

1. UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define communication.
2. Understand the communication process.

Communication supports each of a manager's P-O-L-C functions. The ability to effectively communicate is a necessary condition for successfully planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. Communication is vital to organizations—it's how we coordinate actions and achieve goals. Communication is defined as "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior."^[1] We know that 50%–90% of a manager's time is spent communicating^[2] and that communication ability is related to a manager's performance.^[3] In most work environments, miscommunication is an annoyance—it can interrupt workflow by causing delays and interpersonal strife. And in some work arenas, like operating rooms and airplane cockpits, communication can be a matter of life and death.

Unfortunately, miscommunication is common in the workplace, and the relationship between miscommunication and negative outcomes is strong. A NASA study suggests that deficient interpersonal communication was a causal factor in approximately 70%–80% of aviation accidents over a 20-year period.^[4]

Poor communication can also lead to lawsuits. For example, while malpractice suits are commonly filed against doctors based on the outcome of their treatments, a study of malpractice suits found that a primary influence on whether a doctor is sued is that doctor's communication style. While the combination of a bad outcome and patient unhappiness can quickly lead to litigation, a warm, personal communication style leads to greater patient satisfaction. And satisfied patients are less likely to sue.^[5]

For leaders and organizations, poor communication costs money and wastes time. One study found that 14% of each workweek is wasted on poor communication.^[6] In contrast, effective communication is an asset for organizations and individuals alike. Effective communication skills, for example, are an asset for job seekers. A study of recruiters at 85 business schools ranked communication and interpersonal skills as one of most important skills they were looking for, with 89% of the recruiters saying they were important.^[7] Good communication can help a company retain star employees. Surveys find that when employees think their organizations do a good job of keeping them informed about matters that affect them and they have ready access to the information they need to do their jobs, they are more satisfied with their employers.^[8] Good communication can also increase a company's market value. "When you foster ongoing communications internally, you will have more satisfied employees who will be better equipped to effectively communicate with your customers," says Susan Meisinger, former President/CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management, citing research findings that for organizations that are able to improve their communication integrity, their market value increases by as much as 7.1%.^[9]

FIGURE 11.3

Success on complicated missions at NASA depends on strong communication.



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cheering-full-br2.jpg>

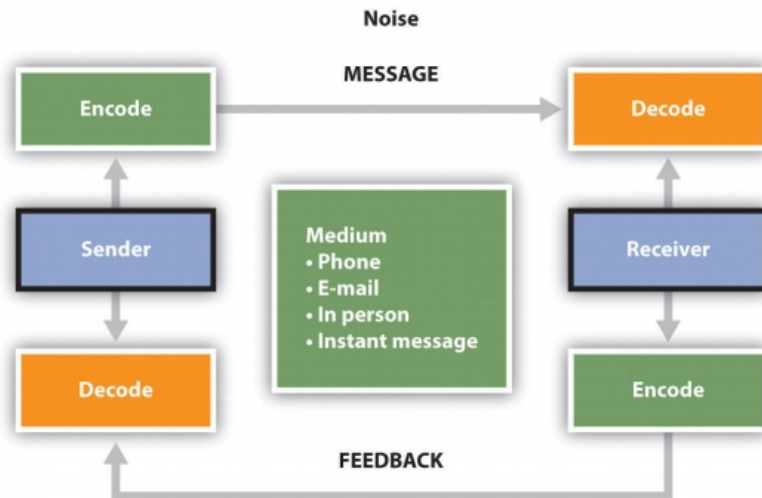
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1.1 The Communication Process

Communication fulfills three main functions within an organization: (1) transmitting information, (2) coordinating effort, and (3) sharing emotions and feelings. All these functions are vital to a successful organization. Transmitting information is vital to an organization's ability to function. Coordinating effort within the organization helps people work toward the same goals. Sharing emotions and feelings bonds teams and unites people in times of celebration and crisis. Effective communication helps people grasp issues, build rapport with coworkers, and achieve consensus.

We all exchange information with others countless times a day, by phone, e-mail, print, and of course in person. Understanding how individuals communicate effectively is the first step in understanding the communication process. We explain one well-known model of communication—the Process Model of Communication—in Figure 11.5.

FIGURE 11.5 The Process Model of Communication



A **Sender**, such as a boss, coworker, or customer, originates the Message with a thought. For example, the boss's thought could be "Get more printer toner cartridges!"

The Sender **encodes** the Message, translating the idea into words.

The boss may communicate this thought by saying, "Hey you guys, we need to order more printer toner cartridges."

The **medium** of this encoded Message may be spoken words, written words, or signs.

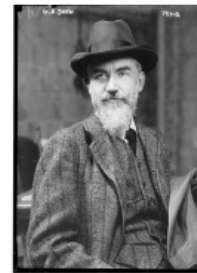
The **receiver** is the person who receives the Message.

The Receiver **decodes** the Message by assigning meaning to the words.

In this example, our Receiver, Bill, has a to-do list a mile long. "The boss must know how much work I already have," the Receiver thinks. Bill's mind translates his boss's Message as, "Could you order some printer toner cartridges, in addition to everything else I asked you to do this week...if you can find the time?"

FIGURE 11.4

Famed Irish writer George Bernard Shaw once quipped, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." As the only person to ever win both a Nobel Prize and an Oscar, his advice on communication is noteworthy.



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:GBShaw_1909.jpg

encoding

The translation of ideas into words.

medium

The way that a Sender's Message is conveyed.

receiver

The person who a Message is intended to reach.

decoding

The process of assigning meaning to a received Message.

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noise

Anything that interferes with or distorts the Message being transformed.

The meaning that the Receiver assigns may not be the meaning that the Sender intended because of such factors as noise. **Noise** is anything that interferes with or distorts the Message being transformed. Noise can be external in the environment (such as distractions) or it can be within the Receiver. For example, the Receiver may be highly nervous and unable to pay attention to the Message. Noise can even occur within the Sender: the Sender may be unwilling to take the time to convey an accurate Message or the words she chooses can be ambiguous and prone to misinterpretation.

Picture the next scene. The place: a staff meeting. The time: a few days later. The boss believes her Message has been received.

"Are the printer toner cartridges here yet?" she asks.

"You never said it was a rush job!" the Receiver protests.

"But!"

"But!"

Miscommunications like these happen in the workplace every day. But how does a miscommunication happen? It helps to think of the communication process. The series of arrows pointing the way from the Sender to the Receiver and back again can, and often do, fall short of their target.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Communication is vital to organizations. Poor communication is prevalent and can have serious repercussions. Communication fulfills three functions within organizations: transmitting information, coordinating, and sharing emotions and feelings. Noise can disrupt or distort communication.

EXERCISES

1. Where have you seen the communication process break down—at work? At school? At home?
2. Explain how miscommunication might be related to an accident at work.
3. Give an example of noise during the communication process.

2. COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand different ways that the communication process can be sidetracked.
2. Understand the problem of poor listening and how to promote active listening.

2.1 Barriers to Effective Communication

Several barriers stand in the way of effective communication. These include filtering, selective perception, information overload, emotional disconnects, lack of source familiarity or credibility, workplace gossip, semantics, gender differences, differences in meaning between Sender and Receiver, and biased language. In this section, we explain each of these barriers.

Filtering

Filtering is the distortion or withholding of information to manage a person's reactions. Some examples of filtering include a manager who keeps her division's poor sales figures from her boss, the vice president, fearing that the bad news will make him angry. The old saying, "Don't shoot the messenger!" illustrates the tendency of Receivers (in this case, the vice president) to vent their negative response to unwanted Messages on the Sender. A gatekeeper (the vice president's assistant, perhaps) who doesn't pass along a complete Message is also filtering. The vice president may delete the e-mail announcing the quarter's sales figures before reading it, blocking the Message before it arrives.

Filtering prevents members of an organization from getting a complete picture of reality. To maximize the possibility of sending and receiving effective communications, it's helpful to deliver a Message in multiple ways and to seek information from multiple sources. In this way, the effect of any one person's filtering the Message will be diminished.

Since people tend to filter bad news more often when communicating with a superior, it is also helpful to remember that subordinates in an organization may be wary of sharing bad news. One way to defuse the tendency to filter is to reward employees who clearly convey information, regardless of whether the news is good and bad.

Here are some of the criteria that individuals may use when deciding whether to filter a Message or pass it on:

- **Past experience.** Was the Sender rewarded for passing along news of this kind in the past, or was she criticized?
- **Knowledge, perception of the speaker.** Has the Receiver's direct superior made it clear that "no news is good news?"
- **Emotional state, involvement with the topic, level of attention.** Does the Sender's fear of failure or criticism prevent him from conveying the Message? Is the topic within his realm of expertise, increasing his confidence in his ability to decode it, or is he out of his comfort zone when it comes to evaluating the Message's significance? Are personal concerns impacting his ability to judge the Message's value?

Selective Perception

Selective perception refers to filtering information to suit our own needs. This process is often unconscious. Small things can command our attention when we're visiting a new city or a new company. Over time, however, we begin to make assumptions about the way things are on the basis of our past experience. Often, much of this process is unconscious. "We simply are bombarded with too much stimuli every day to pay equal attention to everything so we pick and choose according to our own needs." Selective perception is a necessary tool that provides efficiency in a complex culture, but it can also lead to mistakes. A classic study on selective perception involved participants watching a particularly violent football game between Princeton and Dartmouth. Participants rooting for a specific team counted more infractions committed by the other team.

filtering

The distortion or withholding of information to manage a person's reactions.

selective perception

The personal filtering of what we see and hear to suit our own needs.

FIGURE 11.6

A field study found that managers can expect, on average, to do only *three minutes* of uninterrupted work on any one task before being interrupted by an incoming e-mail, instant message, phone call, coworker, or other distraction.



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information overload

This occurs when the information processing demands on an individual's time to perform interactions and internal calculations exceed the supply or capacity of time available for such processing.

grapevine

The informal gossip network within a given organization.

semantics

The meanings of words and the study of meaning in communication.

Information Overload

Information overload can be defined as “occurring when the information processing demands on an individual's time to perform interactions and internal calculations exceed the supply or capacity of time available for such processing.”^[10] Messages reach us in countless ways every day. Some are societal—advertisements that we may hear or see in the course of our day. Others are professional—e-mails, and memos, voice mails, and conversations from our colleagues. Others are personal—messages and conversations from our loved ones and friends.

Experts note that information overload is “A symptom of the high-tech age, which is too much information for one human being to absorb in an expanding world of people and technology. The sources of information overload include TV, newspapers, and magazines as well as wanted and unwanted regular mail, e-mail, and faxes. It has been exacerbated enormously because of the formidable number of results obtained from Web search engines.”^[11] Other research shows that working in such fragmented fashion has a significant negative effect on efficiency, creativity, and mental acuity.^[12]

Emotional Disconnects

Emotional disconnects happen when the Sender or the Receiver is upset, whether about the subject at hand or about some unrelated incident that may have happened earlier. An effective communication requires a Sender and a Receiver who are open to speaking and listening to one another, despite possible differences in opinion or personality. One or both parties may have to put their emotions aside to achieve the goal of communicating clearly. A Receiver who is emotionally upset tends to ignore or distort what the Sender is saying. A Sender who is emotionally upset may be unable to present ideas or feelings effectively.

Lack of Source Credibility

Lack of source familiarity or credibility can derail communications, especially when humor is involved. Sarcasm and irony are subtle and have a high potential to be misunderstood. Lack of familiarity with the source of a joke can lead to misinterpreting humor, especially in less-rich information channels like e-mail.

Similarly, if the Sender lacks credibility or is untrustworthy, the Message will not get through. Receivers may be suspicious of the Sender's motivations (“Why am I being told this?”). Likewise, if the Sender has communicated erroneous information in the past, or has created false emergencies, his current Message may be filtered.

Workplace gossip, also known as the **grapevine**, is a lifeline for many employees seeking information about their company.^[13] Researchers agree that the grapevine is an inevitable part of organizational life with 70% of all organizational communication occurring at the grapevine level.^[14]

Employees trust their peers as a source of Messages, but the grapevine's informal structure can be a barrier to effective communication from the managerial point of view. Its grassroots structure gives it greater credibility in the minds of employees than information delivered through official channels, even when that information is false.

A study of the positive side of gossip found that the likelihood that information would be shared made individuals less likely to act in a selfish manner.^[15] Some downsides of the office grapevine are that gossip offers politically minded insiders a powerful tool for disseminating communication (and self-promoting miscommunications) within an organization. In addition, the grapevine lacks a specific Sender, which can create a sense of distrust among employees—who is at the root of the gossip network? When the news is volatile, suspicions may arise as to the person or persons behind the Message. Managers who understand the grapevine's power can use it to send and receive Messages of their own. They also decrease the grapevine's power by sending official Messages quickly and accurately, should big news arise.

Semantics

Semantics is the study of meaning in communication. Words can mean different things to different people, or they might not mean anything to other people. For example, companies often have their own acronyms and buzzwords (called business jargon) that are clear to them but impenetrable to outsiders. For example, at IBM, GBS is focusing on BPTS, using expertise acquired from the PwC purchase (which had to be sold to avoid conflicts of interest in light of SOX) to fend other BPO providers and inroads by the Bangalore tiger. Translation: IBM's Global Business Services (GBS) division is focusing on offering companies Business Process Transformation Services (BPTS), using the expertise it acquired from purchasing the management consulting and technology services arm of PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), which had to sell the division because of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX, enacted in response to the major accounting scandals like the Enron). The added management expertise puts it above business

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process outsourcing (BPO) vendors who focus more on automating processes rather than transforming and improving them. Chief among these BPO competitors is Wipro, often called the “Bangalore tiger” because of its geographic origin and aggressive growth.

Given the amount of Messages we send and receive every day, it makes sense that humans try to find shortcuts—a way to communicate things in code. In business, this code is known as jargon. Jargon is the language of specialized terms used by a group or profession. It is common shorthand among experts and if used sensibly can be a quick and efficient way of communicating. Most jargon consists of unfamiliar terms, abstract words, nonexistent words, acronyms, and abbreviations, with an occasional euphemism thrown in for good measure. Every profession, trade, and organization has its own specialized terms.^[16] At first glance, jargon seems like a good thing—a quicker way to send an effective communication, the way text message abbreviations can send common messages in a shorter, yet understandable way. But that’s not always how things happen. Jargon can be an obstacle to effective communication, causing listeners to tune out or fostering ill-feeling between partners in a conversation. When jargon rules the day, the Message can get obscured.

A key question to ask before using jargon is, “Who is the Receiver of my Message?” If you are a specialist speaking to another specialist in your area, jargon may be the best way to send a message while forging a professional bond—similar to the way best friends can communicate in code. For example, an information technology (IT) systems analyst communicating with another IT employee may use jargon as a way of sharing information in a way that reinforces the pair’s shared knowledge. But that same conversation should be held in Standard English, free of jargon, when communicating with staff members outside the IT group.

Online Follow-Up

Here is a Web site of 25 buzz words in business:

<http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/1846-business-buzzwords-2012.html>

And here is a discussion of why slang is a problem:

<http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson5.htm>

Gender Differences

Men and women work together every day. But their different styles of communication can sometimes work against them. Generally speaking, women like to ask questions before starting a project, while men tend to “jump right in.” A male manager who’s unaware of how many women communicate their readiness to work may misperceive a ready employee as not ready.

Another difference that has been noticed is that men often speak in sports metaphors, while many women use their home as a starting place for analogies. Women who believe men are “only talking about the game” may be missing out on a chance to participate in a division’s strategy and opportunities for teamwork and “rallying the troops” for success.^[17]

“It is important to promote the best possible communication between men and women in the workplace,” notes gender policy adviser Dee Norton. “As we move between the male and female cultures, we sometimes have to change how we behave (speak the language of the other gender) to gain the best results from the situation. Clearly, successful organizations of the future are going to have leaders and team members who understand, respect, and apply the rules of gender culture appropriately.”^[18]

Being aware of these gender differences can be the first step in learning to work with them, as opposed to around them. For example, keep in mind that men tend to focus more on competition, data, and orders in their communications, while women tend to focus more on cooperation, intuition, and requests. Both styles can be effective in the right situations, but understanding the differences is a first step in avoiding misunderstandings based on them.

Differences in meaning often exist between the Sender and Receiver. “*Mean what you say, and say what you mean.*” While this advice may seem straightforward, different words mean different things to different people. Age, education, and cultural background are all factors that influence how a person interprets words. The less we consider our audience, the greater our chances of miscommunication will be. When communication occurs in the cross-cultural context, extra caution is needed given that different words will be interpreted differently across cultures and different cultures have different norms regarding nonverbal communication. Eliminating jargon is one way of ensuring that our words will convey real-world concepts to others. Speaking to our audience, as opposed to ourselves, is another. Nonverbal Messages can also have different meanings.

FIGURE 11.7

Excessive jargon in business led to the creation of buzzword bingo, where business words or phrases substitute for traditional bingo squares.



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/keasone/2001471860>

jargon

A specific set of acronyms or words unique to a specific group or profession.

FIGURE 11.8

Gender differences in communication have been documented by a number of experts, including linguistics professor Deborah Tannen in her best-selling book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*.

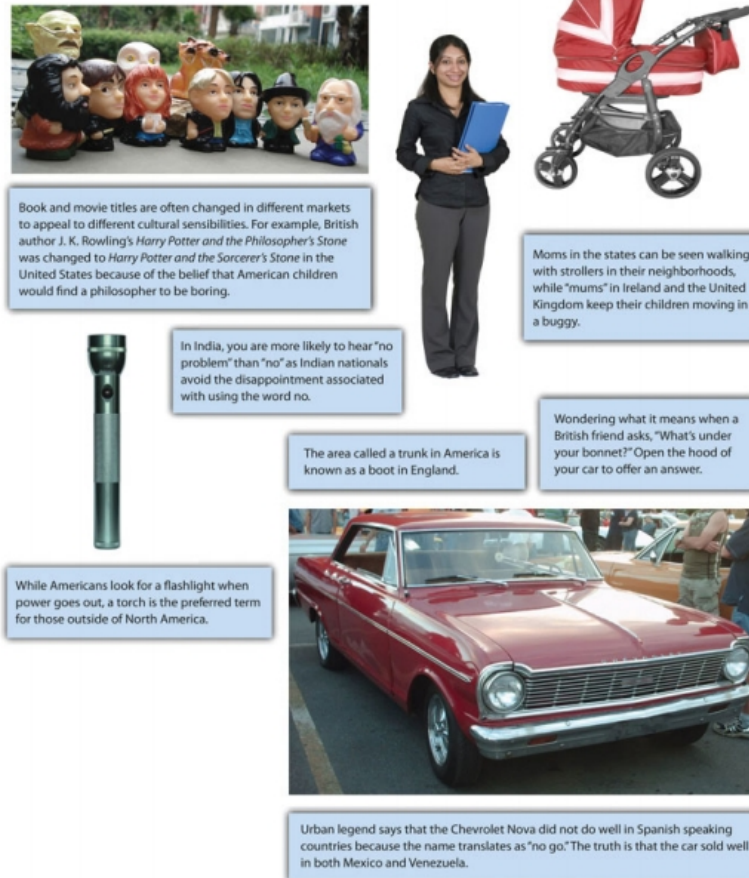


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FIGURE 11.9 Watch Your Language

Cultural differences rooted in language—even across English-speaking countries—can affect how firms do business internationally. Below we provide a few examples.



Source: Image courtesy of Ketchen, D., & Short, J. (2011). *Mastering strategic management*. Irvington, NY: Flat World Knowledge.

Managers who speak about "long-term goals and profits" to a staff that has received scant raises may find their core Message ("You're doing a great job—and that benefits the folks in charge!") has infuriated the group they hoped to inspire. Instead, managers who recognize the "contributions" of their staff and confirm that this work is contributing to company goals in ways "that will benefit the source of our success—our employees as well as executives," will find their core Message ("You're doing a great job—we really value your work") is received as opposed to being misinterpreted.

Biased language can offend or stereotype others on the basis of their personal or group affiliation. The figure below provides a list of words that have the potential to be offensive in the left-hand column. The right-hand column provides more neutral words that you can use instead.^[19]

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FIGURE 11.10 Avoiding Biased Language

Avoid	Consider Using
black attorney	attorney
businessman	business person
chairman	chair or chairperson
cleaning lady	cleaner or maintenance worker
male nurse	nurse
manpower	staff or personnel
secretary	assistant or associate

Effective communication is clear, factual, and goal-oriented. It is also respectful. Referring to a person by one adjective (a *brain*, a *diabetic*, an *invalid*) reduces that person to that one characteristic. Language that belittles or stereotypes a person poisons the communication process. Language that insults an individual or group based on age, ethnicity, sexual preference, or political beliefs violates public and private standards of decency, ranging from civil rights to corporate regulations.

The effort to create a neutral set of terms to refer to heritage and preferences has resulted in a debate over the nature of "political correctness." Proponents of political correctness see it as a way to defuse the volatile nature of words that stereotyped groups and individuals in the past. Critics of political correctness see its vocabulary as stilted and needlessly cautious.

Many companies offer new employees written guides on standards of speech and conduct. These guides, augmented by common sense and courtesy, are solid starting points for effective and respectful workplace communication. Tips for appropriate workplace speech include but are not limited to

- alternating the use of "he" and "she" when referring to people in general,
- relying on guidelines generated by human resources,
- remembering that terms that feel respectful or comfortable to us may not be comfortable or respectful to others.

2.2 Poor Listening and Active Listening

Former Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca lamented, "I only wish I could find an institute that teaches people how to listen. After all, a good manager needs to listen at least as much as he needs to talk."^[20] Research shows that listening skills are related to promotions.^[21] A Sender may strive to deliver a Message clearly. But the Receiver's ability to listen effectively is equally vital to effective communication. The average worker spends 55% of his or her workdays listening. Managers listen up to 70% each day. But listening does not lead to understanding in every case. Listening takes practice, skill, and concentration.

According to University of San Diego professor Phillip Hunsaker, "The consequences of poor listening are lower employee productivity, missed sales, unhappy customers, and billions of dollars of increased cost and lost profits. Poor listening is a factor in low employee morale and increased turnover because employees do not feel their managers listen to their needs, suggestions, or complaints."^[22] Clearly, if you hope to have a successful career in management, it behooves you to learn to be a good listener.

Alan Gulick, a Starbucks spokesperson, puts better listening to work in pursuit of better profits. If every Starbucks employee misheard one \$10 order each day, he calculates, their errors would cost the company a billion dollars annually. To teach its employees to listen, Starbucks created a code that helps employees taking orders hear the size, flavor, and use of milk or decaf coffee. The person making the drink echoes the order aloud.

How can you improve your listening skills? The Roman philosopher Cicero said, "Silence is one of the great arts of conversation." How often have we been in conversation with someone else where we are not really listening but itching to convey our portion? This behavior is known as "rehearsing." It suggests the Receiver has no intention of considering the Sender's Message and intends to respond to

active listening

Giving full attention to what other people are saying.

an earlier point instead. Clearly, rehearsing is an impediment to the communication process. Effective communication relies on another kind of listening: active listening.

Active listening can be defined as giving full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as appropriate, and not interrupting at inappropriate times.^[23] Active listening creates a real-time relationship between the Sender and the Receiver by acknowledging the content and receipt of a Message. For example, repeating and confirming a Message's content offers a way to confirm that the correct content is flowing between colleagues. The process creates a bond between coworkers while increasing the flow and accuracy of messaging.

Carl Rogers, founder of the "person-centered" approach to psychology, formulated five rules for active listening:

1. Listen for message content
2. Listen for feelings
3. Respond to feelings
4. Note all cues
5. Paraphrase and restate

Fortunately, listening is a skill that can be learned.^[24] The first step is to decide that we want to listen. Casting aside distractions, such as by reducing background or internal noise, is critical. The Receiver takes in the Sender's Message silently, without speaking. Second, throughout the conversation, show the speaker that you're listening. This can be accomplished nonverbally by nodding your head and keeping your attention focused on the speaker. You can also do it verbally, by saying things like, "Yes," "That's interesting," or other such verbal cues. As you're listening, pay attention to the Sender's body language for additional cues about how they're feeling. Interestingly, silence plays a major role in active listening. During active listening, we are trying to understand what has been said, and in silence, we can consider the implications. Finally, if anything is not clear, ask questions. Confirm that you've heard the message accurately, by repeating back a crucial piece like, "Great, I'll see you at 2 p.m. in my office." At the end of the conversation, a "thank you" from both parties communicates mutual respect.

In summary, active listening creates a more dynamic relationship between a Receiver and a Sender. It strengthens personal investment in the information being shared. It also forges healthy working relationships among colleagues by making Speakers and Listeners equally valued members of the communication process.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Many barriers to effective communication exist. Examples include filtering, selective perception, information overload, emotional disconnects, lack of source familiarity or credibility, workplace gossip, semantics, gender differences, differences in meaning between Sender and Receiver, and biased language. The Receiver can enhance the probability of effective communication by engaging in active listening, which involves (1) giving one's full attention to the Sender and (2) checking for understanding by repeating the essence of the Message back to the Sender.

EXERCISES

1. Most individuals are poor listeners. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Please support your position.
2. Please share an example of how differences in shared meaning have affected you.
3. Give an example of selective perception.
4. Do you use jargon at or in your classes? If so, do you think it helps or hampers communication? Why or why not?
5. In your experience, how is silence used in communication? How does your experience compare with the recommended use of silence in active listening?