Business Communication

Achieving Results

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Preface

The author begins with a historical perspective on human communication and creates an up-to-date model for our times. She explores the contributions of major theorists and thinkers in the subjects of semantics, language and linguistics and describes how the lessons learned help us achieve results. Moore devotes the rest of the book to applied, actionable recommendations designed to optimize positive internal and external communication outcomes in business.

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1 From Sumer to Social Media

In the last 5,000 years, human communication has progressed from recording events on cuneiform tablets to interacting through popular digital channels on the Internet. Because this ability to communicate can be traced to the very beginnings of civilized society, committing an idea to writing – or to video and other presentation media – is a task that is today nearly as automatic as breathing. Unfortunately, taking care to craft the message for positive results is a skill that isn't as automatic.

Essentially, we have communicated for the same reasons throughout recorded history. We seek to document, persuade, inform, criticize, educate, inspire, ridicule, evaluate, analyze, entertain, satirize and empathize. The tools available to us and the number of people we can reach today make it easy to reach out with a quick opinion or quip. Technology increases the number of messages we can send; however, it becomes all the more necessary to think through the communication process before pressing the send button. This is especially true when we communicate on behalf of an organization as an employee or contractor.

1.1 The Backdrop

Advances in technology and scientific understanding spawn models that help us envision what is happening in a given process. In that sense, a model represents the parts and the whole of a process at the same time. Claude Shannon, a researcher and mathematician at Bell Labs, developed a communication model in 1947. His model diagramming the communication process included the information source, message encoder, transmitter, signal, channel, message decoder, receiver, and noise. Warren Weaver later added the concept of feedback to the model, turning it from a strictly linear process to a circular one, so that it more closely represented interpersonal communication when it was published in 1949 (The Shannon-Weaver Model Defined).

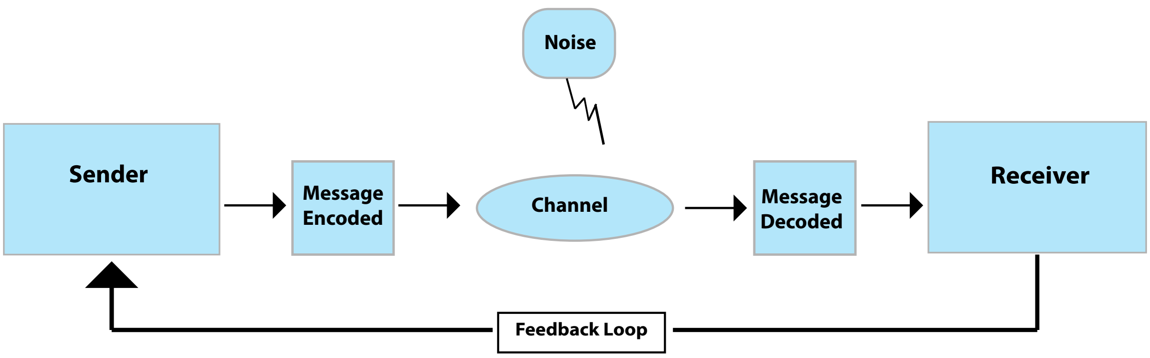

Figure 1: The author's reinterpretation of the Shannon-Weaver Model.

To understand how an interpersonal communication model applies to a business situation, let's say you are the sender, and you write a business process for a new position in your department. You start by determining the format of the document, turning to other recently completed business processes as an example. This decision to use a pre-set format is your way of encoding the message, along with the tone, word choice and detail you use when writing. You are taking your ideas and adapting them to an already-accepted document style to present it in a way that the receiver will understand. The next decision is how to present the information.

When you choose between publishing it through your company's intranet and introducing it in segments in a Power Point presentation, you are determining the information channel best suited to your documents. Before the receiver – a Human Resources manager in this example – can fully understand the information, she must decode it.

The Shannon-Weaver model has a few obvious drawbacks when we try to adapt it to organizational communication. To more accurately represent reality, the model must be given further context. In other words, what factors in the organization influence the communication choices and methods used by its employees? Do a company's hierarchy and corporate culture affect communication? Within the field of communication theory, answers to these questions have been discussed for a century ("Attraction-Selection-Attrition Framework").

1.2 The Theorists

One theory goes beyond the physical environment and states that the employees themselves determine behavior and, hence, key aspects of communication within their organization. Benjamin Schneider, in his article "The People Make the Place," published in Personnel Psychology, made a case for the "Attraction-Selection-Attrition" theory (1987).

- Personality and interests lead us to our chosen profession.
- Organizations select employees who have common traits.
- Those individuals who do not fit into the company's environment usually leave.
- They are replaced by others who reinforce the common attributes.

In companies where employees become too much alike, achieving change may be more difficult. In his book *Diffusion of Innovations*, Everett Rogers describes how each innovation – which could be a new product or practice in a company – goes through four stages: creating or inventing, communicating the invention, acceptance over time, and the consequences of adopting (or not adopting) the new idea or product. Further, Rogers identifies five levels of "adopters" which follow a standard bell curve.

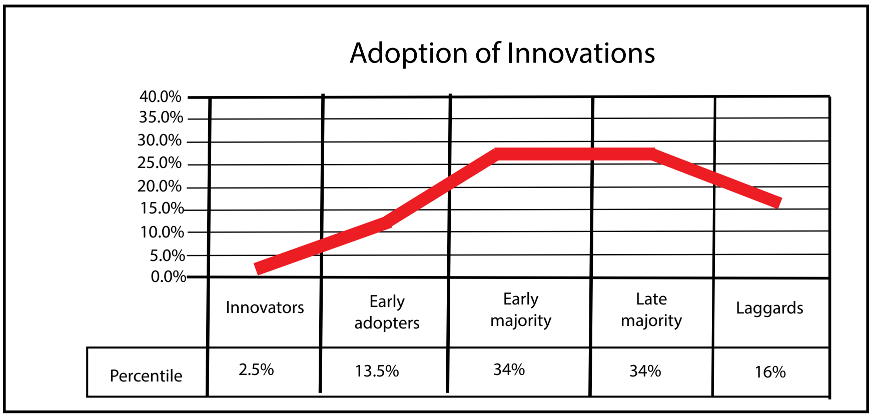

Figure 2: Everett Rogers defined five levels in the process of adopting innovations.

To bring this idea down to earth, imagine that you are responsible for introducing a new online tool to track sales. You have been given a goal of one year to move all of the account executives in your company from tracking their own activity offline to this new system, which will provide better and more consistent management reports. In your role, you become an agent of change and, as you progress through the first few months, there will be a few account executives who will immediately embrace the new online tracking method. Through their quick adoption, they become opinion leaders who can help bring other sales staff on board with the innovation. Some will be less willing to change, and still others will require repeated attempts through emails and presentations before they adopt the online sales tracking system.

How well you perform your task to meet your goal will depend upon how well you design your initial communication, how rigorously you follow up, and how successful you are at responding to the concerns of those who have reservations about adopting a new process. Your role as a change agent requires you to modify your message and begin to communicate possible consequences to those who lag behind the majority of sales staff in accepting the new practice.

What is an innovation? *Any practice, product or service perceived by an employee to be new.*

What influences employees to adopt change? *Interpersonal relationships, opinions of others, and the medium chosen to communicate the innovation.*

1.3 Creating a Better Model

In light of the insights from organizational communication studies and real-world situations such as the one mentioned in the last section, the Shannon-Weaver model should be modified. Creating a better model requires that we not only understand the context in which communication occurs, but that we also pay attention to the type of message being sent and the chosen channel. In the case of the change agent described in Section 1.2, this employee will reach out to account executives many times with a different focus in each message. The change agent must also be prepared to work with groups that are at different points in the adoption process throughout the year. Here is an example of the communication tactics for the new sales tracker:

- Conduct meetings to introduce concept and timetable for adoption
- Train sales staff in person or by conference call and screen sharing
- Report to management on rate of adoption
- Follow-up with sales staff lagging behind in adoption
- Offer incentives for adoption and involve management in meetings
- Seek feedback from account executives who are using the new process
- Analyze results and establish best practices for future process changes

An accurate depiction of communication within a company should be dynamic, showing that the sender switches places with the receiver. The messages should be based on common experiences to improve comprehension – or message decoding. All communication within the company, whether verbal or written, is always conducted within the context of the existing organizational structure. The components of that structure include everything from available technology to accepted etiquette. Also factoring in how communication occurs is whether the company has a hierarchical or horizontal structure.

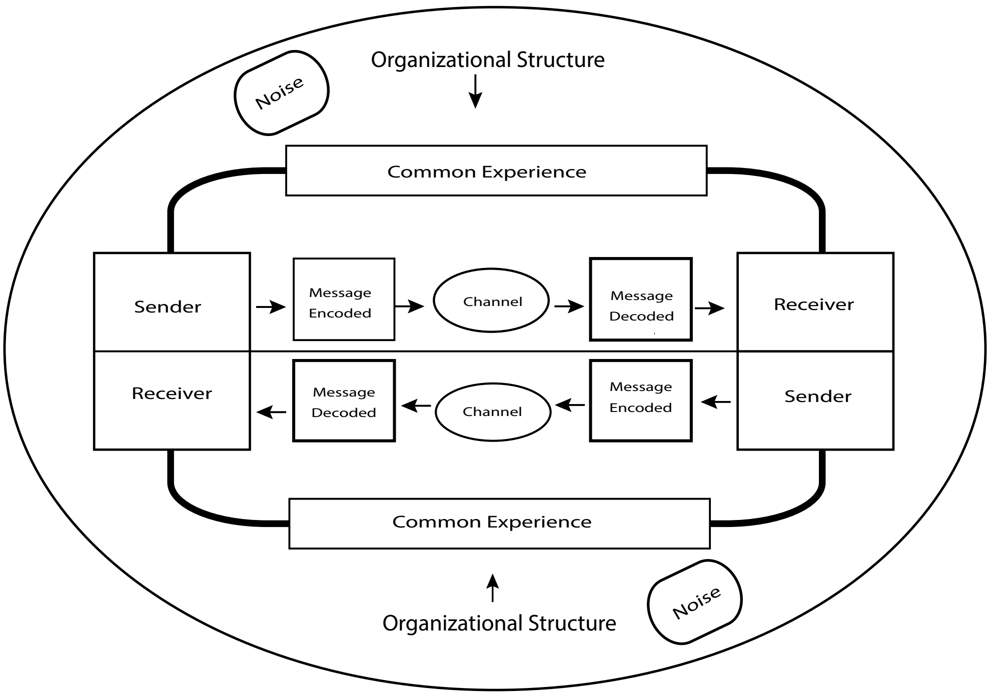

Figure 3: The author proposes a business communication model.

1.4 Communication Barriers

Ironically, factors that could positively influence organizational communication may also lead to noise that impedes efforts to get a message across. Although employees participating in meetings will have a pre-defined number of shared, common experiences, pitfalls can still occur. When planning a presentation or writing instructions for a business process, keep in mind that barriers to communication can be external to the participants, intrapersonal, or interpersonal (Pearce et al. 1984).

1.4.1 Barriers caused by structure

If a company has a hierarchical structure, there may be limitations placed on an employee's ability to manage an entire project. There tends to be more management involvement in the process and less leeway to freely reach across groups up and down the organization. In contrast, a more horizontal structure allows an employee to step up, assume responsibility for a project, and communicate unimpeded to all groups and individuals involved.

The availability of technology used to conduct a meeting, and how well that technology functions, could also contribute to or detract from a planned presentation. Nearly everyone has had the experience at one time or another of having a video conference interrupted by technical difficulties. Perhaps you were trying to demonstrate a new software product and the test site goes down just when you were ready to begin. Luckily, if we are prepared, we can overcome barriers such as these by going to "Plan B" and demonstrate features through an alternate Power Point presentation or through screen shots captured earlier.

1.4.2 Intrapersonal hindrances

Intrapersonal factors that hinder effective communication can be traced to the personality, knowledge level and even to the emotional state of the message sender. An objective self-assessment can help a business communicator overcome these hurdles and modify both the tone of the message and the approach. If the presenter says, "I am the expert," directly or through tone and body language, her audience will not feel free to raise questions or seek clarification of the material. If the same presenter says instead "I have knowledge to share," she invites feedback and a healthy exchange of ideas.

1.4.3 Interpersonal obstacles

How will the sender be received by the audience? Is the speaker credible? In a situation where he is communicating to audience members with a higher rank or status, he may experience a credibility gap. The sender can overcome perceptual factors that block effective communication by objectively assessing how best to frame the message. If his words and body language say, "You must follow these instructions," he will invite scrutiny and questions about his authority. The remedy is to say, instead, "I am giving you these instructions so that we can accomplish management's goals." This latter approach communicates the concept of teamwork and eliminates emotional undertones.

From a psychological perspective, communication is most effective when we are able to disassociate ourselves from the message, to keep the presentation or email or process documentation as objective as possible. Is there a connection between the type of message and the channel, or medium, chosen? Generally speaking, the more impersonal the communication, the least effective and most efficient the medium will be. Conversely, the more personal the communication, the more effective and least efficient the medium will be (Timm and Jones, 1983). Let's look at four examples of common communication channels.

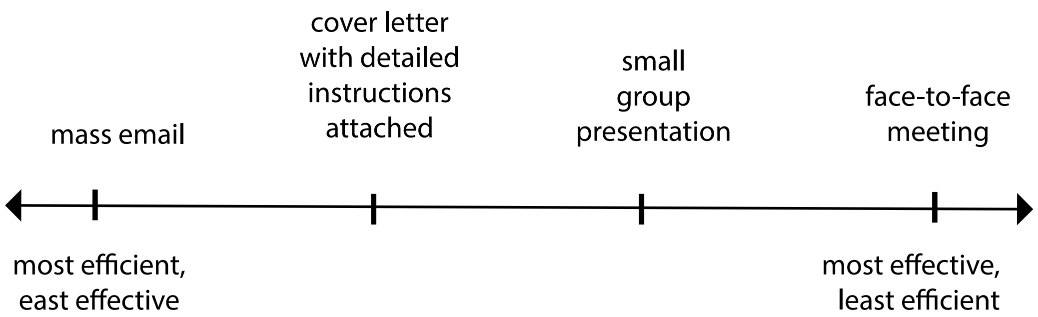

Figure 4: The efficiency and effectiveness of a message can be plotted along a sliding scale.

The challenge for the message sender is to correctly judge the importance of the message in order to maximize both effectiveness and efficiency. Obviously, the receiver has the greatest opportunity to provide feedback and have questions answered in the face-to-face meeting. Are you introducing a new idea or practice? If so, choose a channel that will allow you to actively listen to the concerns and questions raised by the participants. A small group presentation with a question and answer segment built into the agenda serves to dispel misunderstandings and clarify expectations. After the new practice is in place, a less personal follow-up email to update group members will be appropriate.

Five Common Types of Communication Barriers
Organizational structure: hierarchy vs. horizontal, available technology
Intrapersonal factors: personality, level of knowledge and emotional state
Interpersonal factors: perceived credibility of sender by the receiver
Channel choice: match the medium to the message goals
Lack of feedback: Sender depends on feedback to judge success of communication

2 Understanding Semantic Noise

Semantics, according to the Encarta English Dictionary, is the "study of meaning in language." Semanticists also analyze the use of symbols and logic in language. Because effective communication depends on the sender and receiver sharing the same meaning, semantic noise – missteps in the process – must be kept to the minimum. We express opinions, beliefs, attitudes and values both directly and indirectly through the language we use. Unfortunately, when we are not aware of how our predispositions filter the messages we send and the messages we receive, semantic noise can send a communication plan into a tailspin.

While it is virtually impossible to step outside of the experiences that inform our values and attitudes, understanding the nature of semantic noise will help us recognize when it occurs in a business setting and take precautions to avoid it. Becoming an objective, intentional communicator who knows how and when to invoke the appropriate type of message at the right time requires a little time spent on the subject of linguistics. After all, language use is inextricably related to effective communication.

2.1 The role of linguistics

All languages are comprised of sounds that make up words, and the words are then pronounced in a structure that is used either formally or informally within society. Because these sounds evolved differently from culture to culture, they have been arbitrarily assigned by native speakers to symbolize a thing or an idea. The more abstract the symbolic representation, the more imprecise the meaning and the greater the chance that the speaker and the audience may assign a different meaning to the abstraction.

Even within the same language words undergo semantic change over time. A given word may refer to one type of thing and then become generalized to represent other things that are similar. The product brand name Kleenex has undergone such a meaning change and now the name is used by many when referring to any light, disposable, rectangular product that is applied to the nose. Conversely, a word may start out as a general description of something and, over time, refer only to a specific thing. For example, the word *starve* once meant *to die*. Today the word has a more specific meaning, which is *to die of hunger* (Fromkin & Rodman, 1973).

The meaning of words also shifts over time. In their book, *An Introduction to Language*, Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman trace the meaning of several words from Old English to Middle English and to current times. To be *silly* meant to be *happy* in Old English. In Middle English the word meant to be *naive*. Today, *silly* means *foolish*, according to the Encarta Dictionary. However, according the online Urban Dictionary, it means to be *funny in a cute* or *weird way*.

Popular culture and technology contribute new words to the English language each year. In 2012, for instance, the dictionary publishers at Merriam-Webster added 15 words or word combinations, including *cloud computing*, *game changer*, *energy drink* and *aha moment*. In business, each industry develops its own vernacular. Managers in a high-tech firm may use the word "interface" to mean "a communication." Needing to "shut down" or have "down time" is to take a break from work. One employee may ask another person to "ping" her with an update, instead of saying to a co-worker, "Send me another email when you know more."

These words become a type of shorthand to quickly get a message across to those who work with us in the same company. Expressions – and even acronyms – that develop within a company serve to separate the language used internally from that used to communicate to external audiences. In a multi-national company, each geographical area may use company-wide expressions and add their own regionally adopted words and phrases to internal messages and presentations. Such specialized words with understanding limited to one group within an organization can become a hindrance when communicating across geographical regions.

2.2 Chomsky's Contributions

Noam Chomsky, one of the best-known names in the field of linguistics, developed the concept of universal grammar. Early in his studies, he observed that children all over the world, regardless of the language they will eventually speak, go through the same acquisition process. The ease at which children learn to speak and apply the rules of grammar along the way led Chomsky to conclude that humans possess an innate ability to speak that is independent of "intelligence, motivation, and emotional state" (Chomsky, 1965). The complexities of grammar make acquisition all the more amazing. Chomsky concluded that there is "…little hope that much of the structure of the language can be learned by an organism initially uninformed as to its general character…." (Chomsky, 1965)

More recently, Chomsky proposed a minimalist approach to the study of language, which requires the linguist to ask and answer basic questions, resulting in a deeper understanding about the nature of language. In a 2012 lecture, he started with the question, "What is language?" and followed up with other queries about how the concepts, principles and results inform the investigation into acquisition and use. He still held that language acquisition is generated internally, a process he called i-language.

If the capacity for language is hard-wired into the brain, it is easy to see how we can take our communication skills for granted and remain unaware of how our words will be construed. You've heard the phrase, "It's not what you say. It's how you say it." How a sentence is delivered is a major clue to its meaning. Emphasizing one word over another in a sentence changes both the tone and meaning of a statement. For example the question, "What *time* did you arrive this morning?" signifies authority, but when asked in another way, "What time did *you* arrive this morning?" it denotes teasing or sarcasm.

Choice of language in a business setting will vary depending upon the formality, or informality, of a given situation. However, both the spoken presentation and the handouts should be created to match the occasion. If you use overly complex language in a small group training session, the result may be off-putting and demotivate the participants from asking questions and providing feedback. In addition to analyzing the situational requirements of communication, it is equally important to consider the audience. How many charts and graphs will you present? How critical is each one to getting across your message?

2.3 S.I. Hayakawa's Contributions

S.I. Hayakawa, who was a semanticist and teacher, wrote about the nature of language as it relates to thought and behavior. One of Hayakawa's central assumptions in his book, *Language in Thought and Action*, was that "…when the use of language results, as it so often does, in the creation of aggravation of disagreements, and conflicts, there is something linguistically wrong with the speaker, the listener, or both." (Hayakawa, 1964) What are some of the errors that lead to semantic noise?

- Don't confuse the word with the thing it names. Words are merely the agreed-upon symbolic representations of a person, place, thing, idea, or animal. The person is not the same as the title he holds in a company. The title is a way of describing the work he does or the organizational level at which that work is accomplished.
- Does the map match the territory? When we hold onto information that has no basis in fact, the map (information) does not match the territory (our world as it factually exists). A rumor in the workplace is an example of information that doesn't match the territory. Management must address rumors before they become detrimental to productivity or are leaked to the media as fact.
- Understand the differences among reporting, inferring and judging. A report is a factual account of an event, or a first-person observation. An inference is a comment about something that is not known based on something known. *She is buying two sandwiches (known), so she must be really hungry (inferred).* Are we making an incorrect inference? Maybe she is buying a sandwich for a friend. A judgment is a statement of disapproval or approval of an event, of a person, or of objects. When in a meeting, look critically at the reports and identify when an inference is being presented as a fact. Watch your own inclinations, too. Recognizing when we are reporting, inferring and judging helps us to think critically.

Hayakawa also discussed how the use of abstractions can lead to empty, nonsensical statements. As an example, "Management should drive productivity." But what does it mean to drive productivity? What constitutes productivity, and where are we driving it? Without an operational definition of the words or further clarification at the very least, we are left with a meaningless statement.

To illustrate how the process of abstracting works, Hayakawa developed the ladder of abstraction and gave it eight levels. Level one is an object, person or thing. It is something we can point to, that has concrete reality. As we move up the ladder of abstraction, we move farther away from the specific and towards a high-level concept that has little to do with the original level. Figure 5 shows one possible path through terms and concepts, beginning with a *person* and moving up to the highest level of abstraction, which is *productivity* in this case.

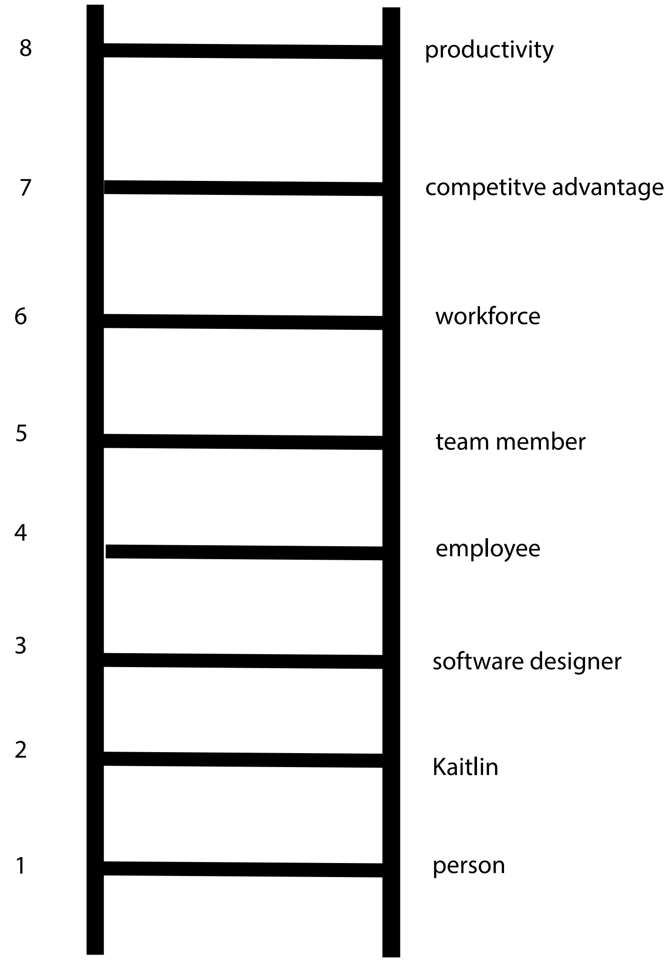

Figure 5: The author applies Hayakawa's ladder of abstraction to an example in business.

Effective verbal and written communication shouldn't necessarily be free of abstractions, but use them in conjunction with descriptive language to explain and support the more complex and less concrete words and phrases. If you have attended a meeting that was only full of detail without any generalized statements, I'm sure that you found it tedious and boring. On the other hand, a presentation that is only generalities and abstractions with no specifics is confusing and meaningless. Meetings are not the place to leave meaning up to interpretation, especially when the objective is to share information to achieve individual or team goals on behalf of a company.

2.4 Exploring the concept of shared meaning

In an organization, when we communicate with one another within the framework of shared experience, we have a built-in benefit that the messages we send and receive will also have shared meaning. Without shared meaning, all the time spent to perfect a presentation, revise meeting notes, or send out an agenda will be wasted.

How do we derive meaning from words? The context in which we hear a word gives us clues to the word's meaning. We pick up on contextual clues all the time, especially when we are learning a new skill. However, if the trainer has prepared the session objectively and with a critical eye, she will have edited her material to include definitions, descriptions and examples.

As long as the words in a sentence are arranged in the expected order, which is at the very basic a subject-verb-object sequence, we believe that we should be able to understand the intended meaning. Granted, in a field that is unfamiliar, we may need to look up one or more of the terms. From a semantics point of view, though, there are words that belong together and words that just do not work in combination. The following sentence is an example often quoted by linguists to illustrate how words that appear in the correct grammatical order may not make sense when used in the same sentence: *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously* (Chomsky, 1957). This sentence contains words that directly conflict with one another. Something cannot be colorless *and* green. Although the image of ideas sleeping sounds rather compelling, the adverb *furiously* modifying the verb *sleep* makes no sense.

Another example of words that fit together structurally but cannot be understood by the reader is the "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll, which is a masterful assemblage of nonsense words. Here are the first four stanzas of the poem:

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the JubJub bird, and shun
The fruimious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought-
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

When a co-worker overuses industry acronyms and field-specific terminology in a presentation to a group from another department, those in attendance may feel as if they have fallen through the rabbit hole and landed next to Alice. A business communicator must be able to temper the use of words which may block the attempt to share meaning. Always keep in mind why the presentation is necessary, who will be attending, and what industry or special knowledge – if any – the audience brings to the meeting.

2.5 Beyond the sound bite

An overabundance of information coming at us in a myriad of forms competing for our attention has given rise to the phenomenon of the sound bite. This terse, short little phrase often repeated ad infinitum becomes part of our cultural lexicon over time. The sound bite proliferates in the political and media realms. Organizations, though, are not immune from the tendency to infuse internal communication with short phrases and slogans. As is true with advertising messages, these internal slogans will have a higher degree of symbolic meaning that is light on the information value and heavy on the connotations conjured by the phrase.

Some Business Sound Bites

We have an open-door policy.
Practice the three P’s: Punctuality, performance and progress.
In e-commerce, cash is king.
Watch the bottom line.
Always arrive eager and ready to work.

Sound bites can be no more than another form of semantic noise that fails to share meaning. Or, when used correctly as a part of an internal communication campaign, these same messages may become effective. Again, context, description and examples make the difference in whether a message is successful or not. When taken as a single message, each one of the sound bites listed above creates more questions than if they had remained unsaid. What is the backstory behind each sound bite? What do these sound bites actually say about the company's management?

- Is the first one referring to all managers? Surely, there must be some times that the office door will be closed. Does an open door mean the same as open communication?
- The second example tells us that the speaker believes you cannot perform well or progress in your career without being on time for work. Is that the message the company's managers really want to distribute? Perhaps, but the employees of this company require a more complete explanation of these expectations.
- Beyond the catchy alliteration in the third example, the question remains: King of what? This is not a statement intended to motivate employees, right? What type of cash carries the royal title? Think about the symbolism behind the message: Cash is being elevated to the highest status. At what level does management at this company place employees who help generate the cash?
- We know that the "bottom line" relates to the net profits of a company. If employees are asked to "watch" it, what does management really want them to do? Cut expenses on office supplies and expense reports, or merely read the financial reports each quarter?
- Here's a cheerful sound bite. The underlying message seems to be that it is best to keep your troubles at home and look positive and productive, even if you don't feel like it.

It may be tempting to have an in house graphic designer work up several posters displaying the latest sound bite from the human resource department. As with all messages, it's best to assess it critically before going to print. The first step in getting beyond the sound bite is to make sure that the symbolic message conveyed by the slogan does not conflict with management's internal communication goals. Remember that the sound bite is part of a larger process. Use the well-written slogan to headline a complete internal communication campaign that may include newsletters, paycheck inserts, and videos.

2.6 Listening is an action

Although many may think that to listen is to be passive, the human behavior we call listening activates both physiological and psychological mechanisms. The first step is hearing, which requires that a sound be within the range of human hearing. When these audible sounds travel into the ear canal, they resonate as vibrations which reach the eardrum and then the middle ear. Because we are surrounding by constant noise, we learn to become selective and pay attention to only those sounds that have meaning for us at a given time.

Selectivity, though, has a detrimental effect on how we assign meaning to and perceive the sounds. It takes conscious effort to listen objectively and reduce our tendencies to screen and pass judgment on thoughts and ideas being presented. By being open to the speaker's ideas, we allow the information to reach us without being blocked or filtered.

Practicing active listening is the best way to show that you are participating in the communication event. Think about the ideas being proposed. Analyze the facts, ask questions and seek clarification from the presenter. Make sure you understand how the disparate points relate to one another. Take your thoughts about the presentation one step farther: Ask yourself how you can use the ideas to help you in your work (Pearce, et al, 1984).

What are the characteristics of a good listener? According to Carol M. Lehman and Debbie D. DuFrene, who wrote the textbook *Business Communication*, those who practice active listening tend to be well liked and effectively share messages with supervisors, which leads to improved work performance. A supervisor who is a good listener is more likely to have employees who have a high degree of job satisfaction (Lehman and DuFrene, 1999).

2.7 Recognizing non-verbal cues

How a message is delivered conveys more meaning than the psychological act of perceiving and processing the words alone. The body language of the speaker, her tone of voice, and the way she pronounces some syllables with more inflection than others are all cues the listener uses to figure out what the speaker *actually* means. Do the inflections and gestures emphasize her message or conflict with what she is saying? Certain gestures carry a message that the speaker may not want to send. Studying non-verbal signals and what they may portray can raise the awareness of both the speaker and the audience members.

- Laughing lightly during a speech may mean the speaker is nervous, or it could mean that he doesn't expect to be taken seriously.
- A manager who sits beside a visitor instead of remaining behind the desk shows that she wants to speak informally or that she wants to speak at the same level and put the visitor at ease.
- A person who states that face-to-face communication is important while not making eye contact confuses the person receiving this message by giving conflicting signals.
- A presenter who taps the desk or podium while talking will find the audience listening more to the distracting noise than to the presentation.

2.8 Examples in business

When unaddressed, semantic noise becomes detrimental to interpersonal relationships and, by association, negatively influences work output. The business situations introduced in the previous sections presented specific examples of semantic noise. In the workplace interpersonal communication is much more subtle and complex. A single interaction, when we understand the context of the relationship between two people, reveals more than one type of noise serving to impede the participants' ability to share meaning.

What happens when two workers interact based on a different set of maps of the same territory? If you have witnessed a conversation where two people are talking at, or past, each other instead of speaking with one another, you will hear the resulting semantic noise. In the two scenarios that follow, the stage will be set so that you can understand what set of facts and assumptions each communicator brings to the interaction. The types of noises involved will be identified and a remedy to improve future interactions will be suggested.

In the last section of this chapter, examples of semantic noise created when presentations are either too general or too specific will be examined. The remedy, an appropriate mixture of abstractions and details, will be suggested.

2.8.1 The division president's assistant and the operations analyst

Setting: The interaction takes place at the corporate headquarters of a mortgage lender.

Facts and assumptions made by the president's assistant: She believes that by virtue of her title, she must take charge to keep all administrative activities running smoothly in the department. She takes on an informal role of managing others below the rank of vice president, even though there is no acknowledgment of her responsibility to do so through an official organizational chart.

Facts and assumptions made by operations analyst: Although he works well in a team environment when collaborating on projects, he only respects the formal reporting relationships when it comes to tasks and situations outside of normal job boundaries.

Type of Noise: Interpersonal barrier

Interaction: The president's assistant announces a surprise fire drill. However, no alarms are sounding. She steps swiftly up to the operations analyst's cubicle, saying, "I need you to leave your desk – right now."

"I'm in the middle of a project," he responds. He is startled, defensive and feeling under pressure to finish updating his database design.

"No, no, no. Listen. I need you to leave now. It's a fire drill." She clearly enunciates each syllable and lowers her tone slightly before moving quickly on to the next cubicle.

Remedy: Which person's map matches the territory? The assistant's manager has a responsibility to clearly establish whether the unofficial supervisory role should be recognized by all of the employees in the department. If not, then the assistant needs to be set straight regarding how she addresses her fellow workers. Either way, all parties involved should be operating with the same set of instructions to reduce or eliminate the interpersonal barriers to effective communication.

2.8.2 The reluctant Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and the accounts payable (AP) manager

Setting: This second interaction occurs at the office of a family owned online retailer.

Facts and assumptions made by CFO: She is a co-owner, but she works part-time. Although the business is small, she believes that all salaried employees should work more than eight hours every day. She also believes that she knows how long it takes to complete each task in the accounting department and holds the one employee she supervisors – the AP manager – to a strict list of tasks. The CFO expects the AP manager to send a report by email at the each of each week with the dates each item was completed. She thinks in hierarchical terms about work duties even though there are only 10 employees in the entire company.

Facts and assumptions made by the AP manager: She is used to working independently but finds the increasing work load difficult to handle with only one part-time accounting clerk to supervise. The AP manager has implemented procedures to streamline AP tasks. However, increasing business puts strains on the resources, and she doesn't think the CFO is willing to help. Consequently, she has been taking work home to keep up with the demands. She comes up with a new idea to ease the workload, but it will take some time to develop. She doesn't feel that the extra work she has been putting in is noticed or appreciated.

Type of Noise: Interpersonal barrier; confusing reporting, inferring and judgment

Interaction: The AP manager walks into the CFO's office. "I have a new idea to make the AP process more efficient. I'd like to talk to you about it."

The CFO picks up the last week's task list from her desk and shakes it at the AP manager. "How can I approve a new project when you can't get the required work done each week?"

Remedy: Which person's map doesn't fit the territory? In this case, both participants are working with information that does not match reality. The CFO has confused a valid comprehensive report of duties with the arbitrary task list and has made incorrect inferences that the AP manager is not getting her work done. Furthermore, she is making judgments without having all the facts available to make a sound decision about the workload imbalance in her department. The AP manager expects the owner's support but doesn't get it.

Both participants need to come up with a task list for the department that represents the actual work being done. The AP manager should let the CFO know how long it takes to complete the projects on the list. The CFO and AP manager should then assign priorities that are reasonable and achievable. If more help is needed to accomplish the work, the owners should commit to providing the required support.

2.8.3 Too abstract, too detailed or just right?

In section 2.3, we discussed appropriate and inappropriate use of abstract and concrete, detailed statements. An exercise in exaggeration further illustrates this concept. Imagine that you and two colleagues have been asked to prepare a presentation about why you should archive emails and how it should be done. Your company uses Microsoft Outlook, and each presenter will be given up to 10 minutes at the next departmental staff meeting. Colleague A decides on a high level approach, Colleague B plans to use his time to focus only on the details, and Colleague C (you) combine both abstract and detailed concepts.

Colleague A's presentation:

Archive Outlook Emails • Your company requires you to archive emails. • Emails may be critical to a project's success. • Stay organized and reach your goals.
Why Archive Emails? • Don't lose your important messages • Save your emails • View them later
Create a PST file • It is quick and easy to back up your files • Create a PST file and save it outside of Outlook • Others can view your files

Colleague B's presentation:

Open MS Outlook

- Create a new folder by clicking on "Folder" from the menu
- Click on the "New Folder" icon on the far left of the screen below the main menu.
- Give the new folder a name.

Select the messages to be archived

- Click on "Home" from the menu
- Open the folder that contains the messages you want to archive.
- Select the messages to archive

Move the Messages to New Folder

- Click on the Move icon located below the menu between Quick Steps and Tags.
- In the pop up window, click on "Other Folder"
- Select the new folder you just created.

Save Folder Outside of MS Outlook

- Archive the messages by first highlighting the new folder
- Click on "New Items" next to the "New E-mail" icon on the far left-hand side of the screen
- Next, click on "More Items"
- Click on "Outlook Data File"
- Name the file and choose a path located on your local computer or choose a path on the network if others also need access to the messages.

Colleague C's presentation:

Why Should I Archive Email Messages?

- Keep messages in the same folder as other files for each project.
- Share messages with others on your team.
- Keep your inbox and other folders organized.

How to Create a New Folder

- Click on "Folder" from the menu.
- Click on the "New Folder" icon on the far left of the screen below the main menu.
- Choose a name for your folder.

How to Select Messages to Archive

- Develop a procedure based on the message date or message content.
- Establish an archiving schedule and put a reminder on your calendar.
- Click on "Home" from the menu.
- Open the folder that contains the messages you want to archive.
- Highlight the messages you want to archive.

How to Move Messages to New Folder

- Navigate to the "Move" icon located within the "Home" menu and click on it.
- Click on "Other Folder" in the window that pops up.
- Select the newly created folder.

How to Archive Email Messages

- Save messages and folders to another drive.
- Return to the "Home" menu and select the new folder that now contains all the messages you want to save.
- Click on "New Items" next to the "New E-mail" icon on the far left-hand side of the scree
- Next, click on "More Items"
- Click on "Outlook Data File"
- Name the file and choose a path located on your local computer or choose a path on the network if others also need access to the messages.

You can easily see that Colleague A did not address the "how to do it" portion of the presentation, and Colleague B failed to tell the audience why it is important to archive email messages. Colleague C successfully answered both the "why" and the "how" while, at the same time, interweaving more abstract concepts with the details so that the audience will fully understand and accomplish the task.

2.8.4 Avoid emotionally loaded words and phrases

Some abstractions are meant to evoke a reaction, and many advertisers cleverly use symbols and slogans together to influence behavior in favor of a buying decision. Emotional or judgmental language in the workplace, though, can block communication (Timm and Jones,1983). For example, when stating a problem to be tackled by a team, phrase it so that the problem can be approached objectively and make it possible to work toward a solution. It should be clear to the reader that the statement is specific and that it doesn't presuppose that someone is to blame for the problem.

- *Poor problem statement*: Hourly workers abuse overtime.
- *Improved problem statement*: Find out why workers are spending more than eight hours per day on assigned tasks. If process improvement is required, enlist the help of hourly employees to find new ways to accomplish daily tasks.

3 Internal Communications

Large and small organizations alike use a multitude of internal channels to send messages to employees. A company's intranet may feature announcements about changes in benefits and provide a list of e-learning opportunities. Newsletters cover new hires, volunteer activities and may even feature an article about employees who attended a recent conference. What about the lesser-known activities carried out by project teams and other groups within a company? These groups will also use the available intra-company channels to reach an audience.

Formal and informal groups may form for a number of reasons. One may be to plan a holiday luncheon or an awards banquet. Whether a group is functional or not will depend on who the individual members are, what each can contribute, and whether the goal is actually realistic. Teams, on the other hand, form specifically to solve a business problem or create a method to address a particular challenge. However, the communication process the team goes through as the individuals work together toward a defined goal warrants a closer look.

One hindrance to an effective group process is what organizational communication researchers call "groupthink" (Timm and Jones, 1983). If the members are not equally engaged in the project assigned to their group, it is likely that one or two individuals will tend to dominate conversations and make the decisions. The other members go along out of indifference or because they feel intimidated. A group that is project centered requires that its members contribute specialized skills and is less susceptible to groupthink.

3.1 Project teams

Employees with specialized skills often serve on project teams, which vary in size, meeting frequency and project length. Studies have shown that size and group purpose are factors that have a major influence on how the team members will interact (Pearce, et al, 1984). Because project teams are formed to advance the goals of the organization, individuals may already know one another and be accustomed to working together. A natural leader may emerge during the first few meetings, or a leader may already be appointed due to her job title and level of responsibility.

3.1.1 Understanding Group Dynamics

All of the communication barriers that occur in interpersonal relationships also apply to group communication. However, how well a group performs will depend upon the structure of the group, the personalities of the individual members, the perceived status of each person, and whether the group has enough cohesion to successfully complete the projects. The behavior of the individuals will also influence the entire group and the ability to stay on task.

Factors Affecting Group Performance

Structure
Size
Personalities of members
Purpose
Status of members
Members' behavior

Is the group is structured like a committee, with the opinions and input from each member carrying the same weight? Not much is accomplished without a leader to move the group onward in discussion and project plans. It is not easy to reach consensus and time is wasted trying to make decisions "by committee." On the other hand, is the team leader viewed as authoritarian and controlling, one who leaves little room for input toward how the project will be completed? Such an atmosphere squelches feedback and foments resentment. The group members are there to take orders and there is no "buy in" or ownership of the project by anyone except the leader. Most groups in organizations fall somewhere between these two extremes. In fact, a group that is structured with the best attributes of each type focuses on the project, has a designated leader, and members are encouraged to share ideas and contribute solutions.

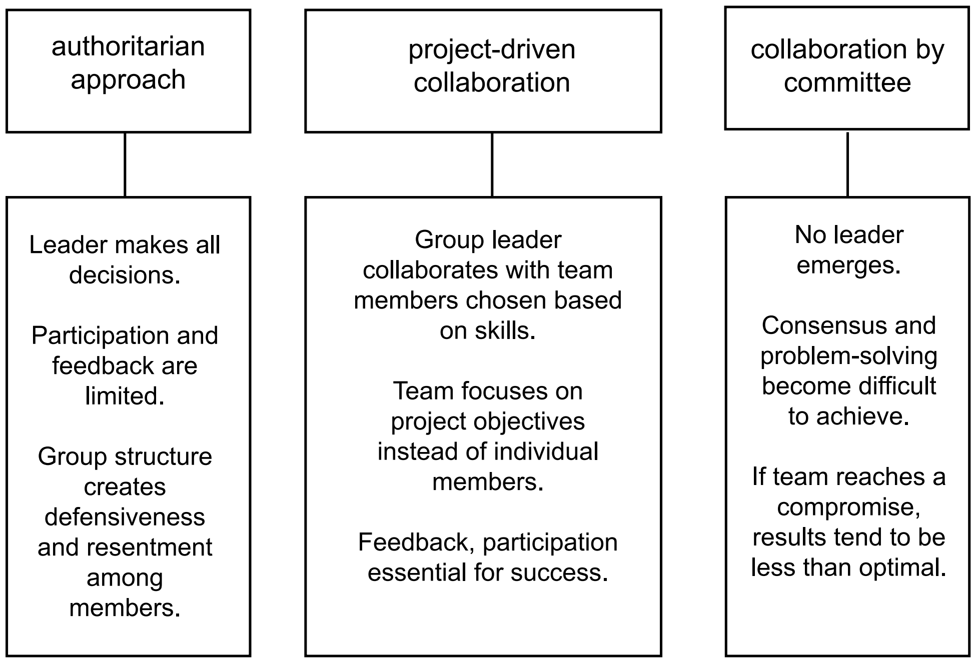

Figure 6: Three classic group structures and characteristics illustrate the advantages of project-driven collaboration.

What is the optimum size of a group? If the project is of short duration and does not involve resources across departments, consider forming a project group of 3 or 5. Some professional communicators suggest building a team with an odd number of members to avoid the split decision scenario with equal sides advocating a different position or outcome. A project such as implementing a new accounting program in a medium to large company may require one large group that breaks down into smaller components to research and test different modules, such as payroll, AP, AR and fixed assets.

Personality types can both help and hinder team progress. A person who stops the leader or presenter at nearly every point with a question unnecessarily prolongs a meeting to the consternation of the other members. A member who interrupts and rushes ahead to comment on points not yet mentioned may confuse other participants and interfere with the tempo and flow of the meeting. It isn't necessary to run each meeting with strict rules. However, a simple request to "hold your questions and comments until after the presentation" will keep the pace even and the interruptions to a minimum.

3.1.2 Establishing your purpose

A team leader's first order of business is to establish the group's purpose. Each member should be clear about the expectations of the company's managers, the anticipated time frame for completing the project, and the skills required. By sharing this information, the team members see how they fit into the project plan. Decide how often the group will need to meet. The team leader should establish meeting frequency at the same time he communicates the purpose. Remain flexible as the project unfolds, calling meetings only when necessary. Follow these criteria to help determine whether to meet with everyone or meet with members separately.

- If group members will benefit from a meeting called to share information, schedule it. Will the data and reports presented help everyone on the team to do a better job?
- Are the group members you choose to invite an integral part of the project phase currently under review? Will each individual's skills be required?
- Are you assigning new tasks and coordinating individual efforts? Consider meeting with a subset of the entire group. Follow up with an email to the entire team so that each participant knows where the project stands.

For purposes of illustration, let's say that the project will focus on researching and adopting a new software program with modules for the accounting department and sales and marketing. As the leader, you bring together a group with experience in several areas: reviewing, recommending and purchasing vendor products; two team members representing the accounting department; and an IT representative to coordinate testing and roll out from a systems perspective. Although the initial focus will be on completing the task, the leader must also work within the group to make sure that all the departments affected by the new software program will be advised of the change so that they can plan ahead.

3.1.3 Go! Ready, set?

The most common communication error witnessed by the author in her 30-plus years of working in various industries is the phenomenon she calls "Go! Ready, set?" In the enthusiasm and synergy created when a team functions well as a group, the members fail to take into account how their product or practice will affect others outside the group. They happily complete the project and begin rolling out their carefully considered plans only to be shocked and taken aback by the negative, if not hostile, reactions to their efforts.

Even a project that culminates in a new service for customers must go through the proper internal communication channels before it is ready to be released or it is doomed to fail. The "Go!, Ready set?" experience occurs when the team is so focused on the details that they neglect to step back and take a look at the project in terms of the organization's structure. In the instance of a new service developed outside the normal channels and marketed directly to customers by the team, there are stakeholders who should be added to the project group at the beginning. What happens when the sales manager first finds out about the service being offered to his customers when he is copied on the final correspondence at the conclusion of the project? The manager may urge his customers to reject the offer. Now you have two groups in the same organization working against one another.

The project team decided to *go* without getting *ready.* The team failed to consider all of the internal "audiences" for the new service. Members didn't get *set,* either, ignoring representatives from sales and marketing who should have been included at the planning stage. As participants, sales staffers should have been invited to contribute their ideas, expertise, and customer knowledge. Remember, as shown in Figure 6, assembling the optimal project team and conducting meetings with an eye toward problem-solving and resolution requires the leader to think conceptually from an organizational communication standpoint at the very outset. Figure 7 diagrams groups directly and indirectly influenced by the team's decision to roll out a new service to customers. Constructing such a communication diagram also serves to identify all of the audiences that need to be aware or involved with the project at various stages.

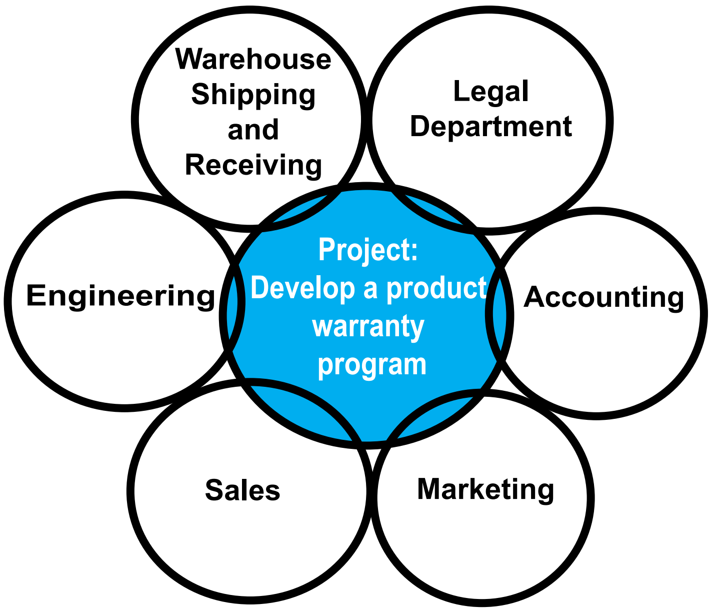

Figure 7: This diagram depicts the interrelationships between project team members and departments affected by both the planning and outcomes of the new warranty program.

3.1.4 Analyzing your audience

The next step after creating a communication diagram for your project is to determine how involved each separate audience should be and at what point communication should begin with each group. Figure 8 takes the results of Figure 7 and develops a plan for keeping the audience members informed. The plan builds in a feedback loop so that the project team receives input along the way. Requesting feedback from departments that are affected by your project but not involved in the details can greatly improve the final project outcome. How? Input reveals potential stumbling blocks that could delay a project. For example, what if the new service requires customers to sign a contract that directly conflicts with an existing contract? It would be better to know about the conflicting terminology at the time the new contract is drafted rather than after distribution.

Project Step	Audience
Meet with team members to assign tasks, schedule meetings, and identify key opinion leaders in each department.	Project team members
Team members present updates.	Departmental opinion leaders
Create draft of warranty contract.	Legal department, sales, and engineering
Document warranty program and disseminate with revised contract, including the plan for distributing it to customers.	Accounting, marketing, warehouse shipping and receiving department, and sales
Create final communication to customers and attach warranty contract.	Customers, all departmental opinion leaders and project team members

Figure 8: The chart represents a simplified communication plan for the project team.
It is meant only to evoke critical consideration of audiences at each step of your process.

3.1.5 Choosing your channels

We know that some internal messages are destined to be ignored while others grab the attention of recipients who then respond quickly. Is there a secret to capturing the attention of your intended receiver? In most companies, email inboxes overflow with reminders, general correspondence and updates. If there is a secret, it involves keeping people apprised of programs and projects that will have a direct impact on their work. In fact, two of the first questions an employee asks are, "How does this affect me?" and "What's in it for me?" In Figure 9, the communication plan has been augmented by the channels chosen to most effectively communicate to each group.

Project Step	Audience	Channel
Meet with team members to assign tasks, schedule meetings, and identify key opinion leaders in each department.	Project team members	Email with attachments as needed
Team members present updates throughout process.	Departmental opinion leaders	Power Point presentation
Create draft of warranty contract.	Legal department, sales, and engineering	Email with editable attachment
Document warranty program and disseminate with revised contract, including the plan for distributing it to customers.	Accounting, marketing, warehouse shipping and receiving department, and sales	Email with attachment that cannot be edited
Create final communication to customers and attach warranty contract.	Customers, all departmental opinion leaders and project team members	Email with final contract attached

Figure 9: Channels are added to the previous chart to match the audience with the communication medium.

3.1.6 Handling updates

When your team members report back to their departments about the project, make sure their messages are consistent with one another. Develop one presentation that can be slightly modified for each audience. Although you are the leader, make sure each team member who represents a key department suggests content for the basic presentation. Explain the project benefits at the beginning of the presentation.

Avoid oversaturating your audience with too many messages. Schedule the update meetings to coincide with critical stages in project development. Too many emails and meetings about a project work against the team's objectives. By limiting your communication to important milestones, though, you respect the workload and time commitments of those employees who should be kept informed of your group's progress.

3.1.7 Opinion leaders in the organization

A project team functioning within an organization starts with an idea and finishes with an innovation that, if successful, will be integrated into the company's best practices. Not all innovations are created equally. Some projects test and stretch the understanding of what is normal and acceptable within a company. Others are quickly integrated as common sense fixes to existing procedures. The more challenging or expansive the project – those that have a great impact on a few departments or a wide impact on many departments – the more crucial it is to enlist the aid of opinion leaders.

Individuals who have attained the informal role of opinion leader do so through their "…technical competence, social accessibility, and conformity to the system's norms" (Rogers, 2003). In his book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, Everett Rogers also points out that opinion leaders tend to be the innovators who can advocate for change through early adoption. He also states that they are at the "center of interpersonal communication networks" (Rogers, 2003).

When you develop your communication chart, identify opinion leaders who can help carry your message to various groups in the organization. For example, a director of sales who has been with the company for several years and is well known may be an asset to your project. Get his opinions and recommendations along the way. Whenever your project team needs to seek advice before continuing on to the next step, try to contact the manager or analyst who can provide assistance and serve as an advocate for your project.

3.2 Employee communication

Many departments within a company must reach out to employees to share information. The payroll department sends the yearly wages and tax statements and advises when requested pre-tax adjustments, such as 401K contributions, have been changed. The human resources department may oversee the annual or semi-annual employee review process. Within operations or sales, training modules may be available for employees through a company Wiki or through an e-learning site located on the organization's intranet. In each instance the messages being sent required planning and prioritizing before they could be deemed ready to publish.

If you are put in charge of compiling, updating and publishing information about your department, how would you manage the messages? Which process would you go through to determine what to publish and what to leave out of an article? The most important step is to decide what you want to say and who you want to reach. Next, use the internal channels that will most efficiently reach your audience. It may sound straight forward, but effective employee communication demands planning and proper execution.

- General articles that feature a new employee or an event should be placed in the company newsletter or the home page of the intranet.

- Consider using a Wiki or e-newsletter to inform employees inside and outside of your department about accomplishments, projects, or skills needed for jobs that may be open.
- Highly technical information and business process documentation can be shared with a limited audience through Share Point or other project-oriented online sites.

If you are instead responsible for an ongoing campaign to keep employees informed of overall company news along with human interest stories featuring departmental staff, your plan will be much more comprehensive. In addition to taking the steps outlined above, you will need to develop a strategy to carry out the communication objectives and come up with a way to measure results at the conclusion of specific stages in the process.

How effective are the messages? By bringing in a communication consultant, you will receive an answer to that question – and many others. Reasons for seeking expert assistance range from a desire to take the pulse of an already-successful internal campaign to an urgent need to resolve an imminent communication crisis. Consultants conduct a study to determine effective and efficient ways that communication can help a business reach goals (Holland and Gill, 2001).

3.2.1 How does a communication audit work?

At the most basic level, an internal communications audit is the process of asking questions of audience members (management and employees) to find out what they know (disseminated information), how they know it (channels), and how they act upon – and think about – the messages. A well-designed audit will yield both qualitative and quantitative results, which will then be compiled in a report at the conclusion of the study. The final report will also provide suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the messages and the efficiency with which they are delivered.

Because a communication study may focus on one or many audiences, such as the organization's employees, customers, or the general public, the analysis of internal communication may be only a part of the overall study. Experts in the field advocate having the audit completed by an objective third party instead of relying on the public relations department because, generally, employees will be able to speak more freely with someone outside of the company (Holland and Gill, 2001). Additionally, if organization's managers decide to conduct a study without the aid of an outside service, there will be an inherent tendency for subjective reasoning to influence the outcome.

Let's use the example of a consultant hired by Company Z to evaluate its internal communication plan. Management's communication goals include improving employees' general knowledge about the company, discrediting rumors and improving morale. Before the consultant begins to gather information, she needs to walk down the ladder of abstraction and come up with questions that can measure whether these goals have been achieved. As the questions are written, the consultant will begin deciding upon the method to use to collect information from the groups within the organization. Depending upon the size of the company and the requirements of the study, she may use focus groups, interviews, and surveys.

What is the existing communication culture and how is information currently being shared? The consultant will analyze the internal messages going out to Company Z employees through all available channels. Do the employees communicate upward to management through the existing communication process? While this question will be answered in part through the interviews and focus groups, the consultant will look for instances of employee feedback or questions asked through internal media.

- Intranet
- Company meetings
- Departmental meetings
- Informal group gatherings
- Team meetings
- Wiki
- Email
- Newsletters
- Bulletin boards

- Flyers
- Posters
- Brochures

3.2.2 Working toward favorable outcomes

After the consultant submits the final report, management and the department in charge of creating and executing the communication plan – whether it is the public relations manager or the human resources director – must agree on the next steps. In the case of Company Z, the study may recommend that managers find ways to recognize employee contributions and request input from employees regarding programs, procedures and practices.

In his article *The Root Causes of Low Employee Morale,* published online on the American Management Association's website, John Schaefer offers five suggestions to managers seeking to improve employee attitudes and morale. Each one of the suggestions relates to how a manager communicates with an employee. Heeding Schaefer's advice, which is paraphrased and expanded below, requires a manger to be open minded and to understand how his or her actions, words and tone affect an employee.

- Take the time to create a trusting relationship. As discussed in section 2.1, team leaders and managers should be as objective as possible when listening to team members or employees who report to them. In a trusting working relationship, semantic noise will be greatly reduced.
- Respect your employees…and the work will get done. What's the opposite of respect? Micromanagers show a lack of confidence in those who report to them and in their own ability to manage.
- Encourage the creative approach. Listen and guide to foster creative thinking.
- Create teams that function effectively. Refer to Section 3.1.
- Be genuine. Your words and deeds should match. For example, don't demand that your employees work more than 40 hours a week if you aren't seen consistently doing the same.

3.2.3 An example that worked

After managers receive the results of a communications audit or needs assessment, they will begin to look for ways to implement changes to improve both the effectiveness and efficiency of their internal communication efforts. Case studies published on various Internet websites show that companies make improvements through two main ways: training and technology, not necessarily in that order. Even managers with good communication skills will benefit from additional training. Technological advances in online tools and software that enables employees to share files can lay the foundation for successful internal messaging. The caveat, though, is that success will depend upon how well new methods are integrated into the organization.

Elite Customer Solutions won the Public Relations Institute of Australia's 2011 Golden Target Award for Internal Communication. The winning project was submitted in a document titled "'Best in Class' Internal Communication Management through SnapComm" modules, which describes a communication environment that was too dependent on email messages, which were often deleted by the recipients. The company's intranet received little traffic, and communication about projects was not handled consistently. These factors, and the absence of procedures and methods to archive files and documents, created a business risk ("Best in Class," 2011).

After conducting a thorough needs analysis, the communication specialist at Elite Customer Solutions sought input from key personnel to create and put into effect a system that would address the challenges and opportunities revealed by the study. The strategy, as defined in the online document, was to change the communication culture to one where employees easily share information, have direct access to news about what is happening in the company, and make more sound decisions that are commensurate with the objectives of the organization ("Best in Class," 2011).

The answer was to adopt and roll out four communication channels that worked within the existing intranet and computer network. Training and support were provided so that employees could get up to speed on the four new messaging modules: a channel to alert employees of news via a screensaver; a channel for internal news stories; a channel to survey and assess employees' knowledge; and a channel that allowed employees to interact through a forum, a blog, and a help desk. For Elite Customer Solutions, new technology together with a well-executed training and support program solved the internal communication issues, addressed the challenges, and removed the risks ("Best in Class," 2011).

3.3 Business process documentation

Once the project team has successfully implemented a new practice or process, business tasks will undoubtedly change. Perhaps the project requires that new positions be created in support of the innovation as it moves into the integration phase. Beyond the job description, actual business procedures should be documented and kept up to date. Such documentation, once drafted, analyzed, and revised, becomes the record of best practices for the position.

Do the steps in the process succeed in reflecting the objectives of the original project team? Let's return to the example of the online tool discussed in Section 1.2 which was to be designed for account executives to record their sales. A database administrator is needed to grant access and run reports. The account executives will need to know who to contact and how to reach the administrator, who should also be available to answer technical questions. Documentation must be written in such a way that anyone with the required skills could assume responsibility for the position by following the steps outlined in the text.

The business process documentation may be called Standard Operating Procedures in some companies or Best Practices in other organizations. Regardless of the name, well-written documentation stands on its own at the pinnacle of communication excellence. To reach that state, the document must be highly detailed, extensively reviewed and analyzed, and revised until it is ready to be published.

3.3.1 Document in detail

Imagine that you have been asked to write instructions for accessing a website and sending an email through the "contact me" page. These tasks may be so well ingrained in your daily routine that you really don't give much thought to the steps involved. Now try to break down each phase of the process without leaving anything out. Think about describing the steps to someone who doesn't even use a computer. You will have to include screen shots to illustrate your instructions. How do you know you have succeeded in documenting the tasks? Ask a friend or relative to sit down in front of a laptop and try to follow your instructions. If that person has to ask you questions, then your instructions are not clear enough.

Of course, business processes are much more complex than the directions for navigating to a website and sending an email. It is the complexity and the degree to which you know your own job that makes properly documenting each step in a given procedure particularly challenging. The first draft is often rife with omissions and ambiguity.

3.3.2 Review and analyze

Enlisting the help of another person in your department to walk through the steps will help you zero in on the areas that can benefit from expanding, clarifying and writing good, concrete instructions. Try to choose someone who is not familiar with the procedures you are describing. If you can, watch while your co-worker tests your instructions. As you observe, note the questions asked and the steps you may have missed.

Another method of reviewing business documentation is to go over the instructions during a conference call. If you use MS Live Meeting, the screen sharing can be captured and recorded for later review. When you watch the video after the meeting, compare it to the written instructions. Do the screen shots match your documentation? Use the feedback you receive from this exercise to make improvements. Be cognizant of the fact that, depending upon the complexity, it is not unusual to test and revise more than once before you arrive at a finished product.

4 External Communication

External communication embodies all of the audiences – or publics – reached through an organization's marketing, governmental relations and community involvement programs. Business communicators in each of these fields have some of the same challenges faced by the internal communications manager and project team leader, except on a grander scale. They will need to look at the types of messages being sent by the company and assess how closely the messages are aligned with the organization's objectives.

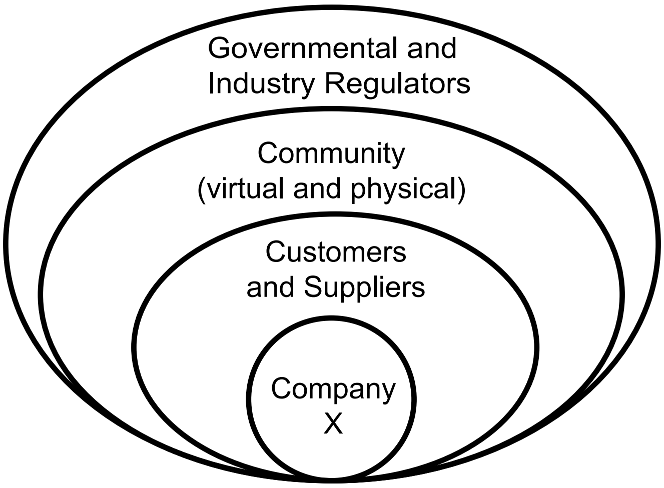

Figure 10: Company X communicates with these audiences.

The above diagram offers one way to view the key publics for Company X. Note that some messages intended for the regulating audience may also be relevant to the online community. For example, let's say that Company X uses green technology to operate a manufacturing plant. While there may be tax advantages, the reduction in the organization's carbon footprint positively affects the surrounding community. In this instance, the business communicators within finance and community relations may work together on the messaging.

4.1 Marketing communication

Because the marketing department is responsible for sales, promotion, branding, pricing, competitive analysis, and distribution, each segment will play an important role in the marketing communication efforts. Just as the communication audit and needs assessment uncover opportunities in the realm of internal communication, a similar evaluation should be completed at the conclusion of each marketing campaign, with an emphasis on measuring the results of the marketing messages These are just a few of the questions to be answered in order to find out how well a marketing communication campaign performed:

- Were the communication objectives of the campaign met?
- How would you describe the customers who purchased products or services during the last campaign? Who were they and what are their demographics?
- Did the company's messages motivate or influences the customers?
- What factors determined or contributed to the customer's attitude toward the company and its products or services?
- What do they buy, and how often are the purchases made?
- If creating brand loyalty was a desired outcome, how did the campaign increase your customers' loyalty to your brand?

4.1.1 Writing an actionable plan

Think about the marketing communication plan as a separate section within the company's overall marketing plan. However, the communication segment can also stand alone because it covers analysis, strategy and implementation – three fundamental components of an actionable plan. Imbedded in the analysis of target markets, products, price, distribution and promotion will be advertising and public relations campaigns, working together and designed to implement the marketing strategy. Data gleaned from placing prior campaigns under the analytical microscope provide a road map to follow. Within the map will be clues to the proper mix of channel and message that will achieve results for a particular product or service.

When writing an actionable plan, set objectives, determine the type of messages that will be created to meet those objectives, and figure out the best media for the message. For example, one objective may be to increase the percentage of visitors to your web site who purchase your products. Now, let's say your marketing research points out that those visitors who are directed to your site from certain online search marketing channels – or pay-per-click sites – tend to buy at a higher rate than visitors who access your website through other means. After analyzing the advertising messages that worked well in the past, you decide to write an ad to appear in the highest-performing marketing search channels in order to increase your conversion ratio.

You can maximize reach by using channels that give the company and its products both a virtual and physical presence. Consider demonstrating products through webinars and videos along with trade shows or in-store events. Run a contest to introduce new products and promote the contest through social media and the company's website. Some other common approaches to sales promotion involve special deal pricing and a program that rewards customers for their loyalty.

Think about how best to execute the public relations portion of the marketing plan. What type of messages and vehicles will get the most coverage for a new product line? What is the most effective approach to creating a customer and community awareness campaign featuring a company's commitment to solar energy? The organization's core values should be reflected in its marketing communications plan, and the plan should grow out of and support the stated company goals and objectives.

How will the marketing communication plan be implemented? Define the tactics that will be used to reach the objectives identified in the strategy section. These are the specific steps to be taken, how much each will cost, when the advertising or messages are scheduled to appear and how results will be tracked. The more specific your implementation steps, the better you will be able to measure effectiveness.

What are the hallmarks of an actionable plan?

Analysis
Strategy
Implementation
Measurement

4.1.2 Coordinating messages

Perhaps there are multiple writers in the marketing department who each represent a specialty. In a medium-sized or large company, it is not unusual to have several staff members contribute to a marketing communication plan. However, it is advisable that the specialists in each area come together in a project team so that there is both cohesion and continuity in the final plan. The team approach gives each member an opportunity to learn from others, which can strengthen the relationship between the disparate messages and help to coordinate them in an overall strategy. In the instance of a new product line launch, the team could choose to schedule and coordinate the following messages:

- Send one or more news release to trade publications online and in print
- Create and post messages on social media channels
- Write blog articles
- Conduct an email campaign
- Advertising on search marketing sites
- Create product spec sheets that visitors can download from the web site
- Publish articles about the products online and in print

4.1.3 Getting the timing right

When planning multiple campaigns and designating a time frame for execution, the marketing team should realize that good timing is essential. The "Go! Ready, set?" phenomenon described in the previous chapter has also been known to occur in marketing. The team needs to coordinate its plans outside the marketing project team, too. Although it may seem obvious, an advertising manager should not start a campaign to sell a product that is not yet in stock. Successful external communication requires that conscientious, effective internal communication happens in the background. One phone call or short meeting could save an entire campaign and help the team get the timing right on the first attempt.

Timing also factors into how team members choose to coordinate messages. A blog post about the new product introductions could be timed to coincide with online introductory discounts. Concurrently, an email campaign to existing and potential customers announces an upcoming webinar to demonstrate the new line of products. By scheduling multiple messages among multiple channels, the team extends the promotion's reach. Another result of good timing is that customers who frequent the website and the blog will receive the message more than once, which strengthens the perception that the new product campaign is an important development.

4.1.4 Measuring results

Communication professionals rely on continuous tracking to gauge performance and results of a chosen medium for a given message within the context of the classic marketing communication mix: advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, personal selling and sales promotion. It is at the conclusion of an entire campaign, though, that the data can be assembled, analyzed and presented in a format that easily allows managers to see how well a campaign performed compared to expectations.

Hussain Zaidi, a marketing and sales consultant in the United Kingdom, offers tips and suggestions throughout the detailed articles on his website ("Sales and Marketing for 'You'"). One of his recommendations is to create a matrix of the communication media mix, including a list of all media within each marketing function, which can be used for analyzing and tracking results. The same matrix will aid future planning when comparing actual to budgeted performance and expense.

Media Mix for New Product Line	Schedule	# Reached	Budgeted Cost	Actual Cost
Public Relations Articles online Press releases Feature article Video				
Advertising Pay-per-click channels Newspapers				
Sales Promotion Product discounts Contests				
Direct Marketing Product Spec Sheets Customer Service Help Line Newspaper Insert				
Personal Selling Sales calls Webinars				
	Totals:			

Figure 11: Company X's media mix and variables being measured may look like this.
An actual matrix would include the names of the article sites and pay-per-click channels.

4.2 Community outreach

The decision to support community programs extends an organization's reach beyond the audiences addressed through regular external communication channels. A company that allows employees to participate in a blood drive or a walk-a-thon to fight cancer generates goodwill and also sends a message about the importance of service and volunteering. Beyond words of support on a web site or a poster in a window, participation reinforces a company's ties to the larger community through supporting events and non-profit interests.

A company that has a dedicated community relations department displays an ongoing commitment to outreach and involvement at the corporate, branch and individual employee level. A communication professional working within the community relations department may act as a liaison between the non-profit organizations and the company's management. She may also take on another role, which is to create and implement a customized community outreach plan. She must decide which programs to urge management to support. Is there an objective way to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of recommending one activity over another?

4.2.1 Choosing an option to complement your business

Before we can answer the question about how to determine the advantages of one community activity over another, it is necessary to look at the organization's purpose, goals and physical location. The type of business conducted by an organization dictates the extent to which community outreach will be necessary. A company that poses a perceived risk to the environment will need a completely different plan than a grocery retailer or an ecommerce business. A manufacturer that uses toxic chemicals in its processes must be proactive in developing and implementing a continuous community outreach plan that communicates the safe practices that have been put in place and describes precautions taken every day by workers at every level.

On the other hand, a non-profit company whose goal is to provide job training for the unemployed or under employed, relies on community outreach for its very existence. This company must effectively communicate to two main audiences: those who reside in the community who can benefit from the help and the businesses who can hire from the pool of newly trained individuals. In this example, the community outreach plan also functions as a marketing plan. Many of the same elements will be included.

A company whose products and services have no direct connection to the immediate or surrounding community will also benefit from participating or sponsoring pre-planned events hosted by a local non-profit organization. Smaller companies can choose to sponsor a little league team or declare a day to work with local elementary school children on reading or math assignments. If you have a small company, decide how often you will be able to donate time and resources. Consider asking your employees to decide on an annual event, such as a fund drive for a program that is in agreement with your organization's core values.

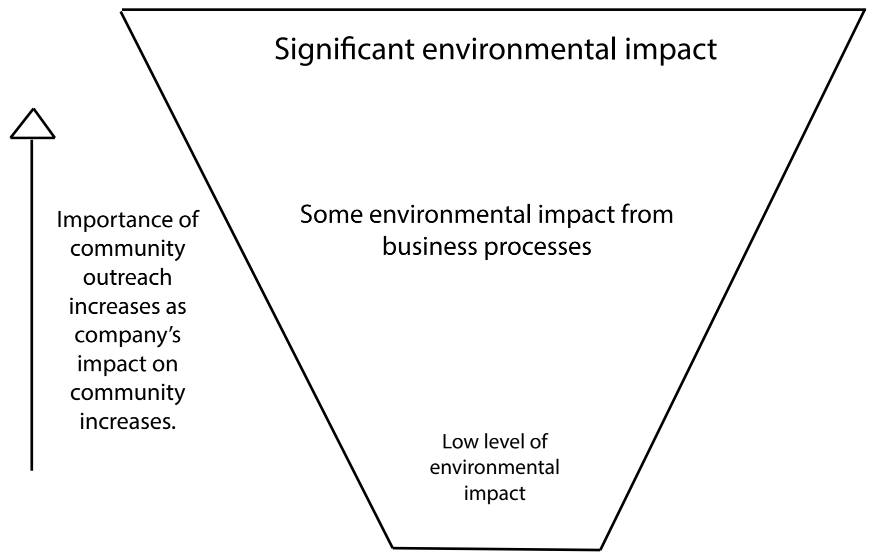

Figure 12: As the environmental impact of a company's processes increases, so does the need for community outreach.

4.2.2 Planning the campaign

What does a community outreach plan look like? If a communicator inside the organization's community relations department were to write a comprehensive plan, he should first establish the goals and objectives of each campaign. The next step is to match community activities with the stated objectives of the outreach campaign. He will then narrow the list by assessing the number of participants needed for the activity compared to how many employees will realistically contribute their time.

Once the activities are chosen, he will prepare a schedule and add it to the plan. This schedule will also include a list of messages and channels he will use to announce the events to employees. If the events are planned within the organization instead of an outside non-profit group, then he will need to seek community participation, as well. For instance, the plan may be to host a 10K run to raise money for a scholarship program or medical research. The final section of the plan should delineate how success will be measured.

Elements of a Community Outreach Plan
Establish goals and objectives
List events and activities
Define participating audience groups or publics
Schedule messages and determine communication channels
Review and measure outcomes

4.2.3 Review objectively

Despite the altruistic motivations of many who participate in community-based events, the organization must objectively review how well each campaign adhered to the stated objectives and helped to move perceptions and attitudes about the company in a positive direction. The prevailing question to be answered is, "What were the outcomes for this community event?" Related to this question are others that, when answered, will reveal how many employees participated, how many community members took part, and what members in each of the groups experienced.

A post-event survey will provide the feedback necessary to assist in planning future activities. How well was the event organized? Was there unnecessary down time that took participants away from their regular work routine during the preparation and participation phases of the event? Were the experiences positive, negative, or both? What improvements could be made if the same event were to be held again? If the negative comments outweigh the positive, it may be better to reassess whether or not to repeat the activity in the future.

4.2.4 Building goodwill

How much goodwill a company generates through effective community outreach cannot be directly quantified. When management places a value on reaching out to the community and dedicates time and resources to make positive communication happen, the result will be goodwill toward the organization. To elaborate, when the actions of an organization create goodwill, then perceptions in the community will be characterized by acceptance, involvement and understanding.

What's more, decision makers in the organization demonstrate that their company is not separate from the community, but intricately connected. Whether the company's focus is on profits or service, individual employees have a chance to get outside of their normal daily routines and interactions to contribute talents, skills and time. With the abundance of semantic noise, perceptual differences and attitudes among various groups within and without an organization, community outreach activities provide a means of achieving a common goal.

5 Putting it All Together

Communication, by definition, is a process by which information is exchanged for the purpose of achieving a shared understanding. The sender must keep the receiver in mind when creating the message, whether it is to be spoken or delivered in writing. Conversely, the receiver must listen or read actively so that he decodes the message as objectively as possible. Both participants should remember that a word is not the thing it names or describes. It is only a symbol or representation of the object or person or thing. The fact that we are able to understand one another at all is due to the degree of shared meaning that comes with speaking the same language. However, we each assign meaning to what we hear or read based on our background, attitudes, beliefs and values.

The previous chapters covered the types of intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational and semantic noise that can impede communication and how functional project teams can limit the effect of this noise. In the last two chapters, strategies for developing and implementing internal and external communication plans were explored. What about the day-to-day communication needed to gather and share information about a project? Writing, speaking, and leading a conference call require awareness and understanding of the communication process *and* solid language skills.

5.1 Effective business writing

Typographical errors happen, and nearly everyone misspells a word now and then. Try to keep these errors to a minimum. If you have received an email or report that is peppered with grammatical, typographical, spelling and organizational errors, did these technical problems affect your attitude toward the writer and the writer's project? The person sending the message needs to take time to review and revise the text and attachments before hitting the send button. When the receiver reads the message, there should be no technical difficulties standing in the way of the ideas and information being shared. Here are some tips for successful writing:

- What's the purpose of the piece? All business writing, even the simplest email, has a purpose. By taking a few minutes to think about that purpose, you direct your efforts toward clearly communicating it to others.
- Abjure obfuscation: When translated from Latin, this phrase literally means to avoid confusion. Unnecessary words and phrases bury your purpose. A report that does not proceed in a logical order only muddies the messages. Stay true to the reason you are writing and don't stray from the objectives.
- Brevity and clarity: Say what you need to say in as few words as possible while writing as clearly as you can.
- Give credit where and when due: If you are putting someone else's idea into practice, give credit to the team or person that brought the idea to your attention.

- Provide back up: Remember to support assertions and conclusions with data, whether in the form of a spreadsheet, chart or survey results.
- Outline and focus: A thoughtfully prepared outline will keep you focused on the task at hand. Keep on track by following the outline. If you need to add a section, edit the outline first.
- Boiling down the structure: In larger documents you will tell your reader what you intend to write about (introduction, purpose, problem statement), then write it (how the problem was addressed, including supporting documentation to illustrate findings), and finally summarize (draw conclusions and suggestions from the data) and call for the next steps to be explored.

5.1.1 Emails

Include the name of the project, program or event you are writing about in the subject line of the email. If the email is an update to a previous message, include "Update" in the subject line so that the reader immediately understands that the message concerns an ongoing project or program. In the first paragraph, state the purpose of the email. Whenever possible, use bullet points to briefly discuss the main ideas you want to convey. All attachments should be mentioned and described in the text of the email.

5.1.2 Meeting minutes

Minutes of a conference call or face-to-face meeting document what was discussed and which participants were assigned duties related to topics. Typically, the list of attendees appears at the top of the minutes. Next, the paragraphs concerning the issues discussed will follow the order of the topics on the agenda, which should have been distributed prior to the meeting. Items that require action should be followed by the individual's name and the anticipated date for completion. Lastly, the date, time and location of the next meeting should be listed.

5.1.3 Instructions

There may be times that you need to provide instructions to co-workers so that they can follow a procedure. Often these guidelines are no longer than one page. The best way to write these instructions is to perform the task and write down each step as you complete it. By recording each separate step, the instructions will be comprehensive and easy to follow.

5.1.4 Reports

Reports may be formal or informal, analytical or informational. Some reports have a pre-defined structure and are prepared according to a schedule. For example, an annual or quarterly report from the finance department will follow a specific format and publishing timeframe. The general purpose of a report is to provide data and details about the organization, departments, projects and products that help management make decisions. Although the writer will have more leeway when structuring an informal report, she must still organize the document in a logical manner and provide enough detail to allow the decision makers in the company to take action.

5.1.5 Presentations

Presentations can serve as a self-running e-learning course with imbedded video. In its simplest form, a presentation can be an effective outline of a speaker's topic, allowing the presenter to elaborate when necessary while maintaining the flow and direction of the speech. At the same time, the presentation should be complete enough so that the audience members can use it as a reference for your topic. Whether self-running or not, the presentation will follow the same structure of other written communications: Define the purpose and understand who your audience will be; introduce the subject; present supporting data for main points; and summarize by setting up the next steps or asking the audience to take a specific action.

5.2 Effective speaking skills

A good public speaker is relaxed, well prepared and achieves the intended communication goals. She may use software, such as a Microsoft Power Point, but she won't depend exclusively on the visual aides to deliver her messages. She is able to speak with confidence and without distracting gestures. A speaker who can connect with the participants and hold their attention from the beginning through the end is able to deliver messages seemingly with little effort. However, that skill comes only with practice and experience. Most speakers address an audience for the following purposes:

- Inform
- Persuade
- Demonstrate
- Motivate

Some speakers will meld more than one type of message into a presentation, perhaps seeking to motivate and persuade while also providing information about the subject at hand. For instance, a top manager within a company speaking at an annual conference will usually have more than one purpose when appearing before employees. If it is a state-of-the-company speech, she may inform the audience about financial performance and try to motivate employees to perform at their best. She could also choose to demonstrate a new product and persuade the audience that it is the key to future success.

5.2.1 Practice, practice, practice

If you aren't used to speaking in front of a group, practice will improve your skills and call your attention to distracting mannerisms. Even veteran speakers can develop some bad habits, and practicing before a speech helps them to get rid of these affectations. By going over the material in advance, you will also become more relaxed and confident. Practice your delivery, including the pitch and volume of your voice. Find out ahead of time how many employees are planning to attend, and make sure that you have a microphone available if you will be addressing a large audience or a group in a larger room. Visit the conference room before your speech to learn about the acoustics and room temperature, as well.

5.2.2 Let your knowledge be your guide

If you are speaking about your own work, or representing your project team as the speaker, then let your expertise guide you. When a person is discussing a topic about which he is highly knowledgeable, he will be able to more effectively get the points across and connect with the audience. A highly knowledgeable speaker may need to practice limiting the presentation to the points outlined so he does not go past the allotted time. If a question and answer session is included at the end of the speech, then that is the time for the content expert to shine and speak off script. However, even experts can be stumped by a question. It is perfectly acceptable to let the questioner know you will find out the answer and get back to her. If there is someone in the audience who can answer the question, perhaps a member of your project team, allow that person to address the questioner.

5.2.3 Leading an efficient conference call

If you work in a company with multiple locations, chances are that the majority of meetings are held via conference call. Many of the rules covered under preparing for presentations apply to these virtual meetings. Because of the technology involved, though, additional planning and communication steps are required to lead a productive and efficient conference call. If you will be presenting and sharing a presentation or other computer files during the call – with a program such as MS Live Meeting – then assign one of the participants to take notes and send them to you at the conclusion.

- Review the purpose of the meeting and think about the support material you will need to present. Decide how long it will take you to pull together the presentation and documents.
- Put together the invitation list and remember to include opinion leaders.
- Consider how long the meeting will take. It is better to schedule an hour and use 75 percent of the time than to schedule 30 minutes and run longer. Be realistic and also show those attending that you value their time.
- Set up the meeting at a time when all the key players will be available. When you send the email announcing the meeting, clearly state the purpose and include an agenda.
- Monitor the meeting replies. If the number of positive responses to the invitation is not adequate, reschedule the meeting.
- Call into the conference between three and five minutes ahead of the scheduled start time.
- Take roll as the callers come on and identify who you are, unless the meeting is with co-workers who know your voice well and with whom you often meet.
- Wait to begin your meeting after nearly everyone whom you expect to call in has done so. It is customary to give participants a few extra minutes after the start time to call in, but keep this planned delay to no more than three to five minutes.
- If you expect to finish before the scheduled time, let your callers know.
- As the meeting starts, make sure you are sharing the correct screen. If you use two monitors in your daily work, as many do today, be careful to select whichever screen you will use for the presentation so that the participants can follow along with you.
- If you ask the participants to mute their phones, you will be able to eliminate excessive noise and focus better on your main points.
- Allow time for questions and answers.
- After the meeting, email the minutes and action items and thank the participants for their time and feedback.
- If scheduling problems kept some of the important participants from attending, reschedule the meeting for those who were not able to attend the first time.

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