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# Understanding Communication and Miscommunication

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The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw

**E**ven with the most simple of communications – one person says something to another, the other person replies – both people may *think* they understand what's passed between them, but often communication has not occurred. Instead, what has occurred is a miscommunication – the meaning has not been understood as the speaker intended it to be.

Take these exchanges between a Mum and Dad and their two young children. Dad is making breakfast. Mum is in the shower.

**Dad:** Josh, go and ask Mummy if she wants an egg.

**Josh:** OK! (runs to bathroom. Runs back to kitchen).  
She said YES! (Runs out of kitchen again)

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**Dad:** Really?

Mum doesn't usually want eggs so Dad asks Ben

**Dad:** Ben, just go and check with Mummy; ask her if she wants an egg.

**Ben:** But I want an egg!

**Dad:** Sure. But please go and ask Mummy.

**Ben:** OK! (runs off. Runs back) Mummy said yes!

Dad goes to the fridge. There are only 2 eggs. He goes to the bathroom.

**Dad:** Sorry, after all that, you can't have an egg. We don't have enough.

**Mum:** (from in the shower): I don't want an egg.

**Dad:** What? Josh said you said 'Yes' you wanted an egg.

**Mum:** No, Josh knocked and said, 'Can I come in?' and I said 'Yes!'

**Dad:** And what about Ben? *He* said you wanted an egg.

**Mum:** Uh uh. Ben came in and asked if he could have an egg and I said, 'Yes, you can!'

How often do you assume someone knows what you meant but it turns out that they didn't? Recently, I was listening to a music station when I heard someone by the name of Mark phone in with a record request. His voice sounded like the friend of a friend. The next morning I texted my friend Karen to ask if it was her friend that I'd heard on the radio the previous day. She texted Mark to ask him and Mark then texted me. His text read 'Karen said you heard me on the radio. Is it true?!!' That confused me. Surely he'd know if he'd been talking on the radio? After a minute I realized what had happened.

Mark is a musician. He thought I meant I'd heard his *music* playing on the radio.

Of course, tales of miscommunication are often amusing. But just as often, they're not. A misread policy or contract, for example, a misinterpreted instruction, a misunderstanding about when and where to meet can lead to all sorts of difficulties. So can a misconstrued attempt to persuade someone to do something or an ill-timed comment about someone's efforts to achieve something.

Presumably though – unless they have malicious intent – no one sets out to miscommunicate. Likewise, no one sets out to deliberately misunderstand either. Humans are social beings; we're wired to communicate and to connect with each other; to seek out and exchange thoughts, ideas, opinions and theories, feelings and emotions, wants and needs, likes and dislikes. We want to communicate and connect with each other. So why do communications often go wrong and turn into miscommunications? Because communication isn't always a simple, straightforward process, it's a dynamic process, influenced by all the complexities and differences in human behaviour.

Often, we believe that there's a right and wrong way that we should communicate with each other. Most of the time, we are completely unaware of how our expectations and assumptions can create all sorts of communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, conflict, and distrust.

## Cultural Differences

For a start, each culture has its own ideas and beliefs about what are and are not appropriate ways to communicate. There are, for example, ‘rules’ about eye contact or how close you can stand next to another person when you’re talking with them. In some cultures, eye contact should be sporadic and people should stand at least three feet apart. In other cultures, eye contact may be considered disrespectful but it is acceptable for there to be just a short space between you when you’re talking with each other.

For some cultures, it’s important and considered correct to talk *indirectly* about an issue. For example, Japanese communication style is indirect and far less verbose – less wordy – than what many of us in the UK are used to. Japanese culture relies less on words to convey context; it’s more focused on the posture, expression, and tone of voice of the speaker to draw meaning from what a person is saying. In order to maintain harmony throughout conversation and prevent a loss of face for either person, a Japanese person may use ambiguous speech and understatement to convey their message in a more subtle way.

The French style of communication is more direct. One reason for this is that the French language is quite precise and therefore it’s difficult *not* to be direct when using it. The standard speaking style in Spanish is also more direct than English. ‘Give me the key’ sounds rude

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in English without a ‘please’ accompanying it, but in Spanish ‘dame la llave’ is perfectly acceptable.

Different cultures differ in the extent to which they communicate feelings and emotions. Some are generally open about their emotions, with hugs and kisses alternating between angry shouting and gesturing. They laugh and cry and are not afraid to show their anger, fear, frustration, and other feelings. Other cultures strive to keep their emotions hidden and believe in communicating only the factual, objective aspects of a situation. This can cause problems when people from different cultures communicate. A person from one culture may think another is out of control as they freely express their emotions. On the other hand, someone from a culture that openly expresses its emotions and feelings might consider the person from the more restrained culture as uptight.

If the people involved are not aware of the potential for such cultural misunderstandings, they are even more likely to fall victim to them!

We’re all islands shouting lies to each other across seas  
of misunderstanding.

Rudyard Kipling

As well as differences in ways of communicating between people from different cultures and countries, different generations also have differences in their ways of communicating. I recently heard a middle-aged

woman describing how irritated she was with her much younger colleagues who rarely returned her phone calls by phone. Instead they typically would text or email back a response. ‘They need to stop emailing and pick up the phone!’ she said.

Each generation has its own expectations about what’s an appropriate way to communicate and they often communicate in different ways. When it comes to communication technology, in general, the older generations prefer talking face-to-face or on the phone, and the younger generations tend toward text-based messages like email and instant message. So, it can be very frustrating when you communicate with someone in a mode that they don’t use or like; these differences in communication often create tension and lead to misunderstandings.

### **Individual Communication Styles**

But it’s not just cultural and generational differences that can occur and create problems with communication. We each have our own individual way of communicating. Think of any two people you know – two people in your family or two friends or colleagues. What sort of words do they use? How do they differ in the gestures they use? What tone of voice do they normally use? How loud or softly do they each talk? Some people love to talk! But they tend to over-explain; they find it impossible to be concise; they’re long winded, giving unnecessary details. In contrast, someone else you know may be too brief

and not explain things fully, leaving you to fill in the gaps and guess what they mean, or to ask questions and clarify what they're saying.

Some people are outgoing and direct communicators, others are more introverted. Generally speaking, when it comes to the way we communicate, we're all somewhere on an introvert/extrovert continuum. At one end of the continuum are 'active' communicators. Active communicators communicate in a lively, spontaneous, opportunistic way. They are direct and straightforward; they get to the point quickly and keep things moving and get things summed up. They use language that makes an impact, they're not afraid to use strong language, and are prone to exaggerate and use large gestures and animated facial expressions. They like to participate in conversation, discussion, and debates; they're not patient listeners unless they're amused or fascinated by what the other person is saying. Whether they're experts in what's being discussed or not, they come across confidently and persuasively.

Also towards the extrovert end of the communication continuum are 'purposeful' communicators. Purposeful communicators like to be clear about the aim of a conversation and to stay on track. They like ideas and issues to be discussed in a logical order. They don't like interruptions. They're not keen on chat and small talk but would rather communicate with others in a way that will get things done. Purposeful communicators use 'proper' language and don't like to hear or use slang and jargon. They may often use words to emphasize what they

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mean – extreme or absolute terms like ‘always’, ‘never’, ‘must’, ‘should’, or ‘can’t’. And they may come across as impatient and controlling.

At the more introverted end of the continuum are the ‘connectors’. Connectors tend to listen more than talk – they like to ‘read between the lines’ and work out the feelings and intentions behind what another person is saying. They like to talk about relationships and people. They’re interested in values and beliefs. They’re tactful and considerate; thinking about how to phrase something so that it doesn’t offend the other person. They dislike conversations that lead to conflict. Connectors like to take time to relate to and connect with others. They’re friendly and approachable and welcome conversation with others. They show empathy and appreciation and communicate in a way that will promote cooperation and harmony. Connectors are good listeners, speak from the heart, are influenced by their feelings and emotions, and use their intuition. They tend to be subjective (unlike theorists who are objective).

‘Theorists’ are also towards the introverted end of the communication style continuum. They tend to think and deliberate during a conversation. They like to review what they’ve just heard and respond carefully in a way that most accurately expresses their thoughts on the matter. Their aim is to get information that will help them solve or discover something or provide new knowledge. They like talking about theories, ideas, and information rather than feelings and relationships and use wording such as ‘I think’ rather than ‘I feel’. They’d

rather say nothing than say something wrong. Unlike ‘connectors’, they usually avoid emotional bonding and go straight for the facts. This approach can come across as quite cold and can be off-putting to those seeking to first establish a personal connection. Theorists’ body language is usually quite controlled and so may be hard for others to read. Their conversations like to take in and develop new ideas and possibilities. They enjoy describing all aspects and details of a situation or an idea. Theorists are quick to pull together odd bits of information into rational arguments.

Of course, these descriptions of the ways we communicate are general descriptions; we don’t all neatly fall into one of these cultural, generational, or extroverted/introverted communication styles. None the less they serve to illustrate the fact that we don’t all communicate in the same ways. And differences in the way we each communicate can present barriers that get in the way of effective communication.

## **What’s in a Word?**

Words are the source of misunderstandings.  
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

As well as our own particular characteristic way of communicating, the specific words we use can mean different things to different people. If, for example, a parent asks their child if their room is clean and tidy, do the parent and the child have the same definition of the words ‘clean’ and ‘tidy’? Not likely!

Any one word may have two distinct meanings. The first meaning – the denotative meaning – refers to the definition you would find in a dictionary. The second type of meaning is the connotative meaning. The connotative meaning of a word is what the word suggests and represents to a person; the collection of ideas that they associate with that word. So, just as words like ‘clean’ and ‘tidy’ have different connotative meanings, so do words like ‘Socialist’ and ‘Tory’, ‘Religion’ and ‘Feminist’. They each have meanings that provoke different reactions from different people.

As Dale Carnegie, author of the book *How to Make Friends and Influence People*, says, ‘When dealing with people, let us remember we are not dealing with creatures of logic. We are dealing with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudices and motivated by pride and vanity.’

## **Gobbledygook, Gibberish, Twaddle, and Drivel**

Some words have different meanings to different people, but other words can mean something to one person but mean absolutely nothing to another person. Recently, my Mum’s doctor told her she might need a hip replacement but that the referral system has changed. ‘I’m no longer the gatekeeper,’ he said. ‘It’s a different pathway. I’ll refer you to the physio and if they think you might need a hip replacement, the physio, not me, refers you to a consultant. It’s a new pathway.’ Pathway? Gatekeeper?

My Mum had no idea what he meant. (Fortunately I did and was able to explain it to her.)

Since 1979, the Plain English Campaign have been campaigning against gobbledygook, jargon, and misleading public information. On their website – [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk) – they have some good examples of meaningless, empty phrases. Here’s a few of them. The first two are from interviews with footballers. The second two are from business managers.

- The pundits have written us off since day one but we ran the lines well and the killer pass and finish came at the right time and we’ll try and use that as a springboard and push on.
- Our crosses never looked like beating the first man but he’s put it right down the corridor of uncertainty at the right moment there and it’s not good-night Vienna just yet.
- Our exploratory research points to compatible organizational projections.
- We need a more blue-sky approach to responsive policy consulting.

Confused? Unfortunately, Google Translate won’t help; it can’t make any sense of these statements either!

## **Assumptions and Judgements**

What else gets in the way of clear communication? Not just what we say, but what we hear. Or rather, what we

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think we hear. Listening looks simple but it's not easy. As the Spanish saying goes 'cada cabeza es un mundo', which translates as 'every head is a world', meaning we each have our own perspective.

Our individual assumptions, beliefs, and judgements are often behind much of what we misconstrue and misinterpret. Those assumptions, beliefs and judgements, biases and prejudices can easily distort what the other person is saying to you.

For example, Tamwar was telling his friend Suzy about his colleague Sam. Suzy already knew that Sam belongs to a particular religious group and she has a view of the 'kind of people' that belong to that group. Her assumptions distorted what Tamwar was telling her. She missed the point of what Tamwar was saying about Sam, which, actually, was nothing to do with Sam's religious beliefs.

In another example, Ned, a manager, is talking with Nadia, a clerical worker, about a proposal the team has for a new project. Nadia makes some comments but Ned listens to her as 'just an admin worker' and fails to hear the insightful observation and suggestion she makes.

Too often, instead of responding to what people are actually saying and what they mean, we engage and respond to what we think they're saying and mean. It's easy to jump to conclusions and assume, for example, that the person you're listening to is always the same. For example, Dan expects that most of what Bill says

will, as is usual for Bill, come from a place of self-pity. Bill is talking about his wife who he's separated from. 'She's left me, but she keeps "returning" in little ways. She wants to meet up to discuss, what seem to me, minor issues. I don't know what's going on or what to think.' Unfortunately, rather than recognize that Bill is simply confused because his wife seems to have left him, and yet, not left him, all Dan can hear is Bill feeling sorry for himself.

It's not difficult to fall into the trap of judgmental listening; to listen in order to determine whether what the other person is saying is right or wrong. Bob, for example, tells his daughter Tanya that, when he goes to the hospital, 'I want a doctor who speaks English'. Tanya immediately assumes her Dad's reasons for this are racist. And they might be. But assuming that they are only ensures a disconnect and a growing distance between them.

## **When Emotions Get in the Way**

Between what is said and not meant, and what is meant and not said, most of love is lost.

Khalil Gibran

Our emotional reactions often play a part in how we each communicate in particular situations. Feeling frustrated, frightened, or angry can hinder communication and create misunderstandings. So can feeling stressed, intimidated, or upset.

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At times like this, we resort to all kinds of inappropriate and unhelpful ways of communicating. When we're stressed, we might express our thoughts and opinions in aggressive ways; ways that are rude, mean, or abusive, and blame or even threaten other people. In contrast, when we feel unsure or intimidated we might remain passive and hold back from saying what we think or feel.

Sometimes, when we're annoyed or upset, we do and say nothing at all, but at other times we might resort to passive aggressive communication. Rather than say what we feel or think, we mutter our dissent to ourselves or use a non-verbal way of expressing our feelings, rolling our eyes or giving the other person 'dirty looks'. Passive aggressive communication is not easy to respond to because it's expressed in obscure, underhanded ways. The person communicating their resistance towards someone else does so indirectly; for example, using sarcasm or veiled hostile joking and teasing – so-called 'banter'. For whatever reason, they feel unable to say directly what they really think, feel, or want. They don't reveal what they really mean which leaves the rest of us confused as we try to work out what's going on.

So, as you can see, often communication is not straightforward. It's a dynamic process, influenced by all the complications, strengths, and limitations of human interests and behaviour. Although our ability to communicate is innate, there's all sorts of ways that communication can go wrong. But, as well as being innate, communication is also a skill; it's an ability that can be developed and improved.

### **In a nutshell**

- Even with the most simple of communications, both people may think they understand what's passed between them, but often communication has not occurred. Instead, what has occurred is a miscommunication.
- As well as differences in ways of communicating between people from different cultures and countries, different generations also differ in how they communicate.
- We each also have our own individual style of communicating. Some people are outgoing and direct communicators, others are more reserved and introverted.
- These cultural, generational, and individual differences in communication often create tension and lead to misunderstandings.
- The specific words we use can mean different things to different people. And some words can mean something to one person but mean absolutely nothing to another person.
- It's not just what we say, but what we think we hear. Our individual assumptions, beliefs, and judgements are often behind much of what we misconstrue and misinterpret. They can easily distort what the other person is saying.

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- Our emotional reactions – feeling stressed or upset in some way – can hinder communication and create misunderstandings.
- Although our ability to communicate is innate, it's also a skill; it's an ability that can be learned, developed, and improved.