

Communication in the Maintenance Work Environment

Lawrence J. Rifkind, Ph.D.

Georgia State University

INTRODUCTION

At a time when organizations increasingly expect employees to work with minimal supervision and to show more initiative, competent communication skills are becoming a must. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) surveyed its members who are training practitioners, managers, administrators, educators, and human resource developers. They found that the foundation skill upon which all other skills are based is learning to learn. Technical competence requires reading, writing, and computation. The results of this survey suggest that skills that enable people to communicate effectively on the job are oral communication and listening.

This presentation will provide a discussion of communication within organizations and will develop an understanding of the problems that can arise for the aviation industry. Areas to be discussed include the communication process, language usage, verbal and nonverbal communication, listening behaviors, teamwork, conflict management, how to make meetings work, and written communication. Strategies for fostering competent communication behaviors will be included.

COMMUNICATION

Communication does not involve merely sending a message back and forth to another person like a ping-pong ball. Instead, communication is a transaction in which everyone participates, continually offering definitions of themselves and responding to definitions of perceived others. It is a process that occurs between people, rather than a static entity. Communication reveals the dynamic nature of relationships and organizations. In effect, it reflects the notion that nothing stands still.

Definition

There have been hundreds of definitions of communication developed over 25 centuries. For our purposes, "communication is the dynamic and irreversible process by which we engage and interpret messages within a given situation or context." It is "dynamic" since it is constantly in motion and changing and "irreversible" in that nothing we say can ever be completely retracted. For example, if you have a hostile exchange with a coworker and make a statement in anger, only to realize later that your comments were inappropriate, there is no erasing this exchange from the record, even through an apology. Instead, hurt feelings that accompany these sorts of exchanges can have a lasting impact on the other person. As a consequence, we must be diligent in our efforts to be responsible communicators.

Communication is a "process" because it is a specific, continuous series of actions directed toward some end, which is the exchange and interpretation of messages. In order for communication to have occurred, the sender's message, whether verbal or nonverbal, must be interpreted by the person receiving the message. Thus, communication can be viewed as being subject to individual perception of what has transpired. Often, people's retelling of past events does not necessarily coincide. Instead, widely varied stories surface that reflect the subjective interpretation of each of the participants.

The final component of communication is the presence of a "situation or context." Messages cannot be accurately exchanged and interpreted without knowledge of the complete situation in which they were stated. Likewise, without a context in which to place a given message, meanings may be misconstrued or misinterpreted. If a coworker shares information with a supervisor about another worker and does not include the individual's entire circumstances, inaccurate inferences may be drawn. Similarly, if only portions of a conversation are overheard, any meaning assigned to what has transpired will likely be inaccurate.

Competent Communicators Qualities

Unfortunately, communication does not always run smoothly. Inevitably, misunderstandings or conflict will occur. If you have ever unintentionally insulted someone or blurted out something thoughtlessly, you can appreciate the need for competent communication skills. [Communication competency](#) is the ability to achieve your communication goals. It is the ability to communicate in a personally effective and socially appropriate manner.

COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Various problems can be the result of a lack of effective communication skills in the workplace. These problems can be attributable to a vast array of issues that pervade the organization. Some factors that contribute to major communication problems include the following:

Language Usage Barriers

Language is becoming an increasingly sensitive concern in the workplace. There are several problems that contribute to [barriers to effective language usage](#). These include:

Team Characteristics

Group and teamwork will not only be important, but unavoidable in twenty-first century life. Either you love or hate working in groups. This process can be rather time consuming and difficult. Conversely, it can be both rewarding and productive provided it occurs under conditions conducive to the efficient conduct of business.

Conflict Causes

Conflict is a social interaction between people involving a struggle over claims to resources, power and status, beliefs, and other preferences and desires. There are constructive purposes served by conflict. It can enhance understanding and identification of problems, while increasing alternatives and worker interaction. Conflict stimulates interest, creativity, commitment, and quality in the workplace.

Listening

More time is spent listening than in any other form of communication. Therefore it would seem to be the 'linchpin' method for enhancing an individual's overall communication skills, whether they be written or oral, verbal or nonverbal, alone or in small groups. In essence, listening is hearing with selective attention. There are a variety of different methods that can be used to enhance listening behaviors. The following checklists of behaviors to improve listening effectiveness will facilitate this process:

- Listener Checklist
- Language Suggestions
- Successful Culture Characteristics
- Communication Flow Solutions

Leadership Skills

Leadership skills are a critical quality in determining managerial effectiveness. Included within these skills is the ability to plan and conduct meetings and develop effective teamwork.

There are several strategies that can be used in managing conflict. These include:

- Conflict Resolution Strategies
 - Effective Communicator Guidelines
-

SUMMARY

In summary, communication is an ongoing, dynamic, and complex process. It requires a high level of sensitivity and awareness on one's own part in order to effectively monitor one's own verbal and nonverbal behaviors so as to enhance the likelihood of achieving communication competence. The benefits for the individual and the organization are limitless.

APPENDIX

COMPETENT COMMUNICATOR QUALITIES

1. *They are appropriate.*

They follow the rules that guide interactions in a given context. What may be appropriate in one situation may not be appropriate in another.

2. *They are effective.*

They communicate in ways that help them achieve their goals. Effective communicators set goals related to their needs, wants, and desires. Their personal communication style facilitates the accomplishment of these goals.

3. *They are adaptable.*

They recognize the requirements of a situation and adjust their communication to the situation. An unwillingness to adapt may make it more difficult to accomplish goals.

4. *They recognize roadblocks to effective communication.*

They note potential obstacles and work to overcome them. These obstacles may include ineffective language usage, unintentional body language signals, as well as contextual and situational factors.

5. *They understand that competency is a matter of degree.*

They realize that a given act of communication is rarely completely competent or incompetent, but probably somewhere in between. Each component of competency can be considered as occurring "more" or "less."

6. *They are ethical.*

They adhere to standards of right and wrong based on their background, point of view, and circumstances. Because the range of factors that distinguish right from wrong vary considerably, there are few absolutes when it comes to ethical communication.

COMMON LANGUAGE USAGE PROBLEMS

1. *Allness*

We perceive only a small portion of the world around us. Whenever we talk or write, we usually omit more than we can say. The "allness illness" entails forgetting about this selection process and the notion that certain things are always omitted in communication.

People who have the allness illness tend to be intolerant of others' viewpoints. Instead, they mistakenly believe that they know all there is to know about something. There is a corresponding tendency to ignore information that could change an outcome. Instead, people may be judged based upon a single incident or event.

2. *The Word Is Not The Thing*

Bypassing is used to describe miscommunication patterns that occur when senders and receivers of messages "misconnect" with each other in terms of the meanings of words being used. Supervisors and subordinates can use the same words, but the intent of their communication can fail because they each attribute different meanings to the specific words.

3. *Incompleteness*

To some extent, words are the map of the territory that we want to share with others. Just like a geographical map is scaled down to size and does not accurately reflect details, so, too, is the case with words. They do not necessarily accurately represent objects, events, feelings, and ideas. In short, words do not depict everything there is to say about some event or phenomenon.

A map cannot provide a complete and comprehensive representation of a geographic area. Correspondingly, words do not provide an exhaustive view of reality. Since language seldom conforms to the reality of a situation, it is important to keep in mind that there is always more to be said about everything.

4. *Levels of Abstraction*

It is impossible for human beings to take in everything that occurs in the surrounding environment. We must abstract certain details and omit a seemingly endless number of others. How readily we can perceive the limitless possibilities of a word's meaning will determine the extent to which we understand and then communicate accurately our messages to others.

Supervisors must be sensitive and aware of this tendency since any particular object or event has multiple levels of meaning. In communicating with others, the manager must mentally define words based upon the other person's level of abstraction which will ultimately determine the meaning of the word.

5. *Inference Versus Facts*

Often times, we will draw inferences regarding contextual factors before we have all the necessary facts. Inferences are constructed so rapidly that we rarely reflect on whether they accurately represent something as we would like them to be.

Declarative statements are made in the business context on a regular basis. This would include statements such as, "She didn't return the file" or "The work was not completed because he's lazy." These sentences provide no means of verification as to whether they are factual or inferred.

TEAM CHARACTERISTICS

1. *They are a diverse group of people.*

Each individual provides specific and varying resources and abilities that provide constructive input into the team process.

2. *Responsibilities are shared among members.*

Everyone facilitates team activities and discussions. All members are, in effect, equal participants in the team process.

3. *There is a team identity.*

It has a particular identity, personality, self-image and sense of cohesiveness.

4. *Its efforts are interconnected.*

The team constantly weaves and coordinates the contributions of each member in order to develop a tighter energy and focus.

5. *Members strive for mutually defined goals.*

There is intense and open communication designed to develop group consensus. There is usually a clear and elevating goal that motivates its members.

6. *A team works within the context of other groups and systems.*

A team affects and is affected by the context and situation. It does not function in isolation or in a vacuum.

CONFLICT CAUSES

1. *Organizational structure.*

Can pit departments or people within the organization against each other. Causes include unclear goals or power building. If two units see their roles overlapping or striving for similar objectives, they tend to be placed in direct competition with each other.

2. *Performance measures.*

If not clearly stated in terms of expectations, the employee will fill in the gaps. If the manager bases rewards or punishments on behaviors that are unrelated to the job itself, the employee's behavior may pattern itself to receive the rewards.

3. *Unclear job roles.*

Competition may result if members of the organization pursue the same goals. Conflict will likely continue until the job roles are clarified.

4. *Conflicting reality perceptions.*

Each of us defines our own reality based on our individual perception of the context or situation. When these do not coincide with reality perceptions developed by others, conflict inevitably occurs.

5. *Organizational ambiguity.*

Included in this category are: multiple direct bosses; unclear instructions; personality conflicts; poor attitudes; lack of authority; supervisor's lack of experience or understanding; differing standards of behavior amongst organizational members.

LISTENER'S CHECKLIST

1. *Establish an interest in the topic.*

Brainstorm within yourself the reasons why you might benefit from listening to the other person with whom you are communicating. In doing so, you will afford yourself the opportunity to have an open mind toward what is being discussed.

2. *Tolerate distractions.*

Noise can serve as interference in our efforts to listen to someone else. Office equipment, low-flying aircraft, radio, televisions, and other people can serve to divert our attention away from the person to whom we are listening. Even our mood or uncomfortable room temperature can serve as distractions. The key is to listen through the distractions and to focus on the other person and the messages they are transmitting.

3. *Select an appropriate time and place for listening.*

The context should be conducive to effective listening behaviors. For some people, the best time of day is first thing in the morning. For others, it is later in the day. Similarly, sometimes it is most appropriate to meet with someone else in his/her office or at a "neutral site."

4. *Stop talking.*

If you know you talk too much, curb your comments. The more time spent talking, the less time we have available to actually listen to what the other person is saying.

5. *Be prepared to listen.*

Understand your own emotions and feelings. Try to perceive other people as they perceive themselves. Be sure that other things on your mind do not distract you. In particular, be sure you are physically and mentally ready to listen.

6. *Look at the other person.*

This confirms their existence; it lets them know that you are actually interested in what they are saying. If looking at their eyes is difficult, look at their hairline, mouth, forehead, or cheek area. Eye contact is a nonverbal message that says, "You have my undivided attention."

7. *Listen to what is said and what is not said.*

Words can tell us what other people are thinking. Often times, we can infer more meaning from what they do not say rather than what they do say. For example, if issues are repeated, this might indicate an emphasis on those concerns.

8. *Overcome prejudices and biases.*

If you enter into a conversation with your mind already made up, then you will likely miss most of what is being communicated to you. Maintain an open mind at all times by listening rather than judging. In short, suspend judgment.

9. *Actively listen and establish clarity checks.*

Restate or paraphrase what the other person is saying. This not only provides clarification, but can also assist in determining the accuracy of what has been heard in the discussion. Focus on both verbal and nonverbal feedback from the other person. Factors such as their body position or posture, tone of voice, and physical appearance.

10. *Ask questions.*

In doing so, you indicate an interest in what the other person is saying. It also helps you to better understand what they have communicated to you. Ask questions in an open ended way so that the person does not become defensive. For example, "what are your thoughts pertaining to that matter" or "describe what occurred" provides for more disclosure on the part of the other person.

11. *Avoid the "hair-trigger" syndrome.*

Do not react too quickly. Instead, be patient. Try not to complete the other person's statements for him/her until he/she has fully completed what he/she is saying. This is especially true during conflict or in controversial contexts. Similarly, restrain yourself from the impulse to ask question prematurely until the other person has fully expressed his/her thoughts.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE USAGE

1. *Be accurate.*

Verify word definitions and meanings whether direct or implied.

2. *Be clear.*

Strive to convey a sense of shared meaning in word imagery being transmitted to others.

3. *Limit jargon.*

Avoid the overusage of technical terms, buzzwords, acronyms or abbreviations.

4. *Avoid cliches.*

Limit commonly overused phrases, words or examples.

5. *Avoid slang or offensive terms.*

These can become obstacles to achieving communication goals and objectives and usually result in misunderstandings.

6. *Be concrete.*

Using abstract terms makes it difficult to create shared meaning.

7. *Avoid ambiguity.*

Verify that your words are being understood by the people with whom you interact.

8. *Be concise.*

Present your message in a simple, focused manner avoiding any unnecessary digressions or tangents.

9. *Be descriptive.*

Use vivid language to represent what you are communicating.

10. *Establish Your Credibility.*

Language usage will contribute toward the overall presentation of your believability and competency to others.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE

1. *There is a clearly worded and communicated overall philosophy.*

This should reflect the organization's vision for itself, its products, and its services. This vision is then transformed into a mission statement, which includes goals and objectives. Strong organizations are able to reach consensus regarding this philosophy.

2. *The components of the organization philosophy are understood and shared.*

This includes guidelines pertaining to what is and is not acceptable or appropriate for workers in the organization. Performance standards are a critical component since people see firsthand the ways in which quality and other related factors are achieved and maintained.

3. *Shared rites and rituals are practiced.*

Rituals reinforce an organization's values and standards. When employees attain these standards, they should receive appropriate recognition. Rituals and rites include factors such as promotions, transfers, training programs, achievements and retirement.

4. *A special feeling or climate exists.*

This sense is conveyed through communication networks and patterns, as well as physical layouts and arrangements. The physical arrangement of an open versus closed office enhances or inhibits interaction.

5. *There is a concern for people.*

Truly successful organizations display a genuine, heartfelt concern for employees. This may entail a simple "thank you" for a job well done or providing for a system of employee recognitions/awards or added benefits.

6. *Open communication prevails.*

Communication is the most important component of an organization. All the other factors rely on communication for their success. In vibrant organizations, communication tends to be open, free, spontaneous, adequate and feedback-oriented.

SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNICATION FLOW PROBLEMS

1. *Strive towards improving communication techniques.*

Plan meetings and organize thoughts in advance. Ensure accuracy in written and oral communication transmission and reception. Provide timely responses. Be precise.

2. *Make sure that messages are targeted to the correct person.*

Be certain that messages transmitted are, in fact, received. If they are not, identify why and implement corrective measures. In particular, copy written communication to the appropriate individuals.

3. *Indicate the timeliness of expected responses to messages transmitted.*

Perhaps your priorities are not those of the other person's. Try to organize and word the message in such a way that it does not require an inordinate amount of time to read and respond to.

4. *Consider the communication objectives.*

What do you intend to accomplish? How do you intend to achieve this desired outcome? In what communication context is it most desirable to convey the information? In writing? In a one-on-one meeting? Or in a group or committee context?

5. *Maintain accurate documentation.*

It is especially beneficial to maintain written minutes for all meetings that occur and to have those minutes approved by those in attendance.

PREPARATION STEPS FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

1. *Determine the purpose of the meeting.*

| Is the meeting necessary?

| What are the goals and objectives of the meeting?

2. *Determine the audience.*

| Who should attend?

| What should participants bring to the meeting?

| What is each person's range of contributions?

| Are there any hidden agendas?

3. *Make initial preparations.*

| Who is responsible for each portion of the meeting?

| Has everyone who should attend been contacted?

| Have room arrangements been made?

| Is there written verification of the meeting and its arrangements?

| Is there a written agenda? Has it been sent out to participants in a timely manner in advance of the meeting?

| Will breaks be necessary?

| Are there any special equipment needs? What about hand-outs?

4. *Prepare the meeting room.*

| Is the room of sufficient size for the meeting? It is comfortable and well ventilated?

| Are there any distractions in the room?

| Are there sufficient electrical outlets available for special equipment needs? Will a lectern be needed?

| Will there be a need to supply notepads, writing implements, refreshments, name cards/tags, etc.?

Meeting Facilitator's Responsibilities

1. *Establish an open and comfortable communication context.*

| Arrive early and check arrangements.

| Greet participants as they arrive prior to the meeting.

- | Make certain that everyone has been introduced to each other.

2. *Direct the flow of communication during the meeting.*

- | Start the meeting promptly.

- | State the purpose and objectives of the meeting.

- | -Use the agenda as a means of guiding the direction of the meeting.

- | Facilitate equitable participation amongst the members.

- | Ask questions in order to keep the discussion focused.

3. *Present final comments.*

- | Ask for consensus or call for a vote on issues when appropriate.

- | Summarize discussions and decisions.

- | Provide task assignments and appropriate follow-up.

4. *Provide follow-up to the meeting.*

- | Summarize agreements, assignments, and deadlines.

- | Make sure that there are accurate written minutes that are distributed and approved by the participants.

- | Anticipate and facilitate potential problem areas prior to the next meeting.

GUIDELINES FOR TEAM DEVELOPMENT

1. *Determine the purpose of the meeting.*

| Who are the team members?

| What is the demographic composition of the team? including age, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.?

| What experiences do these people bring to the team?

| What attributes does each individual have to offer the team?

2. *Seek ways to connect team members.*

| Identify areas of common ground or past experiences.

| Indicate what members can do in order to achieve a sense of pleasure from the other team members.

| Identify ways in which team members can support each other.

3. *Develop a team vision.*

| What are the team's goals and objectives?

| What are the desirable outcomes?

| How does all of this interconnect with the team decision making process?

4. *Develop a group character.*

| What norms and expectations will foster a strong, positive climate?

| How can the positive attributes of the team and its members be reinforced?

| How can the team and its members be made to feel special and unique?

| What are the team's code of ethics and standards?

5. *Create a context that is safe for team participation.*

| What can members do to maximize their diversity?

| How can team members identify shared values and orientations?

| How can the team develop strategies for managing conflict?

| In what ways can each team member share in leadership?

6. *Discuss each of the phases of team development as they occur.*

| How can these phases be identified?

| How will the team react to a lack of progress?

| How will the team deal constructively when crises and conflicts occur?

7. *Develop task processes.*

| Find ways of maintaining open, clear, and supportive communication.

| Develop strong analytical team processes.

8. *Establish mechanisms for team self-assessment and improvement.*

| How will feedback be incorporated into the team process?

| How will the team obtain feedback from both team members and non-members?

9. *Find ways to celebrate the team and its accomplishments.*

| How will the team accomplish its vision?

| How will the team accomplish its goals and objectives?

| What can the team do to recognize and reinforce its achievements?

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

1. Identify problems and intentions.

Stop and think before speaking. Consider your goals and objectives; what you wish to accomplish. Once these items are clarified, you may be better prepared to state your comments in a more positive and constructive manner.

2. Describe the problem and state your desires.

If you disagree with someone, they cannot work through the conflict unless you communicate your concerns to them. It is your responsibility to describe the situation as concretely as possible. In doing so, the other person has the opportunity to understand your position.

3. Avoid creating defensive reactions in others.

Strive towards depersonalizing conflict so that it will not directly impact personally. Stick to the facts without criticizing others.

4. Listen actively.

Attend to the feelings and emotional tone of the message, as well as the content of what others are saying. Be supportive by providing encouragement. Realize that understanding the needs and desires of others is necessary to the reduction of conflict.

5. Persuade others of the value of conflict.

If a person views conflict as something to be avoided, they may respond defensively. They need to understand that avoiding conflict may be a short term solution that only delays the inevitable.

6. Develop intragroup trust.

Conflict is not a win/lose proposition. Nor is it a place for personal vendettas. Instead, conflict involves cooperative problem solving. The degree of trust established will directly impact the ability to manage conflict constructively.

7. Do not take disagreement as personal rejection.

Instead, focus on the content of the discussion, rather than the personal relationship itself. Respect each person's right to disagree. Do not allow egos to interfere with achieving the group's goals and objectives.

8. Demonstrate cooperativeness if your plan is rejected.

Cooperativeness is essential. In essence, the good of the collective whole will then outweigh individual gain and become the top priority for everyone.

9. Clarify the Issues.

In doing so, individuals will be able to identify, define, and sharpen the issues. Once this task is accomplished, there will be a clear and accurate picture of the areas of conflict and the consequences of the conflict. This requires flexibility and creativity.

10. Allow the other person to save face.

When people engage in face-saving communication, they are able to protect their image and personal identity. This is especially the case during times of conflict since in conflict situations, people are exposing their opinions and attitudes. This makes them feel vulnerable to personal criticism and the loss of esteem from others. In short, conflict can threaten one's identity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR

1. The effective communicator is perceived as being adept at creating messages. That is, messages are perceived as:

| semantically
sane.

| revealing something about the
communicator.

| demonstrating that the communicator knows what he or she is talking
about.

| are clear and
coherent.

| make
sense.

- | coming from someone who knows what they are doing.

- | being developed and presented in an open and positive manner.

2. *The effective communicator is perceived as being similar to the receiver in a variety of ways. That is, messages are perceived as coming from someone:*

- | with a similar background to the receiver.

- | who has interests similar to those of the receiver.

- | who has attitudes which are similar to those of the receiver.

- | who has opinions similar to those of the receiver.

- | who is liked by the receiver and others.

- | who is physically and psychologically attractive to the receiver.

- | who understands things through the other person's point-of-view.

- | who is genuine and sincere.

3. *The effective communicator is perceived as able to appropriately adapt communication to changing situations and contexts. That is, messages are perceived as:*

- | coming from someone who is aware of the impact of the messages.

- | being appropriate to the purpose of the communication.

- | coming from someone who is able to adapt his/her communication behavior to the situation at hand.

- | coming from someone who is able to adapt to the prescribed role in the situation.

| coming from someone who has an extensive repertoire of verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

| coming from someone who uses language appropriate to the receiver.

| being responsive to others.

4. *The effective communicator is perceived as committed to others. That is, messages are perceived as coming from someone who demonstrates:*

| concern that the interaction be mutually beneficial.

| reliability and dependability.

| supportiveness for others.

| concern for the needs and wants of others.

| adapts to others.

| respect and acceptance of others.

| avoids immediate value judgments, but, instead, suspends judgment.

5. *The effective communicator is perceived as adept at receiving messages. That is, messages are perceived as coming from someone who:*

| is an effective listener.

| is sensitive to verbal and nonverbal messages.

| is interested in listening to what others have to say.

| can distinguish between the roles of the source and the message within the communication context.

I can say the right thing at the right time.

I is sincere and poised.

I tolerates and adjusts to distractions.