1.1 WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Communication is an important and necessary process for effective decision-making. First, communication is the vehicle by which information relevant to decisions is transferred. Second, communication is fundamental to the implementation of decisions. Communication whether written, oral, formal, or informal, is goal directed in organizations. It is broadly intended to secure performance at a level that results in the implementation of decisions and the achievement of organizational goals.

According to Koontz, O'Donnell and Weihrich, communication has an internally integrative effect on managerial functions insofar as it:

a. Seeks to establish and disseminate goals of an enterprise.

b. Seeks to develop plans for their achievement.

c. Seeks to organize human and other resources in the most effective and efficient way.

d. Seeks to select, develop and apprise members of the organization.

e. Seeks to lead direct, motivate and create a climate in which people are keen to contribute to achieving corporate objectives.

f. Seeks to control performance.
Communication also relates the organization to its external environment, because personnel become aware of the needs and aspirations of stakeholders, availability of supplies and concerns of the community only through an exchange of information.

The communicative process is undoubtedly one of the most complex of all psychological processes. All communication, be it unilateral (where a person is in communion with himself or herself) bilateral or multilateral follows a preset pattern of:

**Communication Process**

![Communication Process Diagram]

As already mentioned, the communicative process is sent into motion only when an individual has some message to convey. This is the intent. Usually, the message has to be couched in symbols or a channel that can easily be grasped in order to be submitted.

The sender therefore chooses the appropriate medium or channel through which he tries to accomplish his purpose. This is the point where communication often flounders. As we all know, meaning is only conventional; it is we who decide what a particular word will mean. It is not impossible for the same word to mean two separate things, if and only if it is used in two different contexts. Take for instance the word 'WARD'.

- John has been admitted to the cardiac ward.
- My ward is studying in a finishing school.

In the former sentence, 'Ward' means a department of a hospital, while in the latter it refers to my child. There is nothing common to these uses. The same term is being used in two different senses. Ludwig Wittgenstein endorses this as, "Think of the tools in a
tool box; there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw driver, a rule, a glue pot, glue, nails and screws. The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects”.

*(Philosophical Investigations Sec. 11)*

Effective verbal and written communication turns on clarifying the meanings of terms being used, i.e. both parties come to a consensus that they will use a particular word to refer only to a specific object or situation. Consequently, the receiver can be certain that he has heard and understood what the transmitter wants him to, and exactly in the manner that he wants him to.

This stage of consensus or 'recall of linguistic convention', often called empathic listening, where the receiver placing himself in the transmitter's position, seeing the world through the latter's eyes' enquires, "Did I hear you right' is this what you wish to convey?" forms the crux of the communicative process.

From what has been mentioned above, it might appear that communication exhausts itself in verbal intercourse. Far from it, we cannot not communicate. Even our presence or absence from the workplace communicates. The way we carry ourselves, the clothes we wear, the tone and tenor of our voice all communicate. Thus we have verbal communication, which is the process of transmitting messages by words or sounds/symbols and non-verbal or body language.

Having already discussed verbal communication let us briefly examine body language. Non-verbal communication is present everywhere. Virtually anything can convey information to people. The way an individual enters into a room and sits down at a conference table too conveys a message, either that of openness or that of aloofness.

Amongst some common forms of body language we find:

a  **KINETIC BEHAVIOUR**: Gestures, facial expressions, and posture. This obvious from expression like 'shifty eye' or 'flummoxed look', since eye contact can convey a variety of feelings ranging from abject submissiveness, surprise, sorrow to outright anger and indignation.

b  **META LANGUAGE**: The tenor and pitch or one's voice and laughter too convey
more than what mere words can. For instance, a curt, short "You good for nothing idiot" conveys a meaning which is altogether different from the same sentence uttered after a friendly push and light hearted laughter, as between close companions.

c **THE PERCEPTION OF PHYSICAL SPACE:** This plays an important role in non-verbal communication. The size of the room we sit in and the ways we position ourselves in relation to others are important communicative devices. For instance, a senior manager who sits with his legs on the desk talking to his subordinates from between his feet is only going to convey a message "I don't give a damn about you". Such an individual can scarcely expect cooperation from others. Again, constantly glancing at one’s wristwatch or playing with the paperweight when someone is talking conveys a message "I'm bored, for Christ-sake please wind up this conversation". Not a word has been spoken, but so much has been communicated, and very eloquently too. Allied to this is the use of tact and courtesy. Answering a phone call with a belligerent "Yes" will produce a very different reaction from answering in a mellifluous and controlled tone, "Good Morning, John Brown's office.....what can I do for you?" Courtesy and politeness cost nothing to the organization but are critical by way of creating a first impression of bored indifference, or warmth.

d Finally, as already mentioned, body language depends to a large extent on artifacts like clothes, spectacle height, and weight, because they are a reflection on our attitude towards other people. For instance, if in one's job, one is expected to be present in a pin striped suit, and one were to turn up wearing a tee shirt with "My Dad is an ATM!!" boldly emblazoned on the front, it would only convey that one cared two hoots about discipline and decorum.

1.2 **BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

A supervisor sent a memo to a subordinate congratulating him on the timely completion of a task and expressing the hope that such performance would be typical in the future. The supervisor intended the message to be purely congratulatory. The employee received the memo and complained, "Isn't that just like the supervisor! You work hard to
get one thing done on time in this place, and they turn around and tell you that they expect that kind of action all the time!"

Conventional wisdom would say in reaction to this example, that "What we have is a failure to communicate". Although communication breakdowns might appear to have simple causes, they actually stem from a multitude of rather complex causes. These problems fall into two major categories: (1) distortion in communication and (2) information overload. We will examine each of these problems in turn.

1.2.1 DISTORTION IN COMMUNICATION

Communication is a complex manipulation of symbols involving, on one hand, the manipulation or encoding of symbols to carry a message as well as to establish the context of the message and, on the other, the interpretation or decoding of symbols to form a received message. At each stage of this interaction, slippage or noise is possible, creating unintended and misinterpreted meanings. Such barriers include at least the following:

i. ATTRIBUTES OF THE RECEIVER

Different people may react in radically different ways to the same message for a variety of personal reasons. Previous learning or experiences in the same situation may lead to habits of interpretation. Thus, for example, two people raised in different cultures may react quite differently to the same political message. An individual raised in an environment that places a great value on the pronouncement or respected political figures may take an elected official's pronouncement very seriously. However, a person encouraged to be critical of politicians and to have little faith in their word may cynically discount the same pronouncement.

In addition to previous learning, motives and personality also influence the decoding or symbolic interpretation process. An employee who has a highly felt need for advancement in an organization and whose personality tends to be quite optimistic might read a smile and casual comment from a supervisor as an indication that he or she is a "favorite child" being groomed for a promotion. A person with a low need for advancement and a pessimistic disposition may read
nothing more than a casual comment unrelated to anything else into the supervisor's comment.

ii SELECTIVE PERCEPTION

Receiving a message is a form of perceptual behavior. People have a tendency to listen to only part of a message and "block out" other information for a variety of reasons. One of the most important of these is a need to avoid or reduce cognitive dissonance. Thus, people have a tendency to ignore new information that conflicts with or denies already established beliefs, values, and expectations. Selective perception occurs when the receiver evaluates the context of the communication including the role, identity, values, mood, and motives of the sender.

Indeed, a strict interpretation of the Communicative Process would suggest that a message cannot be decoded until the receiver interprets these contextual factors. One aspect of the sender's identity and role would be his or her formal position in the formal organization. Status symbols used by the organization to enhance a formal position may include the size the appointment of an office, titles, special equipment, and secretaries. Such symbols can often distort the intended meaning of a communication from a person in that position. A routine request for information coming from a Director's office, for example, may be met with apprehension on the part of a subordinate officer because the Director himself and not somebody lower in the administrative hierarchy is requesting the information.

iii SEMANTIC PROBLEMS

We have already said that communication consists of the manipulation and interpretation of symbols. A major set of symbols so employed is language. The problem is that many words commonly used in communication carry quite different meanings for different people. Two general kinds of semantic problems present barriers to communication. First, some words and phrases are so general or abstract that they invite varying interpretations. Thus, a newly posted Manager in addressing his Division staff for the first time may say very earnestly. "A major item on my agenda is to involve each of you in reorienting the
Department in new directions. We need new goals and must consider our options.” Two different department members may very well read three different messages into the same words. Abstract words, such as involve, reorienting directions, goals and options, invite varying interpretations. A suspicious member, for example, may interpret involvement in reorienting the Division as a strategy of close supervision that may indeed limit and narrow the discretion he or she already has. An optimistic member, in contrast, may interpret the phrase to mean an expansion of duties to include areas of discretion he or she does not presently have.

A second semantic problem arises when different groups develop their own technical language. Patients, for example, have been perplexed to see a smiling physician report back that the test results (e.g., a pap smear for detecting cancer) were "negative". In this rare case, the technical meaning of the word negative refers to the fact that the test showed the absence of cancer, not its presence (which would certainly be a negative outcome from the patient's point of view). As another illustration, the layperson may be confused by the title, "Initial instrumentation of behaviorally specific battery for assessing risk propensities," until someone explains that it refers to designing a questionnaire intended to measure the degree to which a person takes chances.

**TIME PRESSURES**

Most employees often reflect that their scarce valuable commodity is time. Time is always short, and this fact often leads to distortion in communications. A major temptation when pressed for time is to short circuit formal communication channels. A doctor treating a patient in a clinic, for example, may decide that a patient should be administered a given drug. He is running an hour late, however, and instead of writing up a formal order, he informally instructs the nurse to administer the injection. The immediate demands of the situation are met, but a number of unintended consequences may result. First, nobody but the doctor, nurse, and patient know for sure the specific drug was administered. The billing office never gets the information and fails to bill the patient for the service (driving up the operating costs of the clinic). Of even more potential danger is the fact that the dose never appears on the patient's record and does not become a
part of his medical history. To the extent that this drug in combination with others taken concurrently can be hazardous, or to the extent that it can have serious side effects, the patient's health is placed in jeopardy.

v TENDENCY TO MAKE JUDGEMENTS

This is the propensity or habit to judge, evaluate and approve or disapprove the statement of another person. For instance, if I said, "I didn't like what John said", your reply to this would be of the nature of either disapproval or approval i.e. "Neither did I" or "I thought he was rather sensible". Often, instead of confining ourselves to discussing the situation at hand, we tend to pass strictures on the speaker. For instance in reply to "I didn't like what John said". You may choose to conclude, 'He is a bigot " or "He is obviously a leftist, or else he would never disagree with John, a loyal right winger".

The stronger our feelings and emotions, the more likely it will be that we will never find a common meeting point for communication. The process will always remain just two ideas, two judgements and a vast vacuum in between.

vi UNCLARIFIED ASSUMPTIONS/HIDDEN AGENDAS

Secrecy or unclarified assumptions, result in confusion and loss of goodwill. For instance, a CEO of an organisation may send the Regional Manager a note that he will be visiting their town to attend a wedding and will also pay them a short visit. He assumes that the Regional Manager will depute somebody to meet him at the station or airport, reserve a room either in the company guesthouse or a decent hotel and arrange a full-scale review. The Regional Manager in the absence of any specific instructions for booking room etc. assumes the CEO will be residing with the relatives. With neither party clarifying the message received, a bitter conflict becomes inevitable.

vii DISTRUST, THREAT, FEAR

These emotions stemming from difference in status, tend to distort and undermine communication. Legitimate fear of superiors ingrained in subordinates due to their position in the corporate hierarchy, tends to crystallize into skepticism. This is often reinforced by memories of past experiences of inconsistent behaviour by the superior, or unfair punishment for true but
unpleasant feedback to the boss. This creates a surcharged atmosphere of distrust fueled by real and imagined threats, which far from encouraging open, honest communication, leads to defensiveness and distortion of (unpleasant) information.

1.2.2 INFORMATION OVERLOAD

A second major barrier to communication is information overload. A common complaint among senior managers is that they are literally drowned in communications; if all communications were attended to, the actual work of the organization would never take place. Personnel therefore try to find shortcuts and do not pay adequate attention to details.

1.3 PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

There is no single formula for effective communication. In effective communication, nothing must be taken for granted; a poorly thought out message has as many possible interpretations as there are interpreters.

A prerequisite for effective communication is the management's clear perspective and understanding of its objectives and expectations. The objective of communication is to put across in the clearest possible manner what people are expected to do, in a given time schedule. Towards this end, the management must take into account.

a How it is perceived by the various levels of
   - the organization.
   - What is the prevailing climate of the company.

b To what extent are its wishes in accordance with the individual aspirations of those members of the organization with whom it wishes to communicate.

This will serve to create an atmosphere of emphatic listening on both sides, which is the sine-qua-non of effective communication.

I would now delineate some principles of effective communication. This list certainly has no pretensions of being exhaustive, but simply tries to cover some of the most obvious factors of communication that are commonly ignored.
Effective communication is essential for helping employees to develop in directions useful to the company's aims. Therefore an effective communicative process must have:

1.3.1 CONSISTENCY
The management must present itself and its goals as consistently as possible. Shifting ground, i.e. being unduly severe for some misdemeanor on one occasion and gratuitously permissive for the same thing at another time will only confound matters, since employees will be thrown into a quandary as what meaning they ought to ascribe to their actions and decisions of the management.

1.3.2 APPROPRIATENESS
As already mentioned, communication has not been limited to either the written or spoken word. A gesture or even fluttering of the eyelashes can communicate. Almost any act of the management can be, and usually is perceived as containing a message; therefore it behoves management to control the appropriateness of every public act.

1.3.3 CLARIFICATION
A manager must clarify his or her ideas before communicating. To this, end, he or she must be aware of the organizations' objectives the degree to which those objectives can be imparted as expectations to each subordinate level, the total physical and human climate in which he or she is to communicate (take into consideration the strength of the company grapevine or non-formal mode of communication), be sure that his or her body language is not at variance with his or her verbal intercourse. More than anything else, he or she should be an active listener, and follow up the communication, through obtaining feedback from subordinates and peers. Subjectivity ought to be replaced with studied intersubjectivity, wherein, both parties before closing the communicative process verify "Do we read each other correctly" so as to leave absolutely no room for doubt. Having completed the process of clarification, the manager must encode the message in unambiguous terms, intelligible and acceptable to both himself/herself and the receiver of the message.
1.3.4 UNBIASED RECEPTION

Communication, as already mentioned does not end in expression. It has to be interpreted by the receiver. Towards this end, it is suggested that the latter should try and see the expressed idea and attitude from the communicator's point of view, sense how it feels to him and achieve his frame of reference with respect to the thing he is taking about. This is what Carl. R. Rogers and F.J. Roethlisberger have called "empathic understanding". A good way of doing so would be to insist that each person can speak up for himself or herself only after he or she has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately and to that speaker's satisfaction. This will ensure that there will never be a miscarriage of intent or motive, which usually is the stumbling block of communication.

It is often asked as to how we can be certain that our communication channels are open to receive clear undistorted messages? In the organizational context, some direct indices of effective communication are:

- Efficient, organizational performance in accordance with the organizations objectives.
- Low turnover of employees.
- An esprit de corps in the organization evidence by positive rumblings along the corporate grapevine.

Amongst the indirect indices of effective communication is the fact that there is sufficient upward communication. This is indicative of a spirit of glasnost or candidness that permits the expression of discord and disagreement without the fear of reprisal. Silence is not always an expression of assent, often it connotes indifference, fear and hostility.

Thus we note that effective communication is much more than the sending and reviewing messages. Beyond a superficial process of intent, expression, impression and interpretation, it is an endeavour to transcend oneself, empathise, comprehend and illuminate ideas with a view to eventually concretizing them.
About the author:
Dr. Shiv Dhawan is currently working with the Global Government Consulting Practice within Tata Consultancy Services Ltd. He has seventeen years of hands-on experience in consulting in the sphere of HRD, institutional development and training. This paper is based on his experiences and observations of communication related issues in a number of organisations to whom he has provided consultancy inputs.