

2.3: Different Types of Communication and Channels

Learning Objectives

1. Understand different types of communication.
2. Understand how communication channels affect communication.
3. Recognize different communication directions within organizations.

Types of Communication

There are three types of communication, including: verbal communication involving listening to a person to understand the meaning of a message, written communication in which a message is read, and nonverbal communication involving observing a person and inferring meaning. Let's start with verbal communication, which is the most common form of communication.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communications in business take place over the phone or in person. The medium of the message is oral. Let's return to our printer cartridge example. This time, the message is being conveyed from the sender (the manager) to the receiver (an employee named Bill) by telephone. We've already seen how the manager's request to Bill ("Buy more printer toner cartridges!") can go awry. Now let's look at how the same message can travel successfully from sender to receiver.

Manager (speaking on the phone): "Good morning Bill!"

(By using the employee's name, the manager is establishing a clear, personal link to the receiver.)

Manager: "Your division's numbers are looking great."

(The manager's recognition of Bill's role in a winning team further personalizes and emotionalizes the conversation.)

Manager: "Our next step is to order more printer toner cartridges. Would you place an order for 1,000 printer toner cartridges with Jones Computer Supplies? Our budget for this purchase is \$30,000, and the printer toner cartridges need to be here by Wednesday afternoon."

(The manager breaks down the task into several steps. Each step consists of a specific task, time frame, quantity, or goal.)

Bill: "Sure thing! I'll call Jones Computer Supplies and order 1,000 more printer toner cartridges, not exceeding a total of \$30,000, to be here by Wednesday afternoon."

(Bill, a model employee, repeats what he has heard. This is the feedback portion of the communication. Feedback helps him recognize any confusion he may have had hearing the manager's message. Feedback also helps the manager hear if she has communicated the message correctly.)

Storytelling has been shown to be an effective form of verbal communication that serves an important organizational function by helping to construct common meanings for individuals within the organization. Stories can help clarify key values and also help demonstrate how certain tasks are performed within an organization. Story frequency, strength, and tone are related to higher organizational commitment (McCarthy, 2008). The quality of the stories is related to the ability of entrepreneurs to secure capital for their firms (Martens, Jennings, & Devereaux, 2007).

While the process may be the same, high stakes communications require more planning, reflection, and skill than normal day-to-day interactions at work. Examples of high stakes communication events include asking for a raise or presenting a business plan to a venture capitalist. In addition to these events, there are also many times in our professional lives when we have crucial conversations, which are defined as discussions in which not only are the stakes high, but also the opinions vary and emotions run strong (Patterson et al., 2002). One of the most consistent recommendations from communications experts is to work toward using "and" instead of "but" when communicating under these circumstances. In addition, be aware of your communication style and practice being flexible; it is under stressful situations that communication styles can become the most rigid.

OB Toolbox: 10 Recommendations for Improving the Quality of Your Conversations

1. *Be the first to say hello.* Use your name in your introduction, in case others have forgotten it.
2. *Think before you speak.* Our impulse is often to imitate movies by offering fast, witty replies in conversation. In the real world, a careful silence can make us sound more intelligent and prevent mistakes.

3. *Be receptive to new ideas.* If you disagree with another person's opinion, saying, "Tell me more," can be a more useful way of moving forward than saying, "That's stupid!"
4. *Repeat someone's name to yourself and then aloud, when being introduced.* The form of the name you use may vary. First names work with peers. Mr. or Ms. is common when meeting superiors in business.
5. *Ask questions.* This establishes your interest in another person.
6. *Listen as much, if not more, than you speak.* This allows you to learn new information.
7. *Use eye contact.* Eye contact shows that you are engaged. Also, be sure to smile and make sure your body language matches your message.
8. *Mirror the other person.* Occasionally repeat what they've said in your own words. "You mean...?"
9. *Have an exit strategy ready.* Ideal conversations are brief, leaving others wanting more.
10. *Be prepared.* Before beginning a conversation, have three simple facts about yourself and four questions about someone else in mind.

Source: Adapted from information contained in Gabor, D. (1983). *How to start a conversation and make friends*. New York: Legacy; Post, E. (2005). *Emily Post's etiquette advantage in business*. New York: Collins Living; Fine, D. (2005). *The fine art of small talk*. New York: Hyperion.

Written Communication

In contrast to verbal communications, which are oral, written business communications are *printed messages*. Examples of written communications include memos, proposals, e-mails, letters, training manuals, and operating policies. They may be printed on paper or appear on the screen. Written communication is often asynchronous. That is, the sender can write a message that the receiver can read at any time, unlike a conversation that is carried on in real time. A written communication can also be read by many people (such as all employees in a department or all customers). It's a "one-to-many" communication, as opposed to a one-to-one conversation. There are exceptions, of course: A voice mail is an oral message that is asynchronous. Conference calls and speeches are oral one-to-many communications, and e-mails can have only one recipient or many.

Normally, a verbal communication takes place in real time. Written communication, by contrast, can be constructed over a longer period of time. It also can be collaborative. Multiple people can contribute to the content on one document before that document is sent to the intended audience.

Verbal and written communications have different strengths and weaknesses. In business, the decision to communicate verbally or in written form can be a powerful one. As we'll see below, each style of communication has particular strengths and pitfalls. When determining whether to communicate verbally or in writing, ask yourself: *Do I want to convey facts or feelings?* Verbal communications are a better way to convey feelings. Written communications do a better job of conveying facts.

Picture a manager making a speech to a team of 20 employees. The manager is speaking at a normal pace. The employees appear interested. But how much information is being transmitted? Probably not as much as the speaker believes. The fact is that humans listen much faster than they speak. The average public speaker communicates at a speed of about 125 words a minute, and that pace sounds fine to the audience. (In fact, anything faster than that probably would sound unusual. To put that figure in perspective, someone having an excited conversation speaks at about 150 words a minute.) Based on these numbers, we could assume that the audience has more than enough time to take in each word the speaker delivers, which actually creates a problem. The average person in the audience can hear 400 to 500 words a minute (Lee & Hatesohl, 2008). The audience has *more than enough time* to hear. As a result, their minds may wander.

As you can see, oral communication is the most often used form of communication, but it is also an inherently flawed medium for conveying specific facts. Listeners' minds wander. It's nothing personal—in fact, it's a completely normal psychological occurrence. In business, once we understand this fact, we can make more intelligent communication choices based on the kind of information we want to convey.



Figure 2.3.7: Communication mediums have come a long way since Alexander Graham Bell's original telephone. [Wikimedia Commons](#) – public domain.

Most jobs involve some degree of writing. According to the National Commission on Writing, 67% of salaried employees in large American companies and professional state employees have some kind of writing responsibility. Half of responding companies reported that they take writing into consideration when hiring professional employees, and 91% always take writing into account when hiring (Flink, 2007). Luckily, it is possible to learn to write clearly.

Here are some tips on writing well. Thomas Jefferson summed up the rules of writing well with this idea: “Don’t use two words when one will do.” Put another way, half the words can have twice the impact. One of the oldest myths in business is that writing more will make us sound more important. The opposite is true. Leaders who can communicate simply and clearly project a stronger image than those who write a lot but say nothing.

Putting Jefferson’s Rules Into Action: Five Ways to Communicate More With Fewer Words

1. *Picture the receiver in your mind before you begin to write.* After all, a written communication is a link between people.
2. *Choose simple words.* When in doubt, choose the shorter word (“Automobile or car? Car!”)
3. *Be polite and clear.* Your message will make a strong, clear impact.
4. *Make your message brief and direct by trimming redundant words or phrases.* “Having thus explored our first option, I would now like to begin to explore the second option that may be open to us.” versus “After considering Option 1, I would like to look at Option 2.”
5. *Choose strong, active verbs.* “I suggest...” instead of “It would seem to me that we might...”

Remember, concise writing equals effective communication.

Nonverbal Communication

What you say is a vital part of any communication. Surprisingly, what you *don’t say* can be even more important. Research shows that nonverbal cues can also affect whether or not you get a job offer. Judges examining videotapes of actual applicants were able to assess the social skills of job candidates with the sound turned off. They watched the rate of gesturing, time spent talking, and formality of dress to determine which candidates would be the most socially successful on the job (Gifford, Ng, & Wilkinson, 1985). Research also shows that 55% of in-person communication comes from nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body stance, and tone of voice. According to one study, only 7% of a receiver’s comprehension of a message is based on the sender’s actual words, 38% is based on paralanguage (the tone, pace, and volume of speech), and 55% is based on *nonverbal cues* (body language) (Mehrabian, 1981). To be effective communicators, our body language, appearance, and tone must align with the words we’re trying to convey. Research shows that when individuals are lying, they are more likely to blink more frequently, shift their weight, and shrug (Siegman, 1985).

Listen Up and Learn More!

To learn more about facial language from facial recognition expert Patrician McCarthy as she speaks with Senior Editor Suzanne Woolley at *Business Week*, view the online interview at feedroom.businessweek.com/ind...41fa625f5b0744

A different tone can change the perceived meaning of a message. See the table below for how clearly this can be true. If we only read these words, we would be left to wonder, but during a conversation, the tone conveys a great deal of information.

Don't Use That Tone With Me!

Changing your tone can dramatically change your meaning.

Table 2.3.1:

Placement of the emphasis	What it means
I did not tell John you were late.	Someone else told John you were late.
I did not tell John you were late.	This did not happen.
I did not tell John you were late.	I may have implied it.
I did not tell John you were late.	But maybe I told Sharon and José.
I did not tell John you were late.	I was talking about someone else.
I did not tell John you were late.	I told him you still are late.
I did not tell John you were late .	I told him you were attending another meeting.

Source: Based on ideas in Kiely, M. (October, 1993). When “no” means “yes.” *Marketing*, 7–9.

Now you can see how changing the tone of voice in a conversation can incite or diffuse a misunderstanding. For another example, imagine that you're a customer interested in opening a new bank account. At one bank, the bank officer is dressed neatly. She looks you in the eye when she speaks. Her tone is friendly. Her words are easy to understand, yet professional sounding. “Thank you for considering Bank of the East Coast. We appreciate this opportunity and would love to explore ways that we can work together to help your business grow,” she says with a friendly smile. At the second bank, the bank officer's tie is stained. He looks over your head and down at his desk as he speaks. He shifts in his seat and fidgets with his hands. His words say, “Thank you for considering Bank of the West Coast. We appreciate this opportunity and would love to explore ways that we can work together to help you business grow,” but he mumbles his words, and his voice conveys no enthusiasm or warmth. Which bank would you choose? The speaker's body language must match his or her words. If a sender's words and body language don't match—if a sender smiles while telling a sad tale, for example—the mismatch between verbal and nonverbal cues can cause a receiver to actively dislike the sender.

Following are a few examples of nonverbal cues that can support or detract from a sender's message.

Body Language

A simple rule of thumb is that simplicity, directness, and warmth conveys sincerity. Sincerity is vital for effective communication. In some cultures, a firm handshake, given with a warm, dry hand, is a great way to establish trust. A weak, clammy handshake might convey a lack of trustworthiness. Gnawing one's lip conveys uncertainty. A direct smile conveys confidence.

Eye Contact

In business, the style and duration of eye contact varies greatly across cultures. In the United States, looking someone in the eye (for about a second) is considered a sign of trustworthiness.

Facial Expressions

The human face can produce thousands of different expressions. These expressions have been decoded by experts as corresponding to hundreds of different emotional states (Ekman, Friesen, & Hager, 2008). Our faces convey basic information to the outside world. Happiness is associated with an upturned mouth and slightly closed eyes; fear with an open mouth and wide-eyed stare.

Shifty eyes and pursed lips convey a lack of trustworthiness. The impact of facial expressions in conversation is instantaneous. Our brains may register them as “a feeling” about someone’s character. For this reason, it is important to consider how we appear in business as well as what we say. The muscles of our faces convey our emotions. We can send a silent message without saying a word. A change in facial expression can change our emotional state. Before an interview, for example, if we focus on feeling confident, our face will convey that confidence to an interviewer. Adopting a smile (even if we’re feeling stressed) can reduce the body’s stress levels.

Posture

The position of our body relative to a chair or other person is another powerful silent messenger that conveys interest, aloofness, professionalism, or lack thereof. Head up, back straight (but not rigid) implies an upright character. In interview situations, experts advise mirroring an interviewer’s tendency to lean in and settle back in a seat. The subtle repetition of the other person’s posture conveys that we are listening and responding.

Touch

The meaning of a simple touch differs between individuals, genders, and cultures. In Mexico, when doing business, men may find themselves being grasped on the arm by another man. To pull away is seen as rude. In Indonesia, to touch anyone on the head or to touch anything with one’s foot is considered highly offensive. In the Far East and some parts of Asia, according to business etiquette writer Nazir Daud, “It is considered impolite for a woman to shake a man’s hand” (Daud, 2008). Americans, as we have noted above, place great value in a firm handshake. But handshaking as a competitive sport (“the bone-crusher”) can come off as needlessly aggressive both at home and abroad.

Space

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall coined the term *proxemics* to denote the different kinds of distance that occur between people. These distances vary among cultures. The chart below outlines the basic proxemics of everyday life and their associated meaning (Hall, 1966).

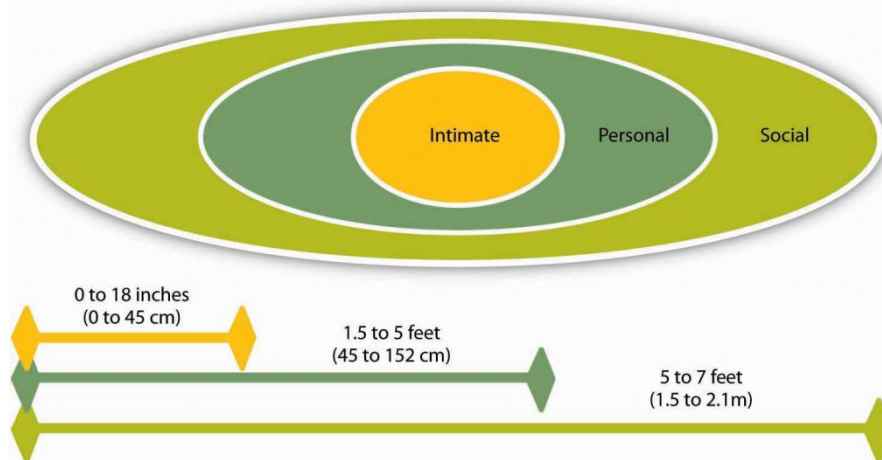


Figure 2.3.9: Distance between speakers is partially determined by their intimacy level. Source: Hall, E. T. (1966). *The hidden dimension*. New York: Doubleday.

Standing too far away from a colleague (public speaking distance) or too close to a colleague (intimate distance for embracing) can thwart an effective verbal communication in business.

Communication Channels

The channel, or medium, used to communicate a message affects how accurately the message will be received. Channels vary in their “information-richness.” Information-rich channels convey more nonverbal information. Research shows that effective managers tend to use more information-rich communication channels than less effective managers (Allen & Griffeth, 1997; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). The figure below illustrates the information richness of different channels.

Figure 8.10



Information Channel	Information Richness
Face-to-face conversation	High
Videoconferencing	High
Telephone conversation	High
E-mails	Medium
Handheld devices	Medium
Blogs	Medium
Written letters and memos	Medium
Formal written documents	Low
Spreadsheets	Low

Information channels differ in their richness.

Sources: Adapted from information in Daft, R. L., & Lenge, R. H. (1984). Information richness: A new approach to managerial behavior and organizational design. In B. Staw & L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior*, vol. 6 (pp. 191–233). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press; Lengel, R. H., & Daft, D. L. (1988). The selection of communication media as an executive skill. *Academy of Management Executive*, 11, 225–232.

The key to effective communication is to match the communication channel with the goal of the message (Barry & Fulmer, 2004). For example, written media may be a better choice when the sender wants a record of the content, has less urgency for a response, is physically separated from the receiver, and doesn't require a lot of feedback from the receiver, or when the message is complicated and may take some time to understand.

Oral communication, on the other hand, makes more sense when the sender is conveying a sensitive or emotional message, needs feedback immediately, and does not need a permanent record of the conversation.

Figure 8.11 Guide for When to Use Written versus Verbal Communication

Use Written Communication When:	Use Verbal Communication When:
conveying facts	conveying emotion and feelings
the message needs to become part of a permanent file	the message does not need to be permanent
there is little time urgency	there is time urgency
you do not need immediate feedback	you need immediate feedback
the ideas are complicated	the ideas are simple or can be made simple with explanations



Figure 2.3.12: Make sure to match the medium to the task. Trying to accomplish a visual task such as choosing colors is more challenging on the phone versus in person. Mike – [Choosing Colors](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Like face-to-face and telephone conversations, videoconferencing has high information richness, because receivers and senders can see or hear beyond just the words that are used—they can see the sender’s body language or hear the tone of their voice. Handheld devices, blogs, and written letters and memos offer medium-rich channels, because they convey words and pictures or photos. Formal written documents, such as legal documents and budget spreadsheets, convey the least richness, because the format is often rigid and standardized. As a result, the tone of the message is often lost.

The growth of e-mail has been spectacular, but it has also created challenges in managing information and increasing the speed of doing businesses. Over 100 million adults in the United States use e-mail at least once a day (Taylor, 2002). Internet users around the world send an estimated 60 billion e-mails each day, and a large portion of these are spam or scam attempts (60 Billion emails sent daily worldwide, 2006). That makes e-mail the second most popular medium of communication worldwide, second only to voice. Less than 1% of all written human communications even reaches paper these days (Isom, 2008). To combat the overuse of e-mail, companies such as Intel have even instituted “no e-mail Fridays.” During these times, all communication is done via other communication channels. Learning to be more effective in your e-mail communications is an important skill. To learn more, check out the OB Toolbox on business e-mail do’s and don’ts.

OB Toolbox: Business E-mail Do’s and Don’ts

1. DON’T send or forward chain e-mails.
2. DON’T put anything in an e-mail that you don’t want the world to see.
3. DON’T write a message in capital letters—this is the equivalent of SHOUTING.
4. DON’T routinely CC everyone. Reducing inbox clutter is a great way to increase communication.
5. DON’T hit send until you’ve spell-checked your e-mail.
6. DO use a subject line that summarizes your message, adjusting it as the message changes over time.
7. DO make your request in the first line of your e-mail. (And if that’s all you need to say, stop there!)
8. DO end your e-mail with a brief sign-off such as, “Thank you,” followed by your name and contact information.
9. DO think of a work e-mail as a binding communication.
10. DO let others know if you’ve received an e-mail in error.

Sources: Adapted from information in Leland, K., & Bailey, K. (2000). *Customer service for dummies*. New York: Wiley; Information Technology Services. (1997). Top 10 email dos and top ten email don’ts. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center Web site: www.uic.edu/hsc/uicmc/its/cus...email-tips.htm; Kawasaki, G. (2006, February 3). The effective emailer. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from *How to Change the World* Web site: blog.guykawasaki.com/2006/02/...fective_e.html.

An important although often ignored rule when communicating emotional information is that e-mail’s lack of richness can be your loss. As we saw in the chart above, e-mail is a medium-rich channel. It can convey facts quickly. But when it comes to emotion, e-mail’s flaws make it a far less desirable choice than oral communication—the 55% of nonverbal cues that make a conversation

comprehensible to a listener are missing. Researchers also note that e-mail readers don't pick up on sarcasm and other tonal aspects of writing as much as the writer believes they will (Kruger, 2005).

The sender may believe that certain emotional signifiers have been included in a message. But, with written words alone, those signifiers are not there. This gap between the form and content of e-mail inspired the rise of emoticons—symbols that offer clues to the emotional side of the words in each message. Generally speaking, however, emoticons are not considered professional in business communication.

You might feel uncomfortable conveying an emotionally laden message verbally, especially when the message contains unwanted news. Sending an e-mail to your staff that there will be no bonuses this year may seem easier than breaking the bad news face-to-face, but that doesn't mean that e-mail is an effective or appropriate way to break this kind of news. When the message is emotional, the sender should use verbal communication. Indeed, a good rule of thumb is that more emotionally laden messages require more thought in the choice of channel and how they are communicated.

Career Advice

Communication can occur without you even realizing it. Consider the following: Is your e-mail name professional? The typical convention for business e-mail contains some form of your name. While an e-mail name like "LazyGirl" or "DeathMonkey" may be fine for chatting online with your friends, they may send the wrong signal to individuals you e-mail such as professors and prospective employers.

Is your outgoing voice mail greeting professional? If not, change it. Faculty and prospective recruiters will draw certain conclusions if, upon calling you, they get a message that screams, "Party, party, party!"

Do you have a "private" social networking Web site on MySpace.com, Facebook.com, or Xanga.com? If so, consider what it says about you to employers or clients. If it is information you wouldn't share at work, it probably shouldn't be there.

Googled yourself lately? If not, you probably should. Potential employers have begun searching the Web as part of background checking, and you should be aware of what's out there about you.

Direction of Communication Within Organizations

Information can move horizontally, from a sender to a receiver, as we've seen. It can also move vertically, down from top management, or up from the front line. Information can also move diagonally between and among levels of an organization, such as a message from a customer service rep to a manager in the manufacturing department or a message from the chief financial officer sent down to all department heads.

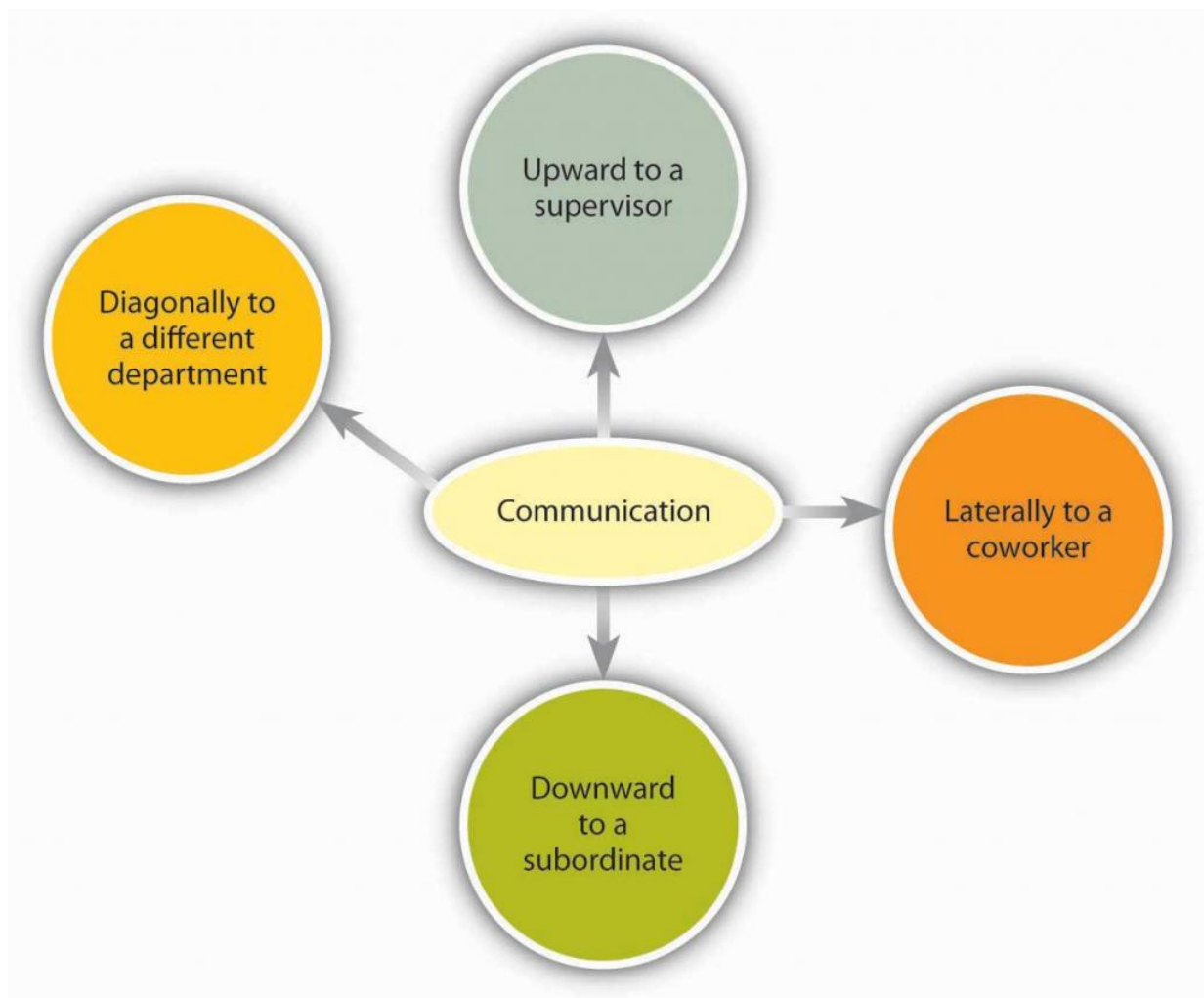


Figure 2.3.13: Organizational communication travels in many different directions.

There is a chance for these arrows to go awry, of course. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of best-selling books such as *Flow*, has noted, “In large organizations the dilution of information as it passes up and down the hierarchy, and horizontally across departments, can undermine the effort to focus on common goals.”^[1]

The organizational status of the sender can impact the receiver’s attentiveness to the message. For example, consider the following: A senior manager sends a memo to a production supervisor. The supervisor, who has a lower status within the organization, is likely to pay close attention to the message. The same information conveyed in the opposite direction, however, might not get the attention it deserves. The message would be filtered by the senior manager’s perception of priorities and urgencies.

Requests are just one kind of communication in business. Other communications, either verbal or written, may seek, give, or exchange information. Research shows that frequent communications with one’s supervisor is related to better job performance ratings and overall organizational performance (Snyder & Morris, 1984; Kacmar et al., 2003). Research also shows that lateral communication done between peers can influence important organizational outcomes such as turnover (Krackhardt & Porter, 1986).

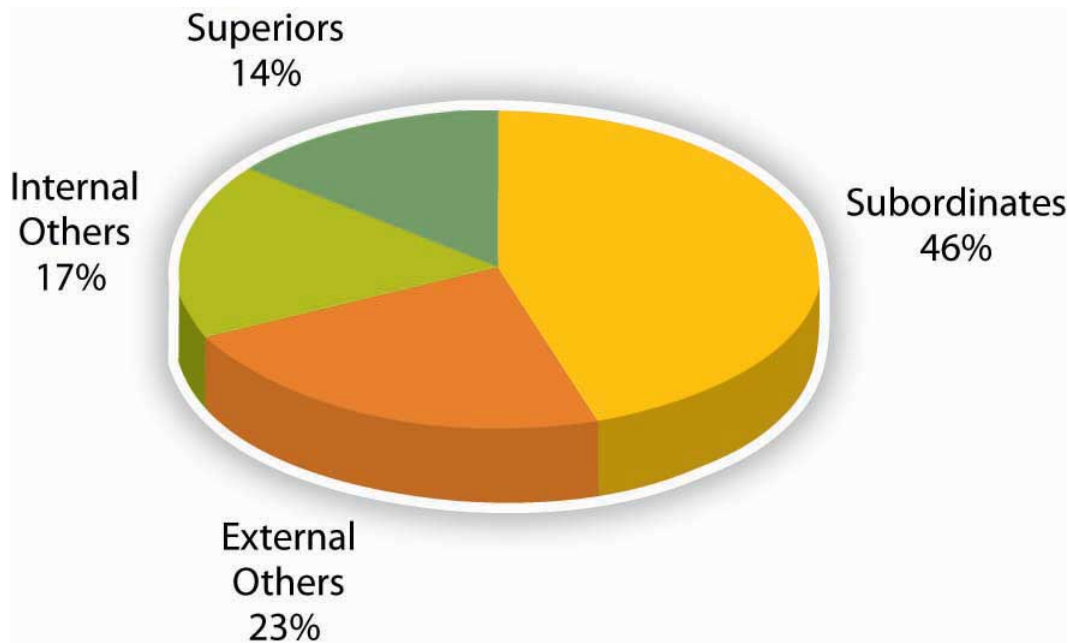


Figure 2.3.14: How Managers Spend Time Communicating at Work Source: Adapted from information in Luthans, F., & Larsen, J. K. (1986). How managers really communicate. *Human Relations*, 39, 161–178.

External Communications

External communications deliver specific businesses messages to individuals outside an organization. They may announce changes in staff or strategy, earnings, and more. The goal of an external communication is to create a specific message that the receiver will understand and share with others. Examples of external communications include the following.

Press Releases

Public relations professionals create external communications about a client’s product, services, or practices for specific receivers. These receivers, it is hoped, will share the message with others. In time, as the message is passed along, it should *appear* to be independent of the sender, creating the illusion of an independently generated consumer trend, public opinion, and so on.

The message of a public relations effort may be *b2b* (business to business), *b2c* (business to consumer), or media related. The message can take different forms. Press releases try to convey a newsworthy message, real or manufactured. It may be constructed like a news item, inviting editors or reporters to reprint the message in part or as a whole, with or without acknowledgement of the sender’s identity. Public relations campaigns create messages over time through contests, special events, trade shows, and media interviews in addition to press releases.

Ads

Advertising places external business messages before target receivers through media buys. A media buy is a fee that is paid to a television network, Web site, magazine, and so on by an advertiser to insert an advertisement. The fee is based on the perceived value of the audience who watches, reads, listens to, or frequents the space where the ad will appear.

In recent years, receivers have begun to filter advertiser’s messages. This phenomenon is perceived to be a result of the large amount of ads the average person sees each day and a growing level of consumer wariness of paid messaging. Advertisers, in turn, are trying to create alternative forms of advertising that receivers won’t filter. The *advertorial* is one example of an external communication that combines the look of an article with the focused message of an ad. Product placements in videos, movies, and games are other ways that advertisers strive to reach receivers with commercial messages.

Web Pages

A Web page’s external communication can combine elements of public relations, advertising, and editorial content, reaching receivers on multiple levels and in multiple ways. Banner ads, blogs, and advertiser-driven “click-through” areas are just a few of the elements that allow a business to deliver a message to a receiver online. The perceived flexibility of online communications can

impart a less formal (and therefore, more believable) quality to an external communication. A message relayed in a daily blog post, for example, will reach a receiver differently than if it is delivered in an annual report. The popularity and power of blogs is growing, with 11% of *Fortune* 500 companies having official blogs (up from 4% in 2005). In fact, blogs have become so important to companies such as Coca-Cola Company, Eastman Kodak Company, and Marriott International Inc. that they have created official positions within their organizations titled “chief blogging officer” (Chief blogging officer, 2008). The “real-time” quality of Web communications may appeal to receivers who might filter out traditional ads and public relations messages because of their “prefab” quality. Despite a “spontaneous” feel, many online pages can be revisited many times in a single day. For this reason, clear and accurate external communications are as vital for online use as they are in traditional media.

Customer Communications

Customer communications can include letters, catalogs, direct mail, e-mails, text messages, and telemarketing messages. Some receivers automatically filter these types of bulk messages. Others will be receptive. The key to a successful external communication to customers is to convey a business message in a personally compelling way—dramatic news, a money-saving coupon, and so forth.

Key Takeaways

Types of communication include verbal, written, and nonverbal. Surprisingly, 55% of face-to-face communication comes from nonverbal cues such as tone or body language. Different communication channels are more or less effective at transmitting different kinds of information. In addition, communication flows in different directions within organizations.

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