

Lesson 3

Communication in Groups



Key Terms

ascendant
authoritarian
barriers
distortion
dysfunctional roles
filter
grapevine
groupthink
rapport
social roles
task roles

What You Will Learn to Do

- Analyze how you communicate in group situations

Linked Core Abilities

- Communicate using verbal, nonverbal and written techniques
- Treat self and others with respect

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Define roles adopted by individuals in groups
- Describe types of productive and nonproductive behaviors
- Identify personal behavioral tendencies within group interactions
- Discuss how to communicate with people of different personalities
- Define the key words contained in this lesson

Chapter 4

Key Note Term

barriers – an obstruction; anything that holds apart or separates.

Introduction

In this lesson, you examine some of the characteristics and social influences that can affect group communications. In addition, you will have the opportunity to see how communication **barriers** and breakdowns can affect your ability to communicate effectively and how you can establish credibility through your communications.

The Art of Communication

The art of communicating is a skill that you must develop. Using words so that listeners or readers understand their meanings is a difficult task because of differences in background, education, and experience of individuals with whom you are trying to communicate.

Throughout this lesson, remember that the purpose of communication is to make known and exchange information, thoughts, opinions, or feelings by speech, writing, or gestures. It is a transmission and interchange, by any means, of information, feelings, and direction. A communicator must remember that communication is a circular process, with both parties being free to present as well as to receive ideas, feelings, and attitudes (see Figure 4.3.1).

Elements of Communication

Remember, the communication process is made up of various elements. These elements are communicators (senders), messages, receivers, channels (written words, sound, sight, radio, and television), feedback, noise, and setting.

Figure 4.3.1: These students are enjoying an opportunity for open communications in a small group.

Courtesy of Larry Lawfer.



The group communication process follows the same format. In groups, the communicator may send a message to several receivers that attach different meanings or interpretations to the message and, in turn, may offer different feedback.

Group Communication

Whenever there is a group of people together for any length of time, there will be social groups. Membership in these groups normally depends on factors such as skill, ability, job assignment, ethnic background, interests, or values. If you look around your school, you will probably be able to identify many social groups.

Roles in Group Communication

At some point in your life, you have probably heard the saying, “You can either be a leader or a follower.” This statement might lead you to believe that there are just two possible roles you can assume within a group, when, in fact, there are a number of potential roles that you might play at any given time. Leadership is actually the combination of a variety of roles within a group that moves the group toward its goals.

Roles are the characteristic and expected social behavior of an individual within a group. We all have unique skills, strengths, and talents which, when contributed to the group, enable the group to operate effectively and be successful. When we communicate with one another in a group situation, we assume certain roles based on these unique skills, strengths, and talents. Some of these roles enable us to complete tasks, while others build and strengthen the group. Still others are destructive or harmful to the group communication process.

The Roles We Play

Within any group, roles will naturally evolve during the group formation process, and may change over time. Group dynamics and communication can either be accelerated or hindered based on the roles we assume.

Though many different roles exist, they fall into the following three major categories.

- **Task roles** are those roles that help the group accomplish a specific task.
- **Social roles** are those roles that help the group maintain itself as a group.
- **Dysfunctional roles** are those roles, which are destructive and block group communication.

Task Roles

In order to accomplish a goal and achieve results, members of the group must take on task-oriented roles that will fit in with the objectives of the group as a whole. For example, if your group was responsible for putting on a fund-raiser to raise money

Key Note Terms

task roles – roles assumed during the group communication process that help the group accomplish a specific task

social roles – roles that individuals assume during the group communication process that help maintain the group

dysfunctional roles – roles assumed by individuals within a group that are destructive and block group communication

for a school trip, you might need people to suggest ideas and gather information. You would also need someone to plan the event, and someone to coordinate it. These are all task roles. The following are descriptions of some of the task roles (this is not an exhaustive list).

- **Initiator.** Suggests new ideas and proposes solutions.
- **Opinion seeker.** Looks for options; seeks ideas and suggestions from others.
- **Coordinator.** Organizes the various activities of team members and shows relationships between ideas.
- **Energizer.** Stimulates the group to a higher level of activity.
- **Recorder/secretary.** Keeps a record of group actions.
- **Information giver.** Offers facts or generalizations to the group.
- **Information seeker.** Asks for information about the task; seeks data.
- **Evaluator.** Measures decisions against group goals.
- **Spokesperson.** Speaks on behalf of the group.
- **Planner.** Prepares timelines, schedules, and organizes group logistics.

Social Roles

To maintain the group as a unit, it is also necessary that some people assume social roles to promote social interaction and a healthy group dynamic (see Figure 4.3.2). These roles are less concerned with the task at hand, and more concerned with team growth and cohesiveness. The following are some social roles.

- **Encourager.** Praises the ideas of others; warmly receptive to other points of view and contributions.
- **Volunteer.** Offers whatever is needed.
- **Group observer.** Keeps records of group activities and uses this information to offer feedback to the group.
- **Compromiser.** Moves the group to another position that is favored by all group members by coming “half way”.
- **Gatekeeper.** Keeps communication channels open by encouraging or facilitating the participation of others or by proposing regulation of the flow of communication.
- **Standard setter.** Suggests standards or criteria for the group to achieve; standards may apply to the quality of the group process or limitations on acceptable individual behavior within the group.
- **Summarizer.** Raises questions about the direction which the group discussion is taking by summarizing what has been discussed and showing where it deviates from group objectives.
- **Reality tester.** Subjects group accomplishments to a set of standards for the group; this role examines the “practicality” or the “logic” behind a suggestion of group discussion.
- **Mediator.** Mediates the differences between group members. Attempts to reconcile disagreements and relieves tension in conflict situations.



Figure 4.3.2: What role is the student who is speaking playing in this group?
Courtesy of Nancy Sheehan.

Dysfunctional Roles

When an individual has competing needs or a personal agenda that is not in harmony with that of the group, the result will often be one of frustration. This frustration frequently manifests itself through behaviors that block effective group communication. The following list shows some examples of dysfunctional roles.

- **Aggressor.** Attacks other group members, deflates the status of others and shows aggressive behaviors.
- **Blocker.** Resists movement by the group.
- **Recognition seeker.** Calls attention to him- or herself.
- **Self confessor.** Seeks to disclose nongroup related feelings or opinions.
- **Dominator.** Asserts control over the group by manipulating other group members.
- **Help seeker.** Tries to gain the sympathy of the group.
- **Nonparticipator.** Chooses not to participate in group discussions.

You need to be careful when labeling dysfunctional roles, because these behaviors may be subject to interpretation. You may see a particular group member as a blocker, when they in fact see themselves as a reality tester. It is important to be aware of the lens through which you view the behavior of others.

Choosing Your Role

The role a person plays largely depends on his or her personality, preferences, and abilities. Some roles will come more naturally than others, and you may fill more than one role at the same time. For example, you could be an opinion seeker and an encourager at the same time. In other cases, you may also share roles with other members of the group.

Within group communications, the qualities that members bring to a group affect their ability to accept influence uncritically, increase cohesiveness, mediate conflicts, and solve problems. These characteristics are another important dimension that affects the roles we play within a group. Our credibility and our attitudes can influence our behaviors, and the way others perceive us.

Likewise, a personality trait is a tendency to behave in a consistent way in different situations. These traits are also important in determining our role in group communications. We can classify the numerous personality traits into six broad categories. They appear in some combination in each of us; however, your predominant trait will influence how you interact within a group.

Key Note Terms

authoritarian – characterized by or favoring absolute obedience to authority, as against individual freedom

ascendant – dominant in position or influence; superior

- **Authoritarianism.** An **authoritarian** person thinks that there should be status and power differences between people. As group members, these people use their power when in a position of leadership. They are firm, demanding, directive, and not likely to accept the ideas of others.
- **Social sensitivity.** This trait, also known as **empathy**, is an understanding of the feelings of others. It shows a person's ability to look at what is happening from the perspective of the other person.
- **Superior tendencies.** Group members who possess high **ascendant** tendencies tend to assert themselves and exert dominance over others. These group members influence group decisions; however, they tend to make remarks that build themselves up at the expense of others and display stern behavior that works against success in dealing with others.
- **Self-reliance and dependability.** Group members who show these traits demonstrate a sense of responsibility. They possess such characteristics as integrity, self-esteem, self-reliance, and self-control. They are successful in helping the group to accomplish its goals. People with high self-esteem tend to resist influence attempts and threats made by others; whereas, people with low self-esteem tend to be influenced by someone who has higher self-esteem.
- **Unconventionality.** Unconventional group members do not behave in expected ways. They do not seem to be interested in the group's objectives, and their behavior keeps the group from its work.
- **Emotional stability.** Anxiety and adjustment are two widely studied indicators of emotional stability. An anxious group member will worry about some uncertain or future event although there is no apparent cause for his or her worry. On the other hand, if an individual is well adjusted, relating well to his or her environment, that person appears to have emotional control and stability. Adjustment is positively related to group effectiveness, motivation, development of cohesiveness, and high morale.

Influences of a Social Group

Not only can there be one or more social groups within an organization, they can have a great deal of impact on the operation of the organization. By uniting, members of a social group (or of social groups if there are more than one in an organization) can influence a leader's action, or the actions of the leadership in the organization, in regard to making decisions on policies, rules, or procedures.

Definition of a Small Group

Most people would define a small group as having at least three and no more than twelve or fifteen members as shown in Figure 4.3.3. A group needs to have at least three members; otherwise it would be difficult to make decisions. With three members, coalitions can be formed and some kind of organization is present. Too large of a group (more than twelve or fifteen members) inhibits the group members' ability to communicate with everyone else in the group.

Within the group, roles will evolve and procedures will be developed as to how the group functions. A group must have a common purpose or goal and they must work together to achieve that goal. The goal brings the group together and holds it together through conflict and tension.

Decision Making in Groups

Many groups meet to solve problems or make decisions. Typically, a six-step approach is used when making decisions within a group.

1. **Identify the problem.** What is the problem? What is wrong with the current situation?
2. **Analyze the problem.** What are the issues in play in your group's situation?
3. **Identify the goals.** What are the goals of the final decision?
4. **Generate the solution(s).** Generate as many solutions as possible. Avoid **groupthink** by listing many solutions. (Groups experiencing groupthink do not consider all alternatives and they desire unanimity at the expense of quality decisions. They are focused on reaching a decision, not finding the best solution.)
5. **Evaluate and select the solutions.** Measure each solution against the goals from step three.
6. **Implement the solution(s).** Enact the chosen solution(s).

Brainstorming

Another option for decision making is brainstorming. When brainstorming, group members are encouraged to generate as many ideas about a particular topic as they can. Group members should be encouraged to say anything that comes to

Key Note Term

groupthink – the situation where a group does not consider all available alternatives due to the desire to reach consensus



Figure 4.3.3 These three people compose a small group.

Courtesy of Lawrence Migdale.

mind when brainstorming. Every idea is written down and judgments about ideas are saved until later, when the group returns to all of the ideas and selects those that are most useful.

Nominal Group Decision Making

Nominal group decision making is a group decision-making tool used when the group must place a set of options in a preferred order. To use the nominal method, group members work individually to list all alternatives to a problem or issue. Sometimes, the nominal method is used after a brainstorming session is held. The group facilitator asks each group member to individually rank all of the options from highest to lowest priority. Finally, the facilitator computes an average score for each idea. The lowest score is the highest priority for the group.

There are many ways that a group can make a final decision, decide on a solution, or come to agreement. Some of the most popular ways of making the decision include:

- **Consensus.** The group members all agree on the final decision through discussion and debate.
- **Compromise.** Through discussion and readjustment of the final plan, group members come to agreement by giving up some of their demands.
- **Majority vote.** The decision is based on the opinion of the majority of its members.
- **Decision by the leader.** The group gives the final decision to its leader.
- **Arbitration.** An external body or person makes a decision for the group.

Leadership in Groups

Leadership is concerned with control and power in a group. Leadership can be aimed at either maintaining the social relationships in the group or facilitating the group to achieve its task. Groups will sometimes have two leaders: one for the social dimension and one for the task dimension.

Some researchers believe certain people are born with traits that will make them good leaders in all situations. A second perspective is that the group's leader selects an appropriate leadership style for the given task. A third way of understanding leadership says that to some degree, leaders are born with traits that make them good leaders, but that they also learn how to become leaders and use strategies appropriate to a given situation.

There are four main styles of leadership:

- **Autocratic.** The leader uses his or her authority to make decisions.
- **Democratic.** Authority is shared and all group members help make decisions.

- **Laissez-faire.** A “hands-off” style in which the leader allows the group to make its own decisions.
- **No leader.** No one in the group exercises leadership. This style, says researchers, leads to group disintegration and is followed by autocratic leadership.

Communication Barriers

In Lesson 2, you learned that there are many barriers to effective listening. These barriers can also interfere with effective communication in groups and lead to the **distortion** of communication. After you understand how these barriers impact group communication, you can do your part to overcome them.

- **Laziness.** Effective communication can be hard work.
- **Internal distractions.** Sometimes group members may have a lot on their minds, which makes it hard for them to concentrate on what someone else is saying.
- **Past relationships.** If members of the group have either a poor or an excellent past relationship with each other, this can affect communication.
- **Lack of trust.** Believing that other members of the group have betrayed your trust or that they do not have your best interests in mind is a barrier.
- **Lack of self-confidence.** If a group member does not sound confident, another member may have a harder time staying focused.
- **Prejudice.** Prejudice can effect both how we hear others as well as how we receive the information.
- **The “halo” effect.** If a group member has an association with someone or something the group already likes, the group is much more likely to be receptive to the member as well as the information. Members may not question what they should question.
- **The “horns” effect.** If a group member has an association with someone or something about which the group has negative feelings, the group may not listen the way they should.
- **External distractions.** Sometimes there are a lot of things going on in the same location where the group is trying to listen to each other.
- **A different level of power between members.** One member may have the authority, and one not. Either way, it can impact how members communicate.
- **Gender preferences.** One group member may have different expectations because of the gender of another member.
- **Emotionality on the part of a member.** If a member gets passionate about the topic, it may distract other members from hearing the real message.
- **Prejudging the message before the entire message has been delivered.** Sometimes a member will say something at the start of a speech or conversation that may distract another member from effectively listening to the rest.
- **Allowing personal characteristics of another member to get in the way.** If one group member was dirty or smelled unpleasantly, for example, another member might not attend to everything that is said.
- **Not caring about another group member.** Being indifferent to a person can affect how well another member pays attention to the message.

Key Note Term

distortion – twisted out of true meaning; reproduced improperly

- **Interrupting.** Sometimes a group member is so excited about an idea he or she wants to share, that the member does not wait for the communicator's thoughts to be completed. This distracts both the sender and the receiver of the message.
- **Trigger words.** Some words evoke an emotional response that prevents effective communication. These words are distracting because they make group members concentrate on something else besides what is being said. Sometimes trigger words will represent different things to different members of a group. This also leaves room for misinterpretation.
- **Delivery style.** Sometimes the way information is delivered can be distracting. One group member might have a very monotone voice or may continuously put in verbal pauses like "uh" or "you know." Any of these things may cause other members to concentrate more on the delivery than the content.

Psychological Barriers

Each member of a group has psychological needs. If these needs are not met, it can create problems. Psychological barriers to communication are more difficult to identify and overcome than other barriers, and require leaders and group members to possess and apply knowledge of human nature to each situation.

Since everyone has a unique combination of factors (or **filters**) such as needs, values, beliefs, experiences, education, goals, and so on (all of which combine to make up a person's character), it is through these filters that group members can see and hear the existence of possible psychological barriers. Consequently, it is through an understanding of how these filters can drive and/or influence one's character, either independently or collectively, that people can learn to avoid potential communication problems, including these barriers.

Guidelines to Avoid Barriers

Aim at your target. Group members always want the target of their communication to understand the message thoroughly; therefore, before sending a message, take a moment to aim at the target. Form the content and tone of the message so that it hits the target squarely and correctly—on the first try.

Use several channels of communication and repeat important communication.

Since barriers can easily filter or block information, communicators must often use several methods to relay the information. In addition, repeat important communication to ensure the information gets out to everyone.

Communication Breakdowns

The number one cause of wasted energy and productivity within groups is communication breakdown. Communicating effectively is a vital part of a group's success. It is imperative that each member of the group communicate effectively if the group is to succeed. Factors that completely disrupt the flow of information are communication breakdowns. The following are four situations that can cause a total breakdown.

Competing for a Person's Attention

People or things that compete for a person's attention may be one cause for a breakdown in communication. Competition for attention occurs when a person receiv-

Key Note Term

filters – a person who alters information or a method of altering information as it is being passed from one person to another

ing the information is trying to do several tasks at once. For example, when somebody interrupts you, one solution that you can implement is to stop working, clear your mind, and concentrate on the new subject until you understand it, then resume work as before the interruption occurred.

However, if you are the person doing the interrupting, you should handle the situation differently. Your first step is to recognize that the other person is busy. If your concern can wait, let it. If you must interrupt, make it as short as possible.

Situations Affecting Self-Esteem

A communication breakdown can often result from a situation that affects the self-esteem of the parties involved. In such cases, if you are aware that certain people do not get along with each other, or have not established a **rapport**, consider this when giving a message that must go to or through the other.

Misunderstandings

Misunderstanding what someone expects of you is another factor that can lead to a communication breakdown. When one group member does what they think another member wants them to do, but actually they do not do what is expected, there is a serious lack of communication.

Misunderstandings often occur when a person uses a word or phrase to describe an action or event rather than actually describing what took place. For example, saying there was a “fight” between Bonnie and Cheryl is quite different from saying Bonnie and Cheryl do not like each other and had an argument last night over what to watch on television.

Another cause of misunderstandings is the use of jargon. Jargon occurs when social or professional groups use certain words that have special meanings because of the nature of the group. Communication breaks down when people outside the group, or new people to that group, do not understand the special meanings.

Distortions, Interpretations, and Filters

As you can see, group communications do not always run smoothly. In addition to various social influences or barriers, frequently someone will distort, dilute, change, or stop the information flow before it reaches everyone for whom the sender intended it. As information travels from one group member to another, each member has the opportunity to make it more specific by adding, changing, deleting, or refining the message.

Most communication processes are not always accurate or perfect since each person in a group must interpret what was said. Two more examples of opportunities for miscommunication are **grapevine** and rumor.

Key Note Term

rapport – a relationship, especially one of mutual trust

Key Note Term

grapevine – an informal, often secret means of transmitting information, gossip, or rumor (that is usually incomplete or does not make sense) from one person to another within an organization or institution

Conclusion

Communicating is one of the most important things you do in life. *Do not think that it comes easily!* You must practice good communication skills daily; then you will gradually see results and be able to communicate effectively and confidently in a group. The spectrum of roles within the group communication process is much richer than just leaders and followers. By increasing our awareness of the diversity of those with whom we interact, and stretching our own capacities, we can develop the skills to communicate effectively and productively within a group.

This concludes the chapter, “Communication Skills.” In this chapter, you learned about the communication process, how to become a better listener, and the importance of communicating in groups.

Lesson Review

1. Define the three major categories of group roles.
2. Describe three types of productive and three types of nonproductive behaviors individuals display within group interactions.
3. Identify your personal behavioral tendencies within group interactions.
4. How would you communicate with people with different personalities?