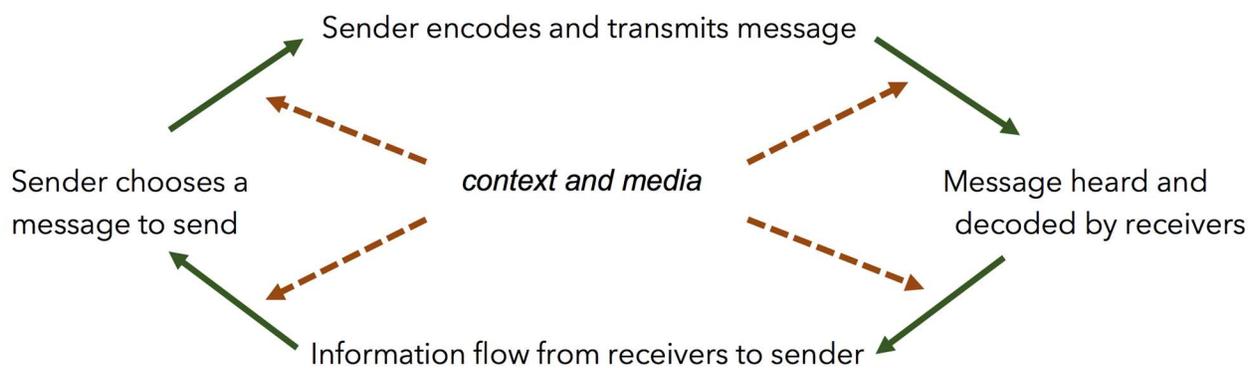


COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER 17

Communication is the process of transmitting information via meaningful symbols so that a message is understood by others. A classic model of the communication process describes it as having four basic components that are connected as shown in Figure 17.1. These four components are traditionally presented as unfolding in four steps. As depicted by the arrows with dotted lines in Figure 17.1, communication is challenging because moving from one step to the next can be hampered by two basic factors: the overall *context* in which the communication takes place (e.g., a noisy room) and the *media* that are used to transmit the message (e.g., an email message does not convey as much information as a face-to-face conversation). In other words, context and media influence each of the four components.

Figure 17.1: Four parts in the communication process



We begin by noting two basic differences between FBL, TBL, and SET approaches to communication which inform all four parts of the process discussed in this chapter.

1. The SET approach has the broadest range regarding the *purpose and content* of information being communicated; it shares the FBL and TBL interest in communication about how to improve task-oriented operations but adds an interest in enhancing positive socio-ecological externalities (e.g. communications that develop a sense of community in the workplace and facilitate meaningful work).
2. A traditional FBL/TBL approach tends to see the four components of the communication process depicted in Figure 17.1 as starting with the sender choosing a message, and then proceeding from there. In contrast to seeing it as a one-way flow of information, the SET approach has a more holistic view that recognizes the importance of the four components but is more ambivalent about the starting point of the process. Thus, the SET view emphasizes that any new message must be understood in light of previous communication. Any message a sender communicates is informed by previous messages that have been sent and received. This makes it difficult to think of reducing communication to a simple four-step process that starts with the receiver choosing a message.

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IDENTIFY MESSAGE TO BE TRANSMITTED

The classic communication process begins when a manager has a **message**—that is, *a specific idea or general information*—that he or she wants to communicate to others. Managers (and others) must be selective in the messages they communicate since time is a limited resource for both them and the target of their communication. The messages they choose will be influenced by their approach to management and their communication styles, which includes the level of filtering. **Filtering** *occurs when information is intentionally withheld or not communicated to others*. Filtering can have both positive and negative outcomes.

Managers' messages may range from one extreme of having too little filtering (the so-called "spray and pray" approach), to the other extreme of having too much filtering (the "withhold and uphold" approach), or any of four additional variations somewhere in-between, as follows:

- *Spray & Pray*: In this approach managers shower members with a lot of data and hope that the members will be able to sort out any information that is relevant for them (see Chapter 18 and the relationship between information systems and data).
- *Trust & Adjust*: In trust & adjust a manager's messages provide stakeholders with all the relevant information they require to be able help identify key issues that need to be addressed. These issues are then discussed, and adjustments are made as necessary. Stakeholders trust managers to keep them informed, and managers trust stakeholders to use the information in good faith.
- *Tell & Sell*: In tell & sell a manager's messages identify and describe what the manager thinks are the key issues that need to be addressed, and then seek to convince others to accept the manager's preferred solution, often using elaborate and well-developed presentations to do so. Managers who use a tell & sell approach generally do not solicit feedback and input from others to develop solutions, but only to seek to ensure that others have understood the managers' instructions (i.e., for these managers, the "information flow from receivers to sender" is the final stage of the communication process, not a formative stage).
- *Underscore & Explore*: In this approach managers identify and describe what they think are the key issues that need to be addressed, but, unlike tell & sell, managers don't provide information about what they think the solution should be. Rather, the managers who underscore & explore explicitly listen to feedback from other members so that they can develop better solutions. This approach has been recommended by scholars, and is the preferred approach among TBL managers who welcome input and participation from others.
- *Identify & Reply*: Here managers develop messages based on concerns and issues that followers identify, and managers reply to those issues. In short, employees set the agenda and managers respond to rumours, innuendos, and leaks. As a result, messages tend to focus on day-to-day

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operational concerns, and followers lack the information to understand the long-term strategic issues facing their organization.

- *Withhold & Uphold*: Compared to the other approaches, in this approach managers messages provide the least amount of information to others. Managers believe that they have all the answers, and that others do not need to or are not able to understand the big picture.

FBL, TBL, AND SET APPROACHES TO IDENTIFYING THE MESSAGE

The three approaches to management can be seen to vary along three dimensions related to identifying the message: content, perspective, and directionality.

1. **Content**: The FBL/TBL approaches are generally more focused on task-oriented messages designed to enhance financial well-being, whereas the SET approach includes a broader variety of messages that enhance a variety of forms of well-being.
2. **Perspective**: All three management approaches recognize that the organization is controlled by the people whose messages set the agenda. A SET approach is more inclined to invite multiple stakeholders to help set the agenda as to how an organization can best enhance socio-ecological well-being while maintaining adequate financial well-being. This is consistent with the practices of deliberative dialogue. Deliberative dialogue seeks to foster messages that promote collaboration and listening to find meaning and agreement.
3. **Directionality**: Although the “underscore & explore” approach favored by TBL managers (and increasingly by FBL managers) invites some two-way communication with stakeholders, it retains an emphasis on the manager’s role in identifying key issues, persuading others, enabling meaning, and initiating change. In contrast, as will be discussed more fully in the “information flow from receivers to sender” component of the communication process, SET managers prefer the “trust & adjust” perspective, understanding that if you develop a singular message where you “think you have it” you sacrifice the deeper understanding that comes from incorporating aspects of the truth held by others.

ENCODE AND TRANSMIT THE MESSAGE

After determining what message they want to communicate, managers must determine the best way to encode and communicate that message. **Encoding** refers to choosing the symbols and media that are used to develop and transmit a message.

IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

When choosing how to encode a message, managers must be aware of potential barriers, sometimes called noise. **Noise** is anything that interferes with the transmission of a message. Noise can impede

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communication at all four steps of the communication process. Noise can include the literal challenges such as the noise of machinery or a poor phone connection. Noise can also be more figurative such as sending an email to an employee who is already overwhelmed with emails, ongoing personality conflicts, time pressures, ambiguous words or symbols, jargon, or technical language.

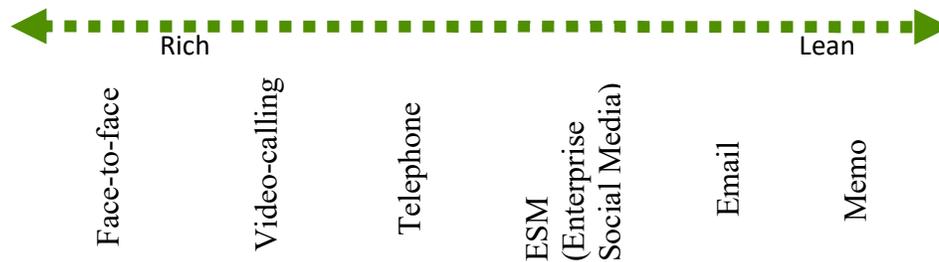
The challenge for managers is to anticipate which barriers to communication need to be overcome, and then encode the message accordingly. This involves conveying messages in language that is easy to understand, clear, and unambiguous.

CHOOSE COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND CHANNELS

Communication media

An important consideration in choosing a communication medium is media richness. **Media richness** refers to a medium's ability to resolve ambiguity. Media richness is determined by the speed and accuracy of feedback that is possible, the verbal and nonverbal cues that are employed, and the level of language used. As shown in Figure 17.2, face-to-face is the richest communication medium because it allows participants to not only hear the content of each other's messages and their tone of voice, but to also see subtle body language. It also allows for immediate feedback and the personalizing of messages.

Figure 17.2: Communication media along the "rich vs lean" continuum



Characteristics of rich media

- personal/unique
- two-way instant feedback/problem-solving
- demands physical co-presence
- spontaneous/flexible
- mass dissemination is difficult

Characteristics of lean media

- impersonal/generic
- one-way slow feedback/problem-solving
- allows for differences in time/space
- premeditated/well-crafted
- mass dissemination easy

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Communication channels

Along with choosing appropriate communication media, managers must also select the appropriate channel, or the path, that a message travels. In addition to messages sent to members within the same team or department, researchers have identified two basic types of channels: formal (upward and downward), and informal (lateral and diagonal).

An organization's *formal communication channels* follow the lines of authority that are shown on an organization chart. Formal downward channels are used when messages are sent from bosses to subordinates along the chain of command. This is the most studied channel. These are used when managers provide instructions or information to subordinates. Unfortunately, a message can lose as much as 25% of its intended meaning each time it moves one hierarchical level down the chain of command. This might help to explain why employees would much prefer receiving information from their immediate supervisor rather than from senior managers—they feel more confident that they will understand what the message is intended to mean.

An organization's *informal communication channels* exist outside of the formal chain of command. An informal lateral channel is being used when, for example, a member of the accounting department directly contacts a member of the sales department (who is at the same hierarchical level, but in a different department) in order to clarify a sales invoice (this is quicker and potentially more accurate than going through the formal chain of command, which would involve the heads of the two departments).

A *grapevine* is an informal diagonal and lateral communication channel that can carry both organizational information (e.g., rumours about an impending merger) and personal information (e.g., who gets along with whom). The grapevine helps employees meet their needs for social interaction, and it is a fast and efficient channel of communication that provides a valuable window into what is important to organizational members. Sometimes the grapevine passes inaccurate information, but generally it is considered to be 75 to 95% accurate. Managers should assume that the grapevine will be active and not try to suppress it, but they should be quick to correct misinformation.

FBL, TBL, AND SET APPROACHES TO ENCODING

FBL, TBL, and SET approaches to encoding parallel one another, but with two important differences. First, there will be differences regarding understandings of noise and barriers to communication. For example, whereas a SET approach values information about socio-ecological externalities associated with a firm's product or service, from an FBL perspective that same information may be treated as unnecessary noise that distracts members from the core purpose of the firm. Similarly, an FBL approach may emphasize the importance of similarities among team members in order to facilitate

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communication, whereas from a SET perspective differences among members provide an opportunity for a richer understanding of issues.

Second, although FBL, TBL, and SET managers may use the exact same media or channels to communicate messages, they often do so with different intentions and outcomes. For example, productivity-oriented FBL managers generally choose leaner media where they can communicate with many people at once (e.g., a report posted on ESM) because they deem this to be the most efficient use of their time. In contrast, even though SET managers may generally prefer richer media, they may choose to post a report on ESM for socio-ecological reasons (e.g., because it reduces GHG emissions that would arise from traveling to different sites to communicate face-to-face).

RECEIVE AND DECODE THE MESSAGE

In this step, the receiver *attributes meaning to the message* through a process called **decoding**. The decoding process mirrors the encoding process, and thus has two components.

1. The communication medium and the channel chosen can affect the richness and meaning of a message. For example, a face-to-face “thank you for a job well done” from a CEO is decoded differently than when a series of names of employees is posted in a company newsletter.
2. Like senders, the communication process works best when receivers are aware of potential noise and barriers to communication that may impede their understanding of the message. Unfortunately, people are often unaware of such barriers. Everyone decodes (and encodes) messages through the lens of their own unique needs, past experience, values, culture, abilities, shortcomings, aspirations, goals, and attitudes. The greater the mismatch between sender and receiver, the greater the likelihood that the meaning of the message will differ from before it was encoded to after it was decoded.

Researchers have identified two kinds of perception biases that can act as barriers to understanding when a message is decoded. The first kind of perception problem is related to *stereotyping*—making assumptions about other people based solely on their gender, race, age, or some other characteristic. A second kind of perception problem is related to *selective perception*, which occurs when people (often unintentionally) screen-out or filter information. This is evident, for example, when people “tune out” ads on television or the internet. On the upside, selective perception helps us to focus on our areas of expertise and to avoid distractions, but it is a problem when we tune out things that are important.

The most important decoding skill is being a good listener, which includes but goes beyond not falling prey to perception biases. This means being attuned to the words being communicated, as well as any other signals (e.g., tone, body language, word choice, what is not being said, etc.). Being a good listener is difficult (talking is easier). We often confuse “hearing” a message with “receiving” a message. Good listeners are able to focus and absorb what another person is trying to communicate. Table 17.1 describes hallmarks of good (active) and poor listeners.

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Table 17.1: Hallmarks of active and poor listening

Characteristics of active listening	Characteristics of poor listening
- actively concentrate on non/verbal message	- mind wanders, thinking of what to say next
- keep an open mind, assimilate information	- prejudge what a person will say; impatient
- good eye contact, nod, mirror body language	- easily distracted (e.g., start multi-tasking)
- provide feedback/paraphrase message/clarify	- assume message is understood as intended

Given the traditional assumptions about the importance of one-way manager-to-subordinate communication, it should not come as a surprise that most studies focus on how subordinates listen to managers, and very little research looks at how managers listen to their employees. This is unfortunate because it is important for managers to be good listeners. Listening improves communication, and promises to improve the quality of decision-making in organizations (see the discussion of feedback below). Listening provides an inexpensive positive reinforcement for other members and helps to create general positive feelings that can increase their support for a manager. But these benefits don't appear if managers fail to *show* that they are listening.

FBL, TBL, AND SET APPROACHES TO DECODING

There are many similarities among FBL, TBL, and SET approaches to decoding, but also two differences.

- First, as is evident throughout the book, the three approaches to management have different *selective perception* biases. FBL decoding focuses on task-related issues like productivity and efficiency, TBL adds a focus on socio-ecological externalities that may help a firm to enhance profits, and SET is receptive to messages that optimize socio-ecological well-being that go beyond profit maximization.
- Second, because of their grounding in individualism, FBL and TBL perspectives are more likely emphasize individual decoding compared to the SET approach, which is more likely to emphasize collective decoding.

INFORMATION FLOW FROM RECEIVERS TO SENDER

From an FBL or TBL perspective, the information flow from receivers to sender (feedback) is seen as the *final* step in the communication process, and the focus is on determining whether the sender's message was received as intended. But from a SET perspective, the information flow from receivers to sender (feedforward) is seen as the *first* step in the process, and the focus is on whether the senders are attuned to intended receivers, which in turn helps senders to develop their messages. Of course, both of these views can be true at the same time, and both operate among all managers, but which view is emphasized will have an effect on communication practices and content.

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