Key Concept

3

COMMUNICATION

Communication is not a matter of being right, but
of starting a flow of energy between two people
that can result in mutual understanding.
John Sanford

Interpersonal Communication

For a group to come into existence, organise itself, and develop into an effective team requires above all else good communication between members. There is more to this than just talking or exchanging information: co-operative action depends for its success on the accurate transfer of *meaning* between individuals or between groups. The aim is to achieve an understanding between the sender and the receiver whereby the meaning received is the same as the meaning intended. When this happens, we have what Jones (1972) calls a '*shared common-meaning experience*': that moment of understanding that occurs when each 'meets' the other and attributes the same meaning to the data or symbols being exchanged. It is an intriguing definition of human communication.

Organisations use the communication process in a number of ways and for a variety of purposes. One-way communication may be used to inform, instruct, control or persuade; two-way communication is usually preferred for interactive functions such as task co-ordination, problem-solving, conflict resolution, decision-making and team building. In the classical hierarchical organisation, further distinctions may be made between vertical and horizontal flows (top-down, bottom-up, crosswise) and between formal and informal channels and procedures (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Koontz, O'Donnell and Weirich, 1980; McCroskey, Richmond and Stewart, 1986; Reitz, 1981). Koontz et al. offer the following list of functions served by communication:

- to establish and disseminate goals of an enterprise;

- to develop plans for their achievement;

- to organize human and other resources in the most effective and efficient way;

- to select, develop, and appraise members of the organisation;

- to lead, direct, motivate, and create a climate in which people want to contribute;

- to control performance.

In small groups the main concerns are with face-to-face interaction and the factors that assist or hinder effective interpersonal and intergroup communication. Figure 3.1 depicts a simple model of the process.
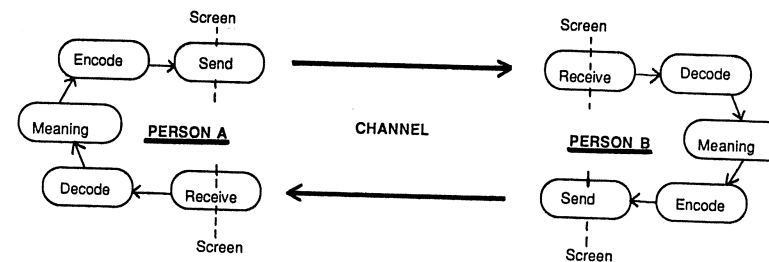

Fig. 3.1 The communication process.

Person *A* starts the interaction by encoding: transforming a thought into symbols (written or spoken words, sounds, visuals, etc.) for transmission as a signal through a channel or medium. The act of sending the encoded message assumes a recipient (Person *B*), who in turn decodes the message and transforms it into thought and meaning. *B*'s response to *A* follows a similar sequence, and so the process continues. During this flow back and forth, there will be two main sources of message distortion: screens and noise.

A screen is the totality of the individual's personality, experience, emotional and physical state, attitudes, beliefs, values, biases and assumptions. Any message must pass through *A*'s as well as *B*'s screen, and in doing so each may distort, confuse or add to the content unintentionally. When *B* is responding to *A*, it is to what *B* actually heard or saw rather than to what *A* intended *B* to hear or see.

Noise refers to any interference with the message in the space between the sender and the recipient, i.e. in the channel. Channels include the air space between the parties, telephone lines, mail and courier services and

so forth. Each of these may cause further distortion by generating background noises, discomfort, obstructions, static, fading, tampering, etc. Noise may also affect the screens of each party by playing on their emotional and/or physical state.

Apart from screens and noise, a particular instance arises when two communicators have to contend with the problem of different sensory preferences. People take in and give out information through three basic sensory channels: visual (seeing), auditory (hearing) and kinesthetic (feeling). A clinical therapeutic approach to interpersonal communication known as neurolinguistic programming (NLP) has provided strong evidence that individuals tend to have a preference for one of these channels over the others when talking or listening (Bandler and Grinder, 1975; Laborde, 1983; Lankton, 1980). Misunderstanding can occur if the sender's mode does not match that of the receiver, for example, when a strongly visual person is talking to a strongly kinesthetic person. 'I don't *see* what you mean . . .' and 'I *feel* you're not really with me . . .' contain verbal clues to differing preferences.

NLP proposes ways that one or both parties may improve their understanding of each other by matching their words and imagery more closely. It is of little use replying to 'I don't see what you mean' with 'Didn't you hear what I said?' The single most important tenet of the NLP approach is that *the success of communication must be measured with reference to the framework of the recipient rather than that of the sender.*

Types of Communication

We can use the model in Figure 3.1 to examine three different *levels* of communication, and a number of different *modes*. The first level is *communication as sending* (one-way). At this level, only half the process takes place (from 'encode message' to 'meaning') and the receiver remains passive. Office memos, orders, advice and pronouncements from superiors can all be sent quickly, but it may take a long time to discover that the message was not properly understood or acted upon. Where immediate feedback is impossible or discouraged, there is no way to determine whether what B received was what A intended. This type of communication is dependent on the sender's competence in expression and on the hopeful assumption of a high degree of rapport between the parties.

The second level is *communication as exchange* (two-way). At this level, *A* and *B* are in dialogue for as long as it takes to establish a mutual understanding. The full process continues as each party sends a message then listens to the other's response and responds in turn. Through reflecting back what is heard (feedback) and through the sharing of emotional

as well as intellectual reactions to each other's messages, a state of consensus of understanding may eventually be reached.

The third level is *communication as union*, a deeper experience of mutual understanding than would normally be expected in everyday work situations. This is truly communion, and implies a moment of inspiration shared by two people as their communication reaches a level of meaningfulness that unites them, albeit for an instant, in a moment that may have almost a mystical quality. Even in work groups, such an event may be witnessed when two members resolve a difficult interpersonal conflict with an obviously deeply felt sense of relief and acceptance of each other. The moment of communion is usually followed by silence, any further interchanges being unnecessary or, at most, nonverbal.

There are two basic modes or types of signals used in the interpersonal communication process: verbal and nonverbal. Undoubtedly, the verbal mode is the one we rely on most, but the importance of the nonverbal must not be underestimated. In communicating verbally we use the spoken or written word, and in that simple fact lies the source of much of the difficulty that occurs between people attempting to understand each other. A word is only a label or symbol for a thing, not the thing itself. Because individuals experience the world in ways that are never identical, the meanings we attribute to words and the emotions we attach to them may be markedly different. In addition, words are often inadequate in themselves as tools for describing complexity fully and clearly, particularly the complexity of interpersonal behaviour. Differences in life experience, age, ethnic origins, values and the myriad other factors listed later all contribute to problems in verbal communication.

The nonverbal mode refers to the ways that we transmit messages other than by the written or spoken word. They are largely involuntary, and include body language, vocalism, and symbolism. They contribute very significantly to the communication process between two individuals, but often on a subconscious or covert level. Body language includes posture, gestures, eye contact, movement, touch and personal distance. Vocalism refers to non-word sounds such as grunts, 'ums' and 'ahs', and the tone, volume, pace and emphasis of the voice. Symbolism includes the clothes, hairstyle, and adornments that we choose, and even our furniture, cars and living spaces, all of which give out signals of their own which may mould the message further.

The constant stream of signals from voice, body and possessions are a real and significant part of our communication — if our verbal and our nonverbal signals do not complement each other (i.e. are not *congruent*), the receiver will likely find the nonverbal component more valid when trying to construct meaning. A large proportion of the process of two-way communication is given over to achieving congruence as well as consensus of understanding. In addition, sending and receiving often takes place

simultaneously: a person can be speaking and at the same time processing the other's nonverbal responses to what is being said.

Communication and Context

The flow of communication depends in part on the group structure and culture, in particular the number and direction of channels available, the differences of power, role and status, and the procedural rules and norms that become established. These variables can ease or constrict the flow of messages, and may also affect the message content and the frequency of transmissions.

It was noted earlier that communication networks reveal patterns that vary from completely centralised at one extreme to all-channel at the other. The different patterns have direct influences on morale, leadership, cohesion, problem-solving and group development (Fisher, 1980, pp. 158–65; Shaw 1981, pp. 150–61). Interactions through the various channels are regulated by rules (of task, procedure, etiquette, protocol or social custom) and relationships (e.g. boss–subordinate hostility, peer rivalry). Members of a group with a charismatic or feared leader may behave differently in the way they communicate with each other depending on whether the leader is present or absent.

Differences will also be observed in groups that exist in, say, a collaborative as opposed to a combative culture, or consist of members with a respectful/supportive versus a dehumanising/threatening attitude to each other and to people in general. A supportive non-threatening climate lets people express their opinions, be straightforward, and not be defensive or feel they will be criticised for being honest (McCroskey et al., 1986, p. 260).

The seating pattern in small-group meetings is another factor that has significance in terms of ease or difficulty of communication. Much of this stems from issues of power/status/leadership that may be reflected in the seating arrangements. Some typical configurations are examined in Appendix B.

Sources of Distortion

The many conditions which may hinder, block or distort a communication transaction can be attributed either to the people involved (the sender, the receiver or both) or to the circumstances of the situation at the moment when the attempt is made. Koontz et al. (1980), Napier and Gershenfeld (1985) and Pfeiffer (1973) provide many examples of sources of interference and distortion. These can be expanded and recategorised as follows:

Environmental: excessive noise, heat, cold; inadequate lighting or ventilation; badly arranged or uncomfortable furniture; poor aesthetic quality; overcrowding; intrusions and distractions (e.g. interrupters, telephone, TV).

Physiological: diction (e.g. too fast, too soft, mispronunciation); speech or hearing defects; poor health; distractions (pain, hunger, thirst).

Psychological: negative past experiences leading to fearful expectations (e.g. cynicism, unwillingness to be honest); false beliefs, unclarified assumptions and stereotyping; information overload (an accumulation of inputs resulting in nonprocessing, or faulty or partial processing); emotional overload (e.g. accumulated hostility, sadness, suspicion); emotional blocks (use of defence mechanisms such as projection, regression or denial to cope with increased anxiety or threatened self-esteem); low self-concept; lack of interest in subject matter; preoccupation and mind-wandering; incongruence (contradictory verbal and nonverbal content); hidden agendas.

Interpersonal: charisma or perceived trustworthiness (i.e. credibility, reliability) of sender; power, status and role relationships between sender and recipient; proxemics (inappropriate interpersonal distance, intrusion into personal space).

Language/cultural: semantics (multiple, ambiguous, or disputed meanings to words and phrases); inarticulateness (poor command of vocabulary or expression due to age, education, or English being a second language); jargon, slang, dialect, accent or brogue.

Any part of the communication process — encoding, sending, signal transmission, receiving or decoding — can be affected by the presence of even one of the hindering conditions listed above. Since most transactions take place with several present, it is important not to compound the problem with ineffective behaviour.

Ineffective Communication Behaviour

Group members must develop the ability to communicate clearly and openly with each other in a process based on sharing. If they are to share their reactions, opinions, doubts, fears, interests, strengths and weaknesses, the climate must be safe and encouraging. Controlling, hiding or defensive behaviours and attitudes are not conducive to the creation of trust and safety and will further impede communication.

Judging: evaluative, critical or moral judgements put the recipient on guard, and usually reduce willingness to share and be honest. Criticism is sometimes unavoidable, but wherever possible, descriptive statements are preferable to evaluative ones.

Shoulding: this is a 'trip' laid on the other party by means of 'shoulds' and 'oughts'. It accentuates guilt and puts the person

further away from what he or she is actually experiencing: the image of what they *should* be doing obscures the experience of what they *are* doing.

Putting-down: 'put-downs' and statements that patronise, ridicule or shame the other party are likely to be immediately countered by aggression at one extreme or withdrawal at the other.

Blaming: refusing to accept responsibility for oneself usually evokes an equally angry response and almost guarantees an escalation of hostility. In addition, it doesn't repair damage or resolve conflict.

Explaining: seeking causes and reasons, interpreting, or intellectualising is talking about experience rather than experiencing. The result is that contact with the other person is diminished.

Interrupting: if the receiver cuts off the sender, the complete message cannot be absorbed. Interrupters are unwilling to listen, being more concerned with dominating or impressing the other party than with achieving understanding or communion.

Generalising: using 'people ...', 'we ...', 'you ...', or 'one ...' instead of 'I' impersonalises the conversation and avoids responsibility for the view expressed. 'I' statements make the experience and understanding of each other more immediate.

Alwaysing: the word 'always' is a sure sign that the exchange is going to be 'a wild one', as Sanford (1982, p. 7) puts it. He continues: 'when we use this word, it brings up such a sweeping generalization that discussion is almost impossible'.

Using clichés: tired and worn-out phrases result in communication that shares little of value or significance, e.g. 'Better late than never ...', 'Can't see the wood for the trees ...', 'It's an open and shut case ...'.

Asking pseudoquestions (Pfeiffer and Jones, 1974): questions that conceal an attempt to manipulate, influence or control rather than to elicit information or opinion fall into a number of categories illustrated by the following examples:

- 'set-up' questions that control by manoevring the other into a vulnerable position (ready for 'the kill') or by attempting to narrow the possible responses, e.g.

  'Would you agree that ...?'
  'Am I correct in saying that you ...?'

- 'kill' questions or 'gotcha' questions that are meant to trap the other person rather than obtain an answer, e.g.

  'Didn't you say that ...?'
  'Weren't you the one who ...?'

- questions that hide a command or a reprimand, e.g.

  'When are you going to ...?'
  'Have you done anything about ...?'

- questions that screen the questioner's preference, e.g.

  'Would you like to eat Chinese food tonight?'

- questions that hide the questioner's beliefs or opinions, e.g.

  'Don't you think that ...?'
  'Wouldn't you rather ....?'

- questions that hide the questioner's criticism, e.g.

  'Wouldn't it be better to ...?'

Shifting: changing the focus away from the self and introducing 'red herrings' are ways of diverting the discussion to avoid being confronted with anything uncomfortable or threatening.

Reacting defensively: people who are insecure will tend to hear questions as accusations and turn their replies into justifications or counter-accusations. Defensive behaviour is also a common response to being judged, devalued, criticised, reprimanded or controlled — in short, to almost any of the behaviours listed above! To respond defensively invites reciprocal, defensive behaviour and an escalation of miscommunication (Gibb, 1984).

Suppressing feelings: anger, fear, sadness, and even excitement or joy are often hidden or denied for fear of ridicule, rejection or reprisals, with the result that the communicators as well as their communication become impoverished. Anger, if continually suppressed, may finally erupt in a great emotional avalanche. Joy, if continually suppressed, will turn into deadness and loss of spontaneity. Sadness, if continually suppressed, will result in depression and withdrawal.

Effective Communication Behaviour

To be effective, communicators must first of all strive to become aware of the conditions and behaviours that may be hindering their communication, and then actively seek to minimise them or compensate for them. To be truly successful, however, requires more than just reducing the effects of screens and noise. There are some specific skills that need to be mastered if the process is to start effectively and then proceed to build trust and achieve clarity and understanding. These skills are grouped under four headings: starting, active listening, creating safety and taking risks.

Starting: Sanford (1982, p. 7) says '*starting effective communication requires giving some thought to the opening remark, since the way the dialogue starts often determines the way it will go*'. If the opening toss is offensive, i.e. includes accusations, put-downs, threats or attempts to manipulate the recipient, the return toss is likely to be defensive, and listening will be impaired. Effective initiators are very much in the 'here-and-now': centred, confident, prepared and focused, considerate of and tuned to the recipient.

They use 'I' statements ('*I don't understand what you mean*' rather than '*You're confused*' or '*No one knows what you mean*'). They 'own' and accept responsibility for their opinions, feelings and actions ('*I'm scared of conflict*' rather than '*People can't handle conflict*'). They express themselves clearly and simply, their verbal and nonverbal signals are not contradictory, and they use language and style appropriate to the recipient's frame of reference. After their message is delivered, they become active listeners.

Active listening: this skill is not easy to acquire but it is of paramount importance. Something much more than just hearing words is needed. The listener must be still and attentive: both the facts and the feelings that underlie the content of a message must be grasped. *Feedback* is an essential component, both reflecting back (paraphrasing what the sender said and checking for accuracy) and giving back (sharing thoughts and emotional reactions to what was said). Active listeners are genuine in their desire to hear and understand and are alert to nonverbal cues. They suspend judgement and criticism, refrain from interrupting, and respect the sender's viewpoint and value system. They resist distractions, and confront the sender if he or she is inaudible, ambiguous, or incongruent. They also confront and deal with any dislike or hostility between them.

All the proponents of active listening (e.g. Egan, 1970, pp. 248–60; Rogers and Farson, 1984, pp. 255–67; Sanford, 1982, pp. 17–30) agree that *empathy* is another essential component. Where sympathy is feeling *for* someone, empathy is feeling *with*. If listeners absorb and reflect back the whole message, (facts, feelings and meaning), express their reactions, and accept the sender's feelings and values as legitimate, then an empathic sharing has occurred.

Creating safety: clear and open communication can only flourish in a safe environment where group members can share their thoughts, express their negative as well as their positive feelings, and receive support and encouragement when they risk being honest. No one will take risks in a threatening situation: controlling or judgemental behaviour will increase defensiveness and reduce trust levels. Trust and openness need a climate of safety in which to grow steadily; they cannot be produced instantly. Active listening plays a major part in the creation of a safe

environment, but two specific behaviours are also vital: *being supportive* and *coping with negative feelings*.

Showing support must be a genuine act, not counterfeit or ritualised: it may be better to admit to being at a loss for words than to engage in cliches such as '*I know how you feel*'. Genuine support can be shown in two ways: by giving encouragement or recognition. It is encouraging for others if you are the first to trust, to be honest, or to disclose something of your self. If done appropriately, these behaviours will be seen as invitations to behave in an equally open and involved way towards you. It is good for others to be recognised as likeable, worthy, important. Responding warmly, keeping eye contact, giving compliments and acknowledging the value of another's idea or viewpoint are effective demonstrations of support.

Negative feelings need to be expressed rather than suppressed, so that internal pressure does not build up. Responsibility for them needs to be owned rather than dumped on someone else. The group needs to develop norms that permit members to share and work through their uncomfortable emotions.

Anger is probably the hardest emotion to deal with. Some people handle their own anger by denial or bottling up, others by projection or violence. It is more constructive, but often far harder, to admit to it, own it, and then investigate the fear that lies behind it. Coping with someone else's anger may also be done directly by withdrawal or counter-attack, or indirectly by attempting to invalidate, deflect, or ridicule the other's hostility. It is better to stand your ground, actively listen, and try to identify the source and motivation (anger may be a show of strength, a defence, a punishment, an expression of individuality or an attempt at closeness).

Taking risks: paradoxically, it can be seen that creating safety requires taking risks. Self-expression and involvement with others will always entail some element of risk, but it is in the more 'advanced' behaviours of *self-disclosure* and *confrontation* that the highest risks are taken in the pursuit of effective communication.

Self-disclosure is a powerful way to build trust if done authentically. Chartier (1974, p. 127) says '*a person's ability to engage in self-revelation is a symptom of a healthy personality*'. Nevertheless, it is advisable to guard against over-exposure: too much too soon can be as damaging as none at all. Unrestricted honesty or emotional expression can be alienating or, at worst, destructive. Whether or not to reveal one's thoughts or feelings is a question of appropriateness, of assessing the other person's readiness to be receptive. Unwillingness to disclose at all may stem from guilt, shame, shyness, collusion (a tacit agreement between the parties to pretend or hide), or group norms that make it unwise or unsafe to do so. It is best done at a level at which you feel comfortable, or preferably a little beyond that so as to deepen the dialogue a little. Pfeiffer and Jones

recommend that openness and honesty generally should be a matter of strategy plus acceptable risk, which means '*determining how much open data flow the system can stand and then giving it about a ten percent boost — enough to stretch it but not to shatter it*' (Pfeiffer and Jones, 1972, p. 198).

Confrontation is not the same as attack. If you learn to confront in a declarative rather than an abusive or interrogative manner, communication will improve. The desire to find a common ground must be genuine, and hopefully mutual. *Responsible* confrontation may be an invitation to self-examination, a challenge, or calling a bluff, but it is not an act of aggression. The instinctive response is, nevertheless, to be defensive or retaliate. To shelve this response is also taking a risk and will certainly be difficult, but it will be rewarding. Confrontation is an exercise in which all the effective behaviours described above need to be brought into play as the issue is worked through (Egan, 1970, pp. 287–335; Kurtz and Jones, 1973, pp. 135–38). Giving and receiving feedback is the core interaction for confrontation. Feedback will be most useful when:

- it is offered with concern and attention

- it is specific rather than general or vague

- it is direct rather than oblique or half-hearted

- it is descriptive rather than evaluative or interpretative

- it is immediate rather than delayed

- it is declarative rather than hostile or punitive.

Communication is the core activity which enables the group to develop its structure and do its work: that is, it is the key to successful organisation. It is also the key to successful leadership, for without effective communication neither leaders nor members of a group can take those specific actions that will move a group towards its goals.

For detailed reading on communication in groups and organisations, see Farace et al., 1977; Fisher, 1980, Chaps 3 and 4; Johnson, 1977; Johnson and Johnson, 1987, Chap. 5; Katz and Kahn, 1978, Chap. 14; Luthans, 1985, Chap. 13; Robbins, 1979, Chap. 10.

For detailed reading on interpersonal communication, see Argyle, 1972; Boas, 1982; De Vito 1986; Egan, 1970; Gibb, 1984; Johnson, 1986; Sanford, 1982, Chaps 4 and 5; Satir, 1972; Tajfel and Fraser, 1978, Chap. 5.

For detailed reading on nonverbal communication, see Argyle, 1975; Malandro and Barker, 1983; Mehrabian, 1972; Pease, 1981.

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