Introduction to Communication

In this lesson we will explain the communication model and various communication theories. The purpose of this instruction is to convey the intricacies of communication and to show you the processes involved when you write a press release, deliver a speech or stand in front of a camera to answer a reporter’s questions.

Words convey meaning. How you say the words conveys meaning. How you write the words and the order you put them in conveys meaning. How you dress conveys meaning. The look on your face conveys meaning. How you hold your body expresses meaning as well.

Communicating isn’t easy.

The audience is important to public affairs practitioners. The next time you write a press release, ensure you have truly investigated what is important to your audience.

Communication is not a precise science!

An organization’s reputation, profitability and even its continued existence can depend on the degree to which publics support its goals and policies.

Public affairs officers serve as advocates for the military to build and maintain positive relationships with the public. To build those relationships, public affairs officers must understand the foundation of communication.

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Definition of Communication

All behavior communicates. However, a variety of theorists have taken different approaches to help us understand what parts of our behavior most impact communication. The study of communication is not a precise science and does not have just one single approach. Here are two of the more popular definitions:

1. Communication occurs when humans manipulate symbols to stimulate meaning in other humans. It is a social, symbolic process which occurs in a context that informs, entertains, persuades and stimulates (Infante, pp. 8-9).

2. Communication is a reciprocal process of exchanging signals to inform, persuade or instruct, based on shared meaning and conditioned by the communicators’ relationship in a social context. When we look for signs of communication, the most obvious is verbal, but of course we send “signals” in many other ways, as listed below:
   - Symbolic Process – signs: symbol, ritual – must be agreed upon
   - Social Process – something people do together
   - Co-orientation – mutual understanding and awareness of each other
   - Individual Interpretation – by the receiver, based on their experiences
   - Shared Meaning – basic enough for understanding the concept

There is a myth in communication that suggests sending a message is the same as communicating one. An example of this myth is when PAOs offer media clippings as evidence that communication has occurred. That’s not the case. The existence of media merely demonstrates that a newspaper ran the story – not that anyone has read it.

Transition

Now that we have defined communication, let’s discuss the process of communication.
Two-way Communication and the Communication Model

A model is a theoretical and simplified representation of the real world. By its very nature it suggests relationships (Severin & Tankard, p.34).

Parts of the communication model

**Sender** - Someone who transmits a message but does not necessarily originate it.

**Message** - The CONTENT. The stimulus which the sender transmits to the receiver. Meaning is within people, not words. This explains why different people interpret the same message differently. Effects are mediated by receivers (Infante et al, p. 5; Broom, p. 190).

**Verbal** – Spoken words. Spoken words are symbols, signs, and signals for ideas and have no meaning by themselves. Verbal communication occurs when a person interprets these signs, symbols and signals and forms meaning.

**Non-verbal** – Whether the verbal message is accepted depends on how well the sender communicates nonverbally. Nonverbal messages all contribute to the individual’s image or total impression and reinforce verbal messages.

Professor Albert Mehrabian pioneered an understanding of communications in the 1960s. He established a basic statistic for the effectiveness of spoken communications, but with limited application. His model suggests that face-to-face interpersonal communication is 7 percent verbal, 38 percent vocal, and 55 percent facial. How things are said may override what is said in specific instances.

Mehrabian’s communications model is, on occasion, applied in an overly simplistic or indiscriminate manner.

The model is particularly useful in illustrating the importance of factors other than words alone when trying to convey meaning (as the speaker) or interpret meaning (as the listener), but care needs to be taken in considering the context of the communication: Style, expression, tone, facial expression and body language in Mehrabian’s experiments did indeed account for 93% of the meaning inferred by the people in the study, but this is not a general rule that you can transfer to any given communications situation.

Two-way Communication and the Communication Model (continued)

Channel (medium) – This refers to the means by which the message is conveyed from the sender to receiver. Choosing the right medium (singular) or media (plural) requires an understanding of media and its effects. Examples of channels include e-mail, news releases, speeches and advertisements. Face-to-face is the most direct, powerful and preferred method of communication.

Receiver – the destination of a given message. That individual will decode and interpret the message using his or her own background as a filter. This refers to the process of taking the stimuli that have been received and giving it meaning through individual interpretation and perception. Individuals are not uniformly affected. Listeners decode or understand messages only in the framework of the presuppositions and or assumptions of their personal world.

Feedback can be verbal, nonverbal or both. Without feedback the sender would have no means to assess how the message was decoded, which might mean inaccuracies may never be corrected. We typically get one of two forms of feedback.

- Positive – as perceived by the sender – i.e. applause, head nodding.
- Negative – frowns, head shaking – implies changes should be made.

Barriers to communication, also referred to as "noise," can affect our ability to move messages through the five-step communication model. Such barriers or noise are stimuli which inhibit the receiver’s accurate reception and interpretation of a given message.

Noise could be defined as "unwanted signals that can disrupt message fidelity." In the arena of interpersonal communication, there are at least four sources of noise that hamper the transmission of the message from sender to receiver. There are four examples of noise or barriers.

- Physical – airplane overhead, music, jackhammer, etc.
- Psychological – receiver is mentally preoccupied due to hunger (mentally preoccupied), stereotypes and prejudice.
- Perceptual – semantic noise – perception of meaning. Connotative vs. denotative difference in meaning for symbols, i.e. pop, soda, cola.
- Experiential barriers occur in two ways:
  1. Cultural noise – This comes in the form of cultural misconceptions and negative input that directly distort the understanding of the message by the listener. As a result, the listener is not able to hear accurately what is said.
  2. Personal noise – This comes in the form of personal experiences and attitudes that hinder the listener from appreciating the ramifications and benefits of the message to himself. A listener may have had a negative experience with the military or have been turned off by past government experiences, which interrupts their receipt of information.

Now that we have defined communication, the process and barrier and noise, let's take a look at interpersonal and small group communication.
Communication Contexts

Communication is influenced by the situation. The idea that communication is contextual is a well-accepted idea in communication theory. Context involves situations and variables in the situation, which make it different from other contexts. This list represents the agreed upon contexts in which communication occurs.

- Interpersonal
- Small Group
- Organizational
- Mass
- Intercultural
- Public
- Family
- Health
- Political

NOTE: For our purposes, we will focus on interpersonal and small group communication, and then we will discuss mass and intercultural communication when we consider several communication theories.

Interpersonal – Interpersonal communication occurs between two individuals or within a social network or system and ranges from friend to friend, or husband to wife, as well as to a larger extended family system or social network.

Developing, presenting and validating our individual self-concepts are the primary goals of interpersonal communication. Several different theories have emerged suggesting why we are drawn to one group or message over another. We will discuss just a few of the many interpersonal communication theories.

Theories
- Reinforcement Theory and Attraction – The principle of reinforcement explains most interpersonal attraction. We tend to like, and are attracted to, those people who reward us. Studies have revealed that people experience higher levels of attraction toward others not only when they receive favor, but when they simply receive praise (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008). Similarity in attitudes is particularly rewarding and therefore a reliable indicator of whether people will like on another. This theory helps PA better understand how our publics are more likely to be persuaded by communicators who they believe are similar to them.
- Theory of Perceived Understanding – The perception of being understood or misunderstood is linked to an individual’s interpretation of messages. Perceived understanding seems to be linked with empathy. If you feel someone understands you, you are more likely to continue to interact with that person. Three nonverbal behaviors in particular are positively related to feeling understood: appearing relaxed and at ease, smiling, and using eye contact (Cahn and Shulman, 1984).

Small Group – This represents communication between and among members of a small group, which is defined as three to 12 people who develop regular patterns of interaction and share a common purpose, such as a support group. Members influence and are influenced by one another. Small group communication generally takes place in a context that mixes interpersonal communication interactions with social grouping.

Functional Theory
The functional approach to small-group communication is concerned with the results or outcomes of group behaviors and structures. This perspective sees communication as the tool group members use to solve problems and make decisions (Miller, p. 218).

Communication helps group members by promoting rational judgments and critical thinking, as well as preventing group members from faulty decision-making and flawed problem solving – a kind of “checks and balances.” For example, when working as a team in the workplace, successful communication promotes unique, productive input from group members, while preventing poor product prevention.

Next, let’s look at a few mass communication theories.
Mass Communication

Mass communication is directed toward large audiences, which is mediated by electronic or print media. Mass communication theory suggests that media messages exert a powerful influence on society, culture and individual perceptions and behaviors.

- **Uses and Gratification Theory** (Katz & Blumler, 1974, p. 510-511). This theory explains the uses and functions of the media for individuals, groups and society in general. Communication emphasizes audience members as active participants selecting particular forms of media. They actively use media content as a means to gratify our needs: passing time, information (learning), entertainment, companionship, and escape (relaxation). This theory demonstrates how PA must be aware of our publics in order to know which outlets to use to provide information to them.

- **Cultivation Theory** (Griffin, p. 385-393; Severin & Tankard, p. 286). A passive audience uses media. Their opinions, perceptions, attitudes and values are shaped by the pervasive messages, themes, and images they are exposed to over time. Theorist George Gerbner argues that those who watch television for four or more hours per day develop an exaggerated belief in a “mean and scary world.” The violence they see on television can cultivate a social paranoia that counters notions of trustworthy people or safe surroundings. Television is so pervasive that the line between illusion and reality is blurred. We sometimes mistake a real event for a televised one, and vice versa (Infante et al, p. 12). This theory can help public affairs practitioners understand how repeated news coverage of an event or operation may escalate its importance in our publics’ eyes.

- **Agenda-Setting Theory** (Griffin, p. 395-406). The media exert a powerful influence through the ability to tell us what issues are important. The media don’t tell us what to think; they tell us what to think about. Those with a high need for orientation are more likely influenced by the media in determining the importance and relevance of issues when uncertainty is high.

  **NOTE:** The need for orientation refers to the tendency of an individual to seek information about an issue in the news media (Matthes, p. 23).

- **Diffusion of Innovation Theory** (Infante et al, p. 362-363; Broom, p. 197). This deals with the difficulty of getting any innovation – a new concept, program, process, system, etc. – adopted. The diffusion process illustrates how people adopt or reject change through five stages: awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption. The theory proposes that time and communication channels significantly impact how people adopt innovation, and categorizes people into basic categories ranging from “non-adopters” to “innovators,” each with distinct characteristics that impact the adoption process. This theory can help PA understand how to best communicate and diffuse a concept or system.

- **Two-Step Flow Theory** (Griffin, p. 383). This theory asserts that information from the media moves in two distinct stages. Individuals who pay close attention to the mass media and its messages receive the information. These individuals, called opinion leaders, who are generally well-informed people, pass information along to others through informal, interpersonal communication. They also pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content.

This theory of communication flow does not focus on everyone, but instead on those to whom everyone listens. PA practitioners can better understand how specific operational events may be interpreted and potentially changed by influential people based on information provided by the media. It also reinforces the importance of establishing your credibility for your command so you can be an influencer.
Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication occurs between individuals or groups from different cultures or from different subcultures (for example: ethnic groups) of the same sociocultural system. Culture is the traditions, customs, norms, beliefs, values, and thought patterning passed from generation to generation (Griffin, p. 425). This dimension determines how people live together, their values, and how they communicate (Samovar & Porter, p. 289). A culture can be viewed as emphasizing individualism or collectivism.

- Individualism is very common in the U.S., Australia, Germany and many English-speaking countries. People who value individualism tend to value more explicit forms of communication and conflict resolution. This is also known as low-context communication (Cohen, p. 33). People are concerned with maintaining their own independent self-image.

- Collectivism can be found in parts of Europe and much of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. People in collectivist societies may employ less direct communication and more avoidance-style conflict resolution. This is also known as high-context communication. People are more concerned with maintaining their interdependent self-image as a member of a group, which is a requirement of maintaining face and group harmony.

Now that we have discussed a few mass communication theories, let's take a look at the types of mass communication approaches.

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Types of Mass Communication Approaches

There is a significant evolution in the processes we use to communicate within our society, primarily driven by technological advances in communication systems and the methods we choose to incorporate those technologies into our social exchanges. As communication has evolved, so has our understanding of communication. There are three specific approaches to mass communication:

Broadcast communication – This represents one individual or organization sending a single message to a broad group of people. This broadcast model is characterized by the diffusion of television and radio and the rise of broadcast television and radio networks. It allowed organizations to exercise centralized control of communication and allowed for broad message dissemination without critical consideration of feedback (Griffin, p. 390; MCRP, ch. 4, p. 44).

Narrowcast model of communication – This reflects one individual or organization targeting distinct groups of people with various, yet tailored messages. This model reflects the evolution of cable television networks and segmented radio networks, which allowed organizations to retain centralized control of communication by segmenting the audience through the sophistication of disseminating messages.

Networked communication – Today's knowledge-based societies are embracing a networked communication model as a result of vast changes in the media landscape that has converged interpersonal and mass communication. This is a global communication process that features various degrees of interconnections and interactivity between organizations and publics. Individuals now have unprecedented access to information and numerous choices in the methods with which they communicate with organizations and each other (professional conferences, video teleconference, guest speakers, etc.).

The primary rhetoric within this communication model is in the form of imagery and videos, with an emerging shift to user-generated content vice content produced.
Types of Mass Communication Approaches (continued)

by traditional media. The networked communication model represents an absence of centralized control over communication and dynamic fluidity in message dissemination throughout a global network of individuals who are active participants in the communication process.

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Conclusion

In this lesson we reviewed several definitions of communication. We showed you a communications model and reviewed many theories and contexts in the communications field.

As a PAO, you will be constantly tested on your ability to craft messages. Many things may affect the decoding of your message.

There are barriers that will distort and diminish your original meaning. From feedback, you may discover that members of your audience have “other” things on their minds.

You might have to take the first volley back and "change it," "massage it" and "deliver it" again, with the full understanding that you might have to find another medium or channel to deliver it effectively.

If this sounds difficult, and terribly time intensive, you are absolutely correct. Words are very important, and how your words are put together and presented leads to the success of your message.

In the final analysis, if we convinced you that communication is difficult – but important – and that as a PAO you will need to make a life’s study of this process, then we succeeded in our overall objective. You are the driver and operator of the communication model. You know how to perform maintenance – now it’s time to see what it can do.
References and Additional Resources


Marine Corps Reference Publication. Chapter. 4


