2 UNDERSTANDING THE MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION PROCESS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- Define the five levels of organizational communication.
- Describe the contextual factors, situational factors, and message factors that managers should consider when sending and receiving messages.
- Use the strategic approach, feedback, and measures of effectiveness to plan your own messages.
- Identify the critical communication errors (assumption–observation, failure to discriminate, and allness) and explain how to avoid them.

Whether working for a hospital, manufacturer, or service firm, more than 75 percent of a manager's time is spent communicating. Considering the amount of information for which a manager has responsibility, this is not surprising. General managers face two fundamental challenges: figuring out what to do as they sort through enormous amounts of information and getting things done through a diverse group of people.[1] Effective communication is the key to planning, leading, organizing, and controlling the resources of the organization to master these challenges.

Communication—the essential process that managers use to plan, lead, organize, and control—is not easy. To understand your message, your employees must be able to perceive and interpret it accurately. The process becomes more complex when communicating to a group of people because of the variety of perceptions and interpretations possible.

At the most general level, the communication process consists of an exchange of messages that are comprised of a set of symbols, such as words or gestures. Understanding the messages depends on a common meaning or frame of reference for those symbols. When sending a message, a manager may have the meaning of the symbols clearly in mind, but if someone receiving the message attributes a different meaning, the message is misunderstood. The process is made even more complicated because the symbols' meanings not only differ between people but also change as the experiences of the people involved change.

In this chapter, we examine those aspects of developing and exchanging symbols that relate to managerial communication, and we analyze the human factors that aid or hinder understanding. Further, we present a model of the strategic approach to communication that managers should follow when developing messages. Finally, we discuss three critical errors that managers must avoid when seeking effective communication.

LEVELS OF MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION

Managerial communication may occur at five different levels:

1. Intrapersonal
2. Interpersonal
3. Group
4. Organizational
5. Intercultural[2]

One level is not more important than another. Communication may occur at any or all of these levels simultaneously.

Intrapersonal communication focuses on internal cognitive behavior, such as observing, listening, and reading. Most of these activities involve the seeking of information; consequently, this communication level is extremely important for managerial decision making and problem solving because effective decisions require accurate information. Chapter 10 will help you learn techniques to improve your listening skills, and Chapter 11 will help you interpret nonverbal communication.

Interpersonal communication involves two or more people exchanging messages. They may be sharing information, providing feedback, or simply maintaining a social relationship through conversation. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 focus on written communication, and Chapters 13, 14, and 15 address interpersonal communication situations such as conflict management, negotiation, and interviews.

Group communication involves three or more people working toward a shared goal. The most common form of group communication is the meeting, which may be either formal or informal. Chapter 4 will focus on managing meetings and teams, and Chapter 5 will help you learn more about presenting your ideas at work. Chapter 6 describes how visual messages complement or even replace verbal ones.

Organizational communication operates within the networks that link members of a company or other organization. Organizational communication focuses on operations, such as how a group of tasks is linked to complete a job or how policies and procedures guide behavior and decisions. Chapter 3 explains how technology helps organizations communicate with internal and external groups.

Intercultural communication concerns interactions among people of different cultures. Intercultural communication is occurring more frequently because of globalization, improved telecommunications, and transportation.[3] Given the importance of intercultural communication, Chapter 12 is dedicated to this topic.

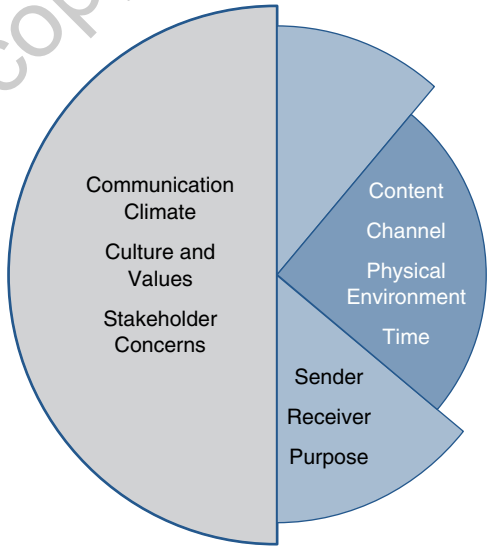
Communication is a behavior we engage in throughout life and often take for granted. You may reach a managerial position yet never deliberately analyze your communication because it has become such common behavior. However, a lack of strategic decision making can cause communication problems for you as a manager. This chapter describes a strategic approach to communication that will help you analyze situations and compose effective messages.

A STRATEGIC APPROACH

The following discussion analyzes separate elements of a strategic approach to communication. However, these variables do not actually occur separately, nor can they be analyzed separately in the managerial context. They are highly interdependent and affect each other concurrently. For instance, the power of the person sending the message, the intended receiver, the message's purpose, and the organizations involved are all interrelated. Each strategic component is interdependent. Although the following discussion considers each of the components separately, remember that each variable affects the others.

The strategic approach could be compared to a golf ball (see Figure 2.1). The durable outer layer, which we will examine first, is the context in which the communication event occurs. The tightly wound inner layer is the specific situation of sender, receiver, and purpose. The core entails the message content, channel, physical environment, and time.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ The Strategic Model for Managerial Communication



Layer 1: Contextual Factors

The first layer consists of communication context. Context involves the setting and background factors that influence the message, including constraints on what can and cannot be stated. The organization's communication climate, culture and values, and stakeholder concerns are discussed in the following subsections.

Communication Climate

The communication climate refers to the general attitude about communication within an organization. Past communication, such as whether employees and managers have been trusting and open or closed and defensive, has a cumulative effect.[4] Trust, openness, and communication have a reciprocal relationship. Effective communicating results in trust and openness, which generally improve job performance.[5] In turn, future communication will get easier because of the trust and openness that have developed.

Major events in an organization's life cycle can affect the communication climate. For example, often when a company is restructuring or a merger is planned, managers reduce the amount of information flowing through the formal channels. The result of this information "vacuum" is employee anxiety and distrust. In such a climate, employees turn to each other, relying on the rumor mill to learn about impending changes and layoffs. Not surprisingly, productivity drops off.

A positive communication climate is fragile. After only one or two critical errors, a positive environment can quickly change to one of distrust and closed communication, making future communication more difficult. This is why the skills and principles discussed in the following chapters are so critical—managers must avoid communication errors that may result in a negative climate.

Culture and Values

Societal and organizational culture form the second factor of the communication context. Culture is the unique set of shared values, beliefs, and behaviors that bind members of nations and organizations together. As Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do." Culture shapes the identity of its members and helps them feel like they belong within the group. It generally remains below the threshold of conscious awareness because it involves taken-for-granted assumptions about how one should perceive, think, and feel. But culture is ubiquitous.

To a large extent, national culture determines how we communicate. In addition to language differences among cultures, many more subtle conventions exist that guide nonverbal behavior, turn-taking, gift-giving practices, and other interpersonal interactions. Chapter 12 discusses more thoroughly how national culture affects business communication.

Organizational culture also affects how managers communicate. If you think about companies with strong cultures, such as Southwest Airlines, Zappos, Google, Stonyfield Farms, or Whole Foods, you will realize that building and maintaining an organizational culture takes hard work. The leaders are great communicators and motivators who clearly and consistently

explain the organization's vision, mission, and values. Research shows that there is a link between culture and organizational success—performance-oriented cultures experience statistically better financial growth.[6] Additional benefits of a strong culture are high employee involvement and commitment, work team cohesiveness, a clear focus on goals throughout the organization, and well-developed internal communication systems.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What adjectives would you use to describe the culture of your workplace?
2. How much of the culture was evident before you began working there?
3. How did you learn about the elements of the organizational culture?
4. In what ways does your organization's culture affect communication practices?

To diagnose the health of your company's culture, look around you during your next meeting or while eating lunch. Listen to the interactions. Watch how the leaders make decisions and disseminate them. For example, in some organizations, e-mail is used for every request, suggestion, and information exchange, whereas in other organizations, face-to-face conversation is the norm.

But an organization's culture affects more than preferences for a particular communication channel. An organization's physical space can affect its culture and encourage or discourage information flow. Office design can consist of closed doors; long, empty hallways; surveillance cameras; and sparse furniture. How many casual conversations are likely to take place among employees who work in such a culture? By contrast, office design can consist of a large, open space free of walls, with lots of seating, music, food, live plants, a waterfall, and employees' work spaces all visible to one another. In such an environment, the organization's cultural values regarding open communication are clear. Similar considerations affect hybrid and remote organizations. Chapter 4 offers advice for creating a positive culture with distributed teams.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How does your employer's culture affect your behaviors and decisions at work?
2. What drives the culture? Have you noticed changes over time?
3. Think about how informal communication and rumors circulate through the organization. How accurate are those messages? What is the tone of those messages?

A cultural analysis does not provide definitive answers, but it gives an understanding of generally accepted values. In organizations, these values are manifested in communication practices. For instance, if independence is valued, a persuasive approach rather than a demanding approach may be required. If formality is valued, a formal hardcopy memo rather than a telephone call may be necessary. If extensive technical details are part of the organizational culture, all reports may require technical elaboration. If collaboration is valued, then information flows smoothly and freely among all networked stakeholders.

Stakeholder Concerns

Decisions are not made in a vacuum. Every organization has stakeholders, or people and groups who are affected by its operations. Internal stakeholders include employees and unions, management, and shareholders. External stakeholders include customers, vendors, and government authorities and regulators. Organizations must be aware of the interests of each group and the power they may have to influence decisions.

In recent years, many organizations have gone a step further to develop corporate social responsibility statements. These policies and practices describe how the organization functions as a member of a community, responsible to not only investors and employees but also the public at large.

Effective communicators seek the input of stakeholder groups during project development. Stakeholders can help you identify novel solutions and avoid hidden problems. Failing to secure their cooperation and commitment can interrupt business processes and potentially damage an organization's reputation.

The communication climate, culture and values, and stakeholder concerns will suggest generally accepted patterns of communication. They are depicted as the outer layer of our analysis because these factors are external to the specific situations in which managers communicate. They also tend to be enduring and difficult to change. This layer must be analyzed first as managers develop the communication strategy.

Layer 2: Situational Factors

Once the external context has been analyzed, managers should consider the specific elements of each communication situation: the sender, receiver, and purpose of the message. The relationship of the three variables is circular rather than linear. Each affects the other concurrently; one does not necessarily come before the other. The relationship between the sender and receiver and the purpose of the message—the outcome the sender intends the message to accomplish—will influence the decisions made in the third layer of the strategic model.

Sender

The sender is the person, team, or organization who encodes an idea into text, speech, or visual elements. The decisions the sender makes about how to communicate a message are based not only on the external factors of Layer 1 but also on their personal factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, values, and religious or political beliefs, and their personal and professional experiences. Managers must analyze their own frames of reference and communication preferences to determine how they will affect the outcome of the communication.[7] Thus, self-awareness is critical for effective communication.

For instance, what strategy is best when persuading a work group to accept a new procedure? A manager may have realized he is most comfortable talking with just one person rather than a group, has trouble with grammar but can usually find the right words, is a patient listener, and holds a company position that makes it difficult to place demands

on others. Consequently, the manager decides it would be best to meet with employees individually in a face-to-face setting to persuade them to accept the new procedure. The manager thus has strategically analyzed his own frame of reference and his role in the communication situation.

Receiver

The receiver is the person, group, or organization that interprets the message and uses the information to take action, make decisions, or understand concepts. Like the sender, the personal factors of receivers influence the way they interpret messages.

In addition to the personal factors, several characteristics of the receiver require analysis: the relationship between the receiver and the sender, the receiver's relative status, their potential interest in the message, their emotional state, their prior knowledge about the subject of the message, and the impact of the message on their work. Together, these characteristics may cause distortions to the intended message, which are sometimes referred to as *internal noise*. A review of these items indicates the types of strategic communication decisions a manager must make relative to the receiver.

Relationship. Participants in a friendly relationship tolerate error and initial misunderstanding more than those in a neutral or hostile relationship.[8] Friendly participants need less time and concentration when communicating than is required in a hostile relationship. For instance, suppose a manager discussing a report with a colleague finds a certain table difficult to read. A friendly colleague will be more tolerant and more willing to ask for clarification than will a hostile one who might criticize the report rather than seek clarification or provide constructive criticism.

Status Difference. Status differences may require that certain customs or traditions be integrated into the communication. For example, the sender may need to refer to certain people by their title or honorific to avoid offending the receiver. Also, the sender may need to stand when addressing a person of higher status, but it may be appropriate to sit down with a person of equal or lower status. People of different status levels may easily interpret words and gestures differently.[9] Suppose a manager says, "Can I meet with you for a few minutes?" This simple statement may be a request or a demand, depending on the receiver's status. Obviously, verbal emphasis needs to be adapted to different audiences.

Receiver's Interest. The potential interest level of the receiver in the message affects their level of attention to the message. Senders must assess the receiver's potential interest and make strategic decisions on how to compose the message.[10] If the receiver has low interest, some persuasive elements may be appropriate to get the person's attention, even when the ultimate goal of the message is to inform. A common mistake is to focus on what the sender needs to say rather than what the receiver wants or needs to know. The manager must adapt the nature of the message to fit the interests of the receiver.

Receiver's Emotional State. The receiver's emotional state at the time of communication may affect how the message is received. A receiver upset about something requires a communication

strategy different from that used with a relaxed person. Similarly, a receiver who is resistant to an idea requires a different strategy from what would be used with someone who is interested and receptive to the idea. Chapter 8 explains how a direct or indirect organizational pattern can improve the likelihood that the receiver will respond positively.

Receiver's Knowledge. The accuracy of a message is irrelevant if the receiver cannot understand the content. If the receiver does not have sufficient prior knowledge of the situation, or if they do not understand the words or symbols being used, then the message will fail to achieve its purpose. Technical words and examples are appropriate only if everyone involved in the communication transaction understands the terminology; decisions and analyses are understandable only if receivers understand the assumptions and background that support them. Incorrectly assuming the receiver has considerable knowledge may result in a communication breakdown. But assuming too low a level of knowledge may waste time and insult the receiver. A receiver's level of knowledge can be gauged quickly by asking questions and getting feedback. The answer given to an open-ended question on a specific topic is often the best indication of a receiver's level of knowledge. The sender should then adapt the message as necessary.

Impact on the Receiver's Work. To provide the correct type and amount of information, senders must consider what the receiver will do with the information. How will the information affect the receiver's ability to take action, make decisions, or understand concepts related to their own work?

Critical Thinking Questions

Think of a communication breakdown you experienced at work between you and a coworker, supervisor, or direct report.

1. Which of the six characteristics of the receiver discussed here can you identify as contributing to the breakdown?
2. What elements of audience analysis will you consider the next time you interact with that person?

In addition to the intended receiver, a message may have one or more audiences who also receive the message or may be affected by it. These secondary receivers may be known to the sender (such as when they are included on the cc: line of an e-mail), but they may also be hidden, such as when a report is shared with others, leaked to the public, or archived for future reference. During their strategic analysis, managers should try to imagine who secondary readers might be and how they might interpret the message as well.

In summary, a manager should consider six characteristics of the receiver before communicating, as summarized in Table 2.1: personal relationship, status, interest in the message, emotional state, knowledge, and impact on work. Knowing one's audience is a critical strategy. Next, the manager needs to analyze the purpose of the message for effective communication in critical situations.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Checklist for Analyzing the Receiver
What is the personal relationship of the receiver to the sender?
What is the receiver's relative status?
How interested in the message is the receiver?
What are the receiver's feelings toward the message?
How much does the receiver know about the topic of the message?
What will the receiver do with the information they learn from the message?

Purpose of the Message

The communication goal or purpose often defines the appropriate strategy for a given situation; consequently, effective managers are keenly aware of their communication goals. A manager has four major reasons for choosing to communicate. First, the mere act of communicating with a fellow worker may be enjoyable. Communication does not always have to mean business, although one should not confuse working with socializing. At work, some socializing by managers can boost employee morale and build relationships that make work more efficient and more pleasant.

Second, managers communicate to present information to others. They must share information with their teams, with other groups within the organization, and with clients or vendors. (Chapter 5 addresses presentations in more detail.) Third, managers communicate to gain information that is needed to do their work. Ironically, not all managers distinguish between gaining and presenting information. Many managers tend to do all the talking when they are trying to gain information. Listening, the focus of Chapter 10, is an essential part of effective communication.

Fourth, managers communicate to persuade.[11] Persuasive strategies include the use of data and logical reasoning, emotional appeals to shared values, or references to one's character and credibility. Although each strategy may work independently, the strongest persuasive messages use all three.

The question of goals can become complicated because goals may be combined. For instance, a goal may be to inform a direct report of a new procedure while also persuading them to accept the procedure. In these situations, managers need to identify goals clearly and develop appropriate strategies; otherwise, they may achieve neither goal.

Unless managers analyze their goals, the resulting communication may waste time and effort. By identifying the purpose of the message and analyzing the sender and receiver factors described above, managers can develop strategies to compose effective messages.

Layer 3: Message Factors

We now come to the third layer of the strategic model, which comprises the message itself. When composing a message, managers should consider four elements:

- The specific content of the message

- The message's channel
- The physical environment in which it occurs
- The time the communication occurs

Review the strategic model in Figure 2.1 again. These four elements appear as the central layer because they depend on the contextual factors of climate, culture, and stakeholder concerns and the situational factors of sender, receiver, and purpose of the message. For purposes of discussion, we review each component separately. But again, remember that in reality a manager needs to consider all interrelationships when developing a communication strategy. Neglecting any one component when analyzing a critical situation may result in a communication failure.

Message Content

We can simplify our discussion by classifying the content of a message according to four factors.

First, will the receiver perceive the message as *positive, negative*, or *neutral*? When the message is positive, the best strategy is to present the good news immediately; however, with a negative message, it is usually best to present neutral information before the negative news.[12] To determine whether the message is positive or negative, consider the receiver's perspective. What may seem positive to a manager may be negative to the receiver. For example, the manager of an accounting firm was ecstatic as she announced a new contract with a growing firm. But staff members were unhappy with the news because they already felt overworked.

Second, does the message deal with *fact* or *opinion*? Facts are established with data and evidence, but opinion is largely based on assumption. Managers should critically analyze the objective basis of their message because they may feel so sure about their opinion that they will present it as fact. When a manager presents opinions as facts, the receivers may be deceived.

Third, to what extent is the message *important* to the receiver? If the message is important to the manager but not to the receiver, the manager has to use attention-getting techniques and connect the message to the receiver's interests. For instance, an announcement that a staff meeting is to be held at 2:00 p.m. may not capture an employee's interest; however, if the notice states that one of the items on the agenda is a new incentive program, employees are more apt to pay attention.

Fourth, to what extent is the message *controversial*? A controversial message calls for greater explanation of the contextual factors and neutral words that can reduce the emotional response. In these situations, phrases such as "surely you realize," "everyone else believes," "can't you see," or "you have to understand" can make the receiver defensive and create conflict.

Effective managerial communication requires analysis of the content factors summarized in Table 2.2. An effective communicator will consider these factors simultaneously with the sender, receiver, and purpose because they all affect one another when developing a communication strategy.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Checklist for Determining Message Content
Will the receiver consider the message to be negative or positive?
Will the message deal with facts or opinions?
How important will the message be to the receiver?
How controversial will the message be?

Channel of the Message

With the advent of sophisticated telecommunications and instant delivery, the question of how the message is to be sent becomes increasingly complicated. Habits further complicate channel selection. Managers find ways of communicating that are comfortable for them and continue to use the same methods, even when they are inappropriate. One accounting manager was known for communicating by sticky notes. While these small adhesive papers are handy for commenting on documents, this manager used them to communicate with his direct reports all the time. He would silently approach an employee in her cubicle, attach the sticky note to her monitor, and walk out again. How do you think the employee reacted?

Which channel is appropriate for which message? Written communication (memos, letters, reports) provides the opportunity for permanent records and may be precise and clear; however, it usually does not provide the opportunity for immediate feedback. SMS and chat messages are less formal and are often hastily written, but they have the advantages of immediacy and speed; e-mail adds the advantage of permanence. Oral communication is often more persuasive than a written message. Texting and phoning can be quick, but they generally provide no permanent record of the conversation. Also, while phone calls allow oral feedback, the participants cannot observe nonverbal behaviors. If body language is important, videoconferencing might be warranted.

The question becomes one of minimizing costs while maximizing communication effectiveness. Should the message be presented to one individual at a time or to a group? While individual communication allows the manager to adapt the message to each person, group communication is quicker and cheaper. The manager needs to decide if individual adaptation is necessary or if the time saved with group communication is more important. Should the message be written, oral, or visual? Should it be formal or informal? Table 2.3 presents some of the options for communication channel. It quickly becomes apparent that there is no single best channel for communication. This is why Chapter 3 presents an extensive discussion of communication channels mediated by some form of technology.

The question of individual versus group is a key to persuasive communication. In some situations, it may be easy to persuade a group of people; however, in other situations, one-on-one communication may be more effective. The manager must strategically analyze all the factors to determine which would be best in a given situation.

Not surprisingly, cost affects all questions regarding channel selection. A letter requires time for drafting and editing. A group meeting requires many individuals to commit their time, and that pooled time can be expensive. These costs need to be balanced with the fact that groups

TABLE 2.3 ■ Channels of Communication

	Informal	Formal
Oral	Personal conversations Interviews and counseling Telecommunication Employee plant tours (orientation)	Staff meetings Public address system Conferences Directives and training Briefings
Written	Bulletin boards Daily news digests E-mail Blogs Text messages Chat/IM	Policy manuals Management newsletters Intranets Reports and white papers Company website
Both oral and written	Face-to-face contact between superior and direct report where written information is exchanged	Company meetings where reports and data are presented Performance appraisals
Visual	Video calls Closed-circuit TV Infographics Emojis GIFs	Videos PowerPoint slide decks Chart talks

allow for input and feedback from different employees. A telephone call is quick but impermanent. A formal report may be extremely time-consuming to put together, but others may refer to it again later. Thus, managers balance cost and time factors when selecting the appropriate channel for their communication.

Physical Environment

The environment in which communication occurs has a clear effect. Just as receiver characteristics may cause internal noise, elements of the physical environment may cause *external noise*. The result is message distortion. Ask four questions when you analyze the environmental factors in strategic communication:

1. Is it a public or private situation?
2. Does it involve a formal or informal setting?
3. What is the physical distance between the sender and the receiver?
4. Is it a familiar or unfamiliar environment?

The answers to each of these questions can significantly affect the communication strategy.

Privacy. Some choices between public and private settings are obvious. For instance, neither the manager nor the direct report would want their annual performance appraisal interview to

be conducted in the company cafeteria. But choosing the correct environment for other situations is more difficult. For instance, should a team's performance problem be discussed with each person individually, or should the discussion be held with all members of the team in a public forum? In the past, managers were advised to "praise in public, punish in private." But this simplistic approach to employee feedback can backfire. Singling out direct reports for special attention can result in other employees ostracizing them as the "boss's pet." The outer layer of the strategic model reminds us to consider culture and climate when deciding whether privacy is important as a communication strategy.

Formality. The formality of the setting affects the wording of the message as well as the opportunity for feedback. While official titles may be appropriate when presenting a formal oral report, they may restrict communication in an informal group discussion. Also, feedback is often more difficult to obtain in a formal setting because questions may seem inappropriate or the questioner may be shy. Finally, people are generally more reserved in their nonverbal behavior in a formal setting, which makes their feedback more difficult to read.

Physical Distance. A third variable to consider is the physical distance between the sender and receiver. Proximity makes messages compelling. In oral communication, physical distance mutes variations in vocal tone and loudness and in gestures and posture. Thus, it is less effective to use these strategies for emphasis when distance is great. In written communication, distance also affects feedback and time. The quality of feedback for a report sent across several time zones may be less timely (and consequently, less useful) than it is for a report exchanged in one building. Distance also makes persuasion more difficult because opposing arguments cannot be answered immediately. A manager may have to decide if it is better to wait until a face-to-face opportunity is available or if the persuasive efforts should occur over phone or video conference.

Familiarity. The final factor to consider when discussing environment is its familiarity. This concept needs to be analyzed from the perspective of the sender as well as the receiver. A familiar environment allows the participants to be relaxed, which is important when the information is sensitive or controversial. When communicating in an unfamiliar environment, a manager should anticipate the distractions that may occur. Distractions that we might be accustomed to in our own environment can be unnerving when we encounter them in unfamiliar surroundings. Something as seemingly simple as heavy traffic outside an office window can be a distraction when we are not used to it.

Table 2.4 summarizes the factors that managers must strategically analyze when considering the physical environment of a communication event.

TABLE 2.4 ■ Checklist for Analyzing the Physical Environment

Is the environment public or private?
Is the environment formal or informal?
What is the physical distance between the sender and the receiver?
Is the environment familiar or unfamiliar?

Time

The timing of the message is another important consideration. Messages should be sent at a time when the receiver is most likely to be receptive to its content. It is not appropriate to try to get the attention of someone immediately before an important meeting. Also, it is highly unlikely that a report will receive much attention if it arrives late on a Friday afternoon. As another example, consider the timing of an announcement made at a large urban hospital consisting of several buildings. For several years, landscaping improvements were being installed to improve water runoff. The grounds were beautiful on completion. But as the project was completed, layoffs of hospital staff were announced. It appeared that the landscaping was done at the expense of jobs. Understandably, many employees were bitter about the allocation of funds.

Managers also need to consider the amount of time spent in preparing to communicate and the amount of time spent in the process. Consider the time of both managers and receivers to estimate cost and communication efficiency. Thus, while a meeting may at first seem advisable because it allows for questions and feedback, it may not be efficient because of the time required to assemble people. An e-mail or text message may be more efficient in certain situations. If meeting attendees do not receive an agenda well before a meeting, they may be unprepared to participate in the conversation and follow-up will be necessary, requiring even more time. This effort is the type of strategic time decision a manager must make.

Finally, remember that time is power, and time is status. People with busy schedules are perceived as more important than those whom you can approach at any time. While the direct report must make an appointment to see the manager, the manager, who has higher status, can drop in on the employee without notice. Status is also communicated by the amount of time a person is kept waiting.

Critical Thinking Questions

Think about a situation in which you committed, experienced, or witnessed miscommunication. Analyze the situation using the strategic model presented here.

1. Where did you (or whoever was communicating) go wrong?
2. What could have been done to avoid the miscommunication?

FEEDBACK AND MEASURES OF EFFECTIVENESS

Integral to a strategic management communication approach are feedback and measures of effectiveness, which are not included in the strategic model (Figure 2.1) because they are inherent in each variable and cannot be separated. Feedback is important in three ways. First, complicated or sensitive messages should be reviewed by a trusted colleague before sending to ensure others will interpret the message in the manner you intend. Second, feedback should

be continually obtained to determine how changing events may affect the overall strategy. For instance, a manager determines that an e-mail about a new procedure was not as clear as she thought because many questions were being asked. Based on this feedback, she quickly calls a meeting to clarify the procedure. In this case, the channel is changed to improve the communication strategy.

Third, feedback may be obtained to determine if the strategy was effective, even though it may be too late to change it. Unfortunately, many managers may avoid this feedback because they believe nothing can be done about it. For example, an advertising agency submits a proposal for an ad campaign. When the contract is given to another agency, the tendency is not to evaluate the effectiveness of the written proposal. After all, nothing can be done about it now. But this is the opportunity to thoroughly evaluate all aspects of the proposal, including such items as an analysis of the receiver, writing style, and timing. Lessons thus learned should be applied to the next proposal. Postmortems, while unpleasant and often avoided, are valuable tools for organizational improvement.

Obtaining feedback and measuring effectiveness may be extremely difficult. In one case, a regional insurance manager was disappointed in sales. She wrote a number of letters, made phone calls, and personally met with her independent sales agents to motivate them, yet sales continued to slide. She contracted with a management consultant to determine how she could improve her motivational strategies. However, it could not be determined if poor sales were the result of communication with the sales agents or the insurance products themselves. Managerial communication is so interrelated with other factors that it is often difficult to determine effectiveness.

Critical Thinking Questions

Consider a time when you failed to reach your goal, whether in a personal activity or on a work project.

1. Who provided you with feedback?
2. How welcome was the feedback you received from each source?
3. What did you do differently the next time you faced a similar challenge?

CRITICAL ERRORS IN COMMUNICATION

The communication process depends on the personalities of those involved and the environment in which they operate. The strategic model helps managers analyze communication situations and plan their messages to increase their effectiveness. Yet managers still make critical errors caused by problems with the way we interpret the world around us.

Even when people believe they are communicating what is real, they are communicating only their perception of reality, which is filtered by their personal experience, values and beliefs, and even language.[13] These mental filters cause three critical but common errors that inhibit

our ability to communicate: the assumption–observation error, the failure-to-discriminate error, and the allness error.[14]

The Assumption–Observation Error

An assumption occurs when people accept something as valid without requiring proof. Every day we act on assumptions. For example, we assume the food in the cafeteria is not toxic (despite our persistent jokes to the contrary), the ceiling in the office will not fall, and numbers being used in a report are valid. In each case, we may not have proof that what we believe is true, but we place our trust in others to be able to continue our day. Assumptions are essential and desirable in analyzing materials, solving problems, and planning. Without them, we would be paralyzed by indecision or lack of information.

When we drop a letter in the mailbox, we assume it will reach its destination in a reasonable time. But is this assumption completely accurate? Evidence suggests the letter may be lost, delayed, or even destroyed. So we take a calculated risk. If the same envelope contains something valuable, we insure the envelope's contents. If it is irreplaceable, we may deliver the item ourselves to ensure its safety.

The assumption–observation error occurs when managers assume their personal observations, experiences, and interpretations of the world around them are accurate and ignore other explanations that are equally or more valid. Consider the following example.

The manager of the quality control department noticed that Andre, a new chemist, was extremely conscientious. Andre remained after work at least a half hour every night to check all the figures. The manager was so impressed with Andre's commitment that she wrote a special commendation letter for his personal file. Later, the manager discovered Andre was really having a lot of difficulty with the tests and was remaining late to correct the many errors he normally made.

To avoid the assumption–observation error, a manager should ask, "What are the facts? What else could be causing this to happen?" Facts and assumptions should be clearly stated. For instance, "We received a shipment of copper one week after placing the order" is a fact, whereas "We must have paid extra for expedited shipping" is an assumption. Expressions such as "in my opinion," "it looks to me as if," and "I am assuming" clearly denote an assumption rather than a fact. Just as these phrases can help managers clarify in their own minds when they are using assumptions, they also give the receivers a clearer understanding of the message.

The Failure to Discriminate

In addition to making assumptions, we also take shortcuts in our thinking. We often look for similarities rather than differences. In its most extreme form, this penchant for similarities leads us to think in stereotypes rather than individual cases.

The failure to discriminate is the failure to perceive and communicate significant differences among individuals or changes in situations. This failure to make clear distinctions can lead us to ignore differences and overemphasize similarities. Diversity in teams can help us overcome this weakness by providing alternate points of view that bring those differences into focus.

One of the consequences of the failure to discriminate is what William Haney called "hardening of the categories." A leading researcher in the field of interpersonal communication and organizational behavior, Haney observed,

> Most of us have a penchant for categorizing—for classifying. Show someone something he has never seen before and one of his first questions is likely to be: "What kind is it?" We meet a new person and we are uneasy until we can pigeonhole: What is she? How is she classified? Is she a salesperson, plumber, farmer, teacher, painter? Is she Protestant, Catholic, Jew, atheist? Democrat, Republican, independent? Lower, middle, upper "class"?[15]

This hardening of categories can result in stereotypes because people may apply their preconceived notions of the group to any individual within the group, regardless of their accuracy. One common example concerns managers who are interviewing job applicants. An applicant may have attended a school whose graduates the interviewer categorizes as undesirable. Therefore, the interviewer does not fully listen to the applicant. The hardening of categories can also cause a person to communicate in terms of general categories rather than specifics and thus lose valuable information. For example, "Joyce is a union member" omits the fact that she is the most qualified inspector in the department.

Even more dangerous than the categorization itself is the fact that people are usually not aware they are doing it. Unconscious bias develops from years of societal and parental conditioning to think certain ways or accept some beliefs over others. Unconscious bias makes failure to discriminate an extremely difficult tendency to overcome. However, Haney provided two valuable suggestions.[16] The first is to internalize the premise of uniqueness—to develop a sensitivity to all the differences in the world. No two things, whether snowflakes or siblings, have ever been found to be exactly the same. A second technique is to index evaluations. This means each person, thing, or situation should be indexed according to some unique characteristic. This can soon lead to the conclusion that everything and everyone is unique and, in turn, provides sensitivity to differences.

Polarization is a special form of failure to discriminate that involves "either–or" thinking. Some situations are true dichotomies that can be stated in terms of either–or. An employee is either absent or present. However, we cannot accurately describe many situations in either–or terms: A product is neither good nor bad; a worker moves neither fast nor slow. Polarization occurs when a person ignores gradations and middle ground and focuses on strict either–or terms. Thus, if a person is told the only options are either success or failure, the person may begin to believe that no other possibilities exist. When managers are wary of either–or statements, they can more accurately distinguish the degree of differences between two items and more accurately perceive the world.

Frozen evaluation is another failure to discriminate. It occurs when people disregard changes in persons, places, or things, focusing instead on early impressions. Because everything in the world changes, evaluations cannot remain static. However, while it is easy to say that change is a major aspect of business, it is often difficult to adapt to that continuous

change. Frozen evaluation can result in an inaccurate perception of the world, and management errors may result.

The key to avoiding frozen evaluations is to remember that all things change. The manager who continually asks what has changed about the situation and how that may require them to reevaluate opinions can prevent this common and critical communication error.

Allness and the Process of Abstraction

A third critical error that managers often make is to structure communications as if what they are stating is all there is to know about a subject. The astute person knows that reality is too complex for anyone to know all there is to know about something. As Bertrand Russell stated, "one's certainty varies inversely with one's knowledge." Haney states that allness is the result of two false beliefs: (1) It is possible to know and say everything about something, and (2) what I am saying (or writing or thinking) includes all that is important about the subject.[17]

Normal communication patterns contribute to the problem of allness because people abstract as they speak. Abstracting is the process of focusing on some details and omitting others. But what we choose to include can manipulate receivers of the message, suggesting that our interpretation is the only one and offering no warning that certain information is being left out. Sometimes the more that is omitted, the harder it is to recognize that one has left out anything.

Almost everything we do involves some level of abstraction, so the solution to the allness error is not simply to omit abstraction. Rather, the solution is to be aware of the level of abstraction occurring and phrase the message accordingly: "as far as I know," "according to the information I have," or "this is what I consider to be the critical information." When you are the receiver, overcome the allness error by asking, "What information has been omitted?" or simply "What else?" Table 2.5 summarizes the questions to ask in order to avoid committing three critical errors when communicating.

The foregoing critical errors—assumption–observation, failure to discriminate, and allness—have been discussed largely from the perspective of the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of communication. However, management communication seldom operates at just the intra- or interpersonal level. Communication becomes more complex as more people become involved and commit their own versions of each error. More is said about group and organizational levels of communication in Chapter 4, which is dedicated to meetings and group dynamics, while Chapter 12 addresses intercultural communication.

TABLE 2.5 ■ How to Avoid Critical Errors

Critical Error	Question to Ask
Assumption–observation	What are the facts?
Failure to discriminate	What labels have I applied to this situation?
Allness	What else is going on?

SUMMARY

Managerial communication occurs at five levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organizational, and intercultural. Each of these levels is considered in this text.

The strategic model of managerial communication helps managers analyze situations and reduce errors in critical situations. The contingency approach to communication suggests that there are no concrete rules that will serve in every instance, but the strategic model offers several factors managers should review before communicating.

The first layer of the strategic model is the contextual factors of communication climate, culture and values, and stakeholder concerns. These external factors tend to be durable and intractable. The second layer involves the specific situational factors of sender, receiver, and purpose of the message. The third layer is the message itself, which includes content, channel, physical environment, and time. Managers must analyze the variables in each layer to compose messages that are appropriate for each situation. After the message is delivered, managers must also seek feedback and measures of effectiveness to continuously improve their communication skills.

In spite of this preparation, several critical errors in the communication process are caused by our interpretations of reality. The assumption–observation error results when a manager relies on personal observation and experience rather than objective data. The failure to discriminate happens when a manager focuses on similarities and ignores significant differences between people or things. The allness error occurs when a person structures communication as if it states all there is to know about a subject. Managers need to consider all these factors and human foibles when communicating.

MANAGER'S CHECKLIST

Before you begin composing a message, analyze the contextual, situational, and content factors that influence it.

- ☐ The communication climate within the organization
- ☐ National, regional, or organizational culture and values
- ☐ Internal and external stakeholder concerns
- ☐ The sender of the message
- ☐ The receiver of the message and their relationship to the sender
- ☐ The purpose of the message
- ☐ The specific content of the message
- ☐ The channel through which the message is delivered
- ☐ The physical environment in which the communication occurs
- ☐ The time the communication occurs

CASES FOR ANALYSIS

Case 2.1: Can Temperature Be Sexist?

Jenny shivered slightly and pulled the sleeves of her cardigan over her knuckles. She expected to be cold in the Minnesota winter, but even in the summer, she often wore long-sleeve shirts and leggings under her skirt to stay warm. About 15 people worked in the office suite, but the temperature seemed to bother her the most. She often asked to raise the temperature setting by a few degrees, but the thermostat inevitably returned to the chilly 72 degrees. Some of her male colleagues argued that their higher metabolism meant they needed a cooler office. The easiest solution, they say, is for Jenny to wear heavier clothing.

A 2015 study suggested that temperature recommendations for office spaces are based on metabolic rates of men in the 1960s who wore business suits.[18] Those standards continue today, even though offices are now filled with women, who often have lower metabolic rates and wear lighter clothing than their male counterparts. A 2021 study confirmed the findings that office buildings are often "overcooled," waste energy, and disproportionately inconvenience women employees in those spaces.[19]

Questions

1. How does this standard reflect the failure to discriminate?
2. How might a cold physical environment affect communication and working conditions for employees?
3. What are other situations in which a small group of people assumed that their experience or limited data set applied to other groups when making decisions?

Case 2.2: The Shroud of Technology

Ben knocked on the door of Nancy Kerr, his supervising director.

"Come in," Nancy said, and Ben entered. He was frustrated, and his demeanor reflected it.

"I need to talk to you about Stacey Burton, who works in the office beside mine," Ben said. "Ever since we rearranged the office suite about a month ago, Stacey has been coming by and standing in the door of my office, just to flirt and to chat. It interrupts my work, and I'm uncomfortable with the overt attention, especially flirtatious attention," Ben continued. "I'm also getting deluged with non-work-related e-mails from Stacey."

"Have you asked Stacey to stop?" asked Nancy.

"Well, not really. The interaction could easily be taken as office banter, if you just heard the words. It is the way Stacey gestures and speaks and looks at me that makes it flirting," Ben said. "I'm really not comfortable with initiating a confrontation with Stacey and thought maybe you would be willing to say something instead."

"I'll be happy to—probably today," Nancy replied. "I'll send an e-mail now. Thanks for bringing this to my attention."

Nancy sent an e-mail asking Stacey to come to Nancy's office briefly at 2:00 p.m.

At 1:55, Nancy heard a knock and said, "Come in."

A young man came in and sat down. "Can I help you?" Nancy asked.

"Well, you said you wanted to talk to me. What can I do for you?" he asked.
"I wanted to talk to you?" asked Nancy.
"Yes," the young man replied. "I'm Stacey Burton."

Questions

1. What assumption–observation error might be made in this scenario?
2. To what extent did the use of technology for these message exchanges contribute to the miscommunication between Nancy and Stacey?
3. What gender stereotypes discussed in Chapter 1 apply to this case?
4. How would you, in Nancy's shoes, handle the awkward moment and the ensuing discussion?

Case 2.3: Developing a Brochure

Mitch Finley, a 29-year-old with a degree in finance, began working as a loan officer at a bank two years ago. Later, he began consulting for other businesses in financial planning. His career goal has been to start his own business.

Recently, Finley opened The Suite Thing, a development company using one of his original business ideas—the construction of two large hotel-like buildings containing suites (living room, bedroom, kitchen) rather than single rooms.

The hotels are located in two cities that are important regional centers for the oil industry. Instead of renting the suites, he is selling them to large oil companies to meet entertainment and tax-planning needs.

Finley had been using a brochure his architects put together, but he was not pleased with its presentation. He had collected other company brochures that he liked and decided to call an advertising firm to design a new brochure and logo for his company.

In the initial meeting, Finley told the advertising representative he needed a new company logo and a brochure folder that would hold his leaflets. Most important, the logo and kit had to be completed as soon as possible because time was money to him.

The advertising representative (very new on the job) acknowledged that his company could do logo and brochure layouts. The representative then asked Finley a few general questions about his two projects—what they involved, where they were located, and their surroundings. The agency rep said he would return within one week with his ideas.

More than two weeks later, Finley called the advertising agency and wanted to know if it had developed the materials. The representative came by later that afternoon with his idea. The agency's approach centered on a hard-sell theme of "Beat the Hotel Game with the Suite Thing." Finley, frustrated by the response delay and the inconsistency between the advertising agency's offering and his own image of the project, said, "No, that's not at all what I want." The advertising representative, taken aback, sat in silence for a time before responding in a frustrated voice, "Well, what do you see your project as being?" and reminded him of the time constraints Finley had given. Finley said he did not see hotels as his competitors, and he wanted a brochure and logo that used soft-sell to introduce his idea to top-level executives as an investment.

The next day the advertising representative returned with a more conservative, soft-sell piece. Finley said, "That's *kind of* what I want, but not really."

Finley cannot understand why he did not get what he wanted the first time because "that's their business and they should know how to do it."

Questions

1. What are some possible causes of Finley's communication problem? Of the advertising representative's?
2. Identify how assumptions caused communication problems in this case.
3. What actions would you recommend to the advertising representative to ensure this does not happen again?
4. Do you believe there is a communication deadlock? If so, what should the participants do to resolve it?

Case 2.4: Resigning From the TV Station

Jane Rye is a student of advertising at the local state university and will graduate at the end of the next term. She has a part-time job in the sales department at a local television station. When hired, Rye thought she was very lucky to have a job there, not only for the money but also for the work experience.

Pat Trent, the sales manager who hired her, was Rye's immediate supervisor. Rye was doing a very good job and received considerable support from Trent. In fact, the sales manager had nothing but praise for Rye's work when reporting to top management. Trent often told her direct report that her work was exceptional and that Trent would like to hire her on a permanent basis after graduation to head a new media research department for the station. The job seemed to promise a challenging and rewarding career.

While Rye was flattered by the offer, she was not interested in the position because she found her present job unsatisfying. However, she never told Trent her feelings about the job or the possible appointment. Because Trent had trained Rye and had promoted her to everyone, Rye had become very loyal and grateful to her sales manager. Thus, Rye thought she would betray Trent if she were to refuse the job. After six weeks, however, Rye decided to quit and work part-time at the university, but she did not know how to approach her boss.

Rye, feeling unable to say anything unpleasant to Trent, let time pass until the day she was ready to quit to start her new job. When Rye got to work that day, the sales manager was scheduled to leave town later that morning. Rye was forced to go into Trent's office while two other people were there discussing another matter. Trent asked Rye what she wanted, and Rye replied, "I am resigning." The sales manager was taken completely by surprise, asked Rye why she was resigning, and wondered what was to be done with the project Rye was handling. Rye apologized for such short notice. Rye explained that she was taking a part-time job at the school starting tomorrow. Trent, very disappointed in her direct report, said, "If you had told me sooner, I could have transferred the project to someone else—now I'm in a bind."

Questions

1. Analyze the situation using the strategic model. What factors did Rye fail to consider when planning to share her news with Trent?
2. How should Rye have handled her resignation differently? Why would that have improved the experience?
3. What are some possible long-term repercussions of the way Rye handled her resignation?