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STARTING WITH THE BASICS

Building a Foundation for Communicating at Work

STARTING POINT

Go to www.wiley.com/go/brounsteincanada to assess your knowledge of the basics of business communication. After reviewing the website, you'll be able to determine where you need to concentrate your effort.

What you'll learn in this chapter:

- the elements of the communication process
- common patterns of business communication
- barriers to effective communication
- guidelines for communicating in teams.

After studying this chapter, you'll be able to:

- examine the importance of each element of the communication process
- use diagrams to compare communication patterns
- identify the positive and negative effects of assumptions, including your own
- describe the guidelines for productive team communication.

INTRODUCTION

Almost everyone needs to be able to communicate effectively with others to be successful at work. Most people must interact in the workplace with bosses and employees, superiors and subordinates, managers, and the managed—all types of co-workers. In this chapter, the tools for communicating successfully are discussed. The role of assumptions is examined. Also reviewed are the five elements of the communication process, as well as patterns of communication and their obstacles. The chapter concludes with guidelines for improving team communication.

1.1 Becoming an effective business communicator

It's difficult to find any job or field of employment where communicating effectively with people isn't vital. In fact, regardless of your job title or the type of organization or industry you work for, if you're like most people, your greatest challenge is not the technical side of your job (your area of expertise). Your greatest challenge is most likely interacting with other people.

Fewer and fewer jobs today require employees to do tasks by themselves. Instead, many public- and private-sector organizations stress that they have customers that they must communicate with and serve. The two basic types of customers are:

- **External customers:** People outside the workplace with whom you need to build good working relationships for success on the job. These can range from suppliers to investors, and include people outside your organization who need the products and services that your business provides.
- **Internal customers:** Your fellow employees, inside and outside the department where you work, to whom you provide services or assistance.

In addition, the workplace is often structured so that many employees do their jobs in cooperative, team-like situations for part or most of their workdays. And if you work in management, most of the demands placed on your job require being able to effectively interact with others—staff, peers, and bosses.

Interactions between people at work, even basic conversations, are often like games of tug-of-war, where one side tries to pull the other over an imaginary line. The rope in the game represents the bond or connection between the two people as they interact. However, unlike a real tug-of-war, where one side competes to pull the other side into the mud, in the communication tug-of-war, the two sides have to cooperate to make sure that neither side gets pulled into the mud. Ideally, the rope should be tight as the two sides work to understand and communicate with each other. If one person pulls too hard, trying to dominate the interaction, or if the other person lets go, giving up on the conversation, the game is over.

The goal of successful communications is working cooperatively so that the rope is strongly held but no one gets dirty. This is a challenge, but it is also a key to effective communicating on the job.

1.1.1 Training for the “game”

Despite years of schooling, for the most part we have not been properly trained to effectively communicate with others.

As a human being, your communication skills fall into four categories:

- listening
- speaking
- reading
- writing.

Although the advent of the computer and the Internet has increased the importance of reading and writing skills, human beings generally spend more time in face-to-face forms of communication: listening and speaking (speaking includes both the verbal and non-verbal ways people express their messages to one another).

Although you’re taught to read and write in school, you probably didn’t receive any formal instruction about how to listen effectively and express yourself constructively while interacting with others. These interpersonal channels of communication are seldom a part of the curriculum in basic education. Yet listening and speaking are more critical for people to understand each other, work together, and solve problems with one another.

Once you add elements like stress, tension, and challenge to your workplace—from dealing with differences of opinion to facing demanding customers—you can see how easy it is to get caught up in that tug-of-war feeling. Because the skills needed to effectively handle stressful situations simply aren’t taught, you may have trouble sharing the rope cooperatively. Instead, communication becomes more adversarial, ranging from pulling too hard and waging verbal war against the other person to letting go of the rope and appeasing that person just to get past a difficult situation. Adversarial ways of communicating essentially block people from working out their differences and interacting respectfully.

SELF-CHECK

- Identify and define external customers and internal customers.
- Discuss how business communication is cooperative, not competitive.
- List and describe the four categories of communication skills.



1.2 Examining the communication process

Many of the problems that occur in an organization are the direct result of people failing to communicate. Faulty communication leads to confusion and errors, and can ultimately lead to the failure of a team or of a plan. Understanding how the communication process works can give you useful insight into how you can make it work for you.

1.2.1 Finding your place in the process

Our communication skills are constantly being tested in the business world. Email, texting, instant messaging, and video conferencing have brought on a revolutionary change in that a huge amount of information is now available to us. At times, it may seem as if we're drowning in a constant flood of emails, texts, instant messages, letters, reports, faxes, junk mail, and data of every kind and every form. This onslaught of information means that you must be able to:

- handle more business documents and other business messages
- sift through more information to choose the information you need
- understand more information
- communicate more effectively to customers, co-workers, suppliers, and others.

To do all these things, you must be a skilled communicator. So how do you become one?

Before answering this question, consider the definition of **communication**: a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour. "Communication" springs from the Latin verb *communicare*, which means "to make common."

Notice that the primary meaning of communication is to exchange information, not to recite, deliver, speak, or write. All of these activities fall short of "making common" the flow of ideas and feelings. Mere speaking is a one-way activity, but communication involves common interests shared by all parties involved in the communication.

Effective communicators share in the give-and-take of ideas and feelings. Even when they give speeches, they notice responses from their audiences. For example, a man smiles in the front row. Someone leans forward to hear from the back row. Two people yawn. All of these responses show that others actively participate in the speaker's communication process. The speaker alone can only make speech noises. The audience alone can only wait to hear or see something. Together, they can communicate in the mutual activity of making thoughts and feelings common to the group.

1.2.2 Breaking down the process

As an effective communicator, you are the **sender** who must transmit information as an understandable message to an intended **receiver**. To do this, you use each of the five elements of the communication process:

1. An *information source* (a "message"—an idea, thought, or fact).
2. A *signal* (a stream of words, images, or gestures that expresses the message).
3. A *transmittal* (an act of sending, delivering, or transferring the message).

4. A *channel* (a “medium,” such as an email, report, TV image, or speech).
5. A *receiver* (an “audience,” which may be listeners, viewers, or readers).

The way in which this process works is that an information source is translated into → a signal that is → transmitted through → a channel to → a receiver.

This description of communication is deceptively simple; within it you’ll find plenty of opportunity for things to go wrong. Problems with communication are often at the core of many of the errors, misunderstandings, and conflicts that occur in the workplace.



SELF-CHECK

- Define communication.
- List the five aspects of the communication process.
- Give some examples of how a communicator could assess how her message is being received.

1.3 Seeing communication patterns at work

Communication patterns are either structured or unstructured. Examples of structured communication include the company newsletter, the weekly meeting of teaching assistants, and the annual shareholders’ meeting. Unstructured communication includes the office grapevine, the after-class chat, and water-cooler conversations. Structured communication is usually:

- **Recorded or documented in some form:** This may include printed copies of a newsletter, the written minutes of a meeting, and the printed agenda for a conference.
- **Less subject to change than unstructured communication:** The messages in a newsletter, for example, are usually fixed in a way that a chat over coffee is not.
- **More widely known and more easily accessed:** Structured communications such as quarterly financial reports are visible to a broad public and open to scrutiny. Private conversations, on the other hand, cannot be accessed without eavesdropping.

Unstructured communication is just as important as structured communication to the effective functioning of a business. Notice these three characteristics about unstructured communication:

- **It depends on personal emotional factors.** For example, structured communications like a bulk email to all staff are received by everyone on the list regardless of how much he or she might agree or disagree with the topic. However, unstructured communications like a conversation over a cup of coffee depend almost entirely on the coffee drinkers’ attitudes toward one another.
- **It is more flexible and open-ended than structured communication.** Conversations can raise questions and express feelings more than they pose arguments and answers. Unstructured communications often involve exchanges of ideas and changing positions, especially in activities like brainstorming.
- **It is more personalized than structured communication.** Because they are for a general audience, most memos, reports, and speeches use general terms that can be understood by the greatest number of people. However, unstructured communication can change the message to suit an individual. The rumour of an impending layoff based on seniority, for example, can be told in very different ways to a long-term vice-president and to an employee hired just last month.

1.3.1 The grapevine

Because of the way it branches and grows, the flow of gossip and rumour in an organization is called the grapevine. Of all the forms of unstructured communication within an organization, one of the most useful—and potentially most destructive—is the company grapevine. Somehow, good news never gets better, but bad news always gets worse when it travels along the grapevine. Inevitably, each participant adds a layer of negativity to the rumour as it moves along. Learn to involve yourself in the grapevine for positive ends.

The grapevine exists because people without knowledge in an organization are people without power.

As a manager, you can use the human “need to know” to build team spirit and mutual trust rather than crippling suspicion and jealousy. As an employee, you can use the grapevine to keep yourself informed about rivalries and alliances in the organization, as well as about what is happening in the company. Here are three suggestions for successfully participating in the grapevine:

- **Make contact in the grapevine in several different places.** Don't restrict your casual knowledge of what others say to the bits and pieces you hear from others at your level. Find interesting associates at other levels in the company. Company social events held outside work hours are often good places to meet people from other levels or departments.
- **Make time to tune in to the grapevine.** Make regular contact with key people in the grapevine. These should not be scheduled as formal meetings, of course. Coffee breaks and lunchtime are great opportunities to tune in to the grapevine.
- **Participate in the grapevine in a positive and natural way.** Don't lecture or spy. The grapevine grows on trust, and it won't include you if you openly stand on a soapbox or take notes on who's saying what. Keep your comments as positive as possible; after all, the person you are openly criticizing is probably also on the grapevine, and the grapevine holds few secrets.

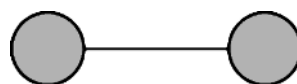
SELF-CHECK

- Define structured and unstructured communication.
- List five examples of structured communication in an organization.
- Give some examples of where and when an employee could participate in the grapevine.



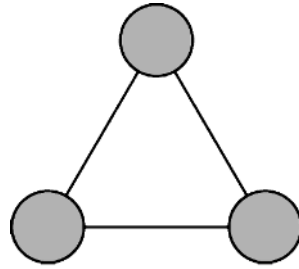
1.3.2 Types of communication patterns

The following simple diagrams lay out some common patterns of business communication. Although they apply primarily to the structured communication patterns detailed above, several can also be found in unstructured settings.



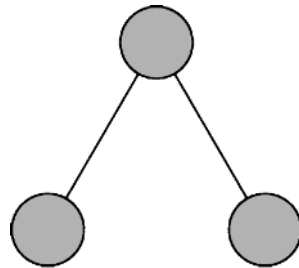
The barbell

In the barbell pattern, both partners depend on the other's confidence. Typically, neither wants to be isolated, so each relies heavily on the partner. This barbell pattern is all about discretion, confidence, and trust.



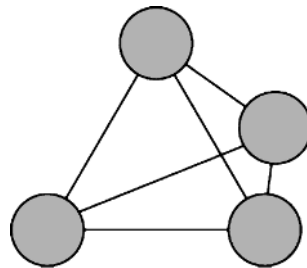
The triangle

Three people joined in a triangle pattern face the challenge of dealing with different points of view without making any one party in the triangle feel left out. Communication triangles work well in an atmosphere of mutual trust. You can recognize the breakdown of the triangle when it begins to take the shape of a broken triangle.



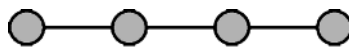
The broken triangle

In the broken triangle, two of the parties have severed communication. With time, they may also sever communication with the one party they have in common. Usually, it's difficult to remain the one trusted associate of two rivals.



The pyramid

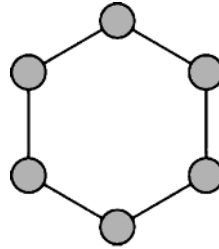
In a pyramid, one party usually assumes the leadership role. In some cases, this party generates or gathers much of the information received by the group. In other cases, the leader acts as a clearing house for information to be shared among members.



The series

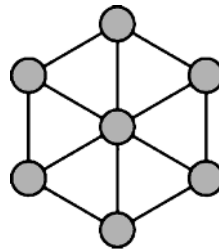
The series presents the same challenge as the party game called Gossip, Telephone, or Rumours. In the game, one person whispers a sentence or two to the next person, who then passes it down the chain. By the time it gets to the last person, the message has usually changed—usually with unintended and unpredictable results.

In business, the results may not be funny. If linked chains are necessary, keep the chains as short as possible; for example, have contact with parties farther down the line.



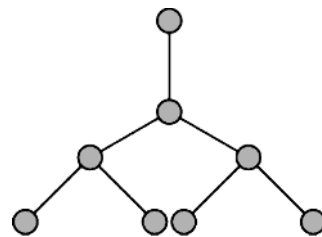
The circle

The circle pattern helps to avoid the problems associated with communication chains. The message is sent around the circle, but eventually finds its way back to the person who started it. He or she can then alter the message, if necessary, or start a new one on its way.



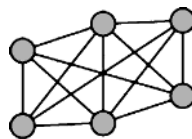
Hub and spokes

The hub and spokes pattern combines aspects of the pyramid—the hub is like the peak of the pyramid—and the circle. The leader initiates a message that is then sent throughout the group. At any point, however, individuals can respond to the leader or to each other.



Legs

In the legs pattern, messages are communicated through levels of responsibility to more and more workers. The legs pattern frees the time of the central decision maker. He or she need only explain the message once instead of many times to many parties. When misused, however, this pattern can isolate company leaders from important feedback from within the company.



The cross-fire

Freedom is the key word for the cross-fire pattern. Members can speak freely to anyone in the group; the pattern works well for brainstorming sessions. This pattern has the danger, of course, of leading to communication chaos.



SELF-CHECK

- Define communication pattern.
- List three different communication patterns.
- Give some examples of how one of the communication patterns might work.

1.3.3 Directional differences

Each of the communication patterns, when translated into actual business contexts, could be described in terms of direction. Were lower-level employees talking to upper-level employees? Were employees on the same level talking to each other? The direction becomes important as you see the possibilities and pitfalls emerge.

- **Upward communication:** Allows the upper level to keep informed and gives the lower level the chance to participate in the decision-making process. However, this can consume a lot of an executive's time, as well as involve upper-level managers in petty decisions that could be handled at a lower level.
- **Downward communication:** Builds a sense of team spirit and mutual dependence through shared knowledge. However, this may lead lower-level employees to expect to be informed of all company matters.
- **Lateral communication:** Helps to create social bonds and build credibility for an organization's message. However, this may be used to isolate certain individuals or groups who are purposely excluded by their peers.

You don't have to wait for your first day in your new career to observe the fascinating working of upward, downward, and lateral communication patterns. Watch for them in your everyday experiences. How do people act when they speak in the different directions? How does their use of language change? Do they choose different media? The answers you discover will help you use upward, downward, and lateral communication to your business advantage.

FOR EXAMPLE

Management style

Michael was the kind of boss who was well liked by his staff. Much of this had to do with his open-door policy of management. As much as he could, he made himself available to his staff to discuss decisions, personnel issues, and so forth—even when they could have been handled at a lower level. When Michael was asked to take on additional duties, however, his time became much more limited. To avoid any disruption in management, Michael assigned the office manager the job of screening out and resolving a portion of the simpler issues that came across his desk. By doing so, Michael could still maintain much of the feeling of his open-door style without having to deal with every decision that needed to be made.

1.4 Giving feedback

A message cannot truly be communicated unless it has been understood by the receiver. So how do you know when you've really communicated? You pay attention to feedback. A receiver interprets a message and, by word or expression, sends feedback to the sender. If the communication continues, the sender uses the feedback received to adapt any new messages.

Feedback may present itself either immediately or at a point later in time. Regardless of when you receive it, consider it a critical part of your ability to communicate effectively.

- **Immediate feedback:** Feedback does not wait for an obvious pause. An audience flashes a sign of approval, disapproval, frustration, curiosity, and so forth on a second-by-second basis. Effective communicators respond to it almost unconsciously by watching the eyes, faces, and physical gestures of the audience. Such clues guide them in adjusting their content and delivery to better suit their audience's needs.
- **Delayed feedback:** In many situations, feedback arrives too late to make on-the-spot adjustments. In the case of a business email, for example, you may not know for days or even weeks how it was received. In other cases, a speaker may chat informally with members of the audience after a presentation, or a writer may attach a questionnaire to a proposal or report. Regardless of when it comes, delayed feedback gives you an opportunity to learn and improve as a communicator.

FOR EXAMPLE

Feedback or no pay cheque

The financial manager of an engineering firm was frustrated by the lack of attention being paid to him by employees at his monthly "State of the Business" addresses. So he tried a bold experiment. In the middle of his next address, without changing his tone of voice, he repeated the same sentence over and over again. It wasn't until the third and fourth repetitions that some employees looked up; many continued to doodle and daydream until the fifth. "Okay," he said, "I'm up here working hard to communicate with you. I'd like you to do the same for me. Sit up, ask questions, shake your head." The experiment worked. With the feedback that followed, he made some minor but successful changes, making everyone happy.

1.5 Barriers to communication

Anything that prevents your audience from understanding your message is a barrier to effective communication. Consider the following barriers, both physical and psychological:

- **Physical barriers:** You've put a lot of work into your speech or report, and you expect your audience's polite attention. Not so. A number of physical forces can wreak havoc on your ability to communicate your message:
 - **Time restraints:** Is a 20-page report or a 20-minute speech too long?
 - **Environmental conditions:** Heat, cold, noise, and drafts can distract an audience.
 - **Presentation:** Fuzzy type, narrow margins, hard-to-read colours, and an unattractive document look unprofessional and won't capture the attention of your audience.
- **Cultural barriers:** Your culture, background, and bias can interfere with the communication process when you attempt to interact with people from a different group. To communicate with other cultural groups, you must be willing to adapt—but not discard—your own patterns of thought and behaviour to meet the needs of your audience. To prepare for this, you need to know your audience and know yourself.
- **Motivational barriers:** Your audience may simply not want to be motivated by what you have to say. And, even after they do begin to move with your thoughts, they might need help to keep going. This mental inertia is increasingly common among hassled business people. The communication tools covered in this book will help motivate an uninterested audience.
- **Emotional barriers:** Business situations are rarely able to entirely avoid the personal element. People's feelings get hurt; they can also develop strong emotional attachments. When you send

a message with strong negative or positive emotions, you shouldn't expect the messages to sail undisturbed through the heavy emotional weather.

- **Language barriers:** This is not a compliment: "I didn't understand much of what he said, but it was an excellent speech." Don't use technical or specialized vocabulary beyond the limits of your audience. Language shouldn't be a mirror in which to admire your own intelligence.
- **Non-verbal barriers:** Non-verbal cues such as body language and gestures can create a serious barrier for your message. A sagging posture can undo the effect of the most enthusiastic words, telling the audience "I don't really believe what I'm saying." Lack of eye contact in most Western cultures communicates insecurity over your words. (See Chapter 2 for more details.)

1.5.1 Working with assumptions

A critical part of being able to communicate effectively is becoming aware of how your assumptions affect your interactions with others.

- **Assumption:** A belief that something is true without proof or demonstration, or that a person is going to behave a certain way before they've had a chance to act.

You've probably been making them (and have had them made about you, too) all your life. But not all assumptions are negative.

- **Processing stimuli:** Assumptions help you gather the information and stimuli to make sense of the world around you. When you're driving, for example, assumptions help keep you alert and aware of what other drivers may do so that you stay safe.
- **Anticipating problem situations:** Assumptions can help you prepare for problems and plan how to respond appropriately if difficult challenges arise.
- **Trying new things:** Assumptions can help you make educated guesses about new people or situations. They can aid you in drawing upon past experiences and determining how to apply them in future situations—in essence, allowing you to take risks and do something new and different.

1.5.2 Avoiding the downside of assumptions

When you assume, you can make a fool out of yourself, but you can also affect others and make them look or feel pretty silly, too. Worst of all, by acting on your assumption, you've probably hurt someone else. Using assumptions a lot—especially when dealing with other people—is a mistake.

The problem with assumptions is that they can lead to mistakes, misunderstandings, and strained relationships when they're acted upon as absolute facts. The following is a list of common assumptions that people make:

- **Jumping to conclusions:** In this scenario, you *think* you know what someone is going to say or whether something can work before you get the whole story. This assumption usually manifests itself in several (often annoying) ways, including:
 - finishing people's sentences for them
 - interrupting before a message has been fully stated
 - tuning out as soon as a person you find unfavourable starts talking.
- **Focusing on intentions:** People have intentions and they have actions, and you can only see the actions. Yet people often make assumptions on what they perceive are someone else's intentions—and quite often assume the worst. When you focus on someone's intentions, you often approach people with undue suspicion and interpret inconsequential actions (the little things) as destructive or as demonstrating ill will.

- **Thinking you know best:** When you think you know best, you're already taking actions or making decisions for someone else without first checking with the person who is affected directly by what you do. These actions range from making commitments to initiating changes. Quite often, the person most affected doesn't find out about these changes until after they're made.
- **Stereotyping:** You assume that everyone in a group that is different from yours behaves and thinks in the same way. Stereotypes can be based on groupings such as ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or occupation. **Stereotyping** involves ideas such as "engineers all do one thing," "men are all like that," "all women do that," and so on. Stereotypical remarks often offend others and do nothing more than show your ignorance and biases.

FOR EXAMPLE

Assuming the best, getting the worst

A project manager assigned a teammate the task of writing an article for the company newsletter. She gave him a deadline and guidelines on content, but assumed he knew enough to have the item proofread before submitting it to the newsletter. Unfortunately, he didn't—and the item contained a major error. With her assumption, the manager opened the way for an embarrassing situation for herself and her team.

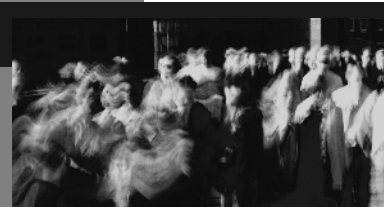
1.5.3 Becoming aware of your own assumptions

Although assumptions are a normal part of the human thought process, you need to become aware of your own assumptions in order to have effective interactions. Here are a few tips to help:

- **Deal with each person as an individual.** Get to know each person you work with or each customer you serve as an individual. The more you understand others, the better you can communicate with them.
- **Listen first.** Once you've heard someone's message, ask questions and check your understanding so that you know what someone really means. When something sounds contrary to your thoughts, avoid reacting quickly with a negative comment or disagreement. Instead, ask the person the rationale of the idea or proposal at hand.
- **Avoid generalizations.** Generalizations about people often come off as stereotypical remarks. Rather than talking in generalizations, you should relate the comments you make to your own experiences and do so only when it is relevant.
- **Communicate first; act second.** Because being in the workplace requires cooperating and coordinating with others, make sure that everyone is consulted before you take action. No matter how well intentioned you are or how brilliant an idea you have, when you don't consult important people first, they're often upset and, as a result, may even reject a legitimate action or idea.
- **Make the safest assumption of them all.** The safest assumption to make when working with others is to assume that they mean well. This assumption allows you to see and deal with the actions and ideas of others at face value.

SELF-CHECK

- Define assumption and describe a positive use of making an assumption.
- Discuss four ways that assumptions can lead to mistakes and misunderstandings.
- List five tips for avoiding the negative side of assumptions.



1.6 Culture and communication

Intercultural communication involves making connections between people with different views of the world. In today's global marketplace, every business communicator needs to know how to interact successfully with members of different cultures, whether in business relations with a foreign company or while employed in multicultural workforces.

When you and your own cultural background come into contact with people of another culture, a middle ground, or **transaction culture**, should emerge. For example, consider the cultural rules that would guide a business conversation between you and a manager from Japan. You would not speak and act entirely as you would when conversing with Canadian co-workers, nor would the Japanese manager hold fast to Japanese conversational rules and behaviours. Both of you would consciously and subconsciously bend your own cultural habits and assumptions to accommodate the communication needs of the other.

Many forces can interfere with the desire to meet other cultures in a productive, mutually satisfying way. The following misconceptions frequently get in the way of successful intercultural communication:

- **Everyone is essentially like me.** We too easily assume that others think as we think, feel as we feel, and therefore should act as we act.
- **Others lack my advantages.** Many people believe the reason that some people aren't like them is that there's something wrong with the people who are different. They explain away cultural differences as deficiencies.
- **Our differences won't matter once we get together.** Putting different cultures into contact will not automatically lead to mutual understanding and respect.
- **Don't worry, I speak the language.** Unfortunately, formal language training does not guarantee successful intercultural communication. Knowing the language does not guarantee that you know the culture.
- **They have to respect my knowledge.** Not so. Many cultures place more importance on mutual trust than on technical know-how.
- **We're all interested in the "bottom line."** Some North Americans are used to doing away with formalities and procedures when they threaten profits or efficiency. In some other cultures, however, you may never violate the established process—including working through a hierarchy, observing customary waiting periods, and completing elaborate paperwork.

Prepare yourself to interact in a new culture by becoming aware of your own assumptions and blind spots. Doing so will help you avoid the devastating effects of crossed signals based on a misunderstanding of gestures, expressions, and innocent actions. Think about the following areas of sensitivity as you work to overcome your own assumptions and stereotypes:

- **How do men relate to women, and women to men?**
- **How does the culture indicate respect?** Consider the roles of silence, seating arrangements, eye contact, gifts, and compliments.
- **How does the culture view human time and space?** Does a 7 p.m. appointment mean "7 sharp" or "sevenish," or "closer to 8"? What about personal space? Should you stand a bit closer to a person from France or Japan than you are used to standing to a Canadian?
- **What are strict taboos in the culture?** For example, is alcohol accepted, winked at, or absolutely unthinkable?
- **How are business commitments made in the culture?** By handshake? By signing of documents? Is a verbal agreement enough for a business commitment?

- **What non-verbal cues are used in the culture to pass information to you or to pass private understandings between members of a culture?** For example, an apology delivered with a big smile in Japan is considered to be utterly sincere.
- **How should you handle the matter of language and translation?** What words should you learn to indicate your interest in another culture? Should you supply your own translator? Will he or she be trusted?
- **How should you dress for business and social occasions in the host country?** Will dressing in native clothes cause you to lose your identity? Or will North American business attire be viewed with irritation and impatience?
- **What aspects of the host country's religious or political life must be understood for effective business relations?** Are certain times of the day set aside for worship? Must certain work groups be separated because of political differences?

FOR EXAMPLE

Getting personal

When travelling to Venezuela, Calgary oil broker Lisa Farnswell could not help but compliment the Venezuelan manager on her flowing, black hair. Obviously pleased, she received the compliment with a smile. The two had a few minutes to wait before starting their meetings, so Lisa continued with what she thought were more pleasantries, asking the manager if her hair was difficult to care for. The smile quickly faded. The Canadian had trampled on an important Latin American custom: avoid personal questions about the private lives of acquaintances.

SELF-CHECK

- Explain the differences between immediate and delayed feedback. Give at least one example of each.
- Discuss six barriers that prevent an audience from understanding a message.
- List six misconceptions that get in the way of successful intercultural communication.



1.7 Approaches to team communication

In today's competitive world, organizations increasingly rely on employee teams to handle projects. Therefore, team communication is crucial to an organization's success. Whether you are a member of a team, the leader of a team, or the manager of a number of teams, the foundation for your success will lie in your team's communication skills.

Many types of communication coexist within an organization or business. When possible, a face-to-face meeting is the most effective, but when another mode of communication is needed at certain times, your team will have a number of choices to select from. Here are a few guidelines a team could follow to communicate, whether formally or informally, internally or externally:

- **Traditional:** Bulletin boards, letters, paper memos, reports, telephone calls, and faxes still have their place in the business of communication.
- **Electronic:** Email, Internet, texting, and video conferencing can reach others instantly, even crossing international borders in the blink of an eye.

- **Conversational:** Everyday chats and informal conversations keep co-workers connected. Be careful to avoid the pitfalls of the office grapevine.

Keep in mind that these communication methods should only be a part of your approach. They cannot substitute for old-fashioned, face-to-face meetings.

FOR EXAMPLE

Getting the message

As the manager of a shipping company, you insist that employees come back from their lunch hours on time. You've posted a general memo, in fact, demanding "compliance with company procedures regarding punctuality." Some workers have understood the message, but many have not. An area supervisor suggested a different approach, one that emphasized the workers as part of a team. Over the next week, each of the supervisors brought it up during meetings, making a point of talking about how all the workers depend on one another—hence the importance of getting back from lunch on time. As a result, punctuality rates rose and the memo was removed.

1.7.1 Keep information flowing

In team situations, the need for members to keep each other informed is extremely important. Think of the flow of information as a loop. By opening and closing the loop, you keep the flow moving.

Closing the loop means following through and getting back to others, informing them of what happened or what you found out about an issue.

Opening the loop means taking the initiative to let others know something in advance, or passing on helpful information—without being asked.

Closing and opening the loop involves thinking of others and keeping communication going at all times so that each person associated with the team feels well informed (in the loop).

1.7.2 Teach so that others can learn

Part of what often is needed in teams involves cross-training or showing new team members how to do certain tasks, and most teaching involves communicating with others. To teach effectively, first remember that the person you're instructing doesn't know the task or job as well as you do. Explain the process step by step and translate any unfamiliar terms into common language.

In addition, allow for—and be receptive to—questions. Answer them clearly and directly. When people feel comfortable asking questions, they're engaged and learn well. You can also check the understanding of your trainees by asking questions of your own. In particular, use open-ended questions so that trainees must provide feedback on what they're learning. Doing so lets you know what's sinking in and what's still confusing.

1.7.3 Offer assistance

When your vocabulary includes comments such as "What can I do to help you?" or "Let me give you a hand with that," or "I can help you get that assignment done, if you'd like," you speak the language of a valuable team player. People want to know that they can count on you to help when they need it, and that you're willing to do so. When you're asked for assistance, always answer with a yes. If not now, then say when you can help and follow through. Someone who speaks and acts in the language of helpfulness and cooperation is a positive member that everybody wants as part of their team.

1.7.4 Ask for help

Part of the benefit of working on a team is that you don't have to figure everything out yourself. You have other resource people who can share their expertise and help you when you need it. Asking questions is a sign of interest and assertiveness, not of stupidity. The only stupid thing you can do is not to ask when you don't know or you're uncertain about something. Don't apologize for asking—just speak up with confidence, stating your need simply and clearly. Then listen for the answer and ask if you need more information or explanation. You may also want to paraphrase the answers you receive to make sure you understand.

1.7.5 Speak up in meetings

The more you get involved in team situations, the more you're asked to attend team meetings. Teams need meetings to coordinate their activities and to collectively communicate to get everyone going in the same direction. For effective teamwork, teams need their members to do more than just show up to the meetings.

Speak up assertively in every meeting. Offer your ideas and express opinions that help the team move forward in getting results. Even if you're the soft-spoken type, pump up your volume a bit and say what you have to offer to help the team—your thoughts and contributions are truly needed.

Actively listen, too, and show your interest in the meetings. Help turn your meetings into constructive two-way conversations. (More on assertive speaking and active listening can be found in Chapter 2.)

1.7.6 Talk in terms of outcomes

A common pitfall for many teams is argument among the team members about how to get a job done. The outcomes needed are often lost in the debate over "your way versus my way."

Make outcomes the focus of these discussions, especially when you're problem solving and planning with your team members. Ask:

- "What goals are to be met?"
- "What results do we need to achieve?"
- "What customer needs must be met?"

Ask questions like these during your discussions and you'll generate a focus on outcomes, not on methods.

1.7.7 Give supportive feedback

You can offer feedback to your team members about their performances. Doing so enhances teamwork, because it opens up honest communication. Just make sure that you *describe* your observations based on actions, instead of providing subjective commentary about other people's performances. (Read more on describing in Chapter 13.)

Give feedback to recognize good performance. When others help you or take other actions that help the team achieve results, express appreciation for it. Just be sure to give specific positive feedback, not general praise.

If something doesn't go well, providing observations about such issues in a straightforward and supportive manner helps team members reflect on their efforts and learn from their experiences. You're not giving feedback to judge others; you're doing so to reinforce performance and behaviours that make for effective teamwork.

1.7.8 Take problems to the right source

One way to determine whether a team will be effective is to look at how its members deal with problems and concerns that arise: Do they snipe at each other? Do they gossip behind each others' backs? Form factions? That doesn't encourage teamwork.

Team members need to work through their problems to grow and become effective as a team. When issues affect the team as a whole, put them on an agenda for a team meeting so that team members can deal with them collectively. When issues deal with an individual, go to that person to address the problem. In both cases, help facilitate the process by using the communication tools and problem-solving models of conflict resolution (outlined in Chapter 13).

1.7.9 Make newcomers feel welcome

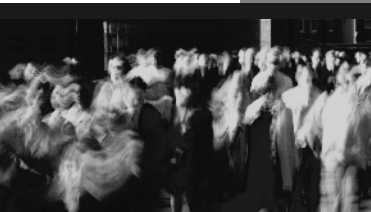
One of the challenges teams sometimes face is integrating new members. New members need to go through the learning curve and need to pay attention to the dynamic among all the members of the team. When little is done to help the new members fit in and feel like a part of the team, the team tends to pull apart.

When you're an established part of a team, always try to help the new person fit in as fast as possible. Use your active-listening skills to find out about the individual's work background. Ask what the person needs and help meet those needs. Ask others to help in showing the new person the ropes, and include the new person in social gatherings.

1.7.10 Maintain a sense of humour

A sure sign that you have an effective team is people laughing with each other as a normal occurrence. Their humour keeps a light touch that eases the stresses that come with the job.

Remember, teams are made up of a collection of personalities. Trying to get them to work together effectively is no small task. If you can see the humorous side of this challenge and act upon it with your team members, you can transition from focusing on yourself in your own job to focusing on the group as a team.



SELF-CHECK

- Discuss examples of traditional, electronic, and conversational types of communication within an organization.
- Explain what closing the loop means.
- Explain 10 ways of enhancing the communication in a team.

SUMMARY

In order to achieve success in business, most people need to communicate effectively with others, whether they are superiors, customers, or co-workers. Assumptions, which typically have a negative implication, play an important role. The communication process itself, from source to receiver, involves active participation to be a success. In those instances when team communication is involved, techniques can be applied to enhance effectiveness.

KEY TERMS

Assumption	A belief that something is true without proof or demonstration, or that a person is going to behave a certain way before he or she has a chance to act.
Communication	A process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour.
External customers	People outside the workplace with whom you need to build good working relationships for success on the job. These customers include suppliers and investors.
Intercultural communication	Making connections between different views of the world.
Internal customers	Your fellow employees, inside and outside the department where you work, to whom you provide services or assistance.
Receiver	A person who listens to one or more speakers.
Sender	The speaker expressing his or her message to other parties.
Stereotyping	Assuming that anyone in a group different from yours behaves and thinks in the same way. Stereotyping can be based on groupings such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or occupation.
Transaction culture	The middle ground that emerges when speakers and their own cultural background come into contact with persons of another culture.

ASSESS YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Go to www.wiley.com/go/brounsteincanada to evaluate your knowledge of the basics of business communication. Measure your learning by comparing self-test results.

Quick questions

- External customers are customers who need the products and services that your business provides. True or false?
- An assumption is having proof that a person is going to behave in a certain way before he or she has had a chance to act. True or false?
- Ways to prevent yourself from making negative assumptions include
 - treating each person as an individual
 - avoiding making generalizations
 - using active listening to check someone's meaning
 - all of the above
- Communication is a one-way activity in which ideas or feelings are delivered, spoken, or written. True or false?
- Which of the following could serve as a form of feedback for a presentation?
 - applause
 - question-and-answer session
 - opinion
 - all of the above

6. Which of the following is *not* a form of structured communication?
 - (a) company newsletter
 - (b) conversation over coffee
 - (c) weekly staff meeting
 - (d) office-wide email
7. The office grapevine is a useful, though sometimes destructive, part of an organization's communication system. Which of the following can help you make the most of it?
 - (a) ignoring it
 - (b) taking part in it only when you have something to contribute
 - (c) participating in it on different levels
 - (d) reporting its misuse to others
8. Which communication pattern avoids the problems associated with the series pattern?
 - (a) hub and spokes
 - (b) circle
 - (c) legs
 - (d) pyramid
9. In thinking about the flow of information as a loop, opening the loop means cutting off individuals from the information. True or false?
10. Feedback is critical to successful team communication. Feedback should *not*
 - (a) recognize good performance
 - (b) provide subjective comments
 - (c) describe observations based on actions
 - (d) be sincere

Give it some thought

1. The communication process is like a game of tug-of-war. What could be happening in a conversation when one person "drops the rope" or "pulls too hard"?
2. Draw a graphic that represents the grapevine among a group of friends, colleagues, or fellow students. Describe the speed, accuracy, and motives of the grapevine.
3. In many cases, making an assumption about another person can often lead to communication problems. To avoid problems, what *should* you assume about the people you are dealing with?
4. Describe the five elements of the communication process in the correct order.
5. What role does feedback play in the communication process?
6. How does unstructured communication generate more emotional responses from receivers than structured communication?
7. Which communication patterns could be described as both efficient and inefficient?
 - (a) cross-fire
 - (b) hub and spokes
 - (c) broken triangle
 - (d) pyramid
8. Which physical and psychological barriers are involved in the following scenarios?
 - (a) An audience loses focus when poor presentation materials are used.
 - (b) An audience interprets poor eye contact as insecurity over the message.
 - (c) An audience can be distracted by noise, drafts, and other discomforts.
 - (d) An audience can be put off by stereotypes or cultural differences.

9. What are different ways that misunderstandings can arise in business dealings between individuals from different cultures?
10. Team communication is a critical part of success in all kinds of organizations. Give some examples of things a teacher can do to “keep information flowing” in a classroom. Refer back to Section 1.7.1 for the general strategies.
11. Even a team member who is not an assertive speaker can contribute to a team’s success. What are two things such a person can do to overcome insecurity or fear?

Applying this chapter

1. You direct credit card services for a large furniture company. You’ve argued for months that the company’s collection letters are sadly out of step with what’s going on in the business world. The “Pay up!” approach is simply not working during these difficult economic times. Discuss how you could avoid the negative use of assumptions and at the same time address the needs of your “audience.”
2. You are the manager of a big box hardware store in a large Canadian city. The radio and television stations have started talking about a big snowstorm to arrive in two days. What assumptions could you make about your customers and what adjustments could you make in your store to get ready?
3. You supervise 10 other employees in an insurance company. On what occasion would you use the cross-fire pattern of communication with your workers? On what occasions would that approach be inappropriate?
4. Assume you’re a member of a hospital’s development team put together to come up with ideas for recruiting new volunteers. A fellow teammate who is new to the hospital staff is showing a lot of enthusiasm during your brainstorming meetings, but nearly all of her ideas have been way off base. Others on the team are showing their frustration. Which of the team communication guidelines could you use to help with the situation?
5. Cecile, a friend from high school, has just landed a great new job in a firm that creates websites for small businesses. She’s a bit nervous, though, because everyone in the new firm seems to work closely in teams and she’s used to working solo. Cecile was relieved when you told her you would write up some practical suggestions for her based on what you were learning about teamwork in your business communications course. Write up a friendly, supportive email to Cecile. She’s especially interested in giving feedback during strategy planning sessions.

THE NEXT STEP

Wrong assumptions

Jot down three instances when making an assumption about someone has backfired, or when someone has made an assumption about you that has backfired. Think about why it happened. Did you jump to a conclusion or resort to a stereotype? What were the consequences? How could you have avoided the situation in the first place?

Communication barriers

Sometimes, the way an organization is arranged can itself become a barrier to communication. Describe any organizational barriers to communication that you see at your workplace, school, or organization. Go on to suggest ways in which you could reduce or eliminate these barriers.

Succeeding in a new country

Pick a country that you would like to visit on business some day. Do some Internet and library research on issues, such as personal space, levels of formality, or the relationship between men and women in

that country. How might issues like these affect your communication with your host? Additionally, identify any strict taboos that you'll want to be aware of. Which taboos might you have violated if you had not taken time to investigate the cultural differences between your country and the foreign country?

Choosing a candidate

Your company is opening an office in a foreign country. Consider what you've learned from the above question and get together with two or three other classmates. Devise an insightful list of interview questions that will identify potential biases or other problems to help you determine which candidates are most likely to succeed in a different culture.

Feedback

List the various forms of feedback you receive during a typical day. Which influence your actions the most? Why?