CHAPTER THREE

Developing Communication Skills

Learning objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Define communication.
2. Describe the interpersonal communication process.
3. Describe problems that could arise from conflicting or inappropriate assumptions made in interpersonal communication.
4. Define semantics, and explain its role in interpersonal communication.
5. Define perception.
6. Explain how emotions may affect communication.
7. Explain active listening.
8. Explain the concept of feedback in communication.
9. Describe the grapevine.
10. Define and briefly discuss the e-mail process.
11. Discuss two factors that complicate communications in international business activities.
John Lewis hadn’t really thought about the importance of communication until after the conversation he had just completed with one of his best workers, Eva Sampson. John had given Eva an assignment and thought that he had clearly communicated the date when he wanted it completed. However, the assignment was not completed by that date because Eva thought she had more time than John had given her. What was the source of this communication failure, and how could it have been avoided?

Communication is the act of exchanging information. It can be used to inform, command, instruct, assess, influence, and persuade other people. Communication skills are important in all aspects of life, including business.

Supervisors use communication every day. In fact, they spend as much as three-quarters of their time communicating (see Figure 3.1). Good supervisors develop effective communication skills. They use these skills to absorb information, motivate employees, and deal effectively with customers and co-workers. Good communication can significantly affect a supervisor’s success.

Communication as a Supervisory Skill

Communicating effectively is an important management skill for several reasons:

• **Supervisors must give direction to the people who work for them.** Supervisors who fail to give clear guidance often find that employees perform their jobs poorly because they do not understand what is expected of them.

• **Supervisors must be able to motivate people.** Good supervisors use their ability to communicate to get other people excited about their jobs.

• **Supervisors must be able to absorb the ideas of others.** Supervisors interact with many people, including co-workers, customers, and suppliers. To be effective, they must be able to understand and accept other people’s viewpoints.

• **Supervisors must be able to persuade other people.** Supervisors often have ideas that others oppose. To persuade other people to accept their ideas, supervisors must be able to communicate effectively.

**FIGURE 3.1**

Communicating in the Business World
Effective communication between individuals, especially between a supervisors and subordinates, is critical to achieving organizational objectives and, as a result, to managing people effectively. Estimates vary, but it is generally agreed that since supervisors spend much of their time with their subordinates, effective communication is critical to the wise and effective use of their time.

Interpersonal communication is an interactive process between individuals that involves sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages. The basic purpose of interpersonal communication is to transmit information so that the sender of the message is understood and understands the receiver. Figure 3.2 diagrams this dynamic and interactive process. An event or a condition generates information. The desire to share the information, or inform another person about it, creates the need to communicate. The sender then creates a message and communicates it both verbally and nonverbally. The receiver, in turn, perceives and interprets the message and (hopefully) creates a reply message as a response to it. This reply message may generate a response by the sender of the initial message, and the process continues in this fashion.

Often, however, many factors interfere and cause this process to fail. Some causes of interpersonal communication failure are conflicting or inappropriate assumptions, different interpretations of the meanings of words (semantics), differences in perception, emotions either preceding or during communication, poor listening habits, inadequate communication skills, insufficient feedback, and differences in the interpretations of nonverbal communications.

Have you ever thought you were being understood when you were really not? This is a common mistake made by most people. If one assumes that communication is flowing as intended, one tends to move on with the dialog without allowing feedback to indicate whether clarity of expression and communication has been achieved. Good supervisors
An Englishman visits America and is completely awed by the many ways we use the word *fix*. For example,
1. His host asks him how he’d like his drink fixed. He meant *mixed*.
2. As he prepares to leave, he discovers he has a flat tire and calls a repairperson, who says he’ll fix it immediately. He means *repair*.
3. On the way home, he is given a ticket for speeding. He calls his host, who says, “Don’t worry, I’ll fix it.” He means *nullify*.
4. At the office the next day, he comments on the cost of living in America, and one of his colleagues says, “It’s hard to make ends meet on a fixed income.” She means *steady* or *unchanging*.
5. He has an argument with a co-worker. The latter says, “I’ll fix you.” He means *seek revenge*.
6. A cohort remarks that she is in a fix. She means *condition* or *situation*.

### Semantics

Semantics is the science or study of the meanings of words and symbols. Words themselves have no real meaning. They have meaning only in terms of people’s reactions to them. A word may mean very different things to different people, depending on how it is used. In addition, a word may be interpreted differently based on the facial expressions, hand gestures, and voice inflections used.

The problems involved in semantics are of two general types. Some words and phrases invite multiple interpretations. For example, Figure 3.3 shows different interpretations of the word *fix*. Another problem is that groups of people in specific situations often develop their own technical language, which outsiders may or may not understand. For example, physicians, government workers, and military employees are often guilty of using acronyms and abbreviations that only they understand.

Words are the most common form of interpersonal communication. Because of the real possibility of misinterpretation, words must be carefully chosen and clearly defined for effective communication.

### Perception

Perception deals with the mental and sensory processes an individual uses in interpreting information she or he receives. Since each individual’s perception is unique, people often perceive the same situation in different ways.

Perception begins when the sense organs receive a stimulus. The stimulus is the information received, whether it is conveyed in writing, verbally, nonverbally, or in another way. The sense organs respond to, shape, and organize the information received. When this information reaches the brain, it is further organized and interpreted, resulting in perception. Different people perceive the same information differently because no two people have the same personal experiences, memories, likes, and dislikes. In addition, the phenomenon of selective perception often distorts the intended message: People tend to listen to only part of the message, blocking out the rest for any number of reasons.
Figure 3.4 illustrates perceptual distortion. Look at the figure and answer the following questions:

1. Is the vertical line longer than the horizontal line in Figure 3.4(a)?
2. Is line $x$ or $y$ longer in Figure 3.4(b)?
3. Are the two horizontal lines in Figure 3.4(c) bowed or parallel?

Using a ruler, you can see that the vertical and horizontal lines in 3.4(a) are equal and that the $x$ and $y$ lines in 3.4(b) are also equal. The horizontal lines in 3.4(c) are also parallel. These examples illustrate the difference between the real world and the perceived world. If differences in perception exist in viewing physical objects, more subtle forms of communication such as facial expressions and hand gestures leave much room for perceptual differences.

Just as perception affects our cognitive processes during communication, emotions affect our disposition to send and receive the communication. Anger, joy, fear, sorrow, disgust, or panic (to mention only a few emotions) can all affect the way we send or receive messages. Emotional disposition is like the stage on which the communication piece plays its part: The stage can be perfectly prepared or in total disarray. The setting for the communication piece is obviously important. Communications during periods of high emotion usually have difficulty succeeding. Therefore, managers with good communication skills strive to manage the emotional as well as the physical communication environment.

Learning to Communicate

Supervisors communicate in writing and verbally. Before they can master either form of communication, they must be able to identify the audience, develop good listening skills, and understand the importance of feedback and nonverbal communication.

Understanding the Audience

Supervisors communicate with many different kinds of people. Hotel managers, for example, communicate with hotel guests, food and beverage managers, housekeepers, maintenance people, architects, travel agents, furniture salespeople, and many other types of people. Each of these groups of people represents a different audience.

To communicate effectively, supervisors need to determine their audience. Specifically, they need to be able to answer the following questions:

1. What does the audience already know?
2. What does it want to know?
Developing Good Listening Skills

One of the most important skills a supervisor can develop is the ability to listen (see Figure 3.5). Good listening skills enable supervisors to absorb the information they need, recognize problems, and understand other people’s viewpoints.

Supervisors need to learn to listen actively. Active listening involves absorbing what another person is saying and responding to the person’s concerns (see Figure 3.6). Learning to listen actively is the key to becoming a good communicator.

Most people do not listen actively. Tests indicate that immediately after listening to a 10-minute oral presentation, the average listener has heard, comprehended, and accurately evaluated, about half of what was said. Within 48 hours, the effectiveness level drops to just 25 percent. By the end of a week, listeners recall only about 10 percent or less of what they heard.

Supervisors need to work at being active listeners. Many people daydream or think about an unrelated topic when someone else is talking. Some people become angry by a speaker’s remarks and fail to fully absorb what the person is saying. Others become impatient and interrupt, preferring to talk rather than listen.

Learning Objectives

1. Listening
   Knowing how to listen is an important part of dealing with customers. Using active listening skills helps managers understand why customers are dissatisfied.

2. Responding
   The way managers respond to complaints can be just as important as the way they solve the customer’s problem. Businesspeople should always be courteous and friendly when dealing with customers. They should demonstrate interest in determining what went wrong and figuring out what they can do to solve the problem.

3. Making Sure the Customer Is Satisfied
   Managers need to determine whether they have satisfied the customers’ needs. To do so, they must interpret the feedback they receive from the customer.
Learning to listen actively involves the following steps:

1. **Identify the speaker’s purpose.** What is the speaker trying to achieve? Why is the speaker speaking?
2. **Identify the speaker’s main ideas.** Which of the points are the key points? Which points need to be addressed by the listener?
3. **Note the speaker’s tone as well as his or her body language.** Is the speaker angry? Nervous? Confident?
4. **Respond to the speaker with appropriate comments, questions, and body language.** Use facial expressions and body language to express the emotions you want to express. Establish eye contact, sit up straight, and lean toward the speaker to show interest. Ask a question or make a comment from time to time to show that you are listening attentively.

Effective communication is a two-way process. Information must flow back and forth between sender and receiver. The flow from the receiver to the sender is called **feedback.** It informs the sender whether the receiver has received the correct message; it also lets the receiver know if he or she has received the correct message. For example, asking a person if she or he understands a message often puts the person on the defensive and can result in limited feedback. Instead of asking if a person understands a message, it is much better to request that the receiver explain what he or she has heard.

In an experiment designed to show the importance of feedback in the communication process, one person was asked to verbally describe to a group of people the layout of the rectangles shown in Figure 3.7. The group members were required to draw the layout based on the verbal description. The group received only a verbal description of the layout. The experiment was conducted in two ways. First, the group was not allowed to ask questions while the layout was being described, and the person describing the layout was hidden from view so the group could not see the person’s facial expressions or other nonverbal communications. Thus, no feedback was present. In the second trial, the group was allowed to ask questions as the layout was being described, and the speaker was openly facing the group. Thus, feedback was present. The results showed the layout was described more quickly to the group when no feedback was allowed. However, feedback greatly improved the accuracy and the group’s degree of confidence in the accuracy of their drawings.

People have a great capacity to convey meaning through nonverbal means of expression. One form of nonverbal communication, called **paralanguage,** includes the pitch, tempo, loudness, and hesitations in the verbal communication. People also use a variety of gestures in nonverbal communication. In America, for example, one can raise an eyebrow to indicate disapproval, interest, concern, or attention. In Japan, however, that raised eyebrow would be considered an obscene gesture.

**FIGURE 3.7**
Rectangles in Communication Experiment

WATCH YOUR HANDS

The use of your hands is one method used to communicate to another person. The use of the handshake is familiar to most people. This ancient practice of indicating that one is unarmed is fairly universal. However, there are plenty of entrenched local alternatives such as the Japanese bow or the Indian namaste. Nonetheless, frequent hand gripping can be essential in some countries. In France, it is de rigueur at the start and end of the day, at least between men. In contrast, hand contact between men and women is unacceptable within the Islamic world.

While conversing, a general flailing of hands and arms may go unnoticed in Italy, but in Japan it may be considered threatening. Also, in some countries it is highly offensive to point with the finger. Furthermore, in many parts of the world—such as the Middle East—eating or accepting food with the left hand is considered unclean.

Source: Adapted from “Business—Culture Differences—Mind the Banana Skins,” Accountancy, October 1, 2001, p. 37.

SUPERVISION ILLUSTRATION 3–1

Written Communication

Supervisors communicate in writing every day. They send e-mails, write letters, and draft reports. To communicate effectively, supervisors must be able to write clearly, concisely, and persuasively.

Before actually writing a business document, supervisors need to think about what they want to achieve. They must identify the purpose of the document, the audience, and the main point they want to convey. Using a form like that shown in Figure 3.8 can help them work through this stage of the writing process.

FIGURE 3.8
Identifying the Purpose, Audience, and Main Point of a Document

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why am I writing this document?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What action do I want the reader to take after reading it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who will read this document?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much does the reader already know about the topic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will the reader use the document?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any special sensitivities I should be aware of?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the main message I want to convey in this document?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will I support that message?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Many supervisors have difficulty writing well. To improve their writing, managers can apply several basic principles:

1. **Write as simply and clearly as possible.** Avoid writing in a way that is difficult to understand.

2. **Be sure that the content and tone of the document are appropriate for the audience.** Do not waste readers’ time communicating information they already know. However, do not assume they are as familiar with the topic as you are. Always use a polite tone, especially when writing to customers.

3. **Proofread the document.** If you are using a computer, use the spell-check function. If you are not using a computer, use a dictionary to check the spelling of words you do not know. Always read the document for incorrect grammar or usage.

Figure 3.9 offers suggestions for improving written communication skills.

### Oral Communication

Not all business communication is done in writing. In fact, most business communication is done orally.

Some oral communication is formal and takes place at meetings or interviews. Most oral communication is informal. It takes place in offices and hallways, next to the water fountain, in the cafeteria, and over the telephone.
Communicating well verbally is important for supervisors. Successful supervisors use their oral communication skills to give clear instructions, motivate their staffs, and persuade other people.

Being able to communicate effectively also is important because it can set the tone within a department or company. In some departments, managers say “good morning” to as many co-workers as they can. They invite their employees to discuss problems with them. In other departments, supervisors isolate themselves from lower-level employees and make no effort to communicate. These small differences can have a big effect on employee morale.

All businesspeople need to be able to speak effectively (see Figure 3.10). Whether they are talking to a colleague or presenting a keynote address before thousands of people, they need to follow the same rules of thumb:

1. Make emotional contact with listeners by addressing them by name where possible. When talking face-to-face, establish eye contact.
2. Avoid speaking in a monotone. Use your voice to emphasize important words within a sentence.
3. Be enthusiastic and project a positive outlook. Focus on what is going right, rather than what is going wrong.
4. Avoid interrupting others. Even if you know what the other person is going to say, avoid cutting other people off or finishing their sentences for them.
5. Always be courteous. Avoid getting angry when other people are talking, even if you disagree with what they are saying.
6. Avoid empty sounds or words, such as “uh,” “um,” “like,” and “you know.” Sprinkling your speech with empty fillers will make you sound unprofessional.

Choosing the Best Method of Communication

Supervisors need to master both written and verbal communication skills. They also need to understand when to use each kind of skill (see Figure 3.11). In general, verbal
communication is most appropriate for sensitive communications, such as reprimanding or dismissing an employee. Written communication is most appropriate for communicating routine information, such as changes in company policies or staff. Choosing the best method of communication will help you relay information in an appropriate and professional manner.

FIGURE 3.11
Choosing the Best Method of Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Communication</th>
<th>Most Appropriate Method of Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication alone</td>
<td>• Reprimanding employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication alone</td>
<td>• Resolving disputes within the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicating information requiring future action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicating information of a general nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicating information requiring immediate action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication followed by written</td>
<td>• Communicating directives or orders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication</td>
<td>• Communicating information about an important policy change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicating with one’s immediate superior about a work-related problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Praising an employee for outstanding performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communicating within the Organization

In order to be an effective supervisor, the importance of the grapevine and e-mail must be understood.

The Grapevine

Many informal paths of communication also exist in organizations. These informal channels are generally referred to as the grapevine. During the Civil War, intelligence telegraph lines hung loosely from tree to tree and looked like grapevines. Messages sent over these lines were often garbled; thus, any rumor was said to be “from the grapevine.” Grapevines develop within organizations when employees share common hobbies, hometowns, lunch breaks, family ties, and social relationships. The grapevine always exists within the formal organizational structure. However, it does not follow the organizational hierarchy; it may go from secretary to vice president or from engineer to clerk. The grapevine is not limited to nonmanagement personnel; it also operates among managers and professional personnel.

The grapevine generally has a poor reputation because it is regarded as the primary source of distorted messages and rumors. However, management must recognize that the grapevine is often accurate. Management must also recognize that information in the grapevine travels more rapidly than information in the formal channels of communication. Finally, management must recognize the resilience of the grapevine. No matter how much effort is spent improving the formal channels of communication, grapevines will always exist.

Because the grapevine is inevitable, management should use it to complement formal channels of communication. In utilizing the grapevine, honesty is always the best policy. Rumors and distorted messages will persist, but honest disclaimers by management will stop the spread of inaccurate information.
IMPACT OF E-MAIL
E-mail has become a powerful tool in advancing communication throughout the organization. Perhaps the greatest advantage of e-mail is its convenience. E-mail also tends to make companies less bureaucratic, less formal and hierarchical, and more open to creative ideas and feedback from all levels of employees.

An employee at Microsoft recently said, “the phone never rings.” About 99 percent of intracompany communications take place through e-mail. Some critics contend that e-mail discourages face-to-face communications, but employees at Microsoft believe that they communicate more effectively through the continual stream of e-mails that they receive every day.

Advocates of e-mail claim that this form of communication encourages creativity and has the ability to bypass the normal business hierarchy. In his 1996 book *Only the Paranoid Survive*, Intel chief Andrew Grove credited e-mail with allowing him to detect problem areas early. He said, “I witness more arguments, I hear more business gossip, sometimes from people. I have never met, than I ever did when I could walk the halls of the one building that housed all Intel employees.”


E-Mail
Especially valuable to communication in today’s organizations is the use of electronic mail systems, or e-mail, provided by networked and online systems. The e-mail system provides for high-speed exchange of written messages through the use of computerized text processing and computer-oriented communication networks. The primary advantages of this system are that it saves time, eliminates wasted effort (such as unanswered or repeat phone calls), provides written records (if necessary) of communications without the formality of memos, and enables communication among individuals who might not communicate otherwise. Supervision Illustration 3–2 describes the impact of e-mail on communication.

Communication in International Business Activities
Communication in international business activities becomes more complicated in both the verbal and nonverbal communication processes. In verbal communication, the obvious problem of dealing with different languages exists. More than 3,000 languages are spoken, and about 100 of these are official languages of nations. English is the leading international language, and its leadership continues to grow. However, as anyone who has studied a modern language knows, verbally communicating with a person in another language complicates the communication process.

The nonverbal communication process is even more complicated. Cultural differences play a significant role in nonverbal communication. For example, in the United States, people tend to place themselves about three feet apart when standing and talking. However, in the Middle East, individuals are likely to stand only a foot or so apart while conversing. This closeness obviously could intimidate an American manager.

There are no simple answers to the problems in communicating in international business activities. However, there are two things the manager should do: (1) learn the culture of the people with whom he or she communicates and (2) write and speak clearly and simply. Most people will have learned English in school and will not understand jargon or slang. As expansion into international business continues, these simple rules will become increasingly important.
Eva’s misunderstanding of John’s message illustrates a breakdown in the interpersonal communication process. Eva received John’s message, interpreted it, and acted on it. However, the message that Eva received was not the message that John intended to send. This may have happened because of poor listening on Eva’s part or because John did not get feedback from Eva to ensure that the message he transmitted was the one she received. Several suggestions for improving listening skills are given on pp. 43–44. John should be aware of the tips for receiving feedback on p. 44. He should also review the situations for using oral versus written communications on p. 48. Perhaps he should have put his instructions to Eva in writing.

**SOLUTION TO THE SUPERVISION DILEMMA**

1. Define communication. Communication is the act of transmitting information.
2. Define interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication occurs between individuals. It is an interactive process that involves a person’s effort to attain meaning and respond to it. It involves sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages.
3. Describe problems that could arise from conflicting or inappropriate assumptions made in interpersonal communication. Misunderstandings can occur when a speaker thinks he or she was being clear or was understood. Questions that go unanswered, points that are misunderstood, and meanings that are misinterpreted are examples of potential problems.
4. Define semantics, and explain its role in interpersonal communication. Semantics is the science or study of the meanings of words and symbols. Because of the possibility of misinterpretation, words must be carefully chosen and clearly defined to enable effective communication.
5. Define perception. Perception deals with the mental and sensory processes an individual uses in interpreting information received.
6. Explain how emotions may affect communication. Emotions affect one’s disposition to send and receive communication. Anger, joy, fear, sorrow, disgust, or panic can all affect the way one sends and receives messages. Communications during periods of high emotion are often subject to distortion.
7. Explain the concept of feedback in communication. Feedback is the flow of information from the receiver to the sender. For communication to be effective, information must flow back and forth between sender and receiver.
8. Explain active listening. Active listening involves absorbing what another person is saying and responding to the person’s concerns.
9. Describe the grapevine. The grapevine consists of the informal channels of communication that develop within the organization as a result of common hobbies, hometowns, lunch breaks, family ties, and social relationships among employees.
10. Define and briefly discuss the e-mail process. The electronic mail, or e-mail, system provides for high-speed exchange of written messages through the use of computerized text processing and computer-oriented communication networks.
11. Discuss two factors that complicate communications in international business activities. Communicating in a foreign language complicates the communication process. Cultural differences exhibited through nonverbal communications are also complicating factors.

**Summary**

1. Define communication. Communication is the act of transmitting information.
2. Describe the interpersonal communication process. Interpersonal communication occurs between individuals. It is an interactive process that involves a person’s effort to attain meaning and respond to it. It involves sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages.
3. Describe problems that could arise from conflicting or inappropriate assumptions made in interpersonal communication. Misunderstandings can occur when a speaker thinks he or she was being clear or was understood. Questions that go unanswered, points that are misunderstood, and meanings that are misinterpreted are examples of potential problems.
4. Define semantics, and explain its role in interpersonal communication. Semantics is the science or study of the meanings of words and symbols. Because of the possibility of misinterpretation, words must be carefully chosen and clearly defined to enable effective communication.
5. Define perception. Perception deals with the mental and sensory processes an individual uses in interpreting information received.
6. Explain how emotions may affect communication. Emotions affect one’s disposition to send and receive communication. Anger, joy, fear, sorrow, disgust, or panic can all affect the way one sends and receives messages. Communications during periods of high emotion are often subject to distortion.
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10. Define and briefly discuss the e-mail process. The electronic mail, or e-mail, system provides for high-speed exchange of written messages through the use of computerized text processing and computer-oriented communication networks.
11. Discuss two factors that complicate communications in international business activities. Communicating in a foreign language complicates the communication process. Cultural differences exhibited through nonverbal communications are also complicating factors.

**Review Questions**

1. What is communication?
2. Define interpersonal communication.
3. Give an illustration of a conflicting assumption.
4. What is semantics?
5. What is perception, and what role does it play in communication?
6. How should one deal with emotions in communication?

7. What is feedback, and how does it affect the communication process?

8. What is active listening?

9. Explain the importance of nonverbal communication in interpersonal communication.

Skill-Building Questions

1. Describe some ways the grapevine can be used effectively in organizations.

2. Explain why many managers frequently raise the following question: “Why didn’t you do what I told you to do?”

3. Discuss the following statement: Meanings are in people, not words.

4. “Watch what we do, not what we say.” Is this a good practice in organizations? Explain.

5. Poor communication of the organization’s objectives is often given as the reason for low organizational performance. Do you think this is usually a valid explanation? Why or why not?

6. How should one deal with emotions in communication?

7. What is feedback, and how does it affect the communication process?

8. What is active listening?

9. Explain the importance of nonverbal communication in interpersonal communication.

10. Describe the following organizational communication systems:
   a. E-mail communication system
   b. Grapevine

11. Describe two factors that complicate communications in international business.

References


Additional Readings


SKILL-BUILDING APPLICATIONS

Incident 3–1
Who Calls the Shots?

The financial reports for the last quarter of operations for Brighton Cabinet Company were just received by the company’s president, John Branner. After looking over the reports, John decided the purchasing department was paying too much for the company’s raw materials, which include plywood, paneling, and flakeboard. He immediately called Joe Scott, vice president of manufacturing, and informed him of the decision. Exhibit 3.1 gives a partial organizational chart for Brighton Cabinet Company.

Joe called Bill Sloane, the supervisor of purchasing, and said, “Mr. Branner is upset over the cost figures for raw materials last quarter. You were well above budget. He wants them brought down this quarter!”

As Bill hung up the phone, he asked himself who figured out the budget for his department and if they realized plywood had gone up from $6.05 to $6.75 a sheet. Bill had been instructed to cut costs, and he was determined to do so. Two days later, Bill found a supplier who would sell Brighton plywood for $5.95 a sheet. He ordered a two-week supply.

On delivery, Bill’s suspicions were confirmed. The plywood was of a poorer quality, but it would work. Bill decided to continue to buy the less expensive plywood.

A month later, Bill was approached by Ted Brown, supervisor of the assembly department, who asked, “Bill, what’s with this plywood? All of a sudden, we’ve been having a lot of it split on us while trying to nail and staple the pieces together.” Bill replied, “Well, Ted, Mr. Branner sent orders down for me to cut costs. I don’t know how else to do it other than purchasing the lower-grade plywood. It was the only way out.” Things were left as they were, and the quarter ended.

The financial reports for the quarter showed a drop in sales and profits. According to forecasts and trends of previous years, the profits and sales should have been higher. John Branner immediately called Mary Strickland, vice president of marketing, to his office and demanded an explanation. Mary explained,

It seems that we have lost a couple of major builders as customers. They seem to think that our competitors have something better to offer. I have investigated the situation and have found that our cabinets are splitting more on installation because we are using a lower-grade plywood now. I talked to Joe Scott. He told me you had ordered him to cut costs, and the purchase of the lower grade was one of the few ways that costs could be reduced.

John immediately ordered Joe to begin purchasing plywood of the necessary quality. Joe then informed Bill. Later that day, Bill asked Joe what should be done with the three-week supply of the lower-grade plywood. “That’s your problem,” Joe snapped. Apparently, he had gotten a good chewing out from Branner.

After making several calls, Bill decided the only good offer for the plywood was made by the company that sold it to Brighton. But it would pay only 60 percent of what it cost Brighton. Bill agreed to the price, wanting to get rid of it to make room for the new supplies that would be coming in.
Three days later, Bill was called into Joe’s office. Joe asked, “Bill, who gave you permission to sell that plywood at that price?” “No one,” Bill replied. “It was my decision. It was the best deal I could find, and I needed to get it out to make room for the new supplies coming in.”

“Well, Bill, with decisions like that, this company won’t last very long,” Joe commented. “You should have used up the other plywood a little at a time by mixing it with the higher-grade plywood. Don’t let this happen again!”

Questions
1. How did this problem begin, and how could it have been avoided?
2. Describe the communication failures that occurred in this case.
3. Is Bill really responsible? Who else, if anyone, is responsible?
4. Comment on Joe Scott’s talk with Bill at the end of the case.

Exercise 3–1
Perception Test
Take a maximum of 10 minutes to complete the following test.

1. In 1963, if you went to bed at 8 o’clock P.M. and set the alarm to get up at 9 o’clock the next morning, how many hours of sleep would you get?
2. If you have only one match and enter a room in which there is a kerosene lamp, an oil stove, and a wood-burning stove, which would you light first?
3. Some months have 30 days; some have 31. How many have 28 days?
4. If a doctor gave you three pills and told you to take one every half-hour, how long would they last?
5. A man builds a house with four sides, and it is rectangular in shape. Each side has a southern exposure. A big bear comes wandering by. What color is the bear?
6. I have in my hand two U.S. coins that total 55 cents in value. One is not a nickel. Please bear that in mind. What are the two coins?
7. Divide 30 by ½ and add 10. What is the answer?
8. Take two apples from three apples, and what do you have?

9. An archaeologist found some gold coins dated 34 B.C. How old are they?
10. How many animals of each species did Moses take aboard the ark with him?

Exercise 3–2
Word Differences
We Americans supposedly speak the English language. However, anyone who has ever visited England knows that the English often use different words and phrases than we do. Can you identify what the English words or phrases in the left column below would be if spoken by an American?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British</th>
<th>American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chemist</td>
<td>a. elevator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phone engaged</td>
<td>b. mailbox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ring-up</td>
<td>c. orchestra seat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>round up</td>
<td>d. line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wines and spirits</td>
<td>e. can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chipped potatoes</td>
<td>f. subway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give way</td>
<td>g. hood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to let</td>
<td>h. newsstand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ta!</td>
<td>i. taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it’s mommy’s go</td>
<td>j. suspenders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>half five</td>
<td>k. aisle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mind your step</td>
<td>l. apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a bit dear</td>
<td>m. janitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>way out</td>
<td>n. hardware dealer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bonnet</td>
<td>o. truck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stall</td>
<td>p. exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flat</td>
<td>q. drugstore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kiosk</td>
<td>r. busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ironmonger</td>
<td>s. too expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pillar box</td>
<td>t. watch your step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>porter</td>
<td>u. call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tin</td>
<td>v. go halfway around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lift</td>
<td>circle and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>queue</td>
<td>straight up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lorry</td>
<td>w. liquor store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rates</td>
<td>x. french fries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>braces</td>
<td>y. yield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gangway</td>
<td>z. for rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>underground</td>
<td>aa. bid adieu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bb. it’s mommy’s turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cc. five-thirty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exercise 3–3
What’s Your Communication Style?

Carefully read each statement and its four endings. Grade these by assigning a 4 to the ending that most describes you, a 3 to the next ending most like you, a 2 to the next ending most like you, and a 1 to the ending least like you. Once you have assigned a number, you may not use that number again in the set of four endings. For example, you may not assign a grade of 4 to both 1a and 1b.

1. I am most likely to impress my co-workers as
   a. Down to earth, practical, and to the point.                   a____
   b. Emotional, sensitive to my own and others’ feelings.          b____
   c. Cool, logical, patient.                                      c____
   d. Intellectual and somewhat aloof.                             d____

2. When I am assigned a project, I am most concerned that the project will be
   a. Practical, with definite results that will justify my time and energy on it. a____
   b. Stimulating, involving lively interaction with others.         b____
   c. Systematically or logically developed.                         c____
   d. Breaking ground and advancing knowledge.                    d____

3. In reacting to individuals whom I meet socially, I am likely to consider whether
   a. They are assertive and decisive.                              a____
   b. They are caring.                                             b____
   c. They seem thorough and exact.                               c____
   d. They seem highly intelligent.                               d____

4. When confronted by others with a different opinion, I find it most useful to
   a. Pinpoint the key differences, and develop compromises so that speedy decisions can be made. a____
   b. Put myself in the others’ shoes, and try to understand their point of view. b____
   c. Keep calm and present my material clearly, simply, and logically. c____
   d. Create new proposals.                                        d____

5. Under pressure, I suspect I may come through to others as being
   a. Too concerned with wanting immediate action, and pushing for immediate decisions. a____
   b. Too emotional and occasionally carried away by my feelings. b____
   c. Highly unemotional, impersonal, too analytical and critical. c____
   d. Snobbish, condescending, intellectually superior. d____

6. When lecturing to a group, I would like to leave the impression of being
   a. A practical and resourceful person who can show the audience how to, for example, streamline a procedure. a____
   b. A lively and persuasive individual who is in touch with the audience’s emotions and moods. b____
   c. A systematic thinker who can analyze the group’s problems. c____
   d. A highly innovative individual. d____

Now transcribe the numbers that you wrote beside each ending to the appropriate spaces below. Total the columns for questions 1–3 and for questions 4–6. The initials at the bottom of the columns—S, F, T, and I—stand for the different communication styles: senser, feeler, thinker, and intuitor. The column with the highest total for questions 1–3 is your communication style under relaxed conditions, and the column with the highest total for questions 4–6 is your style under stress conditions. Once you have defined your particular style, check Table 3.1 at the end of the exercise for the positive and negative traits associated with it. Note that you may have the positive traits without the negative ones or vice versa.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

### TABLE 3.1
Some Traits Linked to Each Communication Style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intuitor</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Fantasy-bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Idealistic</td>
<td>Impractical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Too theoretical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeler</td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Wishy-washy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conscientious</td>
<td>Guilt-ridden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persuasive</td>
<td>Manipulative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinker</td>
<td>Exact, precise</td>
<td>Nitpicker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deliberate</td>
<td>Rigid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weighs all alternatives</td>
<td>Indecisive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensor</td>
<td>Decisive</td>
<td>Impulsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoys producing quick results</td>
<td>Lacks trust in others’ ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technically skillful</td>
<td>Self-involved, status seeking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>