

Communication: The Process, Barriers, And Improving Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Communication is the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another. In this article, I discuss the communication process, barriers to communication, and improving communication effectiveness.

The study of communication is important, because every administrative function and activity involves some form of direct or indirect communication. Whether planning and organizing or leading and monitoring, school administrators communicate with and through other people. This implies that every person's communication skills affect both personal and organizational effectiveness (Brun, 2010; Summers, 2010). It seems reasonable to conclude that one of the most inhibiting forces to organizational effectiveness is a lack of effective communication (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Moreover, good communication skills are very important to ones success as a school administrator. A recent study indicated that recruiters rated communication skills as *the* most important characteristic of an ideal job candidate (Yate, 2009).

In this article, I will help you to better understand how school administrators can improve their communication skills. To begin, I define what is meant by communication and then discuss the process by which it occurs. Following this, I examine barriers to communication and ways to improve communication effectiveness.

Defining Communication and Describing the Process

Communication can be defined as the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another (Keyton, 2011). The word communication is derived from the Latin word, *communis*, which means *common*. The definition underscores the fact that unless a common understanding results from the

exchange of information, there is no communication. Figure 1 reflects the definition and identifies the important elements of the communication process (Cheney, 2011)

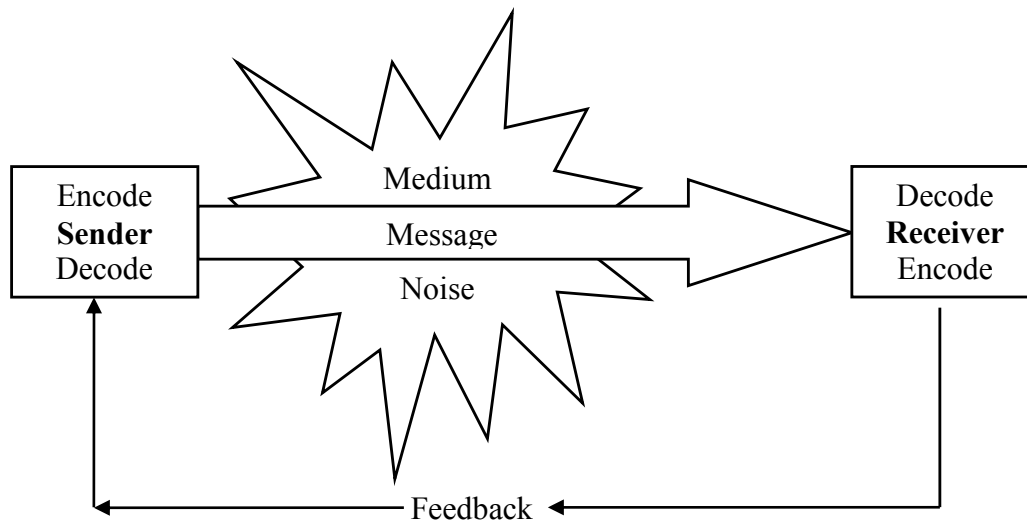


Figure 1. The communication process.

Two common elements in every communication exchange are the sender and the receiver. The *sender* initiates the communication. In a school, the sender is a person who has a need or desire to convey an idea or concept to others. The *receiver* is the individual to whom the message is sent. The sender *encodes* the idea by selecting words, symbols, or gestures with which to compose a message. The *message* is the outcome of the encoding, which takes the form of verbal, nonverbal, or written language. The message is sent through a *medium* or channel, which is the carrier of the communication. The medium can be a face-to-face conversation, telephone call, e-mail, or written report. The receiver *decodes* the received message into meaningful information. *Noise* is anything that distorts the message. Different perceptions of the message, language barriers, interruptions, emotions, and attitudes are examples of noise. Finally, *feedback* occurs when the receiver responds to the sender's message and returns the message to the sender. Feedback allows the sender to determine whether the message has been received and understood.

The elements in the communication process determine the quality of communication. A problem in any one of these elements can reduce communication effectiveness (Keyton, 2011). For example, information must be encoded into a message that can be understood as the sender intended. Selection of the particular medium for transmitting the message can be critical, because there are many choices.

For written media, a school administrator or other organization member may choose from memos, letters, reports, bulletin boards, handbooks, newsletters, and the like. For verbal media, choices include face-to-face conversations, telephone, computer, public address systems, closed-circuit television, tape-recorded messages, sound/slide shows, e-mail, and so on. Nonverbal gestures, facial expressions, body position, and even clothing can transmit messages. People decode information selectively. Individuals are more likely to perceive information favorably when it conforms to their own beliefs,

values, and needs (Keyton, 2010). When feedback does not occur, the communication process is referred to as one-way communication. Two-way communication occurs with feedback and is more desirable.

The key for being successful in the contemporary school is the ability of the school administrator to work with other school stakeholders (faculty, support staff, community members, parents, central office); and develop a shared sense of what the school/school district is attempting to accomplish – where it wants to go, a shared sense of commitments that people have to make in order to advance the school/school district toward a shared vision and clarity of goals. As school administrators are able to build a shared mission, vision, values, and goals, the school/school district will become more effective. Building a relationship between school administrators and other school stakeholders requires effective communication.

For example, research indicates that principals spend 70 to 80% of their time in interpersonal communication with various stakeholders (Green, 2010; Lunenburg & Irby, 2006; Matthews & Crow, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2009; Tareilo, 2011; Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2011). Effective principals know how to communicate, and they understand the importance of ongoing communication, both formal and informal: faculty and department meetings; individual conversations with parents, teachers, and students; and telephone calls and e-mail messages with various stakeholder groups.

The one constant in the life of a principal is a lot of interruptions – they happen daily, with a number of one- and three-minute conversations in the course of the day. This type of communication in the work of the principal has to be done one on one - one phone call to one person at a time, one parent at a time, one teacher at a time, one student at a time; and a principal needs to make time for these conversations. For example, a principal may be talking with a parent with a very serious problem. She may be talking with a community member. She may be talking with the police about something that went on during the school day. The principal must be able to turn herself on and off in many different roles in any given day.

Barriers to Effective Communication

A school administrator has no greater responsibility than to develop effective communication (Pauley, 2010). Why then does communication break down? On the surface, the answer is relatively simple. I have identified the elements of communication as the sender, the encoding, the message, the medium, the decoding, the receiver, and the feedback. If noise exists in these elements in any way, complete clarity of meaning and understanding does not occur. The author, George Bernard Shaw wrote, "The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished" (Shaw, 2011). Four types of barriers (called "noise," see Figure 1) are process barriers, physical barriers, semantic barriers, and psychosocial barriers (Eisenberg, 2010).

Process Barriers

Every step in the communication process is necessary for effective and good communication.. Blocked steps become barriers. Consider the following situations:

- **Sender barrier.** A new administrator with an innovative idea fails to speak up at a meeting, chaired by the superintendent, for fear of criticism.
- **Encoding barrier.** A Spanish-speaking staff member cannot get an English-speaking administrator to understand a grievance about working conditions.
- **Medium barrier.** A very upset staff member sends an emotionally charged letter to the leader instead of transmitting her feelings face-to-face.
- **Decoding barrier.** An older principal is not sure what a young department head means when he refers to a teacher as "spaced out."
- **Receiver barrier.** A school administrator who is preoccupied with the preparation of the annual budget asks a staff member to repeat a statement, because she was not listening attentively to the conversation.
- **Feedback barrier.** During a meeting, the failure of school administrators to ask any questions causes the superintendent to wonder if any real understanding has taken place.

Because communication is a complex, give-and-take process, breakdowns anywhere in the cycle can block the transfer of understanding.

Physical Barriers

Any number of physical distractions can interfere with the effectiveness of communication, including a telephone call, drop-in visitors, distances between people, walls, and static on the radio. People often take physical barriers for granted, but sometimes they can be removed. For example, an inconveniently positioned wall can be removed. Interruptions such as telephone calls and drop-in visitors can be removed by issuing instructions to a secretary. An appropriate choice of media can overcome distance barriers between people.

Semantic Barriers

The words we choose, how we use them, and the meaning we attach to them cause many communication barriers. The problem is semantic, or the meaning of the words we use. The same word may mean different things to different people. Words and phrases such as *efficiency*, *increased productivity*, *management prerogatives*, and *just cause* may mean one thing to a school administrator, and something entirely different to a staff member.

Technology also plays a part in semantic barriers to communication. Today's complex school systems are highly specialized. Schools have staff and technical experts developing and using specialized terminology—jargon that only other similar staff and

technical experts can understand. And if people don't understand the words, they cannot understand the message.

Psychosocial Barriers

Three important concepts are associated with psychological and social barriers: fields of experience, filtering, and psychological distance (Antos, 2011). *Fields of experience* include people's backgrounds, perceptions, values, biases, needs, and expectations. Senders can encode and receivers decode messages only in the context of their fields of experience. When the sender's field of experience overlaps very little with the receiver's, communication becomes difficult. *Filtering* means that more often than not we see and hear what we are emotionally tuned in to see and hear. Filtering is caused by our own needs and interests, which guide our listening. Psychosocial barriers often involve a *psychological distance* between people that is similar to actual physical distance. For example, the school administrator talks down to a staff member, who resents this attitude, and this resentment separates them, thereby blocking opportunity for effective communication.

Successful communication by school administrators is the essence of a productive school organization. However, as discussed previously, communications do break down. Several communication theorists (Abrell, 2004; Auer, 2011; Larson, 2011; Shettleworth, 2010; Weiss, 2011) have focused on the major areas where failures in communication most frequently occur. The following are the major areas where communication breakdowns most frequently occur in schools:

- ***Sincerity.*** Nearly all communication theorists assert that sincerity is the foundation on which all true communication rests. Without sincerity—honesty, straightforwardness, and authenticity—all attempts at communication are destined to fail.
- ***Empathy.*** Research shows that lack of empathy is one of the major obstacles to effective communication. Empathy is the ability to put one's self into another's shoes. The empathetic person is able to see the world through the eyes of the other person.
- ***Self-perception.*** How we see ourselves affects our ability to communicate effectively. A healthy but realistic self-perception is a necessary ingredient in communicating with others.
- ***Role perception.*** Unless people know what their role is, the importance of their role, and what is expected of them, they will not know what to communicate, when to communicate, or to whom to communicate.
- ***Efforts to distort the message.*** Pitfalls in communication often occur in our efforts—both consciously and unconsciously—to distort messages.
- ***Images.*** Another obstacle to successful communication is the sender's image of the receiver and vice versa. For example, on the one hand, school administrators are sometimes viewed as not too well informed about teaching, seen as out of touch with the classroom, and looked on as paper shufflers. On the other hand, some school administrators view teachers as lazy, inconsiderate of administrative problems, and unrealistic about the strengths and weaknesses of their students. Such views lead to a

"we-they" attitude.

- ***Vehicle for message.*** The vehicle by which we choose to send messages is important in successful communication. In most cases, the vehicle to be used is defined by the situation.
- ***Ability to communicate.*** Some of the ways we communicate raise barriers by inhibiting discussion or causing others to feel inferior, angry, hostile, dependent, compliant, or subservient.
- ***Listening ability.*** Frequently, people fail to appreciate the importance of listening, do not care enough to become actively involved with what others are saying, and are not sufficiently motivated to develop the skills necessary to acquire the art of listening.
- ***Culture.*** Our cultural heritage, biases, and prejudices often serve as barriers to communication. The fact that we are African-American or white, young or old, male or female have all proved to be obstacles in communicating effectively.
- ***Tradition.*** Past practice in a school helps determine how, when, and what we send and receive. For example, a school administrator who has an authoritative style may find that his staff will not share information readily. If a new administrator with a collaborative style replaces the authoritarian one, the new administrator may find that it takes a while for his colleagues to speak out on important issues.
- ***Conditioning.*** The manner in which communication is conditioned by the environment influences the accuracy of messages sent and received. If we work for administrators who set a climate in which we are encouraged to share information, we soon become conditioned to communicate accordingly.
- ***Noise.*** A major barrier to communication is what communication experts call noise. Noise consists of the external factors in the channels and the internal perceptions and experiences within the source and the receiver that affect communication.
- ***Feedback.*** Faculty and staff tell their leaders that they want feedback. However, feedback improperly given can impede communication rather than improve it. Administrators and followers both need more training in how to use feedback more productively.

Improving Communication Effectiveness

Effective communication is a two-way process that requires effort and skill by both sender and receiver. Administrators will at times assume each of these roles in the communication process. In this section, I discuss guidelines for improving communication effectiveness, including senders' and receivers' responsibilities, and listening.

Sender's Responsibilities

Several communication theorists (Cheney, 2011; Keyton, 2011; Tourish, 2010) have gleaned ten commandments of good communication, which are particularly applicable to the sender. These commandments, together with a basic understanding of the communication process itself, should provide a good foundation for developing and maintaining an effective set of interpersonal communication skills, which school

administrators can use when communicating with various school stakeholders.

1. ***School administrators need to clarify their ideas before communicating.*** The more systematically administrators analyze the problem or idea to be communicated, the clearer it becomes. This is the first step toward effective communication. Many communications fail because of inadequate planning. Good planning must consider the goals, attitudes, and needs of those who will receive the communication and those who will be affected by it.
2. ***Administrators need to examine the true purpose of each communication.*** Before administrators communicate, they must ask themselves what they really want to accomplish with their message—obtain information, initiate action, or change another person's attitude? Administrators need to identify their most important goal and then adapt their language, tone, and total approach to serve that specific objective. Administrators should not try to accomplish too much with each communication. The sharper the focus of their message, the greater its chances of success.
3. ***Administrators need to consider the total physical and human setting.*** Meaning and intent are conveyed by more than words alone. Many other factors influence the overall impact of a communication, and administrators must be sensitive to the total setting in which they communicate: the circumstances under which an announcement or decision is made; the physical setting—whether the communication is made in private or otherwise; the social climate that pervades work relationships within the school or department and sets the tone of its communications; custom and practice—the degree to which the communication conforms to, or departs from, the expectations of the audience. Be constantly aware of the total setting in which you communicate. Like all living things, communication must be capable of adapting to its environment.
4. ***Administrators need to consult with others, when appropriate, in planning communications.*** Frequently, it is desirable or necessary to seek the participation of others in planning a communication or in developing the facts on which to base the communication. Such consultation often lends additional insight and objectivity to the message. Moreover, those who have helped plan the communication will give it their active support.
5. ***Administrators need to be mindful, while communicating, of the overtones as well as the basic content of the message.*** The administrator's tone of voice, expression, and apparent receptiveness to the responses of others all have tremendous impact on those the administrator wishes to reach. Frequently overlooked, these subtleties of communication often affect a listener's reaction to a message even more than its basic content. Similarly, the administrator's choice of language—particularly her awareness of the fine shades of meaning and emotion in the words used—predetermine in large part the reactions of the listeners.
6. ***Administrators need to take the opportunity, when it arises, to convey something of help or value to the receiver.*** Consideration of the other person's interests and needs—trying to look at things from the other person's point of view—frequently points up opportunities to convey something of immediate benefit or long-range value to the other person. Staff members are most responsive to administrators whose messages take staff interests into account.

7. ***Administrators need to follow up their communication.*** An administrator's best efforts at communication may be wasted, and she may never know whether she has succeeded in expressing her true meaning and intent if she does not follow up to see how well she has put her message across. An administrator can do this by asking questions, by encouraging the receiver to express his or her reactions, by follow-up contacts, and by subsequent review of performance. An administrator needs to make certain that every important communication has feedback so that complete understanding and appropriate action result.

8. ***Administrators need to communicate for tomorrow as well as today.*** Although communications may be aimed primarily at meeting the demands of an immediate situation, they must be planned with the past in mind if they are to maintain consistency in the receiver's view. Most important, however, communications must be consistent with long-range interests and goals. For example, it is not easy to communicate frankly on such matters as poor performance or the shortcomings of a loyal staff member, but postponing disagreeable communications makes these matters more difficult in the long run and is actually unfair to your staff and your school organization.

9. ***Administrators need to be sure that their actions support their communications.*** In the final analysis, the most persuasive kind of communication is not what administrators say, but what they do. When leaders' actions or attitudes contradict their words, others tend to discount what they have said. For every administrator, this means that good supervisory practices—such as clear assignment of responsibility and authority, fair rewards for effort, and sound policy enforcement—serve to communicate more than all the gifts of oratory.

10. ***Administrators need to seek, not only to be understood, but to understand—be a good listener.*** When an administrator starts talking, he often ceases to listen, at least in that larger sense of being attuned to the other person's unspoken reactions and attitudes. Even more serious is the occasional inattentiveness a leader may be guilty of when others are attempting to communicate with him. Listening is one of the most important, most difficult, and most neglected skills in communication. It demands that the administrator concentrate not only on the explicit meanings another person is expressing, but also on the implicit meanings, unspoken words, and undertones that may be far more significant. Thus, an administrator must learn to listen with the inner ear if he is to know the inner person.

Receiver's Responsibilities

Communication depends on the ability not only to send but also to receive messages. So the ability to listen effectively greatly enhances the communication process. But many of us are not good listeners. Effective listening skills can be developed, however. Summarized following are ten rules for good listening (Kneen, 2011):

1. ***Stop talking.*** You cannot listen if you are talking. For example, Polonius in *Hamlet* said: "Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice."

2. ***Put the talker at ease.*** Help a person feel free to talk. This is often called a permissive environment.

3. **Show a talker that you want to listen.** Look and act interested. Do not read your mail while someone talks. Listen to understand rather than to oppose.
4. **Remove distractions.** Don't doodle, tap, or shuffle papers. Will it be quieter if you shut the door?
5. **Empathize with talkers.** Try to help yourself see the other person's point of view.
6. **Be patient.** Allow plenty of time. Do not interrupt a talker. Don't start for the door or walk away.
7. **Hold your temper.** An angry person takes the wrong meaning from words.
8. **Go easy on argument and criticism.** These put people on the defensive, and they may clam up or become angry. Do not argue: Even if you win, you lose.
9. **Ask questions.** This encourages a talker and shows that you are listening. It helps to develop points further.
10. **Stop talking.** This is first and last, because all other guides depend on it. You cannot do an effective listening job while you are talking.

Nature gave people two ears but only one tongue, which is a gentle hint that they should listen more than they talk. Listening requires two ears, one for meaning and one for feeling. Leaders who do not listen have less information for making sound decisions.

Active Listening

Active listening is a term popularized by the work of Carl Rogers and Richard Farson (n.d.) and advocated by counselors and therapists (Brownell, 2009; Burstein, 2010). The concept recognizes that a sender's message contains both verbal and nonverbal content as well as a feeling component. The receiver should be aware of both components in order to comprehend the total meaning of the message. For instance, when a staff member says to her supervisor, "Next time you ask me to prepare a report, please give me some advance notice." The content conveys that the staff member needs time, but the feeling component may indicate resentment for being pressured to meet a deadline with such short notice. The supervisor, therefore, must recognize this feeling to understand the staff member's message. There are five guidelines that can help school administrators to become more active listeners (Rogers & Farson, n.d.).

1. **Listen for message content.** The receiver must try to hear exactly what the sender is saying in the message.
2. **Listen for feelings.** The receiver must try to identify how the sender feels in terms of the message content. This can be done by asking: "What is he trying to say?"
3. **Respond to feelings.** The receiver must let the sender know that her feelings, as well as the message content are recognized.
4. **Note all cues, verbal and nonverbal.** The receiver must be sensitive to the nonverbal messages as well as the verbal ones. If the receiver identifies mixed messages, he may ask for clarification.
5. **Rephrase the sender's message.** The receiver may restate or paraphrase the verbal and nonverbal messages as feedback to the sender. The receiver can do this by allowing the sender to respond with further information.

The last guideline is one of the most powerful of the active listening techniques and is used regularly by counselors and therapists. It helps the receiver avoid passing judgment or giving advice, and encourages the sender to provide more information about what is really the problem.

Conclusion

Communication is the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another. The elements of the communication process are the sender, encoding the message, transmitting the message through a medium, receiving the message, decoding the message, feedback, and noise.

A number of barriers retard effective communication. These can be divided into four categories: process barriers, physical barriers, semantic barriers, and psychosocial barriers. To improve the effectiveness of communications, schools must develop an awareness of the importance of sender's and receiver's responsibilities and adhere to active listening skills.

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