**Effective Communication**

The critical concepts

Sebastian Ioppolo

Our professional and personal success is very largely dependent on our ability to communicate effectively. To achieve this it is important that we understand what is actually meant by the term ‘communication’ and what the critical concepts are that we need to be aware of.

Many people have a narrow interpretation of what ‘communication’ actually means and restrict the meaning to the conveyance of verbal messages, either orally or in writing. They therefore focus their attention on improving verbal skills only when attempting to be more effective communicators. This of course is not fully effective as it fails to recognise that the verbal element is only one of many elements of the communication process and that we communicate in many different ways and not just via the use of words. Some of these ways are not so obvious to us but can be just as powerful, if not more powerful than the verbal element. It is also important to understand that in many circumstances there are many communication elements present and all of these combine to contribute to the understanding of a message.

There are numerous definitions of the word ‘communication’. The following is a simple interpretation that demonstrates the very broad meaning of the term:

*Communication is the exchange of messages between people for the purpose of achieving common meanings.*

Understanding that, whether we are aware of it or not, we communicate in a wide variety of ways, is essential if we are to improve our communication skills and the outcomes of our interactions with others.

Effective communication is when the message received is the same as the message intended. Often this does not occur because the sender of the message fails to take into consideration that the receiver interprets all of the communication elements present from their perspective, and not just those that the sender is necessarily conscious of. For example, in a face-to-face conversation, the speaker may have chosen their words very carefully but may not be aware of their body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. The receiver on the other hand observes all of these and combines them to arrive at their understanding of the message.

Confusion or misunderstanding occurs when the different elements used point to different meanings and are not in sync with each other. For example, the speaker may use the words “I am very excited to be here” but could have a blank or bored expression on their face. The message receiver observes conflicting messages and is often required to make a choice between them in order to come to a conclusion. On the other hand, if all the elements present support and confirm each other – from the perspective of the receiver - then the intended meaning is reinforced and misunderstanding is minimised.



Another important concept to be aware of is that the receiver of a message will interpret the communication elements present from their point of view which may be (and often is) very different to that of the message sender. The mere fact that the message sender is a different person to the message receiver determines that to varying degrees, the interpretations will differ. The interpretation process used by the receiver is reliant on their understanding of the meaning of each of the elements present which is determined by how this person thinks. This in turn is shaped by what makes this person an individual i.e. their background, experiences, education, age, gender, personality, environment, current circumstances and so on. At least some, if not many, of these are likely to be different from those of the message sender and therefore there is the potential for the communication to be misinterpreted.

***Communication is really the conscious and unconscious expression of thoughts and feelings.***

Communication is really the conscious and unconscious expression of thoughts and feelings. The receiver of the message therefore is simply interpreting what thoughts and/or feelings the sender is trying to convey. The receiver analysis the message from their perspective and uses their understanding of their world to arrive at a meaning.

The critical communication concepts therefore are:

1. **Communication consists of several elements** – Even though the message sender may not be conscious of some of the elements that they are using, the receiver combines their interpretation of each of these to arrive at a meaning..
2. **All the elements present should be in sync with each other** – conflicting elements cause confusion and misunderstanding. The more elements present that are aligned – from the perspective of the receiver - the greater the chances of accurate interpretation.
3. **The receiver of the message interprets the elements present from their perspective** – this is often different to the perspective, and therefore the interpretation, of the sender.

An understanding of these concepts and our willingness and ability to understand and adapt to the audience, forms the basis of improving our communication outcomes.

Sebastian Ioppolo has a wealth of experience in business having spent over twenty-six years in management and leadership roles in the corporate world. He is the author of two top selling books on International Business: *‘Import/Export: A Practical Guide for Australian Business’* and *‘Importing and Exporting: 24 Lessons to Get You Started’.* He now shares his knowledge and experience by conducting seminars, facilitating short courses and consulting throughout Australia via his business Mondiale Learning and Development.

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