

COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE: GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

Communication is the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another. Communication in the workplace is critical to establishing and maintaining quality working relationships in organisations. This paper discusses the communication process, barriers to communication, and provides guideline for administrators to improve communication effectiveness. No one in this world can survive in isolation. Communication is the only tool to bridge to gap between individuals. When individuals speak, they normally do not confine themselves to the mere emission of words. A great deal of meaning is conveyed by non-verbal means which always accompany oral disclosure intended or not. It can also be said that, a spoken message is always sent in two parallel levels, the first one is verbal and second one is non-verbal. Facial expressions and body language are the most common way of non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is the process of communication through sending and receiving wordless (mostly visual) cues between people. Today when we interact with others (interpersonal communication) we continuously give and receive wordless signals. Nonverbal communication—the use of dynamic but non-language messages such as facial expressions, gestures, gaze, touch, and vocal cues-is especially important when emotions, identities, and status roles are significant, as well as in situations where verbal communications are untrustworthy, ambiguous, or otherwise difficult to interpret.

KEYWORDS: *Communication, Effectiveness, Administrators, Strategies, Non-verbal communication.*

Introduction

Introduction Fundamental and vital to all administrative functions, communication is a means of transmitting information and making oneself understood by another or others (Sanchez &Guo, 2005). Communicating effectively is an art which must be practiced effectively in the workplace for better output and successful accomplishment of goals of an organisation. Communication is a major issue facing administrators because they are responsible for providing vital information, which results in efficient as well as effective performance in organisations. The study of communication is relevant, because every administrative function involves some kind of direct or indirect communication, be it planning and organising or leading and monitoring, administrators communicate with and through other people. This sort of implies that every person's communication skills impact both personal and organisational effectiveness (Brun, 2010; Summers, 2010). It is very reasonable to conclude that lack of effective communication is one of the most inhibiting forces to organisational effectiveness (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Good communication skills are very important for anyone to succeed as an administrator (Yate, 2009). This paper discusses the communication process and the importance of communication in the workplace and provides guidelines on how administrators can improve their communication skills and effectiveness.

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Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To provide the conceptual knowledge on the objectives and forms of business communication at workplace
- To explain the role of nonverbal cues in effective communication.
- To identify how nonverbal communication can act as barrier to effective communication.

Communication

Communication may be defined as the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another (Keyton, 2011). It is the creation or exchange of ideas, emotions, thoughts, and understanding between the sender(s) and the receiver(s). It is essential for building and maintaining long lasting relationships in the workplace. Although administrators spend most of their time communicating, one cannot simply assume that relevant communication occurs in all exchanges (Dunn, 2002). Many tend to believe that communication has taken place once a memorandum, letter, fax, or e-mail has been sent. However, communication does not take place until information and understanding have transmitted sender and the intended receiver. It is an important part of communication to make oneself understood as intended. A receiver may listen a sender but still not understand what was meant by the sender's message. Being constantly involved in encoding and decoding of messages does not make sure that an administrator is an expert in communication. Understanding is a very subjective concept and a personal matter between people, and different people may interpret messages in a different manner. If the idea received is not the one which was intended, it means communication has not taken place and the sender has spoken or written merely.

Communication Process

The Modern Model of Communication: Over the period of time Business Communication Process has been evolved a lot. In order to make the Business Communication system even more compressive and conceivable the communication theorists are still investing their endeavour by including important new items or elements in it. The Modern Communication model has evolved from Shanon and Weaver's information Theory Model. The modern communication model is presented below:

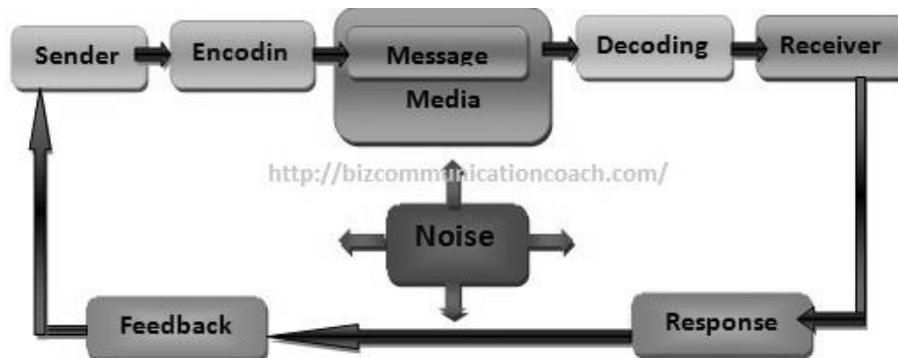


Figure: The Modern Model of Communication

Above figure illustrates the communication process. The sender is the one who initiates the communication. He uses words and symbols in order to convert information into a message for the receiver, the individual(s) who is/are receiving the message. In the context of workplace, the sender is a person who possess a need or a desire to convey an idea or concept to others, the sender may be a person, a department, or a unit of an organisation or system who originates the message. The idea is encoded by the sender by selecting words, symbols, or gestures using which to a message is composed. The message is the result of the encoding, which can take the form of verbal, nonverbal, or written language. The receiver can be described as the individual to whom the message is sent. It is the receiver who decodes the received message into some meaningful information. Accurate decoding of the message by the receiver is very critical to effective communication. The proximate the decoded message gets to the intent of the sender, the more effective is the communication. However, there are environmental and personal barriers which can hamper the communication process. A barrier can be defined as anything that can distorts the message. Some examples of barriers include different

perceptions of the message, language barriers, interruptions, emotions, and attitudes. Finally, feedback takes place when the receiver responds to the message and replies back the message to the sender. Feedback is the destination's reaction to a message (Certo, 1992). It is a crucial element of communication as it allows for information sharing between the receiver and sender in a two-way communication. The elements in the communication process will eventually determine the quality of communication. A problem in any one of these elements can reduce the overall communication effectiveness (Keyton, 2011).

Business communication skills are vital to the success of any organization regardless of its mission, size or geographical location. Business communication is linked with internal culture of any organization. So it is the determining factor to communication inside the organization. Good practices of business communication help the organizations in achieving their goals of informing, persuading, conducive relationships and goodwill. Survival of organizations is possible only if the communication processes are structured and they accept the fast changing global challenges. Communication can take place among business entities, within organizations and between various groups of employees, in market places, owners and employees, sales persons and prospects, buyers and sellers, and also between the organization and the press people. All such communication has an effect on business. If done with care, such communication can promote business interests. Otherwise, it may put the organization in poor light and adversely affect its business interest. Communication is the life blood of any organization with its main purpose being to effect change in order to influence action.

Channels of Communication

A message is always sent through a medium or channel, which is mainly the carrier of the communication. Because there are many choices, selection of the particular medium for transmitting the message can be very critical. The medium can be verbal, nonverbal, written, computer-aided or electronic. With respect to written media, an administrator or other organisation members may select from memos, letters, reports, bulletin boards, handbooks, newsletters, and the like. But for verbal media, choices can include face-to-face conversations, public address systems, telephone, computer, closed-circuit television, tape-recorded messages, slide shows, e-mail, and so on. Nonverbal gestures, facial expressions, body position, and even clothing can also be used to transmit messages. People decode information selectively (Keyton, 2010).

Importance of Effective Workplace Communication

There is no denying the importance of communication in the workplace, considering the fact that in an organisation people belonging to different social and professional backgrounds come together to work for the same goals. Often it is observed that administrators do not always realise the importance of communication at work and thus do not convey their ideas, organisational goals, vision, etc. very clearly. When administrators in an organisation are unable to create an environment which promotes open and clear communication, it can have negative repercussions on the work culture and the employee productivity. Good communication practices are at the heart of every successful business. Communication serves two essential functions in every organisation. It disseminates the information needed by employees to get things done and builds relationships of trust and commitment. Workplace communication is vital to an organisation's ability to be productive and operate smoothly.

- **Workplace communication improves worker productivity:** Effective lateral and work group communication leads to an improvement in overall company performance. It has also been found out that employees who were graded as highest in terms of work productivity received the most effective communication from their superiors. Furthermore, the EY Australian Productivity Pulse TM, found a strong link between organisations who were communicating effectively and the productivity ratings of their people.
- **Workplace communication can increase employee job satisfaction:** Employees feel very much empowered if they are able to get upward communication. This type of communication takes place when information flows upward in an organisation. It usually consists of feedback. If employers or managers listen to their employees and respond, this leads to an increase in employee job satisfaction. In addition, employees are also feel happy if there is a very strong downward communication, which is information flowing down from superiors or managers.
- **Workplace communication can also have a positive effect on absenteeism and turnover rates:** Workplace communication also has a positive effect on absenteeism and turnover rates.

Employees want to feel safe and secure that they are getting truthful information from superiors. They also want to be able to share ideas, thoughts and concerns within the company. Studies have shown that even after a period of downsizing, companies which have excellent communication are able to retain the surviving employees.

- **The business impact of poor communication:** There is fall in staff morale goes down when communication is ambiguous, lacks in crucial details and does not allow for two-way dialogue. Poor communication hits customers and suppliers. They start feeling disenfranchised and take their business elsewhere.
- **Lesser conflicts:** Open communication in the workplace assist in preventing and resolving many conflicts. They can be easily resolved through open and clear communication and mutual discussions which can lead to personal and professional growth.
- **Formation of relationships:** Open communication, whether it is between the employees and administrators or it is between the management and employees often leads to the formation of healthy personal and professional relationships. It can make the employees feel genuinely valued for, and they remain loyal to the organisation. This creates an overall friendly environment and promotes a working relationship which is quite conducive to the work.
- **Proper utilisation of resources:** If an organisation faces some issues, problems, crisis or conflicts because of miscommunication between the staff members, it can cause unnecessary delays in the routine work. It results in wastage of resources and it lowers the overall work productivity.

Forms of Business Communication: Verbal and Non-Verbal

- **Verbal Communication:** Verbal means 'connected with words and use of words.' Any communication using words is verbal communication. Words are the most powerful sets of symbols. Words denote manings as well as connote meanings. That is why all formal communication is usually in words. Words can be written or spoken. Therefore, verbal communication can be divided into two types:
 - **Oral Communication:** As the term itself suggests, communication through the spoken word is known as oral communication. Of the total amount of working time spent in verbal communication, 9 % is in writing, 16 % in reading, 30 % in speaking and 45 % in listening. In oral communication, words should be chosen very carefully so that what they convey has the precise meaning. The sender of the message or his representative is usually the speaker, while the receiver or his representative is the listener. Listening is also a prominent aspect of oral communication.
 - **Written communication:** A message constitutes written communication when it is put in "black and white." It is a formal type of communication. The sender of the message or his representative is the writer. Written communication is generally considered binding on business organizations and is often used as legal evidence. Technological advancement has enlarged the spectrum of written communication through email and such other facilities.

- **Non-Verbal Communication:** Scientific analysis has shown that body movements and gestures constitute 55% of effective communication. Hence, non-verbal communication merits great consideration. Non-verbal communication comprises things such as gestures, physical appearance, posture, etc. It takes place without written or spoken words. While one can refuse to speak or write, it is not possible to avoid behaving non-verbally. Non-verbal communication is classified as:
 - **Kinesics:** The study of body movement that is a part of non-verbal communication is known as kinesics. It is an integral part of communication. Our body consciously as well as unconsciously, conveys messages, moods attitudes etc. in just the same way as language uses sets of symbols to convey meaning.
 - **Paralanguage:** The world of communication involving signals, signs, tone and fluctuations to convey meaning is called paralanguage. Paralanguage means “like language,” but not actually a language. Paralanguage is used to describe a wide range of vocal characteristics which help to express and reflect the speaker’s attitude. It is non-verbal because it does not consist of words. Paralanguage depends on pitch, pause, voice, intonation, stress, gestures and signals. Through pitch and volume variation, stress on words, etc. one’s voice can convey enthusiasm, confidence, anxiety and the speaker’s mental state and temperament.
 - **Proxemics or territory or space:** The word proxemics is derived from the word proximity, which means closeness. It is used with reference to space or territory. A lot of communication takes place non-verbally through the manner in which we use the space around us. A lot of non-verbal communication is also attributed to the colour, design, layout and utilisation of the space around us.
 - **Surroundings:** How the surroundings are organised also contributes to the communication. The decor of the place, the furniture, and the artistic pieces that adorn your office, tell about yourself and your taste.



Figure: Forms of non-verbal communication

Role of Non-Verbal Communication in Effective Communication

Nonverbal cues differ from culture to culture. Studies have repeatedly shown that there are seven facial expressions that are actually universal. These include anger, contempt, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. With this type of information hard-wired into us, it's not surprising that we rely on nonverbal communication to such an extent. In fact, it has been estimated that around 80 percent of communication is regarding what is not being said. Rather, it is based on perceptions of a person's gestures, eye contact, clothing and environment. Being tuned into someone's nonverbal communication cues can help to determine what is being said beyond the words being spoken. Sometimes a person might agree with you on the face of it but the clues such as avoiding eye contact can tell that they are not being completely honest with you with their words. This implies that noticing when a person's nonverbal and verbal communication matches or not will help determine whether they are on board with your idea or not. Using techniques such as "mirroring" may help in putting others at ease. This technique involves subtly mimicking the other person's gestures, body language and even speech patterns. Mirroring happens naturally when people communicate, but strategic use of the method can

help make others more comfortable in a tense situation. When using this technique, it is important that the person not feel they are being teased. This implies that the mirroring should not be exact.

In order to become a successful person in business, one requires much more than good speech. Verbal communication represents a small percentage of dealing with clients in business. The rest is to possess adequate non-verbal skills and to know how and when to use them properly. Sometimes even though our voice and words are under control, our body language, including the tiniest facial expressions and gestures can give our true thoughts and feelings about something. Therefore, it is crucial to control our non verbal gestures for carrying out productive business. Non-verbal communication helps us to express ourselves better. In business meetings even before a word is said, the receiver observes the body gestures and facial expressions of the speaker, with the purpose of trying to make sense of all these symbolic messages.

Barriers to Non-Verbal Communication

- **Paralanguage:** Paralanguage is the manner in which inflections are to be used whenever sending a message verbally. It creates a nonverbal communication barrier whenever it is misunderstood or not applied in an appropriate manner. It could be an individual's tone of voice, pitch or volume that typically defines the words to mean one thing or another. For example, someone might say, "Get out of here," and dependent on how it was said might either mean the person is upset or he might be using the phrase as an expression of awe.
- **Silence:** The lack of expression transmits a message itself that can create a barrier. It can be used as a threatening tool in order to disregard some other person's need for communication, or it can also be used so as to improve communication. If used in the appropriate way, it can help you and the other person to think through the messages that are being sent and how to respond appropriately.
- **Body Language:** Body language can create a communication barrier too. A person with their head down, or turning their back to you are all examples of body language. Body language is used to send those messages that you don't care, don't want to talk or that you're angry. It is the use of your physical body in order to send a message. This can also include positions, symbols that are made with your hands or a stance.
- **Facial Expression:** A person's facial expression act as a barrier, when there is insecurity or fear involved in the conversation. Facial expressions are often misinterpreted and misunderstood. For example, if you're telling someone something highly sensitive and they don't make any facial expression, you may believe that they are not listening, which results in a barrier that you close off your heart and end the conversation.

Conclusion

Communication in the workplace is very critical to establish and maintain quality working relationships in organisations. Being a process of transmitting information and common understanding, effective communication is important in the workplace because every administrative function and activity involves some kind of direct or indirect communication. Resultantly, to improve the effectiveness of communications, it is important that administrators must get aware of the importance of sender's and receiver's responsibilities as well as adhere to active listening skills. Effective communication skills will improve an administrator's ability in the workplace to be a strong leader. Administrators should therefore create an environment wherein issues, opinions, problems, plans, thoughts and ideas pertaining to work, are handled in a professional and proficient manner through positive and effective communication.

A good businessman believes in the saying, 'take care of communication and success shall take care of itself. Nonverbal communication can affect our communication with others in powerful ways, still it is many times ambiguous. Much of the advice offered in the popular media on nonverbal communication is incorrect because a single nonverbal cue is given too much emphasis. Specific advice on communicating effectively has been offered for each type of nonverbal communication i.e. physical appearance, gestures, facial communication, voice, touch, space and environment but some general advice also has been offered as follows: observe multiple nonverbal cues before drawing conclusions about others, monitor your nonverbal communication, recognize vast cultural differences in nonverbal communication, resist jumping to conclusions based on a single nonverbal cue, and strive for consistency in your verbal and nonverbal communication to avoid mixed messages.

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