

Functions of Communication
The Communication Process
Communication Fundamentals
In Practice: Effective Employee
Communications in Leading Companies
Undergoing Dramatic Changes
Current Issues in Communication

CHAPTER

9

COMMUNICATION

I didn't say that I didn't say
it. I said that I didn't say
that I said it. I want to make
that very clear.

— G. Romney



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

- 1** Define *communication*
- 2** Identify factors affecting the use of the grapevine
- 3** List common barriers to effective communication
- 4** Describe an effective communication program in an organization undergoing dramatic changes
- 5** Outline the behaviors related to effective active listening
- 6** Contrast the meaning of talk for men versus women
- 7** Describe potential problems in cross-cultural communication
- 8** Discuss how technology is changing organizational communication



Can the misunderstanding of a few words literally mean the difference between life and death? They can in the airline business. A number of aviation disasters have been largely attributed to problems in communication.¹ Consider the following:



History's worst aviation disaster occurred in 1977 at foggy Tenerife in the Canary Islands. The captain of a KLM flight thought the air traffic controller had cleared him to take off. But the controller intended only to give departure instructions. Although the language spoken between the Dutch KLM captain and the Spanish controller was English, confusion was created by heavy accents and improper terminology. The KLM Boeing 747 hit a Pan Am 747 at full throttle on the runway, killing 583 people.

In 1980, another Spanish controller at Tenerife gave a holding pattern clearance to a Dan Air flight from Manchester, England. But the controller said “turn to the left” when he should have said “turns to the left”—making circles instead of a single turn. The jet banked into a mountain, killing 146.

In 1990, Colombian Avianca pilots, after several holding patterns caused by bad weather, told controllers as they neared New York Kennedy Airport that their Boeing 707 was “running low on fuel.” Controllers hear those words all the time, so they took no special action. While the pilots knew there was a serious problem, they failed to use a key phrase—“fuel emergency”—which would have obligated controllers to direct the Avianca flight ahead of all others and clear it to land as soon as possible. The people at Kennedy never



understood the true nature of the pilots' problem. The jet ran out of fuel and crashed 16 miles from Kennedy. Seventy-three people died.

In 1993, Chinese pilots flying a U.S.-built MD-80 tried to land in fog at Urumqi, in northwest China. They were baffled by an audio alarm from the jet's ground proximity warning system. A cockpit recorder picked up one pilot's last words: "What does 'pull up' mean?" The plane hit power lines and crashed, killing 12.

On December 20, 1995, American Airlines Flight 965 was approaching the Cali, Colombia airport. The pilot expected to hear either the words "cleared as filed" (meaning follow the flight plan filed before leaving Miami) or "cleared direct" (meaning fly straight from where you are to Cali, a slightly different route from the flight plan). But the pilot heard neither. The controller intended to clear him "as filed" but said "cleared to Cali." The pilot interpreted that as a direct clearance. When he checked back, the controller said "affirmative." Both were obviously confused. The plane crashed, killing 160 people. ◆



The preceding examples tragically illustrate how miscommunication can have deadly consequences. In this chapter, we'll show (obviously not in as dramatic a fashion) that good communication is essential to any group's or organization's effectiveness.

Research indicates that poor communication is probably the most frequently cited source of interpersonal conflict.² Because individuals spend nearly 70 percent of their waking hours communicating—writing, reading, speaking, listening—it seems reasonable to conclude that one of the most inhibiting forces to successful group performance is a lack of effective communication. (See Exhibit 9-1.)

No group can exist without communication: the transference of meaning among its members. It is only through transmitting meaning from one person to another that information and ideas can be conveyed. Communication, however, is more than merely imparting meaning. It must also be understood. In a group where one member speaks only German and the others do not know German, the individual speaking German will not be fully understood. Therefore, **communication** must include both the *transference and the understanding of meaning*.

An idea, no matter how great, is useless until it is transmitted and understood by others. Perfect communication, if there were such a thing, would exist when a thought or an idea was transmitted so that the mental picture perceived by the receiver was exactly

communication
The transference and understanding of meaning.

the same as that envisioned by the sender. Although elementary in theory, perfect communication is never achieved in practice, for reasons we shall expand upon later.

Before making too many generalizations concerning communication and problems in communicating effectively, we need to review briefly the functions that communication performs and describe the communication process.

- ◆ An idea, no matter how great, is useless until it is transmitted and understood by others.

Functions of Communication

Communication serves four major functions within a group or organization: control, motivation, emotional expression, and information.³

Communication acts to *control* member behavior in several ways. Organizations have authority hierarchies and formal guidelines that employees are required to follow. When employees, for instance, are required to first communicate any job-related grievance to their immediate boss, to follow their job description, or to comply with company policies, communication is performing a control function. But informal communication also controls behavior. When work groups tease or harass a member who produces too much (and makes the rest of the group look bad), they are informally communicating with, and controlling, the member's behavior.



Communication fosters *motivation* by clarifying to employees what is to be done, how well they are doing, and what can be done to improve performance if it's subpar. We saw this operating in our review of goal-setting and reinforcement theories in Chapter 5. The formation of specific goals, feedback on progress toward the goals, and reinforcement of desired behavior all stimulate motivation and require communication.

For many employees, their work group is a primary source for social interaction. The communication that takes place within the group is a fundamental mechanism by which members show their frustrations and feelings of satisfaction. Communication, therefore, provides a release for the *emotional expression* of feelings and for fulfillment of social needs.

The final function that communication performs relates to its role in facilitating decision making. It provides the *information* that individuals and groups need to make decisions by transmitting the data to identify and evaluate alternative choices.

No one of these four functions should be seen as being more important than the others. For groups to perform effectively, they need to maintain some form of control over members, stimulate members to perform, provide a means for emotional expression, and make decision choices. You can assume that almost every communication interaction that takes place in a group or organization performs one or more of these four functions.



The Communication Process

Communication can be thought of as a process or flow. Communication problems occur when there are deviations or blockages in that flow. In this section, we describe the process in terms of a communication model, consider how distortions can disrupt the process, and introduce the concept of communication apprehension as another potential disruption.



Communication at Home Depot is designed to give employees information, build their morale, and provide a release for the emotional expression of their feelings. Company founders Bernard Marcus and Arthur Blank spend about 40 percent of their time in stores talking with employees, who are encouraged to express their opinions without fear of being fired or demoted. During a closed circuit television program called "Breakfast with Bernie and Art," Marcus (shown here) and Blank speak to the employees from one of their stores, updating them on corporate news, sharing sales and profits results, and answering their questions.



A Communication Model

Before communication can take place, a purpose, expressed as a message to be conveyed, is needed. It passes between a source (the sender) and a receiver. The message is encoded (converted to symbolic form) and is passed by way of some medium (channel) to the receiver, who retranslates (decodes) the message initiated by the sender. The result is a transference of meaning from one person to another.⁴

Exhibit 9-2 depicts the **communication process**. This model is made up of seven parts: (1) the communication source, (2) encoding, (3) the message, (4) the channel, (5) decoding, (6) the receiver, and (7) feedback.

The source initiates a message by **encoding** a thought. Four conditions have been described that affect the encoded message: skill, attitudes, knowledge, and the social-cultural system.

My success in communicating to you is dependent upon my writing skills; if the authors of textbooks are without the requisite writing skills, their messages will not reach students in the form desired. One's total communicative success includes speaking, reading, listening, and reasoning skills as well. As we discussed in Chapter 4, our attitudes influence our behavior. We hold predisposed ideas on numerous topics, and our communications are affected by these attitudes. Furthermore, we are restricted in our communicative activity by the extent of our knowledge of the par-

communication process

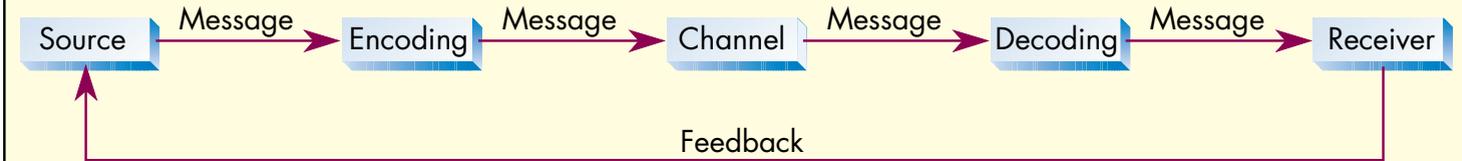
The steps between a source and a receiver that result in the transference and understanding of meaning.

encoding

Converting a communication message to symbolic form.



Exhibit 9-2 The Communication Process Model



ticular topic. We cannot communicate what we don't know, and should our knowledge be too extensive, it's possible that our receiver will not understand our message. Clearly, the amount of knowledge the source holds about his or her subject will affect the message he or she seeks to transfer. And, finally, just as attitudes influence our behavior, so does our position in the social-cultural system in which we exist. Your beliefs and values, all part of your culture, act to influence you as a communicative source.

The **message** is the actual physical product from the source encoding. "When we speak, the speech is the message. When we write, the writing is the message. When we paint, the picture is the message. When we gesture, the movements of our arms, the expressions on our face are the message."⁵ Our message is affected by the code or group of symbols we use to transfer meaning, the content

message

What is communicated.

of the message itself, and the decisions that we make in selecting and arranging both codes and content.

The **channel** is the medium through which the message travels. It is selected by the source, who must determine which channel is formal and which one is informal. Formal channels are established by the organization and transmit messages that pertain to the job-related activities of members. They traditionally follow the authority network within the organization. Other forms of messages, such as personal or social, follow the informal channels in the organization.

The receiver is the object to whom the message is directed. But before the message can be received, the symbols in it must be translated into a form that can be understood by the receiver. This is the **decoding** of the message. Just as the encoder was limited by his or her skills, attitudes, knowledge, and social-cultural system, the receiver is equally restricted. Just as the source must be skillful in writing or speaking, the receiver must be skillful in reading or listening, and both must be able to reason. One's knowledge, attitudes, and cultural background influence one's ability to receive, just as they do the ability to send.

The final link in the communication process is a **feedback loop**. "If a communication source decodes the message that he encodes, if the message is put back into his system, we have feedback."⁶ Feedback is the check on how successful we have been in

channel

The medium through which a communication message travels.

decoding

Retranslating a sender's communication message.

feedback loop

The final link in the communication process; puts the message back into the system as a check against misunderstandings.

transferring our messages as originally intended. It determines whether or not understanding has been achieved.

Sources of Distortion

Unfortunately, most of the seven components in the process model have the potential to create distortion and, therefore, impinge upon the goal of communicating perfectly. These sources of distortion explain why the message that is decoded by the receiver is rarely the exact message that the sender intended.

If the encoding is done carelessly, the message decoded by the sender will have been distorted. The message itself can also cause distortion. The poor choice of symbols and confusion in the content of the message are frequent problem areas. Of course, the channel can distort a communication if a poor one is selected or if the noise level is high. The receiver represents the final potential source for distortion. His or her prejudices, knowledge, perceptual skills, attention span, and care in decoding are all factors that can result in interpreting the message somewhat differently than envisioned by the sender. (See Exhibit 9-3.)

Communication Apprehension

Another major roadblock to effective communication is that some people—an estimated 5 to 20 percent of the population⁷—suffer

from debilitating **communication apprehension** or anxiety. Although lots of people dread speaking in front of a group, communication apprehension is a more serious problem because it affects a whole category of communication techniques. People who suffer from it experience undue tension and anxiety in oral communication, written communication, or both.⁸ For example, oral apprehensives may find it extremely difficult to talk with others face-to-face or become extremely anxious when they have to use the telephone. As a result, they may rely on memos or letters to convey messages when a phone call would not only be faster but more appropriate.

Studies demonstrate that oral-communication apprehensives avoid situations that require them to engage in oral communication.⁹ We should expect to find some self-selection in jobs so that such individuals don't take positions, such as teacher, where oral communication is a dominant requirement.¹⁰ But almost all jobs require some oral communication. And of greater concern is the evidence that high-oral-communication apprehensives distort the communication demands of their jobs in order to minimize the need for communication.¹¹ So we need to be aware that there is a set of people in organizations who severely limit their oral communication and rationalize this practice by telling themselves that more communication isn't necessary for them to do their job effectively.

communication apprehension

Undue tension and anxiety about oral communication, written communication, or both.

Exhibit 9-3 Empty Words That Create Distortions

Many young people today use a vocabulary of “filler words” that contribute to imprecise language. The following words and phrases distort communication because they’re confusing and ambiguous to many listeners:

Like you know

See

So

OK

Like oh my God

I mean

Basically

And all that

And everything like that

And whatever

‘n’ stuff

The following dialog captures the problem:

“Like you know, I was so out of it. I was all, like, Duhhh! I mean, like oh my God. OK, so I said basically what’s happening? OK, so I told him I’d be there and everything like that, you know? And he’s all like not absolutely certain ‘n’ stuff. It was totally an experience.”

Communication Fundamentals

A working knowledge of communication requires a basic understanding of some fundamental concepts. In this section, we review those concepts. Specifically, we look at the flow patterns of communication, compare formal and informal communication networks, describe the importance of nonverbal communication, consider how individuals select communication channels, and summarize the major barriers to effective communication.

Direction of Communication

Communication can flow vertically or laterally. The vertical dimension can be further divided into downward and upward directions.¹²

DOWNWARD Communication that flows from one level of a group or organization to a lower level is a downward communication.

When we think of managers communicating with subordinates, the downward pattern is the one we usually think of. It is used by group leaders and managers to assign goals, provide job instructions, inform underlings of policies and procedures, point out problems that need attention, and offer feedback about performance. But downward communication doesn't have to be oral or face-to-face contact. When management sends letters to employees'

homes to advise them of the organization's new sick leave policy, it is using downward communication.

UPWARD Upward communication flows to a higher level in the group or organization. It is used to provide feedback to higher-ups, inform them of progress toward goals, and relay current problems. Upward communication keeps managers aware of how employees feel about their jobs, co-workers, and the organization in general.



Lee Kun Hee, chairman of the South Korean conglomerate Samsung, uses downward communication to deliver what he calls "shock therapy" to his 180,000 employees. To correct customer complaints about defective products, unappealing designs, and poor after-sales service, Lee prepared 300 hours of videotapes and 750 hours of audiotapes that tell employees what they must do to improve the quality of Samsung products. Lee, shown here on video, told employees to "Change everything but your wives and children."



Managers also rely on upward communication for ideas on how things can be improved.

Some organizational examples of upward communication are performance reports prepared by lower management for review by middle and top management, suggestion boxes, employee attitude surveys, grievance procedures, superior–subordinate discussions, and informal “gripe” sessions where employees have the opportunity to identify and discuss problems with their boss or representatives of higher management.

For example, Federal Express prides itself on its computerized upward communication program.¹³ All 68,000 employees annually complete climate surveys and reviews of management. This program was cited as a key human resources strength by the Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award examiners when Federal Express won the honor.

LATERAL When communication takes place among members of the same work group, among members of work groups at the same level, among managers at the same level, or among any horizontally equivalent personnel, we describe it as lateral communications.

Why would there be a need for horizontal communications if a group or organization’s vertical communications are effective? The answer is that horizontal communications are often necessary to save time and facilitate coordination. In some cases, these lateral



relationships are formally sanctioned. Often, they are informally created to short-circuit the vertical hierarchy and expedite action. So lateral communications can, from management's viewpoint, be good or bad. Since strict adherence to the formal vertical structure for all communications can impede the efficient and accurate transfer of information, lateral communications can be beneficial. In such cases, they occur with the knowledge and support of superiors. But they can create dysfunctional conflicts when the formal vertical channels are breached, when members go above or around their superiors to get things done, or when bosses find out that actions have been taken or decisions made without their knowledge.

Formal vs. Informal Networks

Communication networks define the channels by which information flows. These channels are one of two varieties—either formal or informal. **Formal networks** are typically vertical, follow the authority chain, and are limited to task-related communications. In contrast, the **informal network**—usually better known as the grapevine—is free to move in any direction, skip authority levels, and is as likely to satisfy group members' social needs as it is to facilitate task accomplishments.

communication networks

Channels by which information flows.

formal networks

Task-related communications that follow the authority chain.

informal network

The communication grapevine.



Back



Forward



Home



Reload



Images



Open



Print



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Stop

Netsite :

OB in the News

Empowering Employees by Opening Up Communication

In 1980, a long strike had nearly forced the closing of Missouri-based Springfield ReManufacturing Co. (SRC), a subsidiary of then International Harvester. To cut its losses, Harvester sold SRC, which reassembles diesel engines, to a group of investors. The new management needed to radically change the company if it was going to survive. That radical change came in the form of what has become known as *open-book management*. The goal was to get every employee to think like an owner. To achieve this end, management trained employees to understand the company's financials, shared those numbers routinely with the work force, and provided bonuses and incentive

pay based on profit improvement. For instance, each week SRC shuts down its machines for 30 minutes while its 800 employees break into small groups and study the latest financial statements. Every employee at SRC can now interpret profit and loss statements as well as most accountants.

The results of open-book management have been nothing short of sensational at SRC. In 1981, the company lost \$61,000 on sales of \$16 million. In 1994, the company earned \$6 million on sales of \$100 million.

Open-book management is drawing attention from other companies that are trying to empower their employees. "It's the next logical

step after you've given self-directed teams the power to make decisions owners once had," says Donald Robb, a division manager at R.R. Donnelley & Sons Co. "It integrates all of the other things we've been doing and gives some focus to it."

Dozens of companies, from Allstate Insurance to sportswear maker Patagonia, have implemented open-book management. Allstate's Business Insurance Group, for instance, used open-book management to boost return on equity from 2.9 percent to 16.5 percent in just

three years. The unit's 3,500 employees were trained to understand the importance of key financial measures and then were provided with the information on a regular basis. "It got employees involved and committed, and it gave them some ownership," says the unit's president. "They understood they had an impact on the bottom line."

Based on J. Fierman, "Winning Ideas from Maverick Managers," *Fortune*, February 6, 1995, pp. 66–80; and J.A. Byrne, "Management Meccas," *Business Week*, September 18, 1995, pp. 126–28.



Take It to the Net

We invite you to visit the Robbins page on the Prentice Hall Web site at:

<http://www.prenhall.com/robbinsorgbeh>

for this chapter's World Wide Web exercise.

FORMAL SMALL-GROUP NETWORKS Exhibit 9-4 illustrates three common small-group networks. These are the chain, wheel, and all channel. The chain rigidly follows the formal chain of command. The wheel relies on the leader to act as the central conduit

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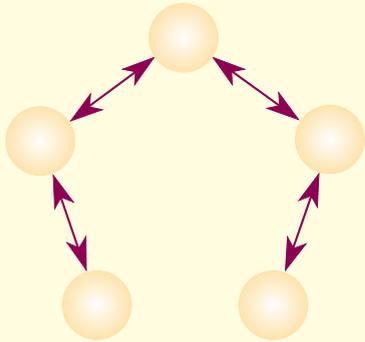


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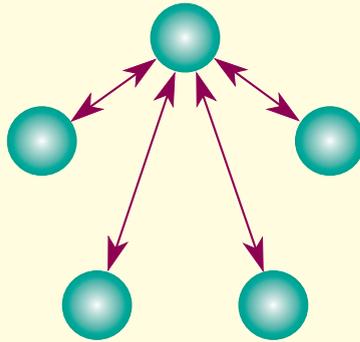


Exhibit 9-4 Three Common Small-Group Networks

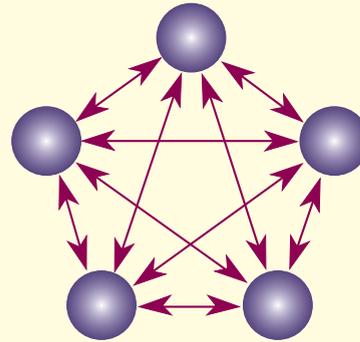
Chain



Wheel



All-Channel



for all the group's communication. The all-channel network permits all group members to actively communicate with each other.

As Exhibit 9-5 demonstrates, the effectiveness of each network depends on the dependent variable you are concerned about. For instance, the structure of the wheel facilitates the emergence of a leader, the all-channel network is best if you are concerned with having high member satisfaction, and the chain is best if accuracy is most important. Exhibit 9-5 leads us to the conclusion that no single network will be best for all occasions.

Exhibit 9-5 Small-Group Networks and Effectiveness Criteria

Criteria	Networks		
	Chain	Wheel	All-Channel
Speed	Moderate	Fast	Fast
Accuracy	High	High	Moderate
Emergence of a leader	Moderate	High	None
Member satisfaction	Moderate	Low	High

THE INFORMAL NETWORK The previous discussion of networks emphasized formal communication patterns, but the formal system is not the only communication system in a group or between groups. Now let's turn our attention to the informal system, where information flows along the well-known grapevine and rumors can flourish.

The grapevine has three main characteristics.¹⁴ First, it is not controlled by management. Second, it is perceived by most employees as being more believable and reliable than formal communiques issued by top management. Third, it is largely used to serve the self-interests of those people within it.

One of the most famous studies of the grapevine investigated the communication pattern among 67 managerial personnel in a small manufacturing firm.¹⁵ The basic approach used was to learn



from each communication recipient how he or she first received a given piece of information and then trace it back to its source. It was found that, while the grapevine was an important source of information, only 10 percent of the executives acted as liaison individuals, that is, passed the information on to more than one other person. For example, when one executive decided to resign to enter the insurance business, 81 percent of the executives knew about it, but only 11 percent transmitted this information on to others.

Two other conclusions from this study are also worth noting. Information on events of general interest tended to flow between the major functional groups (that is, production, sales) rather than within them. Also, no evidence surfaced to suggest that members of any one group consistently acted as liaisons; rather, different types of information passed through different liaison persons.

An attempt to replicate this study among employees in a small state government office also found that only a small percentage (10 percent) acted as liaison individuals.¹⁶ This is interesting, since the replication contained a wider spectrum of employees—including rank-and-file as well as managerial personnel. However, the flow of information in the government office took place within, rather than between, functional groups. It was proposed that this discrepancy might be due to comparing an executive-only sample against one that also included rank-and-file workers. Managers, for example, might feel greater pressure to stay informed and thus cultivate

others outside their immediate functional group. Also, in contrast to the findings of the original study, the replication found that a consistent group of individuals acted as liaisons by transmitting information in the government office.

Is the information that flows along the grapevine accurate? The evidence indicates that about 75 percent of what is carried is accurate.¹⁷ But what conditions foster an active grapevine? What gets the rumor mill rolling?

It is frequently assumed that rumors start because they make titillating gossip. Such is rarely the case. Rumors have at least four purposes: to structure and reduce anxiety; to make sense of limited or fragmented information; to serve as a vehicle to organize group members, and possibly outsiders, into coalitions; and to signal a sender's status ("I'm an insider and, with respect to this rumor, you're an outsider") or power ("I have the power to make you into an insider").¹⁸ Research indicates that rumors emerge as a response to situations that are important to us, where there is ambiguity, and under conditions that arouse anxiety.¹⁹ Work situations frequently contain these three elements, which explains why rumors flourish in organizations. The secrecy and competition that typically prevail in large organizations—around such issues as the appointment of new bosses, the relocation of offices, and the realignment of work assignments—create conditions

◆ The evidence indicates that 75 percent of what is carried on the grapevine is accurate.

that encourage and sustain rumors on the grapevine. A rumor will persist either until the wants and expectations creating the uncertainty underlying the rumor are fulfilled or until the anxiety is reduced.

What can we conclude from this discussion? Certainly the grapevine is an important part of any group or organization's communication network and well worth understanding.²⁰ It identifies for managers those confusing issues that employees consider important and anxiety provoking. It acts, therefore, as both a filter and a feedback mechanism, picking up the issues that employees consider relevant. Maybe more important, again from a managerial perspective, it seems possible to analyze grapevine information and to predict its flow, given that only a small set of individuals (around 10 percent) actively passes on information to more than one other person. By assessing which liaison individuals will consider a given piece of information to be relevant, we can improve our ability to explain and predict the pattern of the grapevine.

Can management entirely eliminate rumors? No! What management should do, however, is minimize the negative consequences of rumors by limiting their range and impact. Exhibit 9-6 offers a few suggestions for minimizing those negative consequences.

Exhibit 9-6 Suggestions for Reducing the Negative Consequences of Rumors

1. Announce timetables for making important decisions.
2. Explain decisions and behaviors that may appear inconsistent or secretive.
3. Emphasize the downside, as well as the upside, of current decisions and future plans.
4. Openly discuss worst-case possibilities—it is almost never as anxiety provoking as the unspoken fantasy.

Source: Adapted from L. Hirschhorn, "Managing Rumors," in L. Hirschhorn (ed.), *Cutting Back* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983), pp. 54–56. With permission.

Nonverbal Communications

Anyone who has ever paid a visit to a singles bar or a nightclub is aware that communication need not be verbal in order to convey a message. A glance, a stare, a smile, a frown, a provocative body movement—they all convey meaning. This example illustrates that no discussion of communication would be complete without a discussion of **nonverbal communications**. This includes body movements, the intonations or emphasis we give to words, facial expressions, and the physical distance between the sender and receiver.

nonverbal communications

Messages conveyed through body movements, the intonations or emphasis we give to words, facial expressions, and the physical distance between the sender and receiver.



The academic study of body motions has been labeled **kinesics**. It refers to gestures, facial configurations, and other movements of the body. It is a relatively new field, and it has been subject to far more conjecture and popularizing than the research findings support. Hence, while we acknowledge that body movement is an important segment of the study of communication and behavior, conclusions must be necessarily guarded. Recognizing this qualification, let us briefly consider the ways in which body motions convey meaning.

kinesics

The study of body motions.

It has been argued that every body movement has a meaning and that no movement is accidental.²¹ For example, through body language,

We say, “Help me, I’m lonely. Take me, I’m available. Leave me alone, I’m depressed.” And rarely do we send our messages consciously. We act out our state of being with nonverbal body language. We lift one eyebrow for disbelief. We rub our noses for puzzlement. We clasp our arms to isolate ourselves or to protect ourselves. We shrug our shoulders for indifference, wink one eye for intimacy, tap our fingers for impatience, slap our forehead for forgetfulness.²²

While we may disagree with the specific meaning of these movements, body language adds to and often complicates verbal communication. A body position or movement does not by itself

have a precise or universal meaning, but when it is linked with spoken language, it gives fuller meaning to a sender's message.

If you read the verbatim minutes of a meeting, you could not grasp the impact of what was said in the same way you could if you had been there or saw the meeting on video. Why? There is no record of nonverbal communication. The *intonations* or emphasis given to words or phrases is missing.

The *facial expression* of the instructor will also convey meaning. A snarling face says something different from a smile. Facial expressions, along with intonations, can show arrogance, aggressiveness, fear, shyness, and other characteristics that would never be communicated if you read a transcript of what had been said.

The way individuals space themselves in terms of *physical distance* also has meaning. What is considered proper spacing is largely dependent on cultural norms. For example, what is businesslike distance in some European countries would be viewed as intimate in many parts of North America. If someone stands closer to you than is considered appropriate, it may indicate aggressiveness or sexual interest. If farther away than usual, it may mean disinterest or displeasure with what is being said.

It is important for the receiver to be alert to these nonverbal aspects of communication. You should look for nonverbal cues as well as listen to the literal meaning of a sender's words. You should particularly be aware of contradictions between the messages. The

boss may say that she is free to talk to you about that raise you have been seeking, but you may see nonverbal signals that suggest that this is not the time to discuss the subject. Regardless of what is being said, an individual who frequently glances at her wristwatch is giving the message that she would prefer to terminate the conversation. We misinform others when we express one emotion verbally, such as trust, but nonverbally communicate a contradictory message that reads, “I don’t have confidence in you.” These contradictions often suggest that “actions speak louder (and more accurately) than words.”

◆ Actions often speak louder (and more accurately) than words.

Choice of Communication Channel

Bucknell University, a 3,600-student campus in central Pennsylvania, regularly uses e-mail to convey career-center, athletics-department, and general-interest announcements to students. But the administration was widely criticized recently for insensitivity by using this communication channel to transmit the news that a fellow student had apparently committed suicide. “We enjoy a close-knit, friendly atmosphere at Bucknell, and it hurts everyone when a tragedy occurs,” said the school paper’s editor in an editorial. “In these situations, only a sympathetic method of conveying information can soften the blow of bad news.”²³ The school’s administration had erred by selecting the wrong channel for its message.



Why do people choose one channel of communication over another—for instance, a phone call instead of a face-to-face talk? One answer might be: Anxiety! As you will remember, some people are apprehensive about certain kinds of communication. What about the 80 to 95 percent of the population who don't suffer from this problem? Is there any general insight we might be able to provide regarding choice of communication channel? The answer is a qualified "Yes." A model of media richness has been developed to explain channel selection among managers.²⁴

Recent research has found that channels differ in their capacity to convey information. Some are rich in that they have the ability to (1) handle multiple cues simultaneously, (2) facilitate rapid feedback, and (3) be very personal. Others are lean in that they score low on these three factors. As Exhibit 9-7 illustrates, face-to-face talk scores highest in terms of **channel richness** because it provides for the maximum amount of information to be transmitted during a communication episode. That is, it offers multiple information cues (words, postures, facial expressions, gestures, intonations), immediate feedback (both verbal and nonverbal), and the personal touch of "being there." Impersonal written media such as bulletins and general reports rate lowest in richness.

The choice of one channel over another depends on whether the message is routine or nonroutine. The former types of messages tend to be straightforward and have a minimum of ambiguity. The

channel richness

The amount of information that can be transmitted during a communication episode.



Exhibit 9-7 Hierarchy of Channel Richness

Channel richness

Type of message

Information medium

Richest

Nonroutine, ambiguous

Face-to-face talk



Telephone



Electronic mail



Memos, letters



Flyers, bulletins, general reports



Leanest

Routine, clear

Quit

Chapter Start

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latter are likely to be complicated and have the potential for misunderstanding. Managers can communicate routine messages efficiently through channels that are lower in richness. However, they can communicate nonroutine messages effectively only by selecting rich channels. Referring back to our opening example at Bucknell University, it appears that the administration's problem was using a channel relatively low in richness (e-mail) to convey a message that, because of its nonroutine nature and complexity, should have been conveyed using a rich communication medium.

Evidence indicates that high-performing managers tend to be more media sensitive than low-performing managers.²⁵ That is, they're better able to match appropriate media richness with the ambiguity involved in the communication.

The media richness model is consistent with organizational trends and practices during the past decade. It is not just coincidence that more and more senior managers have been using meetings to facilitate communication and regularly leaving the isolated sanctuary of their executive offices to manage by walking around. These executives are relying on richer channels of communication to transmit the more ambiguous messages they need to convey. The past decade has been characterized by organizations closing facilities, imposing large layoffs, restructuring, merging, consolidating, and introducing new products and services at an accelerated pace—all nonroutine messages high in ambiguity and requiring the use of

channels that can convey a large amount of information. It is not surprising, therefore, to see the most effective managers expanding their use of rich channels.

Barriers to Effective Communication

We conclude our discussion of communication fundamentals by reviewing some of the more prominent barriers to effective communication of which you should be aware.

FILTERING **Filtering** refers to a sender manipulating information so that it will be seen more favorably by the receiver. For example, when a manager tells his boss what he feels his boss wants to hear, he is filtering information. Does this happen much in organizations? Sure! As information is passed up to senior executives, it has to be condensed and synthesized by underlings so those on top don't become overloaded with information. The personal interests and perceptions of what is important by those doing the synthesizing are going to result in filtering. As a former group vice president of General Motors described it, the filtering of communications through levels at GM made it impossible for senior managers to get objective information because "lower-level specialists provided information in such a way that they would get the answer they wanted. I know. I used to be down below and do it."²⁶

filtering

A sender's manipulation of information so that it will be seen more favorably by the receiver.

The major determinant of filtering is the number of levels in an organization's structure. The more vertical levels in the organization's hierarchy, the more opportunities there are for filtering.

SELECTIVE PERCEPTION We have mentioned selective perception before in this book. It appears again because the receivers in the communication process selectively see and hear based on their needs, motivations, experience, background, and other personal characteristics. Receivers also project their interests and expectations into communications as they decode them. The employment interviewer who expects a female job applicant to put her family ahead of her career is likely to see that in female applicants, regardless of whether the applicants feel that way or not. As we said in Chapter 3, we don't see reality; rather, we interpret what we see and call it reality.

DEFENSIVENESS When people feel that they're being threatened, they tend to react in ways that reduce their ability to achieve mutual understanding. That is, they become defensive—engaging in behaviors such as verbally attacking others, making sarcastic remarks, being overly judgmental, and questioning others' motives. So when individuals interpret another's message as threatening, they often respond in ways that retard effective communication.

- ◆ The meaning of words are not in the words; they are in us.



From Concepts to Skills

Effective Listening

Too many people take listening skills for granted.²⁸ They confuse hearing with listening. What's the difference? Hearing is merely picking up sound vibrations. Listening is making sense out of what we hear. That is, listening requires paying attention, interpreting, and remembering sound stimuli.

The average person normally speaks at the rate of 125 to 200 words per minute. However, the average listener can comprehend up to 400 words per minute. This leaves a lot of time for idle mind-wandering while listening. For most people, it also means they've acquired a number of bad listening habits to fill in the "idle time."

The following eight behaviors are associated with effective listening

skills. If you want to improve your listening skills, look to these behaviors as guides:

1. *Make eye contact.* How do you feel when somebody doesn't look at you when you're speaking? If you're like most people, you're likely to interpret this as aloofness or disinterest. We may listen with our ears, but others tend to judge whether we're really listening by looking at our eyes.
2. *Exhibit affirmative head nods and appropriate facial expressions.* The effective listener shows interest in what is being said. How? Through nonverbal signals. Affirmative head nods and appropriate facial expressions, when added to good

eye contact, convey to the speaker that you're listening.

- 3. Avoid distracting actions or gestures.** The other side of showing interest is avoiding actions that suggest your mind is somewhere else. When listening, don't look at your watch, shuffle papers, play with your pencil, or engage in similar distractions. They make the speaker feel you're bored or uninterested. Maybe more importantly, they indicate that you aren't fully attentive and may be missing part of the message that the speaker wants to convey.
- 4. Ask questions.** The critical listener analyzes what he or she hears and asks questions. This behavior provides clarification, ensures understanding, and assures the speaker that you're listening.
- 5. Paraphrase.** Paraphrasing means restating what the speaker has said in your own words. The effec-

tive listener uses phrases like: "What I hear you saying is. . . or "Do you mean . . . ?" Why rephrase what's already been said? Two reasons! First, it's an excellent control device to check on whether you're listening carefully. You can't paraphrase accurately if your mind is wandering or if you're thinking about what you're going to say next. Second, it's a control for accuracy. By rephrasing what the speaker has said in your own words and feeding it back to the speaker, you verify the accuracy of your understanding.

- 6. Avoid interrupting the speaker.** Let the speaker complete his or her thought before you try to respond. Don't try to second-guess where the speaker's thoughts are going. When the speaker is finished, you'll know it!
- 7. Don't overtalk.** Most of us would rather speak our own ideas than

listen to what someone else says. Too many of us listen only because it's the price we have to pay to get people to let us talk. While talking may be more fun and silence may be uncomfortable, you can't talk and listen at the same time. The good listener recognizes this fact and doesn't overtalk.

8. *Make smooth transitions between the roles of speaker and listener.* When you're a student sitting in a lecture hall, you find it relatively easy to get into an effective listening frame of mind. Why?

Because communication is essentially one-way: The teacher talks and you listen. But the teacher–student dyad is atypical. In most work situations, you're continually shifting back and forth between the roles of speaker and listener. The effective listener, therefore, makes transitions smoothly from speaker to listener and back to speaker. From a listening perspective, this means concentrating on what a speaker has to say and practicing not thinking about what you're going to say as soon as you get your chance.

LANGUAGE Words mean different things to different people. "The meanings of words are not in the words; they are in us."²⁷ Age, education, and cultural background are three of the more obvious variables that influence the language a person uses and the definitions he or she gives to words. Rap-artist Snoop Doggy Dogg and political-analyst/author William F. Buckley, Jr., both speak English.

But the language each uses is vastly different from the other. In fact, the typical “person on the street” might have difficulty understanding either of these individuals’ vocabulary.

In an organization, employees usually come from diverse backgrounds and, therefore, have different patterns of speech. Additionally, the grouping of employees into departments creates specialists who develop their own jargon or technical language. In large organizations, members are also frequently widely dispersed geographically—even operating in different countries—and individuals in each locale will use terms and phrases that are unique to their area. And the existence of vertical levels can also cause language problems. The language of senior executives, for instance, can be mystifying to operative employees not familiar with management jargon.

The point is that while you and I speak a common language—English—our usage of that language is far from uniform. If we knew how each of us modified the language, communication difficulties would be minimized. The problem is that members in an organization usually don’t know how others with whom they interact have modified the language. Senders tend to assume that the words and terms they use mean the same to the receiver as they do to them. This, of course, is often incorrect, thus creating communication difficulties.

In Practice: Effective Employee Communications in Leading Companies Undergoing Dramatic Changes

As we've noted throughout this book, organizations around the world are restructuring in order to reduce costs and improve competitiveness. Almost all *Fortune* 100 companies, for instance, have scaled back the size of their labor force in the last half-dozen years through attrition and layoffs.

A recent study looked at employee communications programs in ten leading companies that had successfully undertaken major restructuring programs.²⁹ The companies were chosen because they had developed reputations for having excellent internal communication programs. The authors were interested in seeing if there were some common factors that determined the effectiveness of these firms' employee communications. The authors specifically chose companies that had undergone restructuring and reorganizations because they believed that the true test of a firm's communication effectiveness was how well it worked in times of major organizational change.

The authors found eight factors that were related to the effectiveness of employee communications in these ten firms. Since the companies studied came from a variety of industries and organiza-

tional settings, the authors propose that these eight characteristics should apply to many types of organizations.

Let's take a look at these eight factors because they provide some research-based guidance to managers in helping decide how best to communicate with employees.

The CEO Must Be Committed to the Importance of Communication

The most significant factor to a successful employee-communications program is the chief executive's leadership. He or she must be philosophically and behaviorally committed to the notion that communicating with employees is essential to the achievement of the organization's goals. If the organization's senior executive is committed to communication through his or her words and actions, it "trickles down" to the rest of the organization.

In addition to espousing a philosophical commitment to employee communications, the CEO must be a skilled and visible communications role model and be willing to personally deliver key messages. The CEOs in this study spent a significant amount of their time talking with employees, responding to questions, listening to their concerns, and conveying their vision of the company. Importantly, they tended to do this "in person." They didn't delegate this task to other managers. By personally championing the

cause of good communication, they lessen employee fears about changes that are being implemented and set the precedent for other managers to follow.

Managers Match Actions and Words

Closely related to CEO support and involvement is managerial action. As we've noted previously, actions speak louder than words. When the implicit messages that managers send contradict the official messages as conveyed in formal communications, the managers lose credibility with employees. Employees will listen to what management has to say regarding changes being made and where the company is going, but these words must be backed up by matching actions.

Commitment to Two-Way Communication

Ineffective programs are dominated by downward communication. Successful programs balance downward and upward communication.

How does a firm promote upward communication and stimulate employee dialogue? The company that displayed the highest commitment to two-way communication used interactive television broadcasts that allowed employees to call in questions and get responses from top management. Company publications had question-and-answer columns and employees were encouraged to submit questions. The company developed a grievance procedure that



processed complaints quickly. Managers were trained in feedback techniques and then were rewarded for using them.

General Electric and Hallmark are two companies that have perfected two-way communication. GE, for instance, launched a companywide town meeting effort in the late 1980s. Managers give credit to these meetings for “uncovering all kinds of crazy stuff we were doing.”³⁰ And Hallmark regularly selects 50 to 100 nonmanagement employees at random for a 90-minute face-to-face discussion with the company’s CEO.³¹

Emphasis on Face-to-Face Communication

In times of uncertainty and change—which characterize major restructuring efforts—employees have lots of fears and concerns. Is their job in jeopardy? Will they have to learn new skills? Is their work group going to be disbanded? Consistent with our previous discussion of channel richness, these messages are nonroutine and ambiguous. The maximum amount of information can be transmitted through face-to-face conversation. Because the firms in this study were all undergoing significant changes, their senior executives got out and personally carried their messages to operating employees. Candid, open, face-to-face communication with employees presents executives as living, breathing people who understand the needs and concerns of the workers.



Shared Responsibility for Employee Communications

Top management provides the “big picture” — where the company is going. Supervisors link the big picture to their work group and to individual employees. Every manager has some responsibility in ensuring that employees are well informed; with the implications for changes becoming more specific as they flow down the organization hierarchy.

People prefer to hear about the changes that might affect them from their boss, not from their peers or from the grapevine. This requires top management to keep middle and lower managers fully apprised of planned changes. And it means that middle and lower-level managers must quickly share information with their work group in order to minimize ambiguity.

Dealing with Bad News

Organizations with effective employee communications aren’t afraid to confront bad news. In fact, they typically have a high bad-news to good-news ratio. This doesn’t mean that these firms have more problems; rather that they don’t penalize the “bearer of bad news.”

Increasingly, many corporations are using their company publications to keep employees current on setbacks as well as upbeat news. Allied-Signal’s *Horizons* magazine, for instance, carried a



recent article by the company's president on the loss of a major bid from Northrop.³²

All organizations will, at times, have product failures, delivery delays, customer complaints, or similar problems. The issue is how comfortable people feel in communicating those problems. When bad news is candidly reported, a climate is created in which people aren't afraid to be truthful and good news gains increased credibility.

The Message Is Shaped for Its Intended Audience

Different people in the organization have different information needs. What is important to supervisors may not be so to middle managers. Similarly, what is interesting information to someone in product planning may be irrelevant to someone in accounting.

What information do individuals and groups want to know? When do they need to know it? In what form (at home, newsletter, e-mail, team meeting) is the best way for them to receive it? Employees vary in the type of information they need and the most effective way for them to receive it. Managers need to recognize this and design their communication program accordingly.

Treat Communication as an Ongoing Process

These leading companies viewed employee communications as a critical management process. This is illustrated by five common activities in which these firms engaged.

MANAGERS CONVEY THE RATIONALE UNDERLYING DECISIONS As change occurs more frequently, and their future becomes less certain, employees increasingly want to know the rationale underlying the decisions and changes that are being made. *Why* is this occurring? *How* will this affect me?

As the historical social contract that traded employee loyalty for job security has eroded, employees have new expectations from management. In times of permanent employment, comprehensive explanations of management decisions weren't as critical for employees because no matter what the changes, their jobs were relatively secure. But under the new covenant, with workers assuming a much greater responsibility for their own careers, employees feel a need for more information so they can make intelligent career decisions. Employees are looking for something from management to make up the difference between what they used to have guaranteed and what they have now. One of those things is information.

TIMELINESS IS VITAL It's important for managers to communicate what they know, when they know it. Employees don't want to be



treated as children, parceled out bits of information piece by piece or kept from information for fear that it might be misconstrued. Give people the facts as soon as they become available. This lessens the power of the grapevine and increases management's credibility. The cost of not communicating in a timely manner is disaffection, anger, and loss of trust.

New technologies make speedy communications possible. Federal Express, as a case in point, has built a \$10 million internal television network so it can communicate quickly with employees. When FedEx purchased Flying Tigers in 1989, the company's chief executive was on the air with the announcement just minutes after the announcement hit the financial wires.³³

COMMUNICATE CONTINUOUSLY Communication should be continuous, particularly during periods of change or crisis. When employees need information and it's not forthcoming, they'll fall back on informal channels to fill the void, even if those channels provide only unsubstantiated rumors. In those organizations where management strives to keep the information continuously flowing, employees are also more forgiving of the occasional error or omission.

LINK THE "BIG PICTURE" WITH THE "LITTLE PICTURE" Truly effective communication does not occur until employees understand how the "big picture" affects them and their jobs. Changes in

the economy, among competitors in the industry, or in the organization as a whole must be translated into implications for each location, department, and employee. This responsibility falls most directly on employees' direct supervisors.

DON'T DICTATE THE WAY PEOPLE SHOULD FEEL ABOUT THE NEWS

Employees don't want to be told how they should interpret and feel about change. Trust and openness are not enhanced by claims like "These new changes are really exciting!" or "You're going to like the way that the department is being restructured!" More often than not, these attempts to sway opinion only provoke antagonistic responses.

It's more effective to communicate, "who, what, when, where, why, and how" and then let employees draw their own conclusions.

Current Issues in Communication

We close this chapter by addressing four current issues: Why do men and women often have difficulty communicating with each other? What are the implications of the "politically correct" movement on communications in organizations? How can individuals improve their cross-cultural communications? And how is electronics changing the way people communicate with each other in organizations?



Communication Barriers between Women and Men

Research by Deborah Tannen provides us with some important insights into the differences between men and women in terms of their conversational styles.³⁴ In particular, she has been able to explain why gender often creates oral communication barriers.

The essence of Tannen's research is that men use talk to emphasize status, while women use it to create connection. Tannen states that communication is a continual balancing act, juggling the conflicting needs for intimacy and independence. Intimacy emphasizes closeness and commonalities. Independence emphasizes separateness and differences. But here's the kick: Women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy; men speak and hear a language of status and independence. So, for many men, conversations are primarily a means to preserve independence and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. For many women, conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support. A few examples will illustrate Tannen's thesis:

Men frequently complain that women talk on and on about their problems. Women criticize men for not listening. What's happening is that when men hear a problem, they frequently assert their desire for independence and control by offering solutions. Many women, on the other hand, view telling a problem as a means to promote closeness. The women present the problem to

- ◆ Men use talk to emphasize status, while women use it to create connection.

gain support and connection, not to get the male's advice. Mutual understanding is symmetrical. But giving advice is asymmetrical—it sets the advice giver up as more knowledgeable, more reasonable, and more in control. This contributes to distancing men and women in their efforts to communicate.

Men are often more direct than women in conversation. A man might say, "I think you're wrong on that point." A woman might say, "Have you looked at the marketing department's research report on that point?" (the implication being that the report will show the error). Men frequently see female indirectness as "covert" or "sneaky," but women are not as concerned as men with the status and one-upmanship that directness often creates.

Finally, men often criticize women for seeming to apologize all the time. Men tend to see the phrase "I'm sorry" as a weakness because they interpret the phrase to mean the woman is accepting blame, when he knows she's not to blame. The woman also knows she is not to blame. The problem is that women typically use "I'm sorry" to express regret: "I know you must feel bad about this; I do, too."

"Politically Correct" Communication

What words do you use to describe a colleague who is wheelchair bound? What terms do you use in addressing a female customer? How do you communicate with a brand-new client who is not like

you? The right answers can mean the difference between losing a client, an employee, a lawsuit, a harassment claim, or a job.³⁵

Most of us are acutely aware of how our vocabulary has been modified to reflect political correctness. For instance, most of us have cleansed the words *handicapped*, *blind*, and *elderly* from our vocabulary—and replaced them with terms like *physically challenged*, *visually impaired*, and *senior*. The *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, allows its journalists to use the term *old age* but cautions that the onset of old age varies from “person to person,” so a group of 75-year-olds aren’t necessarily all old.³⁶

We must be sensitive to others’ feelings. Certain words can and do stereotype, intimidate, and insult individuals. In an increasingly diverse work force, we must be sensitive to how words might offend others. But there’s a downside to political correctness. It’s shrinking our vocabulary and making it more difficult for people to communicate. To illustrate, you probably know what these four terms mean: *death*, *quotas*, *dwarfs*, and *women*. But each of these words also has been found to offend one or more groups. They’ve been replaced with terms like *negative-patient-care outcome*, *educational equity*, *vertically challenged*, and *people of gender*. The problem is that this latter group of terms is much less likely to convey a uniform message than the words they replaced. You know what death means; I know what death means; but can you be sure that “negative-patient-care outcome” will be consistently defined as synonymy-

mous with death? No! For instance, the phrase could also mean a longer stay than expected in the hospital or notification that your insurance company won't pay your hospital bill.

Some critics, for humor's sake, enjoy carrying political correctness to the extreme. Even those of us with thinning scalps, who aren't too thrilled at being labeled "bald," have to smirk when we're referred to as "follically challenged." But our concern here is with how politically correct language is contributing a new barrier to effective communication.

Words are the primary means by which people communicate. When we eliminate words from usage because they're politically incorrect, we reduce our options for conveying messages in the clearest and most accurate form. For the most part, the larger the vocabulary used by a sender and a receiver, the greater the opportunity to accurately transmit messages. By removing certain words from our vocabulary, we make it harder to communicate accurately. When we further replace these words with new terms whose meanings are less well understood, we have reduced the likelihood that our messages will be received as we had intended them.

We must be sensitive to how our choice of words might offend others. But we also have to be careful not to sanitize our language to the point where it clearly restricts clarity of communication. There is no simple solution to this dilemma. However, you should be aware of the trade-offs and the need to find a proper balance.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Effective communication is difficult under the best of conditions. Cross-cultural factors clearly create the potential for increased communication problems. This is illustrated in Exhibit 9-9. A gesture that is well understood and acceptable in one culture can be meaningless or lewd in another.³⁷

One author has identified four specific problems related to language difficulties in cross-cultural communications.³⁸

First, there are *barriers caused by semantics*. As we've noted previously, words mean different things to different people. This is particularly true for people from different national cultures. Some words, for instance, don't translate between cultures. Understanding the word *sisu* will help you in communicating with people from Finland, but this word is untranslatable into English. It means something akin to "guts" or "dogged persistence." Similarly, the new capitalists in Russia may have difficulty communicating with their British or Canadian counterparts because English terms such as *efficiency*, *free market*, and *regulation* are not directly translatable into Russian.

Second, there are *barriers caused by word connotations*. Words imply different things in different languages. Negotiations between Americans and Japanese executives, for instance, are made more difficult because the Japanese word *hai* translates as "yes," but its connotation may be "yes, I'm listening," rather than "yes, I agree."



Exhibit 9-9 Hand Gestures Mean Different Things in Different Countries

The A-OK Sign



In the United States, this is just a friendly sign for "All right!" or "Good going." In Australia and Islamic countries, it is equivalent to what generations of high school students know as "flipping the bird."

The "Hook'em Horns" Sign



This sign encourages University of Texas athletes, and it's a good luck gesture in Brazil and Venezuela. In parts of Africa it is a curse. In Italy, it is signaling to another that "your spouse is being unfaithful."

"V" for Victory Sign



In many parts of the world, this means "victory" or "peace." In England, if the palm and fingers face inward, it means "Up yours!" especially if executed with an upward jerk of the fingers.

Finger-Beckoning Sign



This sign means "come here" in the United States. In Malaysia, it is used only for calling animals. In Indonesia and Australia, it is used for beckoning "ladies of the night."

Source: "What's A-O.K. in the U.S.A. Is Lewd and Worthless Beyond," *New York Times*, August 18, 1996, p. E7. From Roger E. Axtell, *GESTURES: Do and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*, ©1991 John Wiley and Sons.



Third are *barriers caused by tone differences*. In some cultures, language is formal, in others it's informal. In some cultures, the tone changes depending on the context: people speaking differently at home, in social situations, and at work. Using a personal, informal style in a situation where a more formal style is expected can be embarrassing and off-putting.

Fourth, there are *barriers caused by differences among perceptions*. People who speak different languages actually view the world in different ways. Eskimos perceive snow differently because they have many words for it. Thais perceive “no” differently than Americans because the former have no such word in their vocabulary.

When communicating with people from a different culture, what can you do to reduce misperceptions, misinterpretations, and misevaluations? Following these four rules can be helpful:³⁹

1. *Assume differences until similarity is proven.* Most of us assume that others are more similar to us than they actually are. But people from different countries often are very different from us. So you are far less likely to make an error if you assume others are different from you rather than assuming similarity until difference is proven.
2. *Emphasize description rather than interpretation or evaluation.* Interpreting or evaluating what someone has said or done, in contrast to description, is based more on the observer's culture and background than on the observed situation. As a result,

delay judgment until you've had sufficient time to observe and interpret the situation from the differing perspectives of all the cultures involved.

- 3. Practice empathy.** Before sending a message, put yourself in the recipient's shoes. What are his or her values, experiences, and frames of reference? What do you know about his or her education, upbringing, and background that can give you added insight? Try to see the other person as he or she really is.
- 4. Treat your interpretations as a working hypothesis.** Once you've developed an explanation for a new situation or think you empathize with someone from a foreign culture, treat your interpretation as a hypothesis that needs further testing rather than as a certainty. Carefully assess the feedback provided by recipients to see if it confirms your hypothesis. For important decisions or communiqués, you can also check with other foreign and home-country colleagues to make sure that your interpretations are on target.

Electronic Communications

Until the last 15 or to 20 years, there were very few technological breakthroughs that significantly affected organizational communications. Early in this century, the telephone dramatically reduced personal, face-to-face communication. The popularization of the photocopy machine in the late 1960s was the death bell for carbon



paper and made the copying of documents faster and easier. But beginning in the early 1980s, we've been subjected to an onslaught of new electronic technologies that are largely reshaping the way we communicate in organizations.⁴⁰ These include pagers, facsimile machines, video conferencing, electronic meetings, e-mail, cellular phones, voice messaging, and palm-sized personal communicators.

Electronic communications no longer make it necessary for you to be at your work station or desk to be "available." Pagers, cellular phones, and personal communicators allow you to be reached when you're in a meeting, during your lunch break, while visiting in a customer's office across town, or during a golf game on Saturday morning. The line between an employee's work and non-work life is no longer distinct. In the electronic age, all employees can theoretically be "on call" 24 hours a day.

Organizational boundaries become less relevant as a result of electronic communications. Why? Because networked computers—that is, computers that are interlinked to communicate with each other—allow employees to jump vertical levels within the organization, work full time at home or someplace other than an organizationally operated facility, and carry ongoing communications with people in other organizations. The market researcher who wants to discuss an issue with the vice president of marketing (who is three levels up in the hierarchy), can by-pass the people in between and

◆ Organizational boundaries become less relevant as a result of electronic communications.



send an e-mail message directly. And in so doing, the traditional status hierarchy, largely determined by level and access, becomes essentially negated. Or that same market researcher may choose to live in the Cayman Islands and work at home via telecommuting rather than do his or her job in the company's Chicago office. And when an employee's computer is linked to suppliers' and customers' computers, the boundaries separating organizations become further blurred. Hundreds of suppliers, for instance, are linked into Wal-Mart's computers. This allows people at companies like Levi Strauss to be able to monitor Wal-Mart's inventory of Levi jeans and to replace merchandise as needed, clouding the distinction between Levi and Wal-Mart employees.

While the telephone allowed people to transmit verbal messages instantly, it's only been very recently that this same speed became available for the written word. In the mid-1960s, organizations were almost completely dependent on interoffice memos for internal, on-site messages, and on wire services and the post office for external messages. Then came overnight express delivery and fax machines. Today, with almost all organizations having introduced e-mail and an increasing number providing their employees with access to the Internet, written communications can be transmitted with all the speed of the telephone.

Electronic communications have revolutionized both the ability to access other people and to reach them almost instantaneously.



Investment bank Morgan Stanley distributes data and information to employees at its 37 offices around the world on the company's intranet, an internal corporate web. For example, the global network allows traders in Japan to receive up-to-the-minute information on securities transactions from colleagues in New York. Morgan Stanley has also connected its "hoot and holler" worldwide voice messaging system to its intranet, allowing salespeople to receive messages from their workstation speakers on the trading floor.

Unfortunately, this access and speed have come with some costs. Electronic mail, for instance, doesn't provide the nonverbal communication component that the face-to-face meeting does. Nor does e-mail convey the emotions and nuances that come through from verbal intonations in telephone conversations. Similarly, it's been noted that meetings have historically served two distinct purposes—fulfilling a need for group affiliation and serving as a forum for completing task work.⁴¹ Video conferences and electronic meetings do a good job at supporting tasks but don't address affiliation needs. For

people with a high need for social contact, a heavy reliance on electronic communications is likely to lead to lower job satisfaction.

Summary and Implications for Managers

A careful review of this chapter finds a common theme regarding the relationship between communication and employee satisfaction: the less the uncertainty, the greater the satisfaction. Distortions, ambiguities, and incongruities all increase uncertainty and, hence, have a negative impact on satisfaction.⁴²

The less distortion that occurs in communication, the more that goals, feedback, and other management messages to employees will be received as they were intended.⁴³ This, in turn, should reduce ambiguities and clarify the group's task. Extensive use of vertical, lateral, and informal channels will increase communication flow, reduce uncertainty, and improve group performance and satisfaction. We should also expect incongruities between verbal and nonverbal communiqués to increase uncertainty and reduce satisfaction.

Findings in the chapter further suggest that the goal of perfect communication is unattainable. Yet, there is evidence that demonstrates a positive relationship between effective communication (which includes factors such as perceived trust, perceived accuracy, desire for interaction, top-management receptiveness, and upward

information requirements) and worker productivity.⁴⁴ Choosing the correct channel, being an effective listener, and utilizing feedback may, therefore, make for more effective communication. But the human factor generates distortions that can never be fully eliminated. The communication process represents an exchange of messages, but the outcome is meanings that may or may not approximate those that the sender intended. Whatever the sender's expectations, the decoded message in the mind of the receiver represents his or her reality. And it is this "reality" that will determine performance, along with the individual's level of motivation and his or her degree of satisfaction. The issue of motivation is critical, so we should briefly review how communication is central in determining an individual's degree of motivation.

You will remember from expectancy theory that the degree of effort an individual exerts depends on his or her perception of the effort–performance, performance–reward, and reward–goal satisfaction linkages. If individuals are not given the data necessary to make the perceived probability of these linkages high, motivation will suffer. If rewards are not made clear, if the criteria for determining and measuring performance are ambiguous, or if individuals are not relatively certain that their effort will lead to satisfactory performance, then effort will be reduced. So communication plays a significant role in determining the level of employee motivation.

A final implication from the communication literature relates to predicting turnover. The use of realistic job previews acts as a communication device for clarifying role expectations (see the “Counterpoint” in Chapter 3). Employees who have been exposed to a realistic job preview have more accurate information about that job. Comparisons of turnover rates between organizations that use the realistic job preview versus either no preview or only presentation of positive job information show that those not using the realistic preview have, on average, almost 29 percent higher turnover.⁴⁵ This makes a strong case for managers to convey honest and accurate information about a job to applicants during the recruiting and selection process.

For Review

1. Describe the functions that communication provides within a group or organization. Give an example of each.
2. Contrast encoding and decoding.
3. Describe the communication process and identify its key components. Give an example of how this process operates with both oral and written messages.
4. Identify three common small-group networks and give the advantages of each.
5. What is *kinesics*? Why is it important?

6. What characterizes a communication that is rich in capacity to convey information?
7. What conditions stimulate the emergence of rumors?
8. Describe how political correctness can hinder effective communication.
9. List four specific problems related to language difficulties in cross-cultural communication.
10. What are the managerial implications from the research contrasting male and female communication styles?

For Discussion

1. “Ineffective communication is the fault of the sender.” Do you agree or disagree? Discuss.
2. What can you do to improve the likelihood that your communications will be received and understood as you intend?
3. How might managers use the grapevine for their benefit?
4. Using the concept of channel richness, give examples of messages best conveyed by e-mail, by face-to-face communication, and on the company bulletin board.
5. Why do you think so many people are poor listeners?



The Case for Mutual Understanding: The Johari Window

The Johari Window (named after its creators, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingram) is a popular model, used by training specialists, for assessing and categorizing communication styles. The essence of the model is the belief that mutual understanding improves perceptual accuracy and communication.

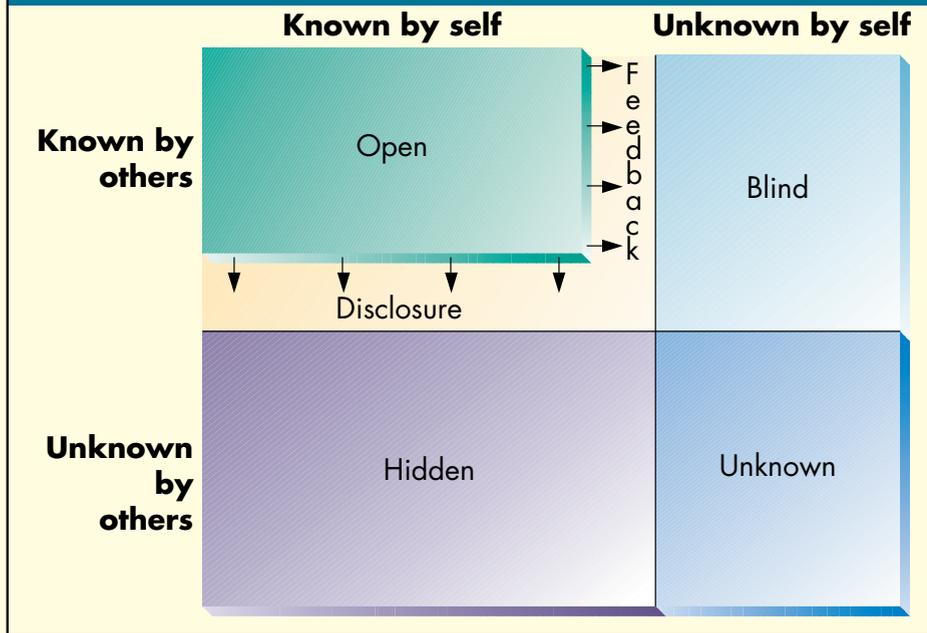
The model classifies an individual's tendencies to facilitate or hinder interpersonal communication along two dimensions: exposure and feedback. Exposure is defined as the extent to which an individual openly and candidly divulges feelings, experiences, and information when trying to communicate. Feedback is the extent to which an individual successfully elicits exposure from others. As shown in Exhibit 9-A, these dimensions translate into four "windows"—open, blind, hidden, and unknown. The *open* window is information known to you as well as others. The *blind* window encompasses certain things about you that are apparent to others but not to yourself. This is the result of no one ever

telling you or because you're defensively blocking them out. The *hidden* window is information known by you and unknown by others. It encompasses those things or feelings that we're aware of but don't share with others for fear they'll think less of us or possibly use the information against us. And the *unknown* window includes feelings, experience, and information that neither you nor others are aware of.

While there is no substantive body of research to support the following conclusion, the Johari Window model argues for more open communication on the assumption that people understand each other better when the amount of information in the open area increases. If you accept this conclusion, how would you increase the open area? According to Luft and Ingram, you do this through disclosure and feedback. By increasing self-disclosure, you reveal your inner feelings and experiences. In addition, the evidence suggests that self-disclosure encourages others to be similarly forthcoming and open. So disclosure breeds more disclosure. When others provide feedback on their insights into your behavior, you reduce your blind window.



Exhibit 9-A The Johari Window



While advocates of the Johari Window encourage a climate of openness, where individuals self-disclose freely with each other, they recognize that there are conditions

where guarded communication may be appropriate. These include transitory relationships, where one party has violated trust in the past, in competitive situations, or



where the culture of the organization doesn't support openness. Although critics might argue that one or more of those conditions just about covers almost all communication situations in organizations, proponents of the Johari Window are more optimistic. They see openness, authenticity, and honesty to be valued qualities in interpersonal relationships. And while they don't say so directly, they imply that it's in the self-inter-

est of individuals to try to expand the size of the open window by increasing self-disclosure and by being willing to listen to feedback from others even if it's unflattering.

Based on J. Luft, *Group Processes*, 3rd ed. (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1984), pp. 11–20; and J. Hall, "Communication Revisited," *California Management Review*, Fall 1973, pp. 56–67.

The Case for Ambiguous Communication

The argument for mutual understanding and openness, while honorable, is incredibly naive. It assumes that communicators actually want to achieve mutual understanding and that openness is the preferred means toward that end. Unfortunately, that argument overlooks a very basic fact: It's often in the sender's and/or receiver's best interest to keep communication ambiguous.

“Lack of communication” has become the explanation for every problem in an organization. If the newly “empowered” work force is unmotivated, it's a communication problem. If the quality-improvement program fails to garner the promised benefits, it's a communication problem. If employees ignore or abuse customers despite training that instructs them otherwise, it's a communication problem.

We're continually hearing that problems would go away if we could “just communicate better.” Some of the basic assumptions underlying this view need to be looked at carefully.

One assumption is that better communication will necessarily reduce strife and con-

flict. But each individual's definition of better communication, like his or her definition of virtuous conduct, becomes that of having the other party accept his or her views, which would reduce conflict at that party's expense. A better understanding of the situation might serve only to underline the differences rather than to resolve them. Indeed, many of the techniques thought of as poor communication were apparently developed with the aim of bypassing or avoiding confrontation.

Another assumption that grows from this view is that when a conflict has existed for a long time and shows every sign of continuing, lack of communication must be one of the basic problems. Usually, if the situation is examined more carefully, plenty of communication will be found; the problem is, again, one of equating communication with agreement.

Still a third assumption is that it is always in the interest of at least one of the parties to an interaction, and often of both, to attain maximum clarity as measured by some more or less objective standard. Aside from the difficulty of setting up this standard—whose standard? and doesn't this



give him or her control of the situation?—there are some sequences, and perhaps many of them, in which it is in the interests of both parties to leave the situation as fuzzy and undefined as possible. This is notably true in culturally or personally sensitive and taboo areas involving prejudices, preconceptions, and so on, but it can also be true when the area is merely a new one that could be seriously distorted by using old definitions and old solutions.

Too often we forget that keeping communications fuzzy cuts down on questions, permits faster decision making, minimizes objections, reduces opposition, makes it easier to deny one's earlier statements, preserves freedom to change one's mind, helps to preserve mystique and hide insecurities, allows one to say several things at the same time, permits one to say

“No” diplomatically, and helps to avoid confrontation and anxiety.

If you want to see the fine art of ambiguous communication up close, all you have to do is watch a television interview with a politician who is running for office. The interviewer attempts to get specific information, while the politician tries to retain multiple possible interpretations. Such ambiguous communications allow the politician to approach his or her ideal image of being “all things to all people.”

Based on C.O. Kursh, “The Benefits of Poor Communication,” *The Psychoanalytic Review*, Summer–Fall 1971, pp. 189–208; E.M. Eisenberg and M.G. Witten, “Reconsidering Openness in Organizational Communication,” *Academy of Management Review*, July 1987, pp. 418–26; and B. Filipczak, “Obfuscation Resounding,” *Training*, July 1995, pp. 29–36.



Learning About Yourself Exercise

Listening Self-Inventory

Go through this 15-item questionnaire twice. The first time, mark the yes or no box next to each question. Mark as truthfully as you can in light of your behavior in recent meetings or gatherings you attended. The second time, mark a plus (+) next to your answer if you are satisfied with that answer, or a minus (–) next to the answer if you wish you could have answered that question differently.

	Yes	No	+ or –
1. I frequently attempt to listen to several conversations at the same time.	_____	_____	_____
2. I like people to give me only the facts and then let me make my own interpretations.	_____	_____	_____
3. I sometimes pretend to pay attention to people.	_____	_____	_____
4. I consider myself a good judge of nonverbal communications.	_____	_____	_____
5. I usually know what another person is going to say before he or she says it.	_____	_____	_____



	Yes	No	+ or -
6. I usually end conversations that don't * interest me by diverting my attention from the speaker.	_____	_____	_____
7. I frequently nod, frown, or whatever to let the speaker know how I feel about what he or she is saying.	_____	_____	_____
8. I usually respond immediately when someone has finished talking.	_____	_____	_____
9. I evaluate what is being said while it is being said.	_____	_____	_____
10. I usually formulate a response while the other person is still talking.	_____	_____	_____
11. The speaker's delivery style frequently keeps me from listening to content.	_____	_____	_____
12. I usually ask people to clarify what they have said rather than guess at the meaning.	_____	_____	_____
13. I make a concerted effort to understand other people's point of view.	_____	_____	_____
14. I frequently hear what I expect to hear rather than what is said.	_____	_____	_____
15. Most people feel that I have understood their point of view when we disagree.	_____	_____	_____

Turn to page 1482 for scoring directions and key.

Source: E.C. Glenn and E.A. Pood, "Listening Self-Inventory," *Supervisory Management*, January 1989, pp. 12–15. With permission.

Working with Others Exercise

An Absence of Nonverbal Communication

This exercise will help you to see the value of nonverbal communication to interpersonal relations.

1. The class is to split up into pairs (Party A and Party B).
2. Party A is to select a topic from the following list:
 - a. Managing in the Middle East is significantly different from managing in North America.
 - b. Employee turnover in an organization can be functional.
 - c. Some conflict in an organization is good.
 - d. Whistleblowers do more harm than good for an organization.
 - e. Bureaucracies are frustrating to work in.
 - f. An employer has a responsibility to provide every employee with an interesting and challenging job.
 - g. Everyone should register to vote.

- h.** Organizations should require all employees to undergo regular tests for AIDS.
 - i.** Organizations should require all employees to undergo regular drug tests.
 - j.** Individuals who have majored in business or economics make better employees than those who have majored in history or English.
 - k.** The place where you get your college degree is more important in determining career success than what you learn while you're there.
 - l.** Effective managers often have to lie as part of their job.
 - m.** It's unethical for a manager to purposely distort communications to get a favorable outcome.
- 3.** Party B is to choose his or her position on this topic (for example, arguing *against* the view that “some conflict in an organization is good”). Party A now must automatically take the opposite position.
- 4.** The two parties have ten minutes in which to debate their topic. The catch is that individuals can only communicate verbally. They may *not* use gestures, facial movements, body movements, or any other nonverbal communication. It may help for each party to sit on his or her hands to remind them of their restrictions and to maintain an expressionless look.
- 5.** After the debate is over, the class should discuss the following:
- a.** How effective was communication during these debates?



- b. What barriers to communication existed?
- c. What purposes does nonverbal communication serve?
- d. Relate the lessons learned in this exercise to problems that might occur when communicating on the telephone or through e-mail.

Have We Got a Communication Problem Here?

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. Just get those planes in the air,” Jim Tuchman was screaming at his gate manager. As head of American Airlines’ operations at the Mexico City airport, Tuchman has been consistently frustrated by the attitude displayed by his native employees. Transferred from Dallas to Mexico City only three months ago, Tuchman was having difficulty adjusting to the Mexican style of work. “Am I critical of these people? You bet I am! They don’t listen when I talk. They think things are just fine and fight every change I suggest. And they have no appreciation for the importance of keeping on schedule.”

If Tuchman is critical of his Mexico City staff, it’s mutual. They universally dislike him. Here’s a few anonymous comments made about their boss: “He’s totally insensitive to our needs.” “He thinks if he yells and screams, that things will improve. We don’t see it that way.” “I’ve been working here for four years. Before he came

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here, this was a good place to work. Not anymore. I'm constantly in fear of being chewed out. I feel stress all the time, even at home. My husband has started commenting on it a lot."

Tuchman was brought in specifically to tighten up the Mexico City operation. High on his list of goals is improving American's on-time record in Mexico City, increasing productivity, and improving customer service. When Tuchman was asked if he thought he had any problems with his staff, he replied, "Yep. We just can't seem to communicate."

Questions

1. Does Jim Tuchman have a communication problem? Explain.
2. What suggestions, if any, would you make to Jim to help him improve his managerial effectiveness?

Does Women's Communication Style Hinder Them in Business?

Deborah Tannen says there's a distinct difference between the genders in the way they communicate. She calls them male and female rituals and she says they can get in the way of achieving work-related goals.

One of Tannen's findings relates to directness. Tannen says women often tend to avoid directness and cast themselves in an

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inferior light. This is seen in the following conversation between two *Money* magazine writers, Lesley Alderman and Gary Belsky.

Gary: Well, do you have anything that you're considering?

Lesley: Here are things we . . . we were . . . that we've been thinking about. I'm just throwing things up.

Gary: Go on.

Lesley: So that's good. Then this one's really out, but . . . you're going to think I'm completely insane . . . but you know, there's like this whole like spiritual kind of drive thing. I can see you . . . like you're saying, "Oh, no." I don't even know if that's the angle, exactly. I'm not sure if that's the angle. All I'm saying is . . . I'm sort of throwing that out something . . .

Gary: OK.

Lesley: Maybe there's something in that. It's a little way out, perhaps.

Another gender-related ritual is apologizing. Women tend to apologize when they haven't done anything wrong. Why? They use it as a ritual way to get into the interaction. Men, on the other hand, seem to apologize only when they absolutely need to.

Tannen says women use a communication style that allows others to save face. They avoid directness and prefer subtlety. This can create real problems in organizations. Female managers may appear to be lacking confidence. They may also appear to be tentative when giving orders. According to Tannen, these conversational rituals can be the basis for underestimating a woman's capabilities. She can be

seen as incompetent, whereas she thinks she's being considerate. She can be seen as lacking in confidence, whereas she feels she's simply being a good person by not flaunting her authority.

Women may be in a "can't win" situation. If they try to be considerate through indirectness, they may receive lower performance evaluations. Their bosses may assume they are not aggressive or confident enough to handle their jobs. But if they talk too much like men, they suffer because their bosses and subordinates may see them as too aggressive.

Questions

1. Do you think gender stereotypes of communication styles can be generalized to the entire work force?
2. Do you think these gender styles are influenced by national culture? Explain.
3. Do you think adults can unlearn specific gender-related communication styles? Defend your position.
4. What suggestions would you make so women can communicate more effectively at work?
5. What suggestions would you make for men?

Source: Based on "He Says She Says," *20/20*, ABC News; aired on October 21, 1994.