

COMMUNICATION

Most supervisors spend a good part of their day communicating to others. However, we generally don't realize how important communication is to being an effective supervisor.

Class Discussion

Topic: Why is communication important in your role as supervisor? What are some common topics that you spend a majority of your time discussing with your employees?

Notes:

In order for a supervisor to demonstrate any of the characteristics listed earlier – or even be able to get the job done – he/she must be a good communicator. This skill underlies all other skills – that is, it doesn't do any good to be great at planning a work day if a supervisor cannot communicate his/her plans to their work crew.

**Effective supervisors are
Effective communicators!**

Supervisors communicate to several different groups of individuals, and may address each group differently.

Small Group Activity

Topic: Communication – Who?

How: Make a list of the individuals and groups with which you regularly communicate?

Think about how you communicate to each, and what you communicate to each – that is, what is your message and how do you usually send that message.

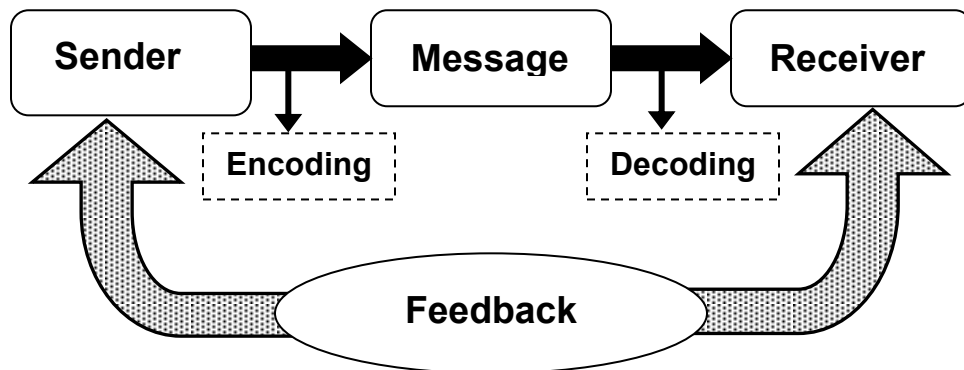
Notes:

KEY ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

Effective supervisors understand the communication process and use this to their advantage in planning and organizing work, directing and controlling work, handling performance issues, talking with their boss or the public, and the many other supervisory responsibilities.

Definition of Communication: The two-way process of a sender transmitting a message to a receiver with mutual understanding.

Key elements of the communication model help us to examine the complexity of the process and the barriers involved in transmitting ideas between the sender and the receiver. Providing feedback is a critical element of the communication process - feedback ensures mutual understanding.



BARRIERS TO THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Class Discussion

Topic: What are the most common barriers you experience when communicating?

Problems with any one of the components of the communication model can become a barrier to communication. Below are some communication barriers that can cause the message to be misunderstood.

External barriers

- **Noise distractions** – This can be noise from a work site, traffic, other’s talking in-person or on the phone, or any other form of sound that can distract you from being understood clearly and from listening effectively.
- **Visual distractions** – This can be any type of object or person in your line of site or the line of site of the person/people with whom you are communicating. For example, two people are trying to talk in a busy intersection, someone is looking at their computer and trying to communicate, or someone is dressed in an inappropriate manner on the job site or for the work area (for example, wearing a shirt that has loud writing or graphics).
- **Physical barriers** – This can be a desk, table, vehicle, piece of equipment, other people, or landscape (tree, bushes, culvert, bridge column...). Essentially, any object that blocks the ability to have a straight line of communication between whoever is communicating.

Personal barriers

- **Past experiences** – These lead to how a person perceives a situation and how that person interprets the situation. For example, if someone in the accounting department only calls when there is a problem in the past, then the supervisor will expect that anytime in the future when the accountant calls there will be a problem. Also, if a supervisor and employee, or if any two people, have had a bad experience in the past, that experience may be recalled whenever those individuals communicate again.
- **Word choice** – Different people speak using different terminology. A new employee may not understand terms that an experienced employee will use to describe a technical situation or piece of equipment.
- **Physical space** – Some people don’t listen well or become defensive if others are too close or approach in a certain manner.
- **Insufficient feedback** – When an employee doesn’t understand the supervisor’s direction but does not want to look like he is causing a problem, the employee will not ask for clarification and the job will not be done correctly or if the supervisor does not provide timely and thorough feedback to the employee.
- **Information overload** – When people talk too much for a person to comprehend all at once – for example, giving directions to a 10-step process in 2 minutes. Or,

when a person has too much going on at one time and isn't able to focus on what is being said because their mind is somewhere else.

- **Cultural/language differences** - Different cultures use different terms or have different understanding of certain terms. Even in our own state, someone may say "We passed by," meaning we stopped but you were not home; whereas others may say "We stopped at your house but you were not home."
- **Nonverbal cues** - Each time a person speaks they send "nonverbal" cues (for example, tone of voice, body language, eye contact...). Sometimes these cues can be misinterpreted. This blocks the ability of people to "listen," and may be taken as offensive. Also, sometimes a person missed a nonverbal cue and reacts inappropriately or takes the message the wrong way.
- **Poor listening skills** - There is a difference between "hearing" and "listening." Sometimes people only "hear." Any of the personal barriers listed here may lead to poor listening skills.

Small Group Activity

Topic: Removing Barriers to Communication

How: Turn to the next page and determine how each barrier can be removed.

Notes:

Barriers	How can you remove or reduce this barrier?
Noise distractions	
Visual distractions	
Physical barriers	
Past experiences	
Word choice	
Physical space	
Insufficient feedback	
Information overload	
Cultural/language differences	
Nonverbal cues	
Poor listening skills	

THE IMPORTANCE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Although people seem to rely primarily on the verbal aspects of communication, nonverbal cues (e.g. gestures, speaking volume, speaking rate, tone of voice, posture, etc.) are also important in communication. Nonverbal cues can either confirm or contradict a verbal message. Nonverbal cues are interpreted by the message receiver, almost automatically – based on something learned through experience over time. Nonverbal cues are a necessary part of a spoken message, though they can be misinterpreted, since the message receiver “decodes” them by making assumptions about what the cues mean.

For example, consider the message delivered when someone says, “I like you,” in a voice raised in anger with his/her hands clinched into fists. Contrast that scenario to one in which the same person says, “I like you,” in a warm and friendly manner, followed by a pat on your back.

When the message that is sent nonverbally is inconsistent with the message that is spoken, people tend to believe the nonverbal message. Therefore, to communicate effectively it is important that the nonverbal message is consistent with the verbal message.

Nonverbal Communication Cues

Nonverbal communication may come from several sources – including our own assumptions about what someone “should be doing” when communicating a particular message or feeling.

- Facial expression
 - Eye contact
 - Smiling or frowning
 - Forehead and eyebrows wrinkling
 - Red faced
- Breathing
 - Fast or slow
- Voice
 - Pitch, volume, tone and word speed
 - Pauses and silence

- Body Posture
 - Slumping or upright, flexible or stiff
 - Leaning toward or away
 - Distance from speaker/listener
- Arms and hands
 - Open/crossed arms
 - Hands tensed or relaxed
 - Hand signals/gestures
- Choosing whether to stand or sit in a given situation

The critical characteristic of nonverbal cues is that they are “encoded” and “decoded” almost automatically. By habit, we use certain nonverbal cues when we speak – and we interpret others’ cues – without really thinking about them. This is fine when we are communicating a positive message in a friendly environment, but it may cause unnecessary conflict and communication problems when the message is negative or when the environment is unfriendly.

Some workplace communication has to occur in a less-than-friendly environment, or must be about a less-than-positive topic. In these situations, listeners pay more attention to our nonverbal cues than our verbal message – and that can lead to miscommunication and other problems.

Small Group Activity

Topic: Interpreting Nonverbal Cues

How: Turn to the next page and determine what each cue may mean.

Notes:

Nonverbal cues	What does this mean to you?
Crossed arms	
Wrinkling the forehead	
Poor eye contact	
Tapping fingers	
Leaning back in chair	
Mouth in a tight line	
Rolling eyes	

Other Ways Supervisors Express Themselves Nonverbally

Supervisors interact with many levels of individuals including the public, their work crew, their administration, other administrative people, politicians, and many others. The image presented by a supervisor can increase or decrease the level of respect one receives and the level of impact of one's talking points. We have discussed body language already and all supervisors should pay attention to the impact that sends. However, a person's appearance and the condition of their work area are also impactful.

1. Appearance: What you wear and how you groom yourself sends a message.
 - a. Informal dress vs. more formal dress
 - b. Flamboyant vs. plain clothes
 - c. Clean vs. dirty work clothes
 - d. Uniform vs. individual styles
 - e. Hair grooming, hair cleanliness
 - f. Personal hygiene
 - g. Manners, level of politeness
 - h. Tired/sleepy appearance
2. Condition of one's work area: How it is organized and its basic appearance sends a message.
 - a. Orderly vs. messy
 - b. Trash in cans vs. scattered around
 - c. Things neatly stacked and in proper storage areas vs. piled up like chairs and boxes in a corner
 - d. Clean floors and walls vs. dirty
 - e. Equipment that is dirty vs. clean

IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Effective communicators know when to stop talking and when to start listening. Active listening can be the key to solving problems, reducing conflict, avoiding misunderstandings, and avoiding unpleasantness. When active listening skills are used properly, we have fewer communication glitches and our working relationships improve. It becomes easier to achieve higher productivity and higher morale.

Active listening is especially important in three particular work-related situations:

1. **When negative emotions are intense:** Listening is crucial when emotions are high. Extreme emotions such as anger, resentment, and excitement warrant careful attention. Individuals feel acknowledged and respected when they are heard.
2. **When employees are sharing ideas:** Listening is vital when employees are sharing ideas. When employees believe that their ideas aren't being heard, they tend to stop sharing them. For supervisors, the result is that their leadership abilities suffer. The team leader (and team members) is essentially cut off from the creativity and expertise of the individual who feels unheard.
3. **When employees are working in teams (work crews):** Listening skills are important in team and work crew situations. A work crew may have a wide variety of personalities; may have people with very different characteristics and preferences; and also may have hidden or competing agendas. By listening carefully, team members can gauge whether or not everyone is working toward the same goal. Listening also helps team members and the team leader identify and address conflicts early, as well as facilitate productive working relationships among the team members. Team members who understand the two-way communication process demonstrate this by appropriately asking questions and paraphrasing when having communicating with others.

No matter what the work atmosphere, active listening is always important to promote the safety of the work crew and the citizens. Everyone needs to listen actively while preparing for the job and on the job. This can prepare employees for the job and prevent accidents during the job.

In these and almost any situation, the advantages of listening make it worth doing well. Listed below are some strategies for improving listening skills:

- Stop talking.
- Avoid, reduce or eliminate distractions.
- Give the speaker your undivided attention.
- Pay attention to nonverbal cues.
- “Be patient” / do not assume / interrupt / finish others’ sentences.
- Avoid concentrating on speaker’s delivery style.
- Identify the speaker’s main and supporting points.
- Avoid overreacting to emotional words.
- Give adequate feedback.
- Listen for the speaker’s feelings as well as facts.
- Tolerate silence.
- Be aware of your biases.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Use paraphrasing, note taking, and asking questions to ensure understanding.
- Ask open-ended questions.

Open-ended Questions and Closed-ended Questions

Active listening is also concerned with prompting the speaker for more information in order to improve understanding of the message being communicated.

Open-ended questions

A question that requests background information, interpretation, clarifying circumstances, etc. is an open-ended question. Put another way, these questions cannot be answered with yes or no. An open-ended question prompts the speaker to give his or her point of view, opinions, and inferences. Most answers to open-ended questions contain “free information” – that is, information the questioner did not know was going to be provided.

Examples:

How did you get it done?

What does your job involve?

What are the characteristics of the best boss you've ever worked for?

Closed-ended questions

A question that can be answered with a simple word is a closed-ended question. For example, any question with a yes or no answer is closed-ended. Also, questions that ask for specific detail (in or out, up or down, right or left, hot or cold, etc.) are closed-ended. One problem with relying on these questions is that *every* closed-ended question has an assumption of the facts built into it; answering such a question means you agree with those presumed facts. For example: "Your performance is terrible – are you lazy or just incompetent?" The presumption built into the question is that someone is either lazy or incompetent, that there can be no other possible explanation for the performance.

Examples:

"Did you get it done on time?"

"What is your job title?"

"Who is the best supervisor for whom you've ever worked?"

Importance of Paraphrasing

The proper use of paraphrasing can also help you ensure that your messages are communicated effectively, as well as to check for understanding.

Examples: "If I heard you correctly, you..."

"Let me see if I'm with you. Are you saying...?"

"What I think you just said was..."

"OK, tell me how we are going to proceed so I will be sure we both understand this."

"Would you tell me how you are going to proceed so I can be sure I explained things clearly?"