
UNIT 4 ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Objectives

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the purpose of communication;
- outline the process of communication;
- describe the media and channels of organizational communication;
- state the basic objectives of organizational communication;
- describe the intentional and unintentional barriers that prevent organizational communication to be effective; and
- explain how a manager can make communicate effectively.

Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Communication Process
- 4.3 Organisational Communication
- 4.4 Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication
- 4.5 Channels of Communication
- 4.6 Barriers to Effective Communication
- 4.7 Communicating Effectively
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4.1 INTRODUCTION

We all know that communication in an organisation is very important for its success and growth. Communication should be effective and two ways, viz., from top to bottom and bottom to top. It is important that each player learns how to communicate to seniors as well as to juniors. In fact, good communication is the foundation for sound management. No managerial activity is possible without communication, and a manager spends most of his/her working time communicating. Hence, it is no exaggeration to say that communication is very vital for every organisation and the success of an organisation largely depends on the effectiveness of the communication system in it.

Communication refers to sharing of ideas, facts, opinions, information and understanding. Simply stated, communication is the dissemination of information and understanding from one person to another. It involves at least three elements: the sender, the receiver, and the message or information that is shared. You must appreciate that if information flows from one end, the knowledge of its effects is received from the other end in the form of feedback. Whether or not the effect produced is the desired one depends upon how well the receiver understands the meaning of the information. Communication has, therefore, been aptly said to be 'transmission of meaning'.

One of the important roles of a manager is to share information with his/her peers, subordinates and others about different issues relating to their jobs and responsibilities. That is, he/she seeks and disseminates information about his/her job and the organisation to all those who are concerned with it. As such, this act takes a considerable part of his/her time. In some cases, between 40 to 60 per cent of the work time in a typical organisation is spent in some kind of communication. Further, the top and middle level managers typically spend 60 to 80 per cent of their total working hours communicating.

According to Peter Drucker, good communication is the foundation for sound management. The managerial functions of planning, organizing, directing and controlling depend on communication in an enterprise. For planning to be realistic, it is essential that it is based on a sound information system in an enterprise. If the latest developments in the market are not shared with the planners, the future plans may become totally meaningless. Adaptation to external environment may not be possible without good communication. Again, in order to achieve stated objectives, it is necessary that leadership is exercised, decisions made, efforts coordinated, people motivated and operations controlled. Each of these functions demands interaction with the people in the organisation. We may, therefore, conclude that the important fact of organizational life for a manager is communication, and his/her success will depend on his/her effectiveness to communicate with others. In other words, how successfully s/he can put his/her ideas across to those who work with him/her and thereby, persuade them to work for achievements of the goals of the organisation.

In this unit, we first describe the communication process and then discuss the goals of organizational communication. We explain various channels of verbal and non-verbal communication. Finally, we highlight the barriers to effective communication and present suggestions on how to communicate effectively.

4.2 THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The essential elements of the simplest model of the communication process can be illustrated as under:



If any one of the three elements is missing, communication does not take place. However, the process of communication is in practice, more complex and consists of at least five elements, which are subject to various influences. The model of the communication process is depicted in Figure 4.1.

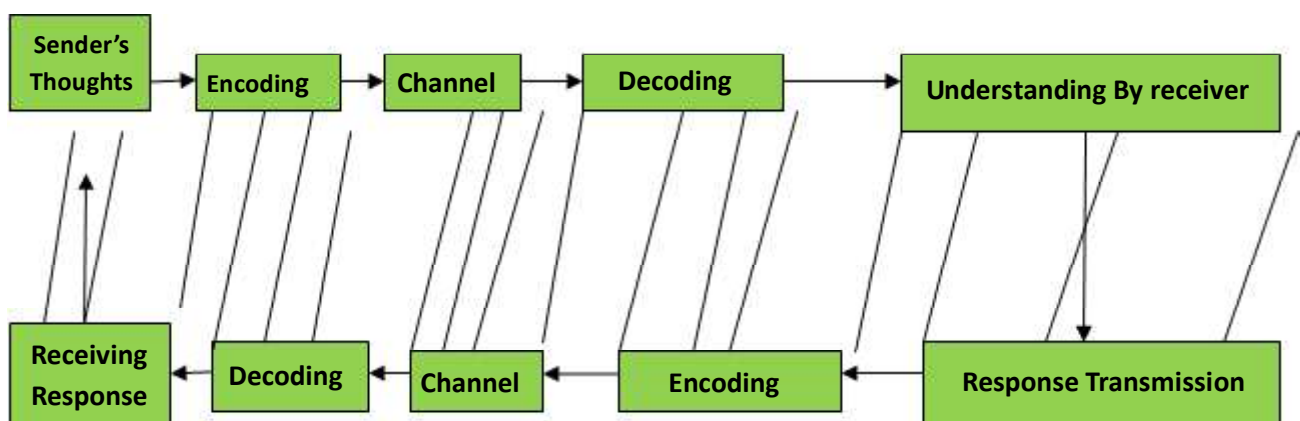


Figure 4.1: Model of the Communication Process

Let us explain what the various elements of this model mean.

Source: In this model the first element is the source of the communication form where the communication originates. The source or sender can be a person, group, or even a machine. The sender initiates communication because s/he has some need, thought, idea or information that s/he wishes to convey to the other person, persons or machine. If, for example, fire has broken out accidentally in some part of a godown in a factory, the security officer (source) will need to convey the message immediately to the fire station (receiver). Fire alarm (machine) can also function as the source instead of the security officer.

Encoding the Message: The information to be transmitted has to be encoded as encoding enables the thoughts to be put in the form of symbols. Normally language provides the symbols that are used in the transmission of thoughts to another person. However, non-verbal means such as, gestures, like wink, smile, grunt, frown wave of hand, etc. provide another form through which thoughts can be transmitted. Similarly, an involuntary shriek may adequately convey the degree of alarm felt by the victim.

Channel: The next element in the process of communication is the channel through which the communication is transmitted. It links the sender and the receiver. The most commonly used channels are sight and sound. In an organizational environment, the channel could take the form of face-to-face conversation, written memos, telephonic exchanges, group meetings, etc. Outside the organisation, the channels could be letters or circulars, magazines radio programmes or TV shows, etc. For communication to be effective, the channel used should be appropriate for the message as well as the receiver. For an urgent message, telegram, telephone, fax, e-mail, etc. or radio would be the appropriate channel. As a power utility employee, you may like to communicate the duration of power cut. Which channel will you choose? Newspaper, Radio or TV?

Activity 1: Channels of Communication

List the various channels of communication that you use while communicating with

Your Boss	Your Subordinate
1)	1)
2)	2)
3)	3)
4)	4)
5)	5)

Decoding: Decoding and understanding the message constitute the last two elements in the communication process. The receiver first interprets and translates it into thoughts, understanding and the desired response. A successful communication occurs when the receiver decodes the message and attaches a meaning to it which very nearly approximates the idea, thoughts or information the sender wished to transmit. This is possible when there is compatibility between

the sender and the receiver. However, when an individual is engaged in communication with another person of a significantly different educational or cultural background s/he will have to put in greater effort to ensure successful communication.

Feedback: Response and feedback complete the two-way process of communication. It is through the feedback that the source (sender) comes to know if his/her message was correctly received and understood. In case it is found that the message has been received incorrectly, it is possible to make corrections subsequently, if the response is timely.

In general, any communication can result in a desired change, an undesired change or no change. We consider communication as successful only when it produces the desired response.

Noise: Surrounding the entire spectrum of communication is the noise that can affect the accuracy and fidelity of the message communicated. Noise is any factor that disturbs, confuses or otherwise interferes with communication. It can arise at any stage in the communication process. The sender may not be able to encode the message properly or s/he may not be properly audible. The message may get distorted by other sounds in the environment. The receiver may not hear the message, or comprehend it in a manner not entirely intended by the sender of the message. The channel may create interference by 'filtering', i.e., allowing some information to pass through and disallowing, others. In any case, there is so much of noise or interference in the entire process that there is every possibility of the communication being distorted. We shall see later in this unit why distortion takes place and what can be done to minimize the distortion of communication.

4.3 ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION

In recent years, communication has attracted increasing attention. Some innovative and successful practices have been evolved. For example, in BHEL (Bhopal Unit), Management-Employee Communication Meetings (MECOMs) have been effectively used. A MECOM is an open forum, in which more than 700 persons participate. It has contributed positively to mutual sharing of information and concerns and better understanding between management and employees. MECOM has helped in effective implementation of decisions. However, establishing this system has not been easy; a lot of work was one prior to and during the evolution of MECOM.

In TISCO, the Chairman keeps communication with his employees by answering every letter that is addressed to him (Some 80,000 per year) and holds an open house at his residence between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. every day where any one can walk in and discuss personal or work-related problems. He also holds "dialogues" with large groups, sometimes of 2500 persons. The most systematic attention to communication has probably been paid in VST Industries, including regular business-related communication with the Union, with great benefits.

Organisational communication may be defined as the process of the flow (transmission and reception) of goal-oriented message between sources, in a pattern and through a medium or media.

An additional element in organisational communication (not present in interpersonal communication) is the flow pattern of messages. Thus, there are seven elements in organisational communication – the transmitting source; the receiving source (the target); the transmitted message; the received message; the goal of the message; the medium or media; and the flow pattern (which is called network) (Figure 4.2). The transmitting and receiving sources are the people sending and receiving the message, respectively.

ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION

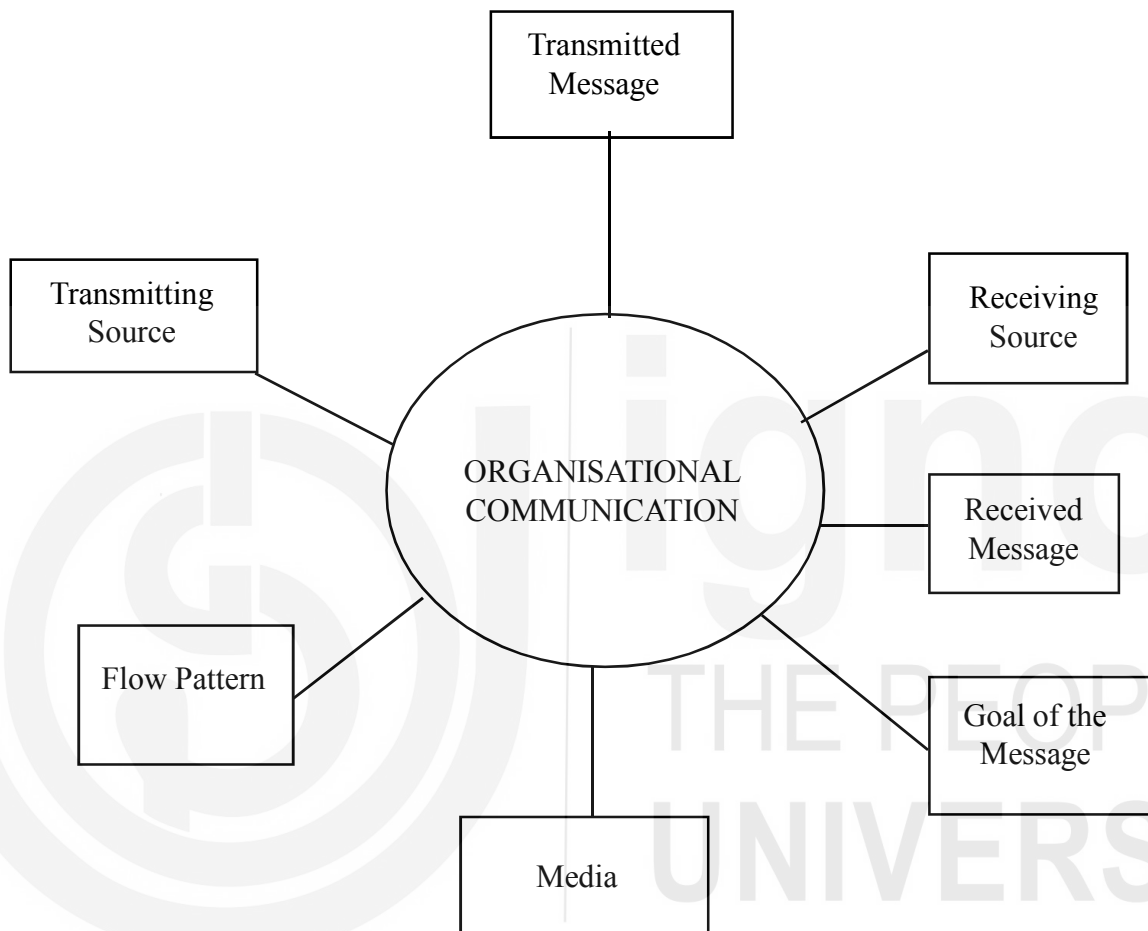


Figure 4.2: Elements in Organisational Communication

Goals of Organisation Communication

Organisational Communication has several goals. These are described in Box 4.1

Box 4.1: Goals of Organisation Communication

Information Sharing: Various types of information are required to be shared in an organisation. These include policies, rules, changes and developments in the organisation, such as settlement with the union, major changes, awards and rewards, etc.

Feedback: Feedback has to be given to the employees on their achievements, to the departments on their performance; and to the management on the fulfillment of goals and difficulties encountered. It helps in taking corrective measures and making necessary adjustments. It can motivate people for developing challenging and realistic plans.

Control: The management information system (MIS) is well known as a control mechanism used to ensure that various activities are being carried out as per plans. Communication helps in ensuring such control as a monitoring mechanism and directing different aspects for optimum results as critical information reaches the appropriate level of people in the organisation.

Influence: One purpose of communication is to influence people. This is very clear in the case of communication from a trainer in a training group. The higher the management level, the more is the influencing role of the manager. The manager communicates to create a good climate, right attitudes and congenial working relationships.

Problem Solving: Communication between the management and the union on some issues (negotiation) is aimed at finding a solution to problems. Many groups meetings are held to brainstorm alternative solutions for a problem and to evolve acceptable solutions. Such communication can be in small or in large groups.

Decision-Making: Communication helps a great deal in decision-making. A more important role is played by the communication of alternative solutions and the exchange of views on various matters.

Change: The effectiveness of a change introduced in an organisation depends to a large extent, on the clarity and spontaneity of the communication. Communication between the consultants and the managers, between the managers and the employees, and amongst the employee helps in knowing the difficulties in the planned change, and in taking corrective action.

Group Building: Communication helps in building relationships. Even under conditions of severe conflict, good relations can be restored only if the communication process is continued. If communication breaks down, the group may disintegrate. Communication provides necessary lubrication for proper functioning of a group. The communication of feelings, concerns, and support is particularly important in this context.

Gate keeping: Communication helps to build linkages of the organisation with the outside world. The organisation can use its environment to increase its effectiveness. It can also influence the Government, its clients, the resource systems, etc.

Written communication is more effective in the transmission (and reception and comprehension) of cognitive messages. On the other hand, oral and specially face-to-face communication is more effective in bringing about changes of opinions and attitudes.

4.4 VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

A communication in which words are used is verbal communication. Communication over long distance takes place usually through verbal communication. Non-verbal communication refers to the use of 'body language' in communicating ideas from the sender to the receiver. Non-verbal

communication most often takes place unconsciously, and it invariably fortifies and supplements verbal communication.

The main characteristic of verbal communication is the use of words, either written or spoken.

Written Communication

Written communication include personal letter, memoranda, policy and procedure manuals, and notices placed on the notice boards. Examples of oral communications are conferences, committee meetings, telephone conversation, loudspeaker announcements, etc. (Box 4.2). Both written and oral communication have their merits and demerits.

Box 4.2: Different Verbal Media in Organisational Communication

Group	Oral	Written
Small Group	Conversation Telephone	Letters/Memos Telex
Large Group	Lectures Meetings Radio Short Circuit	Circulars Newsletters Handbooks/Manuals Posters/Bulletion Board

A written communication has the advantages of being easily verifiable, more precise and accurate. For clarity, we must use simple and familiar words or phrases and short sentences. Spoken messages cannot always be verified so easily. Moreover, written communication becomes absolutely necessary when dealing with lengthy and complicated messages. It would be difficult to understand and retain a lengthy message if it were only in oral form. In spite of such advantages, written communication has drawbacks such as the following:

- **Being slow**, if we consider the total amount of time involved form the formulation an of idea by the sender to the understanding of the idea by the receiver.
- **Ambiguity or lack of clarity** despite the fact that a greater degree of preciseness is aimed at while preparing a written communication.
- **Too much paper-work** due to over-reliance on written communication. This not only consumes time, money and energy, but also infuses a lack of trust among the employees of the organisation.

Box 4.3: How to Communicate Powerfully by E-mail

As with all written communications, your e-mails should be clear and concise. Sentences should be kept short and to the point.

This starts with the e-mail's subject line. Use the subject line to inform the receiver of EXACTLY what the e-mail is about. Keep in mind that the subject line should offer a short summary of the e-mail and allows for just a few words. Because everyone gets e-mails they do not want spam etc. Appropriate use of the subject line increases the chances that your e-mail will be read and not discarded into the deleted e-mail file without so much as a glance.

Because e-mails have the date and time they were sent, it is not necessary to include this information in your e-mail correspondences. However, the writing used in the e-mail should be liked that used in other business writings. The email should be clear and concise, with the purpose of the e-mail detailed in the very first paragraph.

The body of the e-mail should contain all pertinent information and should be direct and informative.

Make sure to include any call to action you desire, such as a phone call or follow-up appointment. Then, make sure you include your contact information, including your name, title, phone and fax numbers, as well as snail-mail address. If you have additional e-mail addresses, you may want to include these, as well.

If you regularly correspond using e-mail, make sure to clean out your e-mail inbox at least once each day. Of course, the exception here may be on days you do not work, such as weekends and holidays.

Make sure you return e-mails in a timely manner. This is a simple act of courtesy and will also serve to encourage senders to return your e-mails in a timely manner.

Internal e-mail should be treated as regular e-mail, following the same rules as outlined above. However, internal e-mail should be checked regularly throughout the working day and returned in a much quicker manner as much of these detail timely projects, immediate updates, meeting notes, etc. Nonetheless, internal e-mails, just like e-mails, should not be informal. Remember, these are written forms of communication that can be printed out and viewed by others than those originally intended for.

Tips for Effective E-mail

Think before you write. Just because you can send information faster than ever before, it does not mean that you should send it. Analyse your readers to make certain that you are sending a message that will be both clear and useful.

Remember that you can always deny that you said it. But if you write it, you may be held accountable for many many moons. You may be surprised to find where your message may end up.

Keep your message concise. Remember that the view screen in most e-mail programs shows only approximately one half of a hard-copy page. Save longer messages and formal reports for attachments. On the other hand, do not keep your message so short that the reader has no idea what you are talking about. Include at least a summary (action or information?) in the first paragraph of your message.

Remember that e-mail is not necessarily confidential. Some companies will retain the right to monitor employees' messages. Do not send anything you would not be comfortable seeing published in your company's newsletter (or your community's newspaper).

Do not attempt to "discipline" your readers. It is unprofessional to lose control in person — to do so in writing usually just makes the situation worse.

Do not "spam" your readers. Do not send them unnecessary or frivolous messages. Soon, they will quit opening any message from you.

Oral Communication

Although an organisation cannot function without written communications of various kinds, yet a significant percentage of information is communicated orally. It has been observed that managers spend 60 to 80 percent of their work time in oral communication. Oral communication has the merit of being instantaneous. Generally, the spoken word is a less complicated way of getting one's ideas across, if articulated well. Also, it offers the possibility of two-way information flow, and therefore less possibility of misunderstanding. The creation of a less formal atmosphere and generation of fellow feelings are other advantages of oral communication.

However, the oral communication also has disadvantages. It is less effective for presenting complicated and lengthy data. Since there is no record, it is subject to misinterpretation and the effects of barriers arising from interpersonal relationships. That is why while negotiating with management, unions emphasize on written commitment.

The choice of the mode of communication is, generally speaking, determined by the situation. However, the use of both will very often strengthen and reinforce a message. For example, the study material for this course is the written communication. It will be fortified subsequently through oral communication in video-conferencing sessions. The two together, we hope, will further increase your understanding of the concepts and application of management.

We would like to present a few guidelines for making verbal communication more effective (Box 4.4.).

Box 4.4: Guidelines for Effective Communication*

- Use simple words and phrases, short and familiar words.
- Use personal pronouns (such as “you”) whenever appropriate.
- Give illustrations and examples.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Use active verbs such as in “The manager plans”.
- Economise on objectives.
- Express thoughts logically and in a direct way.
- Avoid unnecessary words.

Non-verbal Communication

In determining the effectiveness of communication, non-verbal communication plays an important role. Experts in the field of human communication have found that, in a typical message between two persons, only about 7 per cent of the meaning or content of the message is carried by the actual words being used. Another 38 per cent of the message is carried by one's tone of voice (which includes pacing, timing, pauses, and accents). The major part (55 per cent) of the content of the message is in the form of our body language.

Non-verbal communication can take place with our actions or with our body gestures.

Source: “Human Behaviour at Work: Organisational Behaviour” by Keith Davis.

For example, a manager who pounds his fist on the table while announcing that from now on participative management will be practiced in his organisation creates a credibility gap between what he says and what he practices. Think of a manager who says that he believes in an open door policy for all his employees but is busy with his own files while an employee gives him certain suggestions towards improvement in work environment. Is he not making non-verbal communication quite in conflict with his verbal communication? In such situations the non-verbal message is so strong that the verbal message will cease to be effective.

Body gestures that “communicate” may relate to your handshake, your smile, your eye-contact, your posture while standing or sitting, your facial expression while listening, the shrug of your shoulders, indeed, the movement of any part of your body. Therefore, you must be watchful of your body language so that it does not contradict your verbal message. This is indeed difficult because the body language is so involuntary that we are not even aware of it.

Some non-verbal actions which assist or impede communication are listed in Box 4.5.

Box 4.5: Non-verbal Actions that Assist or Impede Communication Actions that assist communication:

- Maintaining eye contact.
- Occasionally nodding the head in agreement.
- Smiling and showing animation.
- Leaning towards the speaker.
- Speaking at a moderate rate, in a quiet tone.

Actions that impede:

- Looking away or turning away from the speaker.
- Sneering or using other contemptuous gestures.
- Closing your eyes.
- Using an unpleasant tone of voice.
- Speaking too slow or too fast.

4.5 CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

An organisation provides a number of channels for the flow of information, that is an organisation has a network of communication channels. These channels can be either intentionally designed, or they may develop of their own accord. When a channel is intentionally created/prescribed for the flow of communication in the Organisation, we call it a formal channel. The communication passing through a formal channel is formal communication. On the other hand, channels, outside the formal channels, are referred to as informal channels. The communication through informal channels is informal communication.

Formal Communication

An organisational chart shows the direction of formal communication flow. It identifies the various transmitters and receivers, and the channels through which they must communicate. The authority relationships indicate the direction of communication flow in an organisation. A formal communication takes place between a superior and subordinate in the form of instructions and directions. Such a flow takes place in the downward direction.

Another formal communication takes place from the subordinate to the superior when reporting on performance. Since the subordinate initiates communication to the superior, the flow is upward. We call this upward communication. The upward communication can take the form of progress reports, budget reports, profit and loss statements, requests for grants, etc.

Formal communication can also take place between one division of an organisation and another. This can be lateral or diagonal. For example there can be formal communication between the technical and accounts divisions of your utility. Formal communication may pass across organisational levels and can help in coordination and quality control. For example, communication between maintenance and financial units helps the utility to serve its customers better and earn better image.

Finally, formal communication may also arise between the organisation and outside parties, e.g., suppliers, customers, Government, etc. This may happen when the management is required to provide information on certain aspects of the working of the organisation. Communication of this kind is usually one-way.

Networks in Formal Communication

You have seen how the formal organisational structure prescribes the channels through which communication flows take place. These channels are designed to keep the flow of information in an orderly manner and to protect the higher level managers from an overload of unnecessary information. However, the way in which these channels are designed and work can affect the speed and accuracy of information as well as the task performance and satisfaction of members of the group. As such, managers have to think of how best to design the organisational structure and the communication network which meets the requirements of the situation.

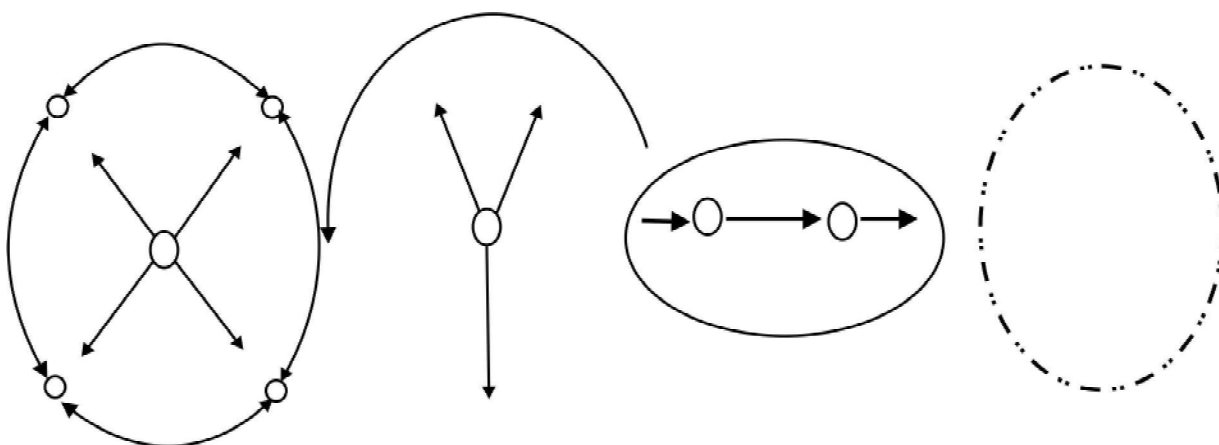


Figure 4.3: Formal Networks

Some research in the design of communication networks has been carried out which indicates their relative merits for use in different situations. Although these networks can assume many forms, the most frequently discussed are the wheel, chain, 'Y' and circle, shown in Figure 4.3.

These forms can well be looked at as an organisational structure made up of five members.

The '**circle**' network represents a three-level hierarchy in which there is communication between superiors and subordinates, with cross communication at the operative level. The 'chain' can represent a five-level hierarchy, in which communication can take place only upward and downward, and across organisational lines.

The 'wheel' or 'star' represents an administrator and four subordinates with whom s/he interacts. There is no interaction amongst the subordinates.

In the 'Y' network two subordinates report to the superior. It may be regarded as a four-level hierarchy.

The effectiveness of a communication pattern is determined by network centrality. The 'Y' and 'wheel' networks are highly centralized, with the superior occupying the central position. The 'circle' and 'chain' networks are decentralized with no member being able to influence all other members.

The centralized networks perform faster and more accurately for simple tasks. For complex tasks, the decentralized networks are comparatively quicker and more accurate.

The centrality of networks also influences the emergence of a leader and the satisfaction of group members. In centralized groups, whether the tasks are simple or complex, one person who occupied the central position by virtue of the control of information emerges as the leader. In decentralized networks no one position could emerge as the leadership position.

These factors have certain implications (given below) for the design of organisational structure and the communication network:

- An organisation with mostly routine, simple tasks is likely to work more efficiently with a formal centralized network of communication, while more complicated tasks would require decentralized networks.
- The problem-solving objectives of speed and flexibility cannot be achieved by the same pattern of communication. Rather, speed in problem-solving can be achieved at the expense of flexibility, and vice-versa. As such, the communication pattern should be designed with reference to the objective that is regarded as more important.
- The pattern that leads to the highest average morale and greatest flexibility in adapting to changed conditions is the one in which there are a large number of active participants in decision-making process.
- Access to information is an important source of power in organisations.

So far we have discussed patterns for formal communication in an organisation. We shall now discuss informal communication and its channels.

Informal Communication

Communication that takes place without following the formal lines of communication is said to be informal communication. This channel is not created by management and is usually not under the control of management. An informal system of communication is generally referred to as the 20 'grapevine' because it spreads throughout the organisation with its branches going out in all directions in utter disregard of the levels of authority and linking member of the organisation in any direction.

The informal communication normally works where there is communication gap between employees and the management. It has been observed that problems relating to work and unfavourable reactions to various organisational practices are transmitted through informal communication. Since the channels are flexible and establish contacts at personal levels among members of organisation at different hierarchical levels, the grapevine spreads information faster than the formal system of communication. About 10 to 40 percent of employees receive information (or misinformation) about the organisation through informal channels of communication.

The grapevine transmits information from one person to a group of persons more rapidly in a cluster chain arrangement. The cluster chain is made up of individuals who act as information sources. Each individual passes the information to several others, some of whom repeat the message to others. Some of those who receive the message may not pass on the information to others but the information may lead to a change in their thinking on the subject and may sometimes affect their behaviour as well. Figure 4.4 illustrates the **cluster chain network** of informal communication.

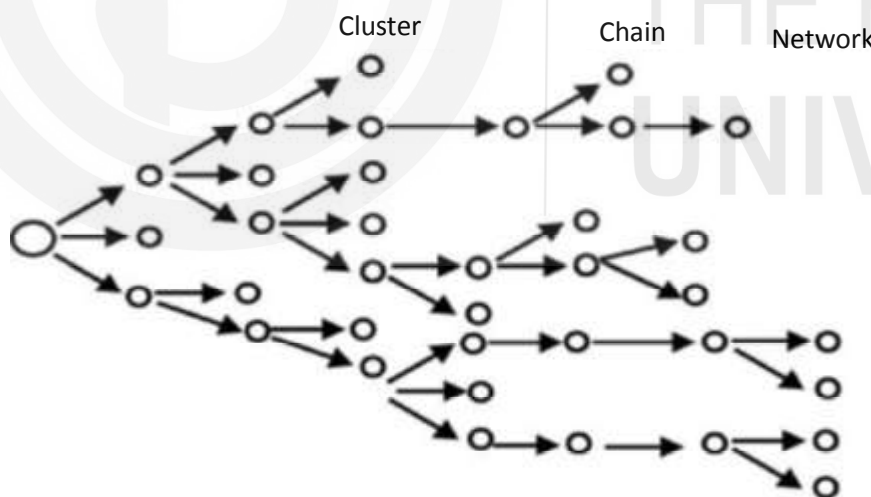


Figure 4.4 : Cluster Chain Network of Informal Communication

Though it has been found that informal communication carries accurate information about three-fourths of the time, there are strong possibilities of its communications being highly distorted. This happens because of the process of 'filtering' whereby each member of the chain passes on only that part of communication which s/he regards important. The receiver is left to fill in the gaps and complete the story according to his/her own imagination. This may at times cause serious problems in the organisation.

Since the grapevine is a fast channel of communication with tremendous capacity to carry information both helpful and harmful, as a manager, you are expected utilize the positive aspects and minimize the negative aspects. In order to do this, you can identify the members of the organisation who usually seek and spread information. It is possible that different individuals are active at different times but usually it will be found that some individuals tend to be more active carriers of information than others. After identifying such individuals, you can use them as sounding boards. If it is discovered that misleading rumours are circulating, it may be desirable to release the official information to clarify the situation. At times, management may even find the informal communication channel more useful in transmitting information than the formal channel. A common method of using informal communication is by ‘planned leaks’, or strategically planned ‘just between you and me’ remarks, which would obviously reach all parts of the organisation far quicker than any kind of communication through formal channels.

Activity 2: Informal Communication

Narrate a solution from your experience, in which informal communication channel saved a situation from turning ugly.

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Problems in Communication

Communication may not always be effective. The main criterion to find out whether a communication is effective or not is the fulfillment of its purpose. In Fig. 4.3, the various purposes of communication in the four directions have been stated. If the purpose is not fulfilled properly, the problem should be looked into. There may be several sources of problems in communication.

Rumours: A rumour is usually a belief which is passed as an item of information from one person to the other without verification of evidence. Remours spread like wildfire in periods of stress or unrest. Two conditions for the spread of rumours are: importance of the topic to people, and lack of availability of correct information about it. The third factor is the critical sense of people. We know that if people have the capacity for decision-making after reflection and on the basis of some information, rumours don’t spread.

Activity 3: Problems in communication

Take any two common rumours in your organisation and prepare an action plan to cope with the rumours, and preventive steps to minimize them in future.

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4.6 BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

One of the biggest dangers in communication is to assume that communication has taken place. Most of us indeed make a great effort in formulating ideas, and finding appropriate words for communicating them to others. In an organisation, considerable money and energy are spent to develop a system of communication. And yet, if you assess the effectiveness of communication in terms of the desired response, you will be surprised at the results. You may logically ask: What causes failure of communication? How can we make communication more effective to bring about a desired change?

The failure in communication is caused by barriers between the sender and the receiver. To make communication effective, it must be ensured that these barriers are removed/overcome. Now-a-days media has become very powerful only because it has devised ways to reach the target audience. The barriers either prevent the communication from reaching the receiver or distort it in such a manner that it ends up either as non-communication or as miscommunication. Since a manager has to use communication as a means of getting work done through his/her subordinates, s/he must ensure that the barriers are minimized.

The barriers that interfere with the understanding of the communication are of three kinds: semantic, psychological and organisational. We now discuss these one by one.

Semantic Barriers

Most difficulties in communication arise because the same word or symbol signifies different things to different individuals. You may recall how Shiny Abraham was disqualified and lost her gold medal, despite coming first by a very wide margin in the 800 m race, at the Asian Games at Seoul (1986). She had crossed the track at the place where she should not have done. According to her, she mistook the symbol, i.e., the colour of the flag. In our country, the red flag indicates danger but in South Korea, white flag is used for the same purpose.

Words, action or a feeling, can have several meanings. For example, abstract words like merit, effectiveness or responsibility, can be interpreted differently by different persons. Difficulty in understanding may arise even in the case of words which have different contextual meanings in different regions/countries. To give you an example, a problem arose in interpreting the meaning of the word 'steps'. In a training programme of health workers relating to family health in Jamaica, this question was asked: "What are some of the steps that a mother should take to make sure that her baby keeps healthy?" There was no response to this question because the trainees were accustomed to only one meaning of the word 'steps' based on their experience; they just could not make any sense of the question. Semantic difficulty also arises because of unfamiliarity with words, for example, a word of a foreign language or a technical word.

An effective communication is one which uses words appropriate to the environment and mental framework of the receiver. This ensures that communication is grasped properly and implemented effectively. Read the following story to understand this point:

A proposal for raising the salaries of the faculty members of an agricultural college was under discussion. The farmers' block was totally against giving the raise to the college teachers – they could not see why they should pay those college teachers \$5000 a year just for talking 12 to 15 hours a week. Faculty representatives made no headway in their negotiations until one of them who had some farming experience, got an inspiration.

“Gentlemen”, he told the members of the administrative body, “a college teacher is like a little bull. It is not the amount of time he spends. It is the importance of what he does!”

The faculty members got the raise.

Semantic barrier can also be created if body language is inconsistent with the verbal communication. A manager who praises the honesty and sincerity of his/her subordinate in a sarcastic tone creates doubts in the minds of the subordinate as to the course of action s/he should adopt in a given situation in future. The same kind of barrier is created by a divergence between the verbal language and the action language of the superiors. When action and language are used jointly, the actions often have more powerful influence on other's actions than words. A management may, for example, profess its belief in being guided solely by the merit of employees while making promotions. But if employees observe that, in actual practice, promotions are made on considerations other than merit, the management's professed policy is bound to be affected by a semantic barrier.

Psychological Barriers

Psychological barriers are the prime barriers in inter-personal communication. The meaning that is ascribed to a message depends upon the emotional or psychological status of both the parties concerned. As such, the psychological barriers may be set up either by the receiver or the sender of the message. You have already seen that the effectiveness of any communication depends upon the perception of the right meaning of the message by the receiver. However, the perception of meaning is influenced by the mental frame of the receiver at the time the message is received. Emotions which dominate our mood at the time, e.g., anger, anxiety, fear, happiness, etc., will affect our interpretation of the message. The phrases ‘viewing with coloured glasses’ or ‘seeing with jaundiced eyes’ explain vividly how our inner feelings may vitiate our perception of the message or the situation. Post experience of the receiver in such situations would also lead to the same effect. The same thing may happen when different individuals interpret the same event or situation. Let us consider the case of a supervisor watching a group of employees resting and gossiping on the lawns. How will this situation be perceived?

To the supervisor, who believes that employees are basically lazy, the situation communicates that they are playing truant with their work, and, therefore, should be given more work to do and disciplined.

To the supervisor who believes that his/her workers are self-motivated and sincere, the situation communicates that they are re-charging their batteries through recreation and enjoyment.

You will, therefore, see that a particular kind of situation, event, happening or words and symbols are capable of being interpreted differently by different people

depending on their psychological states. A receiver who is suspicious or hostile, either as a consequence of his/her feeling of insecurity or because of his/her past experience with the sender of the communication, is more likely to start 'reading between the lines' and describe a distorted meaning to the message.

To the receiver's mind a communication gets tied up with the personality of the source. This is what some people call the halo effect. Thus, if we receive a message from a person we admire, we are more likely to agree with it and act accordingly. On the other hand, our immediate reaction will be one of disagreement with a message that has been received from a person we do not like or trust. Thus, the meaning of the communication may be coloured by our own value judgments about the source of communication.

A receiver of communication suffers from another problem which psychologists refer to as cognitive dissonance. Since an individual tends to be fed with too much of information from different sources, s/he becomes selective in receiving and responding to the communications. S/he is most likely to 'hear' only those messages that conform to her/his own beliefs, attitudes and judgment. Communications that conflict with her/his own viewpoint tend to be ignored. Often the 'other' point of view may not only be ignored, it might indeed be regarded as unfriendly or even hostile. If this happens frequently, subordinates may start questioning whether their superior really wants to hear, opinions contrary to her/his own. As a consequence, much of the unfavourable news in an organisation would never get reported to higher levels until the problem has assumed the form of a crisis.

One common phenomenon with all communications is the effect of filtering. This effect is produced when the communication passes through a large number of persons. Each individual through whom the information is passed interprets facts differently, judges from her/his own point of view what is important or relevant, and passes it on with her/his own interpretations, with the result that the original communication gets altered in the process. The process of filtering involves a biased choice of what is communicated, on the part of either the sender or the receiver. Thus filtering refers to the process of 'selective telling' or 'selective listening'. For example, a subordinate may tell the boss what s/he (the boss) wants to hear. Similarly, though several factors affecting productivity in the organisation may have been identified by the staff, yet the manager may hear and respond only to those factors that fit in the process of communication leading to a distortion in communication.

Organisations are particularly prone to the filtering effect. In large organisations, filtering takes place at multiple levels. In order to save the time of the busy executive and to save him/her from information overload, it is common in organisations for subordinates to prepare notes or abstracts of the communication before passing it on to the superior. The higher an information has to travel, the higher is the degree of abstraction, with the possibility that significant pieces of information may be entirely missed or their significance diluted or distorted. The larger the number of filtering points in an organisation, the greater are the chances of distortion.

Organisational Barriers

Organisations provide a formal framework through which communication is designed to flow. The structuring of the flow itself tends to act as a barrier against

free flow of communication between persons and levels in the organisation. Rules may prescribe how communications are to move from one level to another in upward or downward directions. Not only is there a possibility of delay in the communication reaching its destination, but also there is every possibility of communication getting distorted through the process of filtering as described earlier. It has been found that when information is channelled through different levels of the organisation, it alters as people interpreted facts differently. In an organisational setting, this can be a very big problem since senior level executives have to depend on the information and interpretations of their subordinates. A critical information that has lost its criticality because of the actions of the intervening levels may jeopardize the position of the manager as well as the organisation itself.

It has been observed that the upward communication is particularly subject to the influence of filtering in large organisations. Upward communication serves essentially two purposes in an organisation. First, it helps in coordinating and controlling the activities of the organisation. Second, it enables the superior to appraise the performance of his/her subordinates. While the former does not create any problems, the latter has behavioural implications. It is human nature to show one's performance in a better light than what it actually is. This tendency of an individual naturally brings about a filtering through conscious or unconscious altering, withholding or interpreting facts to be transmitted upward.

The dependence syndrome of the subordinates heightens the tendency to filter information. In a superior-subordinate relationship, the subordinate is, generally speaking, dependent on the superior for his/her advancement. Studies show that the greater the dependence of the subordinate on his/her superiors for the satisfaction of his/her needs, the more his/her tendency to filter information of an unfavourable kind. The subordinates are generally unwilling to communicate unfavourable information when they feel that their superior has the power to punish them in some way. Only positive aspects of performance are likely to be communicated upwards.

The superior-subordinate relationship itself develops a gap between the two. People are more comfortable in communicating with persons of equal status as their own. Communication with persons of higher or lower status is likely to be formal and reticent rather than informal and free. You may have seen that the parking space, bathrooms, refreshment rooms, cabins with stylized furniture, carpets, for the CEO are earmarked. Such symbols accentuate the gap between different hierarchical levels and tend to widen the communication gap.

Perhaps, you may have read that among the several characteristics of Japanese style of management is the removal of status symbols. For example, under the Japanese system there are no separate cabins for managers; the uniforms for workers and managers are the same; they eat the same food in the same cafeteria. All these are intended to reduce the gap between the workers and the managers and bring about a better understanding of the problems of the organisation which is the chief objective of organisational communication. In India, Infosys has some of these practices.

Activity 4: Barriers to Communication

Identify the barriers that prevent the effectiveness of communication. What can both of you do to remove these barriers between you and your boss?

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4.7 COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

In order to make your inter-personal communication more effective, you should keep in mind the following points:

Use direct, simple language and avoid words which can have ambiguous meanings.

Use face-to-face communication: Face-to-face communication allows more accurate feedback to be achieved through two-way communication. Generally speaking, people express themselves more freely while talking rather than through writing. Face-to-face communication permits a manager to use and understand the non-verbal signs also.

Use feedback: Feedback enables us to judge whether or not the ideas have been received in the manner as they were originally intended. Most often it is assumed that communication has taken place once a note has been circulated or put on the notice board. You must devise ways to separate fact from distortion.

Listen with understanding: The biggest block to communication is said to be the inability to listen to the other person intelligently, understandingly and skillfully. We tend to confuse listening with hearing. Real communication takes place when the listener truly understands the position and intent of the speaker. In order to be a successful manager, you must develop your listening ability. You must try to understand the factual and emotional content of the message without making any attempt at criticizing, approving or disapproving it until after you have fully heard and understood the remarks. The empathetic listening, vastly improves the understanding of both the parties, bringing in its wake improved inter-personal relationship in the organisation.

Create constructive environment for the expression of ideas: If you can create a climate in which people acquire confidence that what they say will be listened to with sympathy and considered constructively, you can be sure of a successful and creative communication. This is, however, possible only in an environment of trust which has to be generated by the management through its policies and actions.

Be careful about your non-verbal communication: Because you hold a status higher than your subordinates, your gestures are observed and ‘felt’ by your subordinates. Your body language, therefore, must be supportive of your

communication through words. One of the powerful means of communication are your actions which speak louder than words. If you expect your communication to be effective, ensure that your actions are consistent with your words. Develop and use organisational structures which minimize the chances of filtering the communication: Decentralisation of authority and broadening of span of control can be attempted to reduce the levels in the organisation and minimize the authority filters.

The American Management Association has developed a set of ten suggestions for improving communication, referred to as “The Ten Commandments of Good Communication” (Box 4.6).

Box 4.6: The Ten Commandments of Good Communication

- 1) Clarify before attempting to communicate;
- 2) Examine the purpose of communication;
- 3) Understand the physical and human environment when communicating;
- 4) While planning communication, consult others to obtain their support, as well as the facts;
- 5) Consider the content and the overtones of the message;
- 6) Whenever possible, communicate something that helps, or is valued by the receiver;
- 7) Communication, to be effective, requires following up;
- 8) Communicate messages that are of short-run and long-run importance;
- 9) Actions must be congruent with communication; and
- 10) Be a good listener.

We hope that you would be able to put into practice the ideas given here and improve your ability to communicate with your co-workers, superiors and subordinates. On this note, we would like to end this unit and present its summary.

4.8 SUMMARY

- **Communication** is the transfer of information from one person to another. Successful communication is much more than mere transfer of information – it is the **transfer of meaning and understanding** between two persons.
- Communication has paved the way for modern civilization and good **communication is the foundation for sound management**. No managerial activity is possible without communication of some kind, and the major part of a manager’s working time is devoted to communicating.
- **Communication** is accomplished through a **process** in which the sender encodes an idea, which is transmitted through a channel to a receiver who decodes the message and gains an understanding of the idea of the sender. The reverse process of **feedback** also follows the same pattern. During the entire process, **interference** is created by ‘noise’ which can lead to distortion of the communication.

- Communication takes place either **orally** or in **writing**. It could be just one-way or two-way, which allows the sender and receiver to interact with each other. A two-way communication is regarded better, as it brings about understanding through clarity of the message. In an organisation, communication may take place in several directions upward, downward, lateral and diagonal.
- Words either written or oral convey a very small part of the communication; most of it is transmitted through non-verbal gestures. A manager ought to be careful lest his/her non-verbal gestures contradict his/her verbal message.
- Communication within an organisation flows either through formally designed authority channels or through informal channels spontaneously formed and cutting across authority levels. Informal channels can have both positive and negative sides. **Cluster chain network** of informal communication permits a rapid flow of information through the formation of a grapevine. **Formal communication** is transmitted through several kinds of networks. The choice of a network will depend upon considerations of the complexity of a task, speed in decision-making in order to adapt to a change, and the satisfaction of members desired.
- Interference in communication is caused by **semantic, psychological and organisational** barriers. In order to achieve effectiveness in communication, managers should consciously try to lower these barriers.

4.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1) Why is effective communication important to the manager?
- 2) Explain the elements of the communication process.
- 3) What is 'noise' in communication? What factors in the organisational environment cause noise?
- 4) What purposes are served through vertical communication?
- 5) What problems are encountered in vertical communication?
- 6) Why is informal channel of communication called a grapevine? Should managers use the grapevine or rely on formal channels?
- 7) Explain the significance of body messages in communication effectiveness.
- 8) Explain the statement, "Words are symbols and meaning exists in the mind".
- 9) Think of a situation at home or at work place and identify the communication problems that you have observed or experienced.
- 10) Suggest ways of overcoming the communication problems that you have identified in Question Number 9.