



Communication Breakdowns in Interpersonal Settings: An Experiential Application of a Process-Based Model

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an experiential exercise based on a process-based communication model. The communication model is presented in moderate detail to provide the theoretical background for this exercise. Target audience and exercise objectives are provided as well as complete instructions for executing and processing the exercise. The paper also reports some of the reactions of students to the exercise. Essentially everything an instructor needs to teach and demonstrate the model and facilitate student learning using this exercise is provided.

Theoretical Background

Communication has been a major function of Management and Organizational Behavior throughout history. The importance of honing manager's communication skills has rarely been disputed. Understanding communication processes therefore is a salient path for future leaders and managers to travel.

There have been many important theories of communication over the past forty years (Clampitt, 1991; Davis, 1981; Gerbner, 1957; Schramm, 1954; Westley & MacLean, 1957), but perhaps the most recognizable and accepted is that suggested by Berlow (1960). Berlow conceptualized communication as a process involving several distinct stages: idea generation, encoding of message, selecting a medium for encoded message, and then decoding of the message (on the part of the receiver). Then feedback may occur in instances where the communication runs both ways as the process continues. It has been suggested that communication breakdowns can be found in one of these four stages of communication: idea generation, encoding, selecting a medium, and decoding (Berlow, 1960; Kreitner, 1995).

Idea generation. In this stage an individual develops an idea or opinion from which action or communication is initiated. Here, the communicator develops the meaning of a message before delivering it. Communication can break down in this stage if the idea generated is incorrect or misguided. Even in the face of a well delivered, properly encoded and decoded message, if the idea was poor, then effective communication may not be possible (Berlow, 1960; Kreitner, 1995).

Encoding the message. In this stage an individual develops the words, images, sounds, or gestures which will make up the intended message (Berlow, 1960). This stage relies on the



senders' careful selection of verbal and non-verbal cues that the receiver must recognize and understand. If the message is encoded poorly, it will be impossible for the receiver to derive accurate meaning. Saying things that come out the wrong way or sending signals (intentional or not) which arouse conflict are examples of encoding problems (Kreitner, 1995).

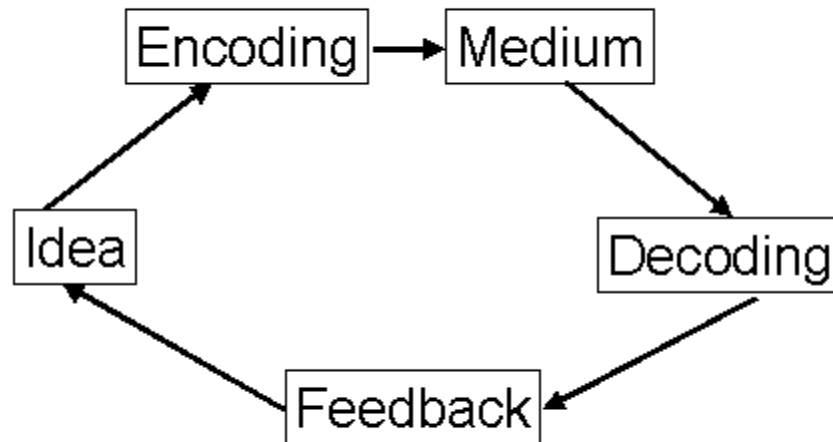
Selecting a medium. During this stage, an individual decides the communication setting. Managers can choose among a number of media: face-to-face conversations, telephone calls, memos, letters, computer reports and networks, photographs, bulletin boards, meetings, organizational publications, news releases, press conferences, and/or others. Managers can also choose from a number of settings: among colleagues, friends, at home, at a neutral location, in public or private, at special occasions, on regular days, and/or others. Each of these considerations goes into the stage of selecting the medium. The timing of communication is closely related to the medium as well. Sometimes, even with the correct media and setting chosen communication can still go awry if the communication is poorly timed. If the wrong medium is selected, the receiver risks a communication breakdown.

Decoding the message. This stage in the process involves the receiver of the message deriving meaning from the message sent (Berlow, 1960). It involves interpretation and attribution on the part of the receiver. If the receiver misinterprets meaning from the message then communication will breakdown. It is important here that the receiver clarify, if necessary, to insure that the meaning being perceived is accurate to prevent communication breakdowns. Decoding problems can often result from receivers' jumping to conclusions or bringing their own agendas to the communication floor (Kreitner, 1995).

Communication is likely to be successful in instances where none of the stages have broken down. When necessary, a feedback loop exists in communication, which represents a continuation of the communication process. After receivers have finished decoding a message, they may generate an idea that they choose to share, at which point they become the senders. This changing of roles from sender to receiver and vice versa is encompassed in the communication process (Berlow, 1960).



Figure 1
The Communication Process (Berlow, 1970)



Target Audience

The *Communication Breakdowns* exercise was designed for an undergraduate upper level organizational behavior course and is also appropriate for any course covering communication. The exercise has been used in both organizational behavior and organization and management theory classes ranging from 13 to 48 and worked well across all class sizes. The exercise has also been used with adults late in their careers and with community extension clientele. In all cases, the exercise has proved to be a good medium for applying the communication process to personal and professional settings.

Exercise Objectives

This exercise is designed to acquaint students with the communication process and to challenge them by asking them to apply it in interpersonal and professional settings to understand communication breakdowns. Students have the opportunity to assess the provided scenarios by applying the communication model and then develop role-plays that will demonstrate breakdowns in the communication process. Because this activity involves knowing, understanding, and critical thinking processes, it is ideal for developing students' skills in these areas.



Instructions

- ☐ Divide the class into groups of three.
- ☐ Distribute the exercise handout to each student.
- ☐ First individually, then in their assigned group, students work through the provided scenarios (1-4), assessing the stage at which communication broke down and how this breakdown in communication could have been avoided.
- ☐ Instruct students to work together in their group to discuss their assessment of the situations and to try to reach agreement as to the stage of communication breakdown.
- ☐ When all of the groups have discussed the four scenarios, you should begin to process them with the entire class (see processing instructions).
- ☐ When you have finished processing the provided scenarios, instruct groups to develop an original and educational scenario that will be role-played for the rest of the class, demonstrating a communication breakdown. The instructor may want to assign a stage in communication for groups to develop a communication breakdown role-play.
- ☐ Make students aware that their role-play will be observed and assessed by classmates and that groups will be assessing other groups' role-plays as well.
- ☐ While groups are developing their role-plays, it is usually helpful for the instructor to visit each group to make sure each is on track and is developing a potentially successful and educational scenario. Often times, this is where the most learning takes place, so be prepared to answer questions and "buffer" the process.
- ☐ When all of the groups have developed their role-plays, you can begin the "performances."
- ☐ As each group completes its presentation, immediate processing should take place. This is where the stages of communication breakdowns need to be revealed and strategies for avoiding such breakdowns discussed.
- ☐ It is usually nice to offer a round of applause to group members after completing their role-plays (this can be a nerve-racking experience for some students).
- ☐ After all the groups have "performed" and processed their role-plays some additional discussion is possible to further process learning opportunities (see processing instructions).



Processing Instructions

Processing the provided scenarios

1. The first scenario involves a communication breakdown resulting from a poor *selection of medium*. Millie breaks up with Zed at her parent's house, six hours away from the city that they lived in, and ends up stranded. Something as personal and intimate as a break up should certainly not take place in between courses of a meal at the parents' house. Most students will correctly identify that this scenario represents a poor selection of medium (on the part of Millie) and that this breakdown in communication could have been avoided had Millie sat Zed down at a neutral (and local) site to break the news to him. This scenario does not provide information regarding the contents of the message itself, so it is not possible to assess Millie's *encoding* or Zed's *decoding* in this communication process. The *idea generation* seems sound enough: she wants to break up with Zed and decides to do so. Her problems came when she selected the *medium*.

2 The second scenario illustrates a communication breakdown resulting from inaccurate *decoding of the message*. Kevin has decided to tell Ron that he has feelings for Ron's wife, and seems to have chosen an appropriate medium (face-to-face, sitting down, one-on-one). Kevin shares that he has the feelings, which is the message he was intending to send. Ron misinterprets the message being sent by assuming, without context, that Kevin has been pursuing his wife romantically during their friendship, an assumption that turns out to be untrue. In this sense, Ron is not *decoding the message* properly. Some students may argue that Kevin could have *encoded* better in this scenario. Students may suggest that he could have said up front that he was not pursuing Ron's wife and has no intentions of coming between the two of them, to relieve that tension before sharing the news. While it may be true that Kevin could have done a better job of *encoding the message*, however, given the content of the communication, it is fairly clear that communication has broken down in the *decoding stage* of the process. Some students may argue that communication also breaks down in the *idea generation stage*. Students may argue that "you just can't tell your friend that you want his wife." If students pursue this line of argument, there is clearly a values-based component being placed on the *idea generation stage* by these students. This position may have its merits and should be explored in the discussion.

3. This scenario involves a communication breakdown resulting from poor *idea generation*, likely from misinterpretations and perceptions. Ron assumes that Rhonda has romantic feelings for him, when in fact, she does not. His *selection of medium* seems appropriate, and there appears to be no problem in the *encoding* or *decoding stages*. The problem in this situation is that Ron's *idea* was inaccurate. An important lesson can be learned from this scenario. Typically, when communication breaks down, we assume that we have said things in the wrong way, or that our points were taken out of context, or that we had bad timing, etc. In this scenario, however, these were not issues. Some students may argue that Ron had poorly *decoded* Rhonda's communications from the past. This may very well be the case, but without having those communications to assess, it is difficult to interpret cause.

4. This scenario involves a communication breakdown resulting from poor *encoding of a message*. John's intentions were to communicate his desire for long-term employment and



growth with the company, but his message came across much more like an ultimatum. As presented, his message was interpreted by his boss about as well as could be expected. The selection of a medium is difficult to assess because not much is provided describing the setting. Idea generation seems appropriate, since it is usually constructive to let your employer know you are committed to the company. This situation is a clear example of poor choice of words resulting in a communication breakdown. Some students may suggest that the boss has misinterpreted John's message. To some degree, it could be argued that anytime there is an *encoding* problem, there will ultimately be a *decoding* problem. It may also be argued that for every *decoding* problem, *encoding* could have been improved. This point has some merit and is worth bringing out in discussions. It should, however, be fairly clear that communication has broken down in this scenario primarily because of poor *encoding of the message* by John.

Processing the Developed Scenarios

When processing the developed scenarios it is important to identify where the communication has broken down. Have students pinpoint the specific stage in the communication process where it seems to have broken down. Once the stage of communication breakdown is established and understood by classmates, discuss steps that could have been taken to prevent the communication breakdown from occurring in the first place. The real message from this exercise that needs to come out is that communication breakdowns can be avoided. Students must be challenged to discuss how the breakdowns in communication could have been avoided – with different approaches in the stages of communication process.

In most cases, it will be fairly obvious what stages of communication are being role-played in the communication breakdown scenarios developed by students. As students consider how the breakdowns could have been avoided, consider a few general rules:

- ☐ *Idea generation problems* could have been avoided had participants thought through their assumptions more objectively before initiating the communication process.
- ☐ *Encoding problems* could have been avoided had participants made better choices of verbal and non-verbal cues or clearer articulations of viewpoints.
- ☐ *Selecting medium problems* could have been avoided had participants better selected appropriate media, settings, or timings of communications.
- ☐ *Decoding problems* could have been avoided had participants practiced more active listening and paraphrasing the sender's messages to ensure their complete and accurate understanding of the sender's message.

Processing Summary

By paying attention to the stages in the communication process students can ensure constructive and effective communications. By giving thought to ideas before initiating communications, we can avoid errors in judgement and perception. By thinking carefully about the appropriateness of different mediums before selecting, we avoid potential roadblocks to



communications. By carefully choosing our words or gestures, we are ensuring that the receiver will accurately interpret our meaning(s). By carefully listening to the messages being sent to us and seeking clarification(s) before responding we are increasing the likelihood of positive communications. Finally, this model can be used to understand communication breakdowns and provide a guiding framework to avoid and minimize breakdowns in future communications.

Teaching Notes

This exercise has been used twelve times (and counting) and has been very well received as both an interesting and highly educational activity. In five of the twelve sections in which this activity was used, students were asked to make journal entries concerning the activity. The comments from students suggests that students were able to apply the communication model to their personal lives and better understand their on-going interpersonal relationships. This should be encouraging to the concerned faculty member.

Each time this exercise is used we are surprised and inspired by the diversity of scenarios created by the upper level undergraduate students. Some of the most memorable scenarios developed included:

- ☐ a groom breaking up with his bride at the wedding (to demonstrate poor selection of medium)
- ☐ a daughter telling her father that she is pregnant in a grocery store (to demonstrate poor selection of medium)
- ☐ a drive-through attendant who never gets the order right (to demonstrate poor decoding)
- ☐ a “Casanova” who can’t get a date because he constantly puts his foot in his mouth (to demonstrate poor encoding)
- ☐ a boss who offers a promotion to a star employee to reward her for her outstanding commitment to the company, while she is concurrently seeking employment elsewhere (to demonstrate poor idea generation).

Appendix

Communication Breakdown Exercise

Idea Generation - Encoding - Selecting a Medium - Decoding - (Feedback)

1. Millie has decided to break up with Zed. She takes him to her parent’s house, six hours away, for a holiday dinner, and while her parents are in the kitchen, in between courses, she springs the break up news on him. He reacts very negatively, yelling and fussing, and then he gets up from the dinner table and storms out of the house and drives home (without her). Millie is now stranded at her parent’s house. Where has the communication broken down?



2. Kevin and Ron are best of friends, at least so each thought. Kevin decides to tell Ron that he has feelings for Ron's wife and has had them for quite some time. He is not interested in stealing her from Ron; he just thought that as his friend, Ron should know that he has these feelings. Kevin wants nothing more than friendship with Ron's wife and Kevin has never pursued anything with her. He sits Ron down that afternoon and he tells Ron that he has feelings for Ron's wife. Ron jumps up in a tirade, before Kevin could finish explaining, and accuses Kevin of hitting on his wife all these years, recounting all the friendly gestures and smiles, then Ron storms out of the house. The two never talk again. Where did the communication breakdown?
3. Ron has liked Rhonda for years and deep down he is convinced that she feels the same way about him. He sits her down one evening in a quiet setting and he lets her know how he feels. She tells him that she is flattered but she considers him as nothing more than a friend. Ron feels awkward and soon thereafter, he leaves feeling upset and hurt. The two never speak again. Where did the communication breakdown in this scenario?
4. John tells his boss that he cannot imagine staying with one company for any extended period of time if promotional opportunities do not come his way. His boss then fires him on the spot and said, "There are no promotions available right now." Later John tells a friend, "I was only trying to let him know that I was committed to long term employment and wanted to grow with the company, I had no idea he would fire me!" Where did the communication breakdown in this scenario?

Role-Plays

Develop a three to four minute role-play that demonstrates a communication breakdown resulting from failure in one of the four steps in the communication process. Your scenario can take place in a professional or personal setting. Your instructor/facilitator will assign you one of the four stages of communication to develop your communication breakdown skit. As you develop your role-play, keep in mind that your classmates will be trying to assess the stage at which communication has broken down. Try to be as creative and educational as possible while you develop your role-plays.



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