Business and Professional COMMUNICATION

PLANS, PROCESSES, AND PERFORMANCE

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Plans, Processes,
and Performance

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PREFACE

Business and Professional Communication: Plans, Processes, and Performance began with a request that created a problem. In 1994, the Idaho State University College of Business conducted a survey of companies that had hired recent business graduates. The survey results showed that College of Business students needed to improve their oral and written communication skills. Although business students were already required to take a basic course in oral communication, the business faculty wanted them to also take a more advanced course in business and professional communication. They asked the communication department to structure a business and professional communication course that was presentation oriented but did not repeat material from the basic oral communication requirement.

The problem was that none of us in the communication department could find textbooks or course outlines for a presentation-oriented business and professional course that emphasized communication skills and did not repeat significant units covered in most public speaking courses. It was obvious that we needed to develop new content and unique assignments for the course. Working with other faculty members, we developed new assignments; wrote lectures, exercises, and discussion questions; and created evaluation instruments for learning modules on interpersonal politics, technical communication, risk communication, and crisis communication. These materials have been refined through three years of practical instruction in our service course here at Idaho State University.

Lacking a textbook for our unique course, we decided to see whether we could find a publisher willing to take a chance on a different approach to the business and professional communication course. Fortunately, the answer was "Yes." Through a development process that lasted four years, we tried to include the most up-to-date content available. We avoided rehashing theories from management and social psychology, focusing instead on the basic communication skills required in any business or professional career. Finally, we included chapters not found in any other business communication textbook on interpersonal politics, technical communication, risk communication, and crisis communication. When faithfully applied, the skills described in this book can improve any student's chances for professional employment and advancement. Perhaps this book is a reflection of the often-given advice that employees should look for opportunities in everyday problems. If so, then the development of the book serves as an example of its content. In any event, we believe that our product can help you change your professional problems into opportunities.

Writing a book is never an individual accomplishment. Without the help of a variety of people this project could not have been accomplished. We would like to thank our parents, Yvonne and Richard and JoAn and Norm, for their constant words of support and encouragement. The book has been enriched by the enthusiasm and pedagogical suggestions made by our wonderful colleagues at Idaho

State University including John Gribas, Bob Rouse, Andra Hansen, Jackie Czerepinski, and Charles Heisler. We appreciate the support of our chair, Bruce Loebs, who has given us much free time from administrative duties over the years and always expressed his interest in and encouragement of this project.

We would also like to thank the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Idaho State University, Victor Hjelm, for his constant belief in the importance of communication in a liberal arts curriculum. The dean of the College of Business at Idaho State University, William Stratton, has consistently supported our ideas for the Business and Professional course, and to him and his faculty we owe a great debt of gratitude. Thanks also go to George Ziegelmueller at Wayne State University, a friend and fellow Allyn and Bacon author, who had sage words of advice to offer us one August afternoon. Finally, thanks to Noelle Tangredi for her artistic talents and advice.

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CHAPTER

1

The Role of Communication in Business and the Professions

What Is Communication?
  - Meaning
  - The Flow of Messages

Goals of Communication
  - Shared Meaning Is the Objective of Most Business and Professional Communication
  - Ambiguity Is the Objective of Some Business and Professional Communication

Precepts of Effective Communication
  - The Most Powerful Communication Is Multichannel and Multidirectional
  - Effective Communication Involves More Listening Than Talking
  - Effective Communication Is Audience Centered

Communication Competence

Summary

The new millennium is here and with it enormous changes in business and professional life. Global competition, international trade, the environmental movement, rising health care costs, new technologies, reductions in the size and scope of government, and constant pressure for increased productivity are just a few of the changes that have accelerated at the close of the twentieth century. Despite these rapid changes, many people agree on one thing: A person's success in a business or professional career depends in large measure on the ability to communicate with others. Let's look at some of the contributions communication makes to employee motivation, productivity, organizational change, and individual career success.

Communication is crucial to employee motivation. There is a consensus among professionals that "truly effective communication does not occur until the employees understand how the 'big picture' affects them and their jobs. Changes in the economy, among competitors in the industry, or in the company as a whole, must be translated into implications for each plant, job, and employee."[1] Letting employees know how their efforts were successful in landing an important account not only instills pride but provides information about the kinds of efforts that succeed at the organization. Even bad news can motivate employees. In a study of communication practices in business, researchers found that "the company with the highest bad-news to good-news ratio appeared to be performing very well, in terms of employee satisfaction and economic performance."[2] As the researcher explained, when bad news is candidly reported, problems can be solved or reduced before they are company threatening. In addition, reporting bad news makes good news more believable.

Whereas good communication provides a motivating work environment, ineffective communication often leads to a drop in the quality and quantity of work, higher absenteeism, and higher staff turnover.[3] According to Mike Greene and Mike Hollister, partners in Greene, Hollister, Inc., a Boca Raton, Florida, management consulting firm, "You can tell when communication is awry. Employees start leaving early...and behaving irresponsibly, even though you've done a good job of hiring."[4] Michael Dennis, a credit manager, says, "more open and frequent communication will build bridges between you and your subordinates, resulting in a happier and more productive work environment."[5] A healthy communication environment means that employees enjoy going to work because it is satisfying and they like to share ideas with their coworkers and supervisors. As such, effective communication improves employee motivation and morale, which are essential for organizational productivity.

Effective communication is also important to managing organizational change. Faced with increased global competition, downsizing, restructuring, and the constant need to cut costs, U.S. corporations are making major changes to enhance productivity in every aspect of their business. Moreover, government agencies are not immune from these pressures: As of 1998, the federal government employed 62,000 fewer employees than in 1990.[6] Remaining employees face greater pressures for efficiency and productivity than ever before. Although this can be beneficial for companies and agencies, the changes can be wrenching for employees. Downsizing and restructuring threaten jobs, business relationships, and employee security.[7] Effective communication is one way to reconcile the competing needs of organizational change and employee security. A study of ten leading U.S. companies revealed that "organizations can convert employees' concerns into support for major changes if they effectively address employees' fears about restructuring and reorganization. On the other hand, if communication is inadequate, employees will be more resistant to change."[8]

To ensure creativity in a competitive environment, employees must be able to exchange mundane news. As one manager suggests, "Most employees are more interested in their company than you suspect."[9] Innovativeness is spurred when people from different parts of an organization talk casually, compare notes on problems, and work together to create new solutions and opportunities. Casual conversation isn't meaningless gossip; rather, problems are often solved as people exchange information. Organizations in which people are free to communicate and feel safe in doing so are more creative than in places where communication is hindered by strict supervision and distrust.

Finally, effective communication is vital for new management models. Total quality management, total quality improvement, flattened hierarchies, employee empowerment, and self-directed work teams all require effective communication for success. One business consultant suggests that, within the next ten years, over 90 percent of all firms will adopt some form of new management practice. Effective communication is the key to making these processes work.[10]

Effective communication is also essential for individual career success. According to W. H. Weiss, an industrial consultant, "no single aspect of the supervisor's job can contribute to career success as much as being an effective communicator."[11] Researchers Beverly Sypher and Theodore Zorn conducted a study of the relationship between communication skills and upward mobility in an East Coast insurance company. They found that "Persons with more developed [communication] abilities tended to be found at higher levels in the organizational hierarchy and tended to be promoted more often than persons with less developed abilities."[12] A study of job competencies showed that oral communication was more important than written communication for entry-level job seekers in business. The specific skills preferred by managers in this study include following instructions, listening skills, conversation skills, giving feedback, communicating with the public, meeting skills, presentation skills, handling customer complaints, and conflict-resolution skills.[13]

Despite the emphasis on communication by many companies, employees often lack these skills. A survey of 470 human resource executives rated communication as the most critical employee shortcoming. Managers of training departments consistently cite communication as one of the most critical areas for additional employee development.[14] Seattle-based consultant John Jensen believes that, "poor communication skills are more the rule than the exception in companies."[15] When business students now in the working world were asked which skills they wished they had been taught in college, they cited public speaking, how to present technical information, listening, writing, small-group communication, problem-solving communication, and persuasion.[16]

Perhaps communication skills are ignored because they are considered soft skills—"touchy-feely indulgences, less critical to business success than 'hard' technical skills."[17] Professionals are taught technical information vital to their field but are not taught how to communicate that information. One health professional wrote, "the most consistent problem that I have experienced in my career of working with industrial hygienists, safety professionals, environmental engineers, and other technical specialists...is a persistent and serious failing of technical people to communicate well."[18] Business consultant Robert Gedaliah says the attitude that communication skills are soft skills is nonsense. "Communication skills are the nuts and bolts of everything. For success in hard skills, we must educate people in soft skills."[19] As we move into the next century, communication skills will be the key to achieving your own professional aspirations.

But what exactly is communication and how does it function? We will answer these questions by defining communication in two parts: First, we will define and explain the concept of meaning, and then we will explain how messages flow between communicators. This leads us to the two overarching goals of most business and professional communication: shared meaning and ambiguity. We then discuss three axioms of effective communication and close the chapter with a discussion of the stages of learning necessary to improve your communication skills.

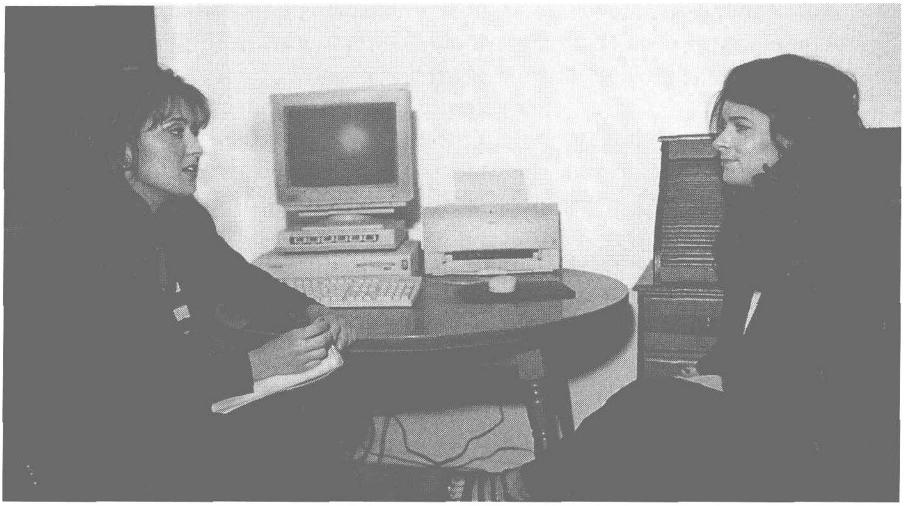
What Is Communication?

As previously indicated, the term "communication" has become an important one for people in business and industry. When pressed to define exactly what the term means, however, many managers are at a loss. What exactly is communication? For our purposes, **communication** is an exchange of messages between individuals for the purpose of creating or influencing the meaning that others assign to events. To fully understand our definition of communication it is first necessary to understand our definition of "meaning"; then we will explain how messages are exchanged between communicators.

Meaning

Meanings are interpretations we develop for particular experiences. For example, going to a job interview is an experience that some relish and others despise. The difference is in the interpretation or meaning that each person associates with the activity.[20] The meaning that we give an event is not carried by the event itself; rather, events gain particular meanings as people converse about them. For example, most people hate the game-playing and intrigue associated with organizational politics. Nevertheless, in Chapter 3 we argue that the strategic thinking in organizational politics can be enjoyable. If you are convinced, your interpretation of organizational politics will have changed. As such, the meaning of any situation not only varies from person to person but can change for individuals over time, based on their communication with others.

As you might guess from the discussion, **shared meaning** occurs when two people share agreement in their interpretation of an experience or event.[21] Shared meaning may develop independently—for example, when two people learn that they both hate job interviews. More frequently, we attempt to negotiate shared meaning with others through communication. When business people talk about effective communication they usually mean communication that creates shared meaning between people. For example, sales people work to persuade potential buyers to share their assessment of a product's value. On the other hand, **ambiguity** is the opposite of shared meaning. It occurs when a message sender achieves a low correspondence between his or her intent and the receiver's interpretation.[22] Although business people tend to emphasize the



Communication is an exchange of messages for the purpose of creating or influencing meaning.
Credit: Kevin C. Wellard

importance of shared meaning, ambiguity plays an important role in a variety of professional communication contexts, including organizational politics and organizational crises.

Communication creates or influences shared meaning through the use of signs and symbols. **Signs** are involuntary expressions of emotion, and are usually nonverbal rather than verbal cues. Facial expressions, eye contact, posture, gesture, and vocal variations are all examples of nonverbal signs. Signs are involuntary because they are not normally under conscious control. When angry, you do not need to think about raising your voice, scowling, and slamming your fist. These cues are exhibited as a natural extension of your anger. As such, signs usually illustrate and emphasize the verbal portion of a message, although they can contradict a message, producing ambiguity and confusion for the listener.

Symbols, on the other hand, are voluntary expressions that stand for or represent something else. Symbols are voluntary because the choice of whether and how to express yourself symbolically is more conscious than is the case for signs. Letters are symbols because they stand for certain sounds. Words are symbols because they stand for objects, ideas, or states of mind. Symbols are necessary because my picture of a tree cannot be transmitted to you directly. Instead, our culture has agreed that the word "tree" stands for objects with roots, a trunk, branches, and leaves or needles. If my use of the word "tree" creates a corresponding picture of a similar tree in the your head, then this symbol has created shared meaning. If, however, when I use the word "tree" I am thinking of a Joshua tree, a variety common in the desert Southwest, but the word makes you think of a maple tree, the symbol has been only partly successful in helping us share meaning. However, sharing meaning is never as simple as selecting the one correct symbol to represent an idea. Effective communicators consider the logical and psychological meanings of their symbols.

To create shared meaning the communicator must consider the logical relationship between a symbol and the thing it represents. This involves selecting the right words to stand for the objects, events, or states of mind to which the speaker is referring. Although tools such as dictionaries aid this selection, the chore is complicated by the fact that almost every word has more than one definition. If I said, in response to the CEO's motivational presentation, "The boss's rhetoric is quite nice," this could be taken in two ways depending on my meaning for the term "rhetoric." In one meaning, rhetoric is the art or science of using words effectively, thus my comment is a compliment. If, on the other hand, I meant rhetoric as artificial eloquence, showiness, and unnecessary elaboration of language and literary style, then my comment is an ironic insult. Multiple definitions increase the beauty and power of language, but do so at the cost of precision.

In addition to the sheer number of definitions for each symbol, the fact that they are abstract further complicates the possibility of shared meaning. As we said above, symbols are not the things they represent; rather, they stand in the place of those things. Although this may seem to be an obvious point, it leads to less obvious complications. The fact that symbols are abstractions (removed from the thing they represent) is sometimes depicted as a ladder of possibilities.[23]

At the bottom of the ladder in Figure 1.1 is an event, an employee's lateness for work. The statements above the line are symbolic, meaning they are representations of the actual event. As we climb the ladder of abstraction we increase the power of our description, moving from describing three events to describing the employee's general approach to work. But, that increase in power also increases the ambiguity of the description. All language operates on a continuum that at one end may be highly precise but only minimally descriptive, and at the other end is broader but more ambiguous.

In addition to the logical properties of language, psychological meanings must also be considered. Psychological meanings are the private associations that individuals have for a symbol. For example, although the dictionary definition for the term

You are a poor worker.
You have a poor attitude toward your work.
Symbols Your poor attitude is reflected in poor attendance.
You have been late a variety of times this month.
You have been late three times this month.

An Event Late for work three times.

FIGURE 1.1 **The Ladder of Abstraction**

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