Computer graphic presentations can create communication barriers. It is important to maintain eye contact and not overwhelm the audience with a large number of detailed slides.

V. OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION
Most communication barriers are surmountable. The general strategy is to be aware that such barriers exist, and to develop a specific tactic to deal with each one.

A. Understand the Receiver
Understanding the receiver can help overcome every communication barrier. Empathy is needed to understand the receiver, and also helps build rapport.

B. Communicate Assertively and Directly
If the sender explains explicitly and directly what he or she wants—and conveys feelings—the message is more likely to be received. An application of assertive communication is the informative confrontation, a technique of inquiring about discrepancies, conflicts, and mixed messages. It is helpful to repeat your message and use multiple channels. A spin measure is another form of indirect communication that might be converted into direct communication.

C. Use Two-Way Communication and Ask for Clarification
Two-way communication reduces barriers because a dialogue helps reduce misunderstanding by communicating feelings as well as facts. Also, two-way communication allows for questions and answers. Two-way communication also helps build connections with people and is useful in obtaining clarification on what the other person means by a particular phrase. The telephone is making a comeback because it enhances two-way communication.

D. Elicit Verbal and Nonverbal Feedback
The effective communicator asks for verbal feedback, and looks for nonverbal indicators of acceptance and understanding.

E. Enhance Listening Skills
Listening is a basic part of communication. A helpful technique is active listening, which means listening for full meaning without making premature judgments or interpretations. Active listening includes listening for total meaning, and reflecting the message back to the sender. An advanced skill for active listening is to ask questions instead of making statements. The receiver does not blurt out questions as soon as the other person is finished speaking.
F. Unite with a Common Vocabulary
A management writer recommends that managers should first identify the core work of a business, and then describe it in a shared business vocabulary. In this way, the various functions would speak a common language. Business jargon can contribute to a common vocabulary but must be used cautiously to avoid misunderstanding.

G. Be Sensitive to Cultural Differences
In order to overcome culturally based communication barriers (1) be sensitive to their presence, (2) show respect for all workers, (3) use straightforward language, (4) be alert to cultural differences in customs and behavior, (5) be sensitive to nonverbal differences, (6) do not be diverted by accent, grammar, or personal appearance, and (7) be attentive to individual differences in appearance.

H. Engage in Metacommunications
Many people make no particular effort to overcome communication barriers. Another possibility is to metacommunicate, or communicate about your communication to help overcome barriers or resolve a problem. In other words, talk about how well, or not well, the communication is going.

VI. HOW TO CONDUCT AN EFFECTIVE MEETING
Poorly conducted meetings are a productivity drain. The suggestions for group decision making presented in Chapter 5 apply here. Group meetings can also be improved by such means as (1) meeting only for valid reasons, (2) starting and stopping on time and offering refreshments, (3) keeping comments brief and to the point, (4) avoiding electronic distractions, (5) capitalize on technology when appropriate, (6) encouraging critical feedback and commentary, (7) striving for wide participation, (8) solving small issues ahead of time with e-mail, and (9) considering “huddling” when quick action is needed.

VII. ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION
Politics is related to communication because so much interpersonal communication in organizations is politically motivated. Organizational politics refers to informal approaches to gaining power or other advantages through means other than merit or luck. In recent years, as managers have to rely more on personal influence and less on hierarchy, the meaning of organizational politics has become more favorable.

A. Relatively Ethical Political Tactics
A political tactic might be considered relatively ethical when it is used to gain advantage or power that serves a constructive organizational purpose. Five useful and relatively ethical political tactics are: (1) develop power contacts, (2) be courteous, pleasant, and positive, (3) create a positive image, (4) ask satisfied customers to contact your boss, (5) be politically correct, and (6) send thank-you notes to large numbers of people.

B. Relatively Unethical Political Tactics
In reality, not all organizations are ideal and many people use negative political tactics to fight for political advantage. Four widely practiced unethical political tactics are:
(1) Back stabbing. You pretend to be nice, but all the while plan someone's demise. Email is widely used for back stabbing. (2) Setting up another person to fail. Give
another person an assignment with the hopes that he or she will fail and therefore be discredited. (3) Playing territorial games. Also referred to as turf wars, territorial games involve protecting and hoarding resources that give one power, such as information and authority. (4) Be unpredictable. Some particularly devious executives behave unpredictably by design to keep people off guard.

C. Exercising Control of Negative Organizational Politics
Carried to excess, organizational politics can damage productivity and morale, including hurting the careers of innocent people. Being aware of the presence of organizational politics leads to control. Open communication can also constrain the impact of political behavior. Avoiding favoritism is a big help. Also, managers should find a way to talk about territorial games.

Comments on End-of-Chapter Questions

1. Employers continue to emphasize good communication skills as one of the most important qualifications for screening career-school and business graduates. What are some of the reasons for this requirement?

Most career-school and business graduates are hired for positions that involve extensive interaction with people, even if they will be doing mainly analytical work. To be effective in such positions, a person must have at least passable communication skills. Without acceptable communication skills, one’s potential contribution can be lost. Another serious consideration is that a person will have a difficult time being hired if he or she shows a major communication deficiency.

2. How might understanding the steps in the communication process help managers and professionals do a better job?

Knowing the steps in the communication process helps managers and professionals understand what needs to be done for a communication event to be successful. Included in the steps, for example, is the importance of obtaining feedback and dealing with noise.

3. What kind of facial expression do you think might make a person appear intelligent?

People often make comments such as “that person looks intelligent.” So facial expressions are related to perceptions of a person’s intelligence, whether or not the perceptions are valid. Facial expressions likely to create a perception of intelligence are a smile, eye lids open, an occasional frown, an occasional cocking of the head to look quizzical, and pursing the lips while touching the chin with the thumb and forefinger.

4. Some top-level managers insist that employees use instant messaging (IM). What do you think is their justification for the widespread use of IM?

A major justification is that workers at all levels must communicate with each other
immediately when problems arise or answers to questions are needed. Using IM, 
communication is immediate and direct. As a result, very few people have to wait for 
an answer.

5. Many telemarketers have such poor communication skills that they are difficult to 
understand. What should telemarketing managers do about this problem?

The poor oral communication skills of telemarketers should be of major concern to 
telemarketing managers. A major problem is one of recruitment and selection. A 
shortage exists of people with good communication skills who want to be 
telemarketers. Better training would help, but it often takes a long time to improve a 
person’s speech habits. Telemarketing managers might expand their recruiting net to 
include retired people with good communication skills who are seeking part-time 
employment.

6. For what reasons do executives spend an average of about 30 hours per week in 
meetings?

Executives are propelled into face-to-face meetings for several reasons. A major factor 
is the need to coordinate activities with others including receiving their input and 
getting their reaction to new activities and plans. A major decision like outsourcing 
work to Mexico would best not be done in isolation. Even if a decision is unilateral, the 
executive must get others on the staff to begin thinking about implementation. Also, 
meetings are still a convenient vehicle for communicating important information and 
receiving immediate feedback.

7. Many workers who have been laid off during a downsizing contend that if they had 
possessed better political skills they could have avoided being downsized. What are 
they talking about?

The basic point is that in almost any downsizing, the vast majority of workers are not 
downsized. Often, about 10 percent of workers are placed on the hit list. Several 
consultants have reported the people who are liked the most are the least likely to be 
downsized. And, people who are disliked the most are downsized first. Political skills 
help a person be liked by many others, and develop a base of support.

Comments on Self-Assessment and Skill-Building Exercises

The Positive Organizational Politics Questionnaire—In Chapter

The advantage of this questionnaire is that it emphasizes positive political tactics rather than 
including many negative and devious tactics. Yet a very high score, such as 14 or 15, could 
suggest that the person is too political and therefore might have a problem of being perceived as 
entirely trustworthy. The questionnaire also deals with a person’s sense of morality. For 
example, some people think a positive response to Statement 2 (“I go out of my way to flatter 
important people.”) is immoral.
Practicing Your Active Listening Skills—End of Chapter

Active listening is far from a natural skill for most people, so this exercise might be an eye-opener for many students. It will require intense concentration to study the role players and the evaluation factors simultaneously. Another approach is to intently observe the role players, than do the ratings. However the ratings are done, this exercise should prove useful in pinpointing the meaning of active listening.

Cross-Cultural Communication Skill—End of Chapter

Many students will find this exercise to be informative providing they can locate a person from another culture. In our multicultural school and work environment, this should not be a problem. Other student may need more structure, such as applying one technique for enhanced cross-cultural communication. For example, a student might simply look for the opportunity to use straightforward language and speak clearly with a given individual from another culture.

The Communication Component of Jobs—End of Chapter

Many students will find this exercise to be highly practical and enlightening. Their research is also likely to reinforce the importance of effective communication skills in most professional-level jobs. It is possible, however, that a given job description will not mention communication skills. For students not already familiar with the site, visiting “hotjobs” alone is an eye opener about a useful career tool.

Answers to Case Questions

Do We Need this Blogger?

A key point this case illustrates is that participating in the young communication medium of company blogs has some potential disadvantages. A second point illustrated is that a company may need a policy to deal effectively with blogs

1. Even though the blogging policy has not yet been implemented, how well have Kincaid’s actions conformed to the tentative policy?

   It looks like Kincaid’s blog could be interpreted in violating the tentative policy in one important way. The policy clauses at issue are (a) Employees cannot disclose confidential or proprietary information, and (b) Public statements cannot be defamatory, profane, libelous, harassing, or abusive. The statement about the abuses in the Chinese factory could be interpreted as fitting both clauses.

2. What steps, if any, do you think top management should take to control Kincaid’s blogs?

   We recommend that Kincaid be counseled to continue with the positive statements about Genève in his blog, but eliminate derogatory comments. He might be authorized to poke mild fun at the company, but that he should eliminate his outright negative statements.
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2. What relevance does this case have for the subject of interpersonal communication?

The major relevance of this case for the subject of interpersonal communication is that it deals with the effective use of computer-mediated technologies. Also the Genève case deals with the problem of open corporate communication. A company may welcome open communication, yet there are limits. A company does not want any of its employees to present a negative face to the public. However, the company might want to make positive use of blogs.

BS Bingo at Violet Cow

This case illustrates the challenges of conducting meetings in the digital age. The widespread use of electronic devices must be recognized, yet decorum and civility are still important.

1. What do you recommend Cindy do to have more disciplined meetings? (Or, should she do anything?)

If Cindy is discouraged by electronic rudeness, she needs to establish guidelines for meeting behavior. An effective technique might be to hold a meeting about the bounds of acceptable behavior.

2. Should Cindy conduct her business meeting with language that would make it very difficult to win at B. S. Bingo?

B. S. Bingo, or its equivalent, could be conducted in most fields. Cindy is a brand manager in a business firm, so she should not be concerned about avoiding all terms that might be on the B. S. Bingo card. However, Cindy should avoid slinging around terms that have very little meaning. She should also avoid overuse of jargon, such as saying “At the end of the day” too frequently.

3. What stance should Cindy take about multi-tasking during the meeting?

As mentioned above, Cindy might first discuss the problem of multi-tasking with the group. She might then create a guideline that prohibits multi-tasking except in emergencies. During a meeting, when multi-tasking surfaces, Cindy might halt the meeting until the multi-tasker is through. Staring at the multi-tasker might help also.