

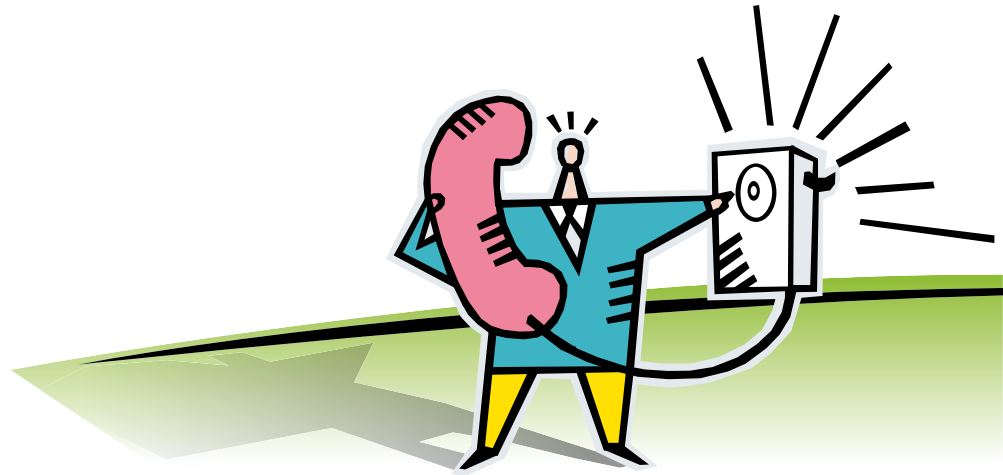
Easy to blame it on communication

No one doubts the importance of communication. We often hear words such as “We have a communication problem”, “There is a communication problem”, “It is a communication problem” as reasons why the actual outcome is not as intended. For example, a missed schedule could be due to a number of reasons. It could be because:

- the deadline was not clear as it was not articulated (communicated); or
- someone had somewhere, somehow misunderstood the deadline; or
- the compliance relating to the deadline was viewed as not important and was totally ignored.

The end result may be the same, i.e. a missed schedule, but the causes or reasons for the schedule being missed are very different. And yet, there is a tendency for some people to use the broad term “communication problem” without being specific, which is not helpful. After all, different types of problems require different sets of solutions, and fixing the underlying communication problem requires knowing exactly what the problem is.

“Communication problem” is an overused phrase in many organizations. It is popular precisely because it is ambiguous, non-confrontational, safe as it can be interpreted anyway, it is easy, convenient, and does not require rigorous thinking. It is a lazy person’s way of giving an answer to



UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION

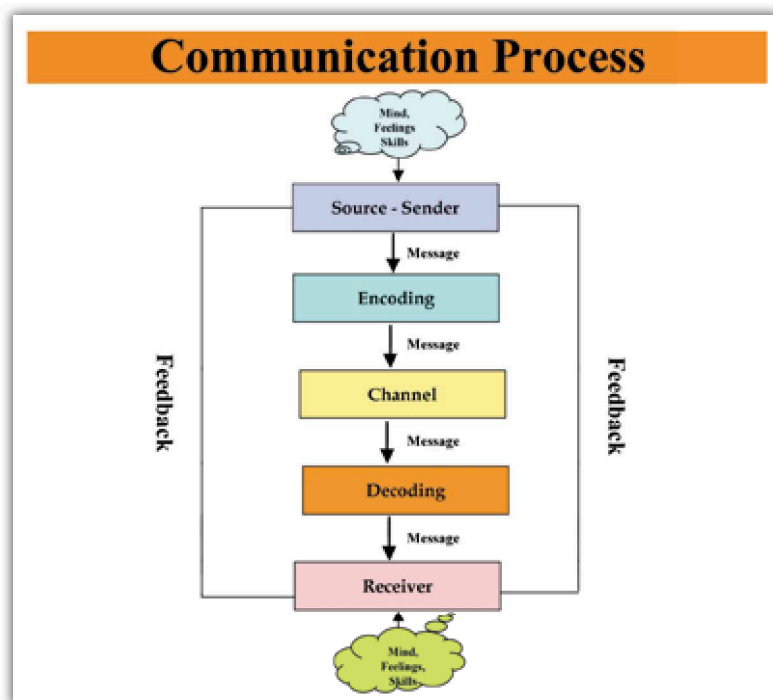
a problem. It does not require much analysis.

Thus, if the intent is to promote effective communication and solve the “communication problem” we so often hear in organizations, it is essential to start by understanding the basics including defining what communication is, the communication process, communication barriers and

associated factors contributing to effective communication.

Understanding communication

Communication is a big word. It is a word that has different meanings for different people. Communication is not “someone does the talking and the other party listens and responds accordingly”. It is more than merely imparting and transmitting meaning from one party to another. Very





PROCESSES AND BARRIERS By Weelan Ho

importantly, for communication to occur, the **meaning** must be **received** and **understood** by both parties. Any idea, however significant, is useless until it is transmitted and understood. In short, communication is about the mutual transference of a message and the understanding of its meaning.

The communication process

Communication can be thought of as a process or flow. The figure below logically and sequentially illustrates the communication process. The sender must want to communicate and transmit messages, while the receiver must want to accept and decipher the messages with the best intent for communication to occur.

Source -sender

Everything starts with attitude. To communicate, there must be motivation to express on the part of the sender. The **sender** with the desire to express is the **source** of the communication.

Encoding

The sender translates his thoughts into words if it is oral or written communication; symbols or

gestures in the case of non-verbal communication. This process of converting the desire to communicate into words, symbols and gestures is known as **encoding**.

Message

The outcome of encoding is the **message**. A message can have two parts – the content which deals with the fact; and feelings, evident through words, body language and tone.

Channel or medium

The **medium** or **channel** of communication is the method used to transmit the message to the intended receiver. It can be in the form of spoken words through the phone, written words using a memo, graphics on a slide, or gestures through face-to-face situations such as in meetings. The sender must consider the appropriateness of the medium. For example, the telephone may be an appropriate channel for making enquiries, but, it is not an appropriate or effective channel for resolving major conflicts.

Receiver

The **receiver** is the person(s) for whom the message is intended. As mentioned above, everything starts with attitude. The sender must have the motivation to express and communicate; similarly, the receiver must be open and be in the right frame of mind when decoding, i.e. interpreting, the message.

Decoding

The sender initiates the communication by conveying a message. The receiver interprets and translates the message into meaning. This process is known as **decoding**. Communication is said to be effective when the sender and the receiver achieve common meaning, i.e. the message sent was received, interpreted and understood correctly as intended. How well the message is decoded is dependent on the context of the message, and the receiver's values, perceptions, attitude, education and skills.

Feedback

Feedback is a closed-loop mechanism that allows the sender and the receiver the opportunity to ask questions, probe, clarify issues, to achieve understanding of meaning between them. Active listening and questioning skills are two key skills used to achieve feedback.

Communication is a two-way street. The onus for effective communication lies with both the sender and the receiver.

Communication barriers

Ineffective communication occurs when there are blockages or barriers within the communication process that prevent the sender and receiver from achieving common meaning. Barriers can occur at any point(s) within the process. Extrapolating or deducing from the communication process, communication barriers arise from three areas: barriers stemming from the mind, feelings and skills. However, they are not independent from one another for it is not possible to segregate our feelings from our mind (for example, our attitude towards life) and the choices of words we use are often influenced by how we feel and think.

Barriers stemming from the mind

Communication barriers developed as a result of perception, attitude, and tendency to see things from a particular perspective – whether we are open, all-embracing or obstinate all relate to the mind. The mind determines what we will say, and it also affects how we interpret

things. Being genuine, open and accepting are basic qualities both sender(s) and receiver(s) must have to enable effective communication.

Barriers as a result of feelings

Communication that hurts one's feelings also causes communication barriers. Negative feelings block true dialogue. One is less likely to want to have conversations with someone who is critical and judgmental of others. Other communication approaches that hurt feelings and create barriers include moralizing, giving order, name calling ... just to name a few.

Barriers because of skills deficiency

The choices of words used, how we phrase our intent, the use of voice and tone, the timing and the manner we convey the messages, the types of medium, platform and intervention we use to achieve our objectives, are all skills related and can be taught and learned.

Effective communication demands both parties (the sender and the receiver) to be in the right frame of mind in terms of attitude, with both parties willing and able to adopt a communication approach that considers feelings and embraces appropriate language that it is conducive to achieving the intended objectives.

Understanding the communication process and the associated barriers is a start. These at least remind us of the need to be specific and clear and guide us to identify the particular areas of concern within the communication process, instead of lumping everything under the broad umbrella of a "communication problem". **T/D**

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