

11.5: The Major Channels of Management Communication Are Talking, Listening, Reading, and Writing

5. Know why talking, listening, reading, and writing are vital to managing effectively.

The major channels of managerial communication displayed in **Exhibit 11.6** are talking, listening, reading, and writing. Among these, talking is the predominant method of communicating, but as e-mail and texting increase, reading and writing are increasing. Managers across industries, according to Deirdre Borden, spend about 75% of their time in verbal interaction. Those daily interactions include the following.



Exhibit 11.6 Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening: How They Help in Creating Meaning (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC-BY 4.0 license)

One-on-One Conversations

Increasingly, managers find that information is passed orally, often face-to-face in offices, hallways, conference rooms, cafeterias, restrooms, athletic facilities, parking lots, and literally dozens of other venues. An enormous amount of information is exchanged, validated, confirmed, and passed back and forth under highly informal circumstances.

Telephone Conversations

Managers spend an astounding amount of time on the telephone these days. Curiously, the amount of time per telephone call is decreasing, but the number of calls per day is increasing. With the nearly universal availability of cellular and satellite telephone service, very few people are out of reach of the office for very long. The decision to switch off a cellular telephone, in fact, is now considered a decision in favor of work-life balance.

Video Teleconferencing

Bridging time zones as well as cultures, videoconferencing facilities make direct conversations with employees, colleagues, customers, and business partners across the nation or around the world a simple matter. Carrier Corporation, the air-conditioning manufacturer, is now typical of firms using desktop videoconferencing to conduct everything from staff meetings to technical training. Engineers at Carrier's Farmington, Connecticut, headquarters can hook up with service managers in branch offices thousands of miles away to explain new product developments, demonstrate repair techniques, and update field staff on matters that would, just recently, have required extensive travel or expensive, broadcast-quality television programming. Their exchanges are informal, conversational, and not much different than they would be if the people were in the same room.¹⁸

Presentations to Small Groups

Managers frequently find themselves making presentations, formal and informal, to groups of three to eight people for many different reasons: they pass along information given to them by executives, they review the status of projects in process, and they explain changes in everything from working schedules to organizational goals. Such presentations are sometimes supported by overhead transparencies or printed outlines, but they are oral in nature and retain much of the conversational character of one-to-one conversations.

Public Speaking to Larger Audiences

Most managers are unable to escape the periodic requirement to speak to larger audiences of several dozen or, perhaps, several hundred people. Such presentations are usually more formal in structure and are often supported by PowerPoint or Prezi software that can deliver data from text files, graphics, photos, and even motion clips from streaming video. Despite the more formal atmosphere and sophisticated audio-visual support systems, such presentations still involve one manager talking to others, framing, shaping, and passing information to an audience.

A series of scientific studies, beginning with Rankin, Nichols and Stevens, and Wolvin and Coakley, confirm: most managers spend the largest portion of their day talking and listening.¹⁹ Werner's thesis, in fact, found that North American adults spend more than 78% of their communication time either talking or listening to others who are talking.

According to Werner and others who study the communication habits of postmodern business organizations, managers are involved in more than just speeches and presentations from the dais or teleconference podium. They spend their days in meetings, on the telephone, conducting interviews, giving tours, supervising informal visits to their facilities, and at a wide variety of social events.²⁰



Exhibit 11.7 Public speaking Public speaking is often a terrifying but crucial skill for managers. (Credit: Mike Mozart/ flickr/ Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0))

Each of these activities may look to some managers like an obligation imposed by the job. Shrewd managers see them as opportunities to hear what others are thinking, to gather information informally from the grapevine, to listen in on office gossip, to pass along viewpoints that haven't yet made their way to the more formal channels of communication, or to catch up with a colleague or friend in a more relaxed setting. No matter what the intention of each manager who engages in these activities, the information they produce and the insight that follows from them can be put to work the same day to achieve organizational and personal objectives. "To understand why effective managers behave as they do," writes Kotter, "it is essential first to recognize two fundamental challenges and dilemmas found in most of their jobs." Managers must first figure out what to do, despite an enormous amount of potentially relevant information (along with much that is not), and then they must get things done "through a large and diverse group of people despite having little direct control over most of them."²¹

The Role of Writing

Writing plays an important role in the life of any organization. In some organizations, it becomes more important than in others. At Procter & Gamble, for example, brand managers cannot raise a work-related issue in a team meeting unless the ideas are first circulated in writing. For P&G managers, this approach means explaining their ideas in explicit detail in a standard one-to-three-page memo, complete with background, financial discussion, implementation details, and justification for the ideas proposed.

Other organizations are more oral in their traditions—3M Canada is a “spoken” organization—but the fact remains: the most important projects, decisions, and ideas end up in writing. Writing also provides analysis, justification, documentation, and analytic discipline, particularly as managers approach important decisions that will affect the profitability and strategic direction of the company.

Writing is a career sifter. If managers demonstrate their inability to put ideas on paper in a clear, unambiguous fashion, they’re not likely to last. Stories of bad writers who’ve been shown the door early in their careers are legion. Managers’ principal objective, at least during the first few years of their career, is to keep their name out of such stories. Remember: those who are most likely to notice the quality and skill in managers’ written documents are the very people most likely to matter to managers’ future.

Managers do most of their own writing and editing. The days when managers could lean back and thoughtfully dictate a letter or memo to a skilled secretarial assistant are mostly gone. Some senior executives know how efficient dictation can be, especially with a top-notch administrative assistant taking shorthand, but how many managers have that advantage today? Very few, mostly because buying a computer and printer is substantially cheaper than hiring another employee. Managers at all levels of most organizations draft, review, edit, and dispatch their own correspondence, reports, and proposals.

Documents take on lives of their own. Once it’s gone from the manager’s desk, it isn’t theirs anymore. When they sign a letter and put it in the mail, it’s no longer their letter—it’s the property of the person or organization it was sent to. As a result, the recipient is free to do as she sees fit with the writing, including using it against the sender. If the ideas are ill-considered or not well expressed, others in the organization who are not especially sympathetic to the manager’s views may head for the copy machine with the manager’s work in hand. The advice for managers is simple: do not mail the first draft, and do not ever sign your name to a document you are not proud of.

Communication Is Invention

Without question, communication is a process of invention. Managers literally create meaning through communication. A company, for example, is not in default until a team of auditors sits down to examine the books and review the matter. Only after extended discussion do the accountants conclude that the company is, in fact, in default. It is their discussion that creates the outcome. Until that point, default was simply one of many possibilities.

The fact is managers create meaning through communication. It is largely through discussion and verbal exchange—often heated and passionate—that managers decide who they wish to be: market leaders, takeover artists, innovators, or defenders of the economy. It is only through communication that meaning is created for shareholders, employees, customers, and others. Those long, detailed, and intense discussions determine how much the company will declare in dividends this year, whether the company is willing to risk a strike or labor action, and how soon to roll out the new product line customers are asking for. Additionally, it is important to note that managers usually figure things out by talking about them as much as they talk about the things they have already figured out. Talk serves as a wonderful palliative: justifying, analyzing, dissecting, reassuring, and analyzing the events that confront managers each day.

Information Is Socially Constructed

If we are to understand just how important human discourse is in the life of a business, several points seem especially important.

Information is created, shared, and interpreted by people. Meaning is a truly human phenomenon. An issue is only important if people think it is. Facts are facts only if we can agree upon their definition. Perceptions and assumptions are as important as truth itself in a discussion about what a manager should do next.²² Information never speaks for itself. It is not uncommon for a manager to rise to address a group of her colleagues and say, “The numbers speak for themselves.” Frankly, the numbers never speak for themselves. They almost always require some sort of interpretation, some sort of explanation or context. Do not assume that others see the facts in the same way managers do, and never assume that what is seen is the truth. Others may see the same set of facts or evidence but may not reach the same conclusions. Few things in life are self-explanatory.

Context always drives meaning. The backdrop to a message is always of paramount importance to the listener, viewer, or reader in reaching a reasonable, rational conclusion about what she sees and hears. What’s in the news these days as we take up this subject? What moment in history do we occupy? What related or relevant information is under consideration as this new message arrives? We cannot possibly derive meaning from one message without considering everything else that surrounds it.

A messenger always accompanies a message. It is difficult to separate a message from its messenger. We often want to react more to the source of the information than we do to the information itself. That’s natural and entirely normal. People speak for a reason,

and we often judge their reasons for speaking before analyzing what they have to say. Keep in mind that, in every organization, message recipients will judge the value, power, purpose, intent, and outcomes of the messages they receive by the source of those messages as much as by the content and intent of the messages themselves. If the messages managers send are to have the impact hoped for, they must come from a source the receiver knows, respects, and understands.

Managers' Greatest Challenge

Every manager knows communication is vital, but every manager also seems to “know” that she is great at it. Managers' greatest challenge is to admit to flaws in their skill set and work tirelessly to improve them. First, managers must admit to the flaws.

Larkin and Larkin write, “Deep down, managers believe they are communicating effectively. In ten years of management consulting, we have never had a manager say to us that he or she was a poor communicator. They admit to the occasional screw-up, but overall, everyone, without exception, believes he or she is basically a good communicator.”²³

Managers' Task as Professionals

As a professional manager, the first task is to recognize and understand one's strengths and weaknesses as a communicator. Until these communication tasks at which one is most and least skilled are identified, there will be little opportunity for improvement and advancement.

Foremost among managers' goals should be to improve existing skills. Improve one's ability to do what is done best. Be alert to opportunities, however, to develop new skills. Managers should add to their inventory of abilities to keep themselves employable and promotable.

Two other suggestions come to mind for improving managers' professional standing. First, acquire a knowledge base that will work for the years ahead. That means speaking with and listening to other professionals in their company, industry, and community. They should be alert to trends that could affect their company's products and services, as well as their own future.

It also means reading. Managers should read at least one national newspaper each day, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, or the *Financial Times*, as well as a local newspaper. Their reading should include weekly news magazines, such as *U.S. News & World Report*, *Bloomberg's Business Week*, and the *Economist*. Subscribe to monthly magazines such as *Fast Company* and *Fortune*. And they should read at least one new hardcover title a month. A dozen books each year is the bare minimum on which one should depend for new ideas, insights, and managerial guidance.

Managers' final challenge is to develop the confidence needed to succeed as a manager, particularly under conditions of uncertainty, change, and challenge.

ethics in practice

Disney and H-1B Visas

On January 30, 2015, The Walt Disney Company laid off 250 of its IT workers. In a letter to the laid-off workers, Disney outlined the conditions for receipt of a “stay bonus,” which would entitle each worker to a lump-sum payment of 10% of her annual salary.

Of course, there was a catch. Only those workers who trained their replacements over a 90-day period would receive the bonus. One American worker in his 40s who agreed to Disney's severance terms explained how it worked in action:

“The first 30 days was all capturing what I did. The next 30 days, they worked side by side with me, and the last 30 days, they took over my job completely. I had to make sure they were doing my job correctly.”

To outside observers, this added insult to injury. It was bad enough to replace U.S. workers with cheaper, foreign labor. But to ask, let alone strong-arm, the laid-off workers into training their replacements seemed a bit much.

However unfortunate, layoffs are commonplace. But this was different. From the timing to the apparent neglect of employee pride, the sequence of events struck a nerve. For many, the issue was simple, and Disney's actions seemed wrong at a visceral level. As criticism mounted, it became clear that this story would develop legs. Disney had a problem.

For David Powers and Leo Perrero, each a 10-year information technology (IT) veteran at Disney, the invitation came from a vice president of the company. It had to be good news, the men thought. After all, they were not far removed from strong performance reviews—perhaps they would be awarded performance bonuses. Well, not exactly. Leo Perrero, one of the summoned workers, explains what happened next.

"I'm in the room with about two-dozen people, and very shortly thereafter an executive delivers the news that all of our jobs are ending in 90 days, and that we have 90 days to train our replacements or we won't get a bonus that we've been offered."

Powers explained the deflating effect of the news: "When a guillotine falls down on you, in that moment you're dead . . . and I was dead."

These layoffs and the hiring of foreign workers under the H-1B program lay at the center of this issue. Initially introduced by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, subsequent modifications produced the current iteration of the H-1B visa program in 1990. Importantly, at that time, the United States faced a shortage of skilled workers necessary to fill highly technical jobs. Enter the H-1B visa program as the solution. This program permits U.S. employers to temporarily employ foreign workers in highly specialized occupations. "Specialty occupations" are defined as those in the fields of architecture, engineering, mathematics, science, medicine, and others that require technical and skilled expertise.

Congress limited the number of H-1B visas issued to 85,000 per year. That total is divided into two subcategories: "65,000 new H-1B visas issued for overseas workers in professional or specialty occupation positions, and an additional 20,000 visas available for those with an advanced degree from a U.S. academic institution." Further, foreign workers are not able to apply for an H-1B visa. Instead, a U.S. employer must petition on their behalf no earlier than six months before the starting date of employment.

In order to be eligible for an employer to apply a foreign worker for an H-1B visa, the worker needed to meet certain requirements, such as an employee-employer relationship with the petitioning U.S. employer and a position in a specialty occupation related to the employee's field of study, where the employee must meet one of the following criteria: a bachelor's degree or the foreign equivalent of a bachelor's degree, a degree that is standard for the position, or previous qualified experience within the specialty occupation.

If approved, the initial term of the visa is three years, which may be extended an additional three years. While residing in the United States on an H-1B visa, a worker may apply to become a permanent resident and receive a green card, which would entitle the worker to remain indefinitely.

U.S. employers are required to file a Labor Condition Application (LCA) on behalf of each foreign worker they seek to employ. That application must be approved by the U.S. Department of Labor. The LCA requires the employer to assure that the foreign worker will be paid a wage and be provided working conditions and benefits that meet or exceed the local prevailing market and to assure that the foreign worker will not displace a U.S. worker in the employer's workforce.

Given these representations, U.S. employers have increasingly been criticized for abuse of the H-1B program. Most significantly, there is rising sentiment that U.S. employers are displacing domestic workers in favor of cheaper foreign labor. Research indicates that a U.S. worker's salary for these specialty occupations often exceeds \$100,000, while that of a foreign worker is roughly \$62,000 for the very same job. The latter figure is telling, since \$60,000 is the threshold below which a salary would trigger a penalty.

Disney faced huge backlash and negative press because of the layoffs and hiring of foreign workers. Because of this, Disney had communication challenges, both internally and externally.

Disney executives framed the layoffs as part of a larger plan of reorganization intended to enable its IT division to focus on driving innovation. Walt Disney World spokesperson Jacquee Wahler gave the following explanation:

"We have restructured our global technology organization to *significantly increase our cast member focus on future innovation and new capabilities*, and are continuing to work with leading technical firms to maintain our existing systems as needed." (Italics added for emphasis.)

That statement is consistent with a leaked memo drafted by Disney Parks and Resort CIO Tilak Mandadi, which he sent to select employees on November 10, 2014 (not including those who would be laid off), to explain the rationale for the impending layoffs. The memo read, in part, as follows:

"To enable a majority of our team to *shift focus to new capabilities*, we have executed five new managed services agreements to support testing services and application maintenance. Last week, we began working with both our internal subject matter experts and the suppliers to start transition planning for these agreements. We expect knowledge transfer to start later this month and last through January. Those Cast Members who are involved will be contacted in the next several weeks."

Responding to the critical *New York Times* article, Disney represented that when all was said and done, the company had in fact produced a net jobs increase. According to Disney spokesperson Kim Prunty:

“Disney has created almost 30,000 new jobs in the U.S. over the past decade, and the recent changes to our parks’ IT team resulted in a larger organization with 70 additional in-house positions in the U.S. External support firms are responsible for complying with all applicable employment laws for their employees.”

New jobs were promised due to the restructuring, Disney officials said, and employees targeted for termination were pushed to apply for those positions. According to a confidential Disney source, of the approximately 250 laid-off employees, 120 found new jobs within Disney, 40 took early retirement, and 90 were unable to secure new jobs with Disney.

On June 11, 2015, Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois and Senator Jeffrey Sessions of Alabama released a statement regarding a bipartisan letter issued to the attorney general, the Department Homeland Security, and the Department of Labor.

“A number of U.S. employers, including some large, well-known, publicly-traded corporations, have laid off thousands of American workers and replaced them with H-1B visa holders To add insult to injury, many of the replaced American employees report that they have been forced to train the foreign workers who are taking their jobs. That’s just plain wrong and we’ll continue to press the Administration to help solve this problem.”

On July 7, 2015, *The Daily Caller* reported that the Department of Labor had commenced investigations of Disney after having received several formal complaints from laid-off workers. According to the report, Department of Labor personnel reached out to the former Disney workers to conduct phone interviews regarding names of displaced employees as well as typical salaries for the positions. Disney declined to comment on the report.

In response to request for comment on the communications issues raised by the Disney layoffs and aftermath, *New York Times* columnist Julia Preston shared the following exclusive analysis:

“I would say Disney’s handling of those lay-offs is a case study in how not to do things. But in the end it’s not about the communications, it’s about the company. Those layoffs showed a company that was not living up to its core vaunted family values and no amount of shouting by their communications folks could change the facts of what happened.”

Questions for Discussion

1. Is it ethical for U.S. companies to lay off workers and hire foreign workers under the H-1B program? Should foreign countries restrict the hiring of foreign workers that meet their workforce requirements?
2. Discuss the internal and external communications that Disney employed in this situation. The examples here are of the formal written communications. What should Disney have been communicating verbally to their employees and externally?

Sources: Preston, Julia, *Pink Slips at Disney. But First, Training Foreign Replacements*, The New York Times June 3, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/us...train-foreign-replacements.html; Vargas, Rebecca, *EXCLUSIVE: Former Employees Speak Out About Disney's Outsourcing of High-Tech Jobs*, WWSB ABC 7 (Oct. 28, 2015), http://www.mysuncoast.com/news/local...lusive-former-employees-speak-out-about-disney-s-outsourcing-of-article_d8867148-7d8c-11e5-ae40-fb05081380c1.html; Boyle, Mathew, *Ahead of GOP Debate, Two Ex-Disney Workers Displaced by H1B Foreigners Speak Out for First Time*, Breitbart.com, October 28, 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government...isney-workers-displaced-by-h1b-foreigners-speak-out-for-first-time>; Sandra Pedicini, *Tech Workers File Lawsuits Against Disney Over H-1B Visas*, *Orlando Sentinel*, published January 25, 2016, accessed February 6, 2016, available at <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/busin...125-story.html>; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Understanding H-1B Requirements*, accessed February 6, 2016, available at <https://www.uscis.gov/eir/visa-guide...standing-h-1b-requirements>; May, Caroline, Sessions, Durbin: Department Of Labor Has Launched Investigation Into H-1B Abuses, Breitbart.com (June 11, 2015), <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2015/06/11/sessions-durbin-department-of-labor-has-launched-investigation-into-h-1b-abuses/>; Stoltzfoos, Rachel, *Feds Investigate Disney, HCL America Over January Layoffs*, The Daily Caller (July 7, 2015), dailycaller.com/2015/07/07/feds-over-january-layoffs/#ixzz41DY4x8Dy; Email from Julia Preston, National Immigration Correspondent, The New York Times, to Bryan Shannon, co-author of this case study, dated February 10, 2016.

concept check

- What are the four components of communication discussed in this section?
- Why is it important to understand your limitations in communicating to others and in larger groups?
- Why should managers always strive to improve their skills?

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