

# Communication

## What is communication?

However much the technology of communication may advance, it will not replace people's basic need to keep in touch. All the internet, email, and telecommunications you can think of will never replace – for example – the effect of saying 'Thank You' face to face with a member of your team. So if it's not about technology, what is communication? In the context of communicating in and around your department or office, it is:

'A means of making sure that your team collectively and individually understand what is happening and why, and have sufficient information to contribute fully and effectively to the running of the business.'

Nobody can run any part of the business by themselves; effective communication is one of the key management skills which enable people to work together towards a common goal.

## But I talk to people anyway!

Communication is more than just talking to people – for a start it involves listening too! It includes:

- **Involving the team** in decision making and problem solving
- **Encouraging individuals** to talk about their ideas and opinions
- **Keeping the team informed** about business issues, developments and objectives
- **Sharing information** within as well as to the team
- **Ensuring that everyone** is allowed, and encouraged to have their say
- **Using the best media** for the message

As a manager you should do your share of receiving as well as giving out information – after all, you have two eyes and two ears for receiving information, and one mouth for giving it, so use them in that proportion!

## Benefits of good communication

A team that communicates well will enjoy the following benefits:

- **Better decisions** due to more ideas, more input, and team agreement
- **More commitment** because the team have 'bought into' the decision making process and the decision itself
- **Improved understanding** by knowing how one person's contribution fits with another's to make up the team performance
- **Fewer problems** because the team has it's own mechanism for solving them, rather than bringing them all to you
- **More flexibility** – when individuals understand what their colleagues do and need to do, they are more likely to help willingly

- **Quicker change** – the key skill in managing change is communication – the team can change direction more rapidly whilst remaining stable
- **Team spirit** – as a useful additional benefit, the team will enjoy more and better team spirit and morale, leading to a stronger sense of identity as a team

## Can I always involve everyone?

No. There will be times when a decision needs making instantly, or by the person on the spot alone, and there is not the time or need to involve the team. It may be that on a particular issue there are no options to discuss. However, in this case, how you communicate is as important as what you communicate. Rather than laying the blame elsewhere, it is better to explain to your team the reason why a decision has been made. This may mean 'painting the bigger picture', to put a decision in context.

## Methods of communication

By the very nature of our business, it is not always possible to gather the whole team together at once. In place of this, you may care to use some or all of the following:

- Large or small group **meetings**, briefings or presentations
- **One to one** meetings
- **Informal** chats
- **Telephone** calls
- **Written notes**, emails or letters
- **Notices** displayed on the notice board

There may be others you use from time to time, but generally those listed above will be the main ones for business purposes.

## Choosing your method

The general rule here is 'Simplest is Best'. There is usually a trade-off between speed and accuracy or consistency, so it may be necessary to consider which of these is most important. If speed is the priority, a combination of messages passed on, a group meeting, and some phone calls may be best. If however accuracy is most important, a notice on the board or a series of briefings and one-to-ones run by the same person using the same script will be most useful.

Consider the impact on the person receiving the message. Any sensitive issue, such as a change in ways of working is best discussed with the individual concerned before the information is made public. This gives the person a chance to air any concerns and have them dealt with in private. The key tip here is to look at it from their point of view.

Make full use of the methods available to you. For example, a manager often has the opportunity to communicate with every member of their team each day. If the management team is committed to MBWA, (Management By Walking About) the opportunities increase many-fold. You can also hold extra team meetings if necessary, or make a point of speaking to each person individually, perhaps with the next OTOM.

## Factors in communication

It has been suggested that when we communicate, the meaning is perceived as follows:

7%	by the words	38%	by the tone of voice	55%	by the body language
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Make sure that you 'walk what you talk', for example if you are asking your team to get behind a recent change to working practices and give it their best shot, you must come across as enthusiastic yourself. This means using the right body language and tone of voice, as well as choosing the right words. If you need to give sensitive news to an individual, again make sure that your body language and tone match what you need to say.

Another factor to consider is honesty and integrity. Honesty is about matching what you say to the facts, such as giving a straight answer to a question. Integrity is about matching the facts to what you say, such as carrying out an action you have committed to doing. Both of these are about matching words to actions, which again relates to 'walk what you talk'.

When considering the impact of your communication on the other person, ask yourself whether it will have the effect you want it to. From time to time you will need to influence your line manager, or negotiate with another part of the business, or make contact with another member of your extended team. In this case you may want to use a different method, or adopt a different tone or words, to the ones you habitually use with your team on a day-to-day basis. Only by using the right skills and techniques will you get the best results as described earlier.

## Remote communication

The communication methods above are suitable where the manager works with their team. Where a team is dispersed and the manager works remotely, as in a field manager role, there are other factors to consider.

The behaviours you use as a manager will not be so obvious in an email or phone call, so you may need to take a more democratic approach to making decisions. This will also help to involve the individuals more, and so help build the virtual team. It is also useful to spend more time than usual getting to know the team members, to build relationships and encourage trust and co-operation.

You will need to find a way of encouraging the social conversation that would normally occur in the workplace, in order to build relationships within the team. One way of doing this is by making 'social' phone calls and emails within the team acceptable where they would not usually be encouraged. Another way is by arranging 'communication days' where people can meet face-to-face, although these will need to be carefully organised in order to get the most out of them.

A conference call is often a useful alternative to a face to face meeting, although the biggest component of communication, the body language, is absent. A caller can opt to withdraw from the conversation and not be noticed for a while; the person hosting the call will need to ensure that all the callers are participating fully. The host will also need to act as chairman, to ensure for example that one person speaks at once. In a meeting you can 'tune out' of a second conversation, on a conference call the effect is chaotic. Where equipment is available a videoconference can also be useful, with the added benefit of body language being visible.

An email may be used to distribute a document, photo or other attachment that can then be discussed in the virtual meeting, where it cannot be handed out for comment. It usually combines speed and accuracy, although you cannot control when and if it is read – there may be some delay or it may be ignored totally! It is also wise to avoid or minimise sarcasm and irony as this may be interpreted differently by the reader, or when taken out of context.

The same points also apply to written notices or documents, where they will be read remotely, and cannot be discussed at the time.

**For related topics see Top Tips:**

- **Assertiveness**
- **Body Language**
- **Rapport**