

## Section V

### **What are the key processes leading to organizational effectiveness?**

Organizational processes refer to the flow of information and the activities associated with how it flows, including how it is generated, how it is transmitted, how it is used to make decisions, who makes these decisions, and how people use information to influence the behavior of individuals and organizations. Formal organizations have highly structured processes for gathering, disseminating, and using information and many individuals are involved in the communication loops. Informal organizations have much more flexible processes for handling information.

Section V describes the central processes that are involved in disseminating information and using it in organizations. Chapter 15 presents the basic interpersonal communications model that is used in sharing information between two people. Organizational communication systems are based on this same model but they are much more complex. Chapter 16 explains how information is used to make decisions, but also how various individual, group, and organizational factors influence decision-making and frequently contribute to inferior decision-making. Chapter 17 describes leadership and explains when leaders should a particular style of leadership for making a decision depending upon the nature of the decision, the characteristics of the followers, and the demands of the situation. Chapter 18 presents a different model for making decisions and explains why most decisions are based more on power relationships than on rational decision making.

Chapter 15	Communication
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Chapter 18	Power and Influence

# Chapter 15

## Communication and Interpersonal Skills

### Chapter Outline

#### Interpersonal Communication

- The Communication Process
- Persuasive Communication
- Supportive Communication
- Listening
- Nonverbal Communication

#### Organizational Communication

- The Effects of Organizational Structure
- Direction of Communication Flow
- Communication Roles

#### Improving Communication Effectiveness

- Barriers to Effective Communication
- Reactions to Communication Overload

## Interpersonal Communication

Communication is the exchange of information between a sender and a receiver. The information may be something other than verbal or written messages and the senders and receivers may be other than people. For example, an airplane instrument panel (sender) sends messages to the pilot (receiver) and a smoke detector (sender) notifies the fire department (receiver) of a fire. In today's organizations, many messages are sent by complex management information systems, where data are input from numerous sources, analyzed by computer, and then electronically transmitted to receivers.

Communication is the lifeblood of an organization; it is the thread that holds the various interdependent parts of an organization together. An organization is a stable system of patterned activities where people work together to achieve common goals through a hierarchy of assigned roles and a division of labor. These patterned activities depend on communication for coordination and integration. If the communication flows could somehow be removed from an organization, the organization would cease to exist. The patterned activities of organizations depend on the exchange of information.

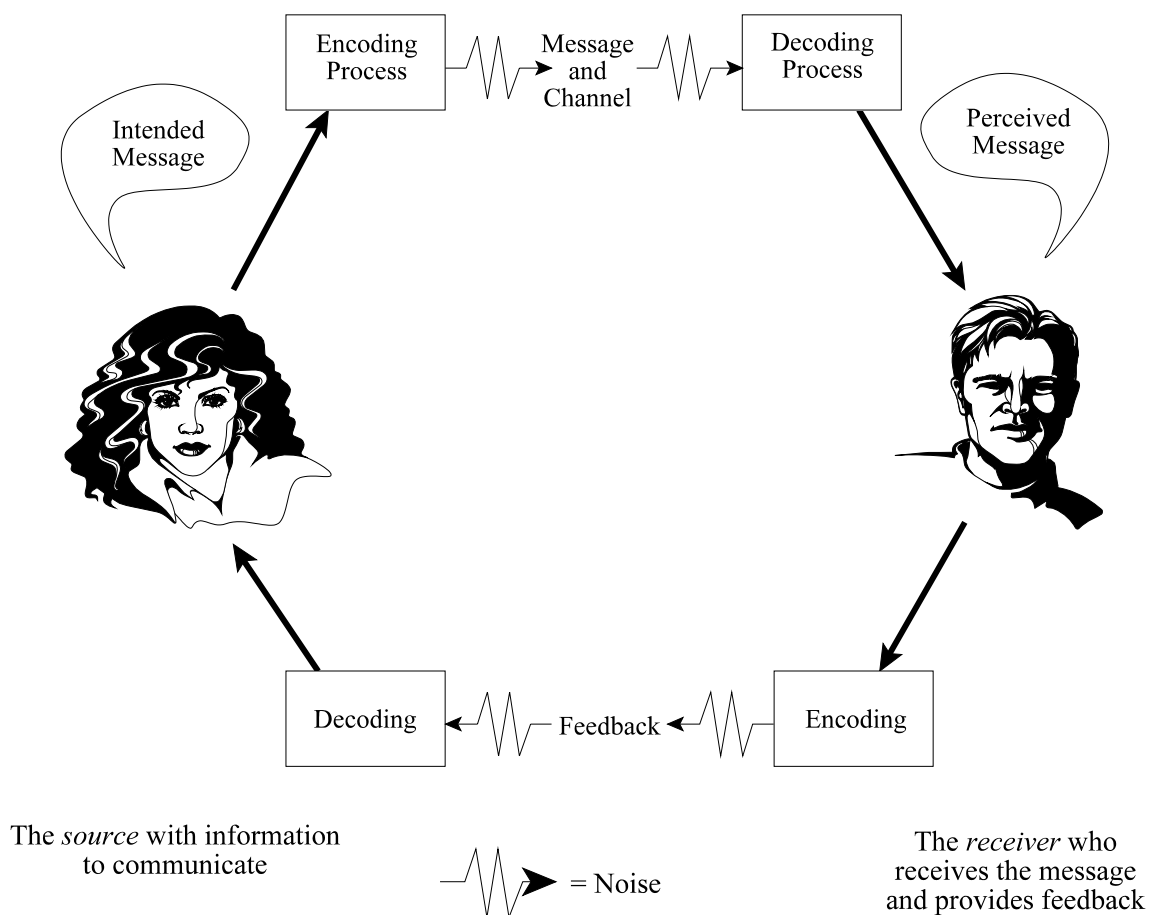
### The Communication Process

**Symbolic Interaction.** The communication process is a *symbolic interaction* between two people. For example, when a customer orders a turkey club sandwich and a strawberry milkshake at a fast-food restaurant, the customer is using words as symbols to indicate what he wants to eat. A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else. The words "turkey sandwich" are made from letters of the alphabet, but they are used to represent something made from slices of turkey and bread. The customer selected a turkey club sandwich after looking at a nonverbal representation showing a picture of the sandwich. The person behind the counter used even different symbols to inform the kitchen what to prepare—"One turkey deluxe, one strawberry."

Although some symbols are quite clear, such as a hat or chair, other symbols are much more ambiguous and difficult to explain, such as loyalty and diligence. Our ability to use symbols allows us to learn from the experience of others. People who lived many centuries ago can communicate their experiences to us symbolically through writing and art. Although receivers who have not experienced the same events as the senders may have difficulty comprehending the exact messages, highly complex messages can often be effectively communicated because of our ability to use symbols. For example, someone who has never experienced a tropical storm may not know exactly what such an event might be like, but a skilled communicator who has experienced such an event should be able to describe it vividly enough for the receiver to appreciate how powerful and frightening a tropical storm can be. A symbolic presentation using words, however, is almost always only a rough approximation of what actually occurred. Even when we are communicating information about physical objects, the meaning may be ambiguous and incomplete because of our inability to find a common ground in communication.

**Elements of the Communication Process.** The basic elements of the communication process are diagrammed in Exhibit 15.1.

**Exhibit 15.1 The Communication Process**



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1. The *source* or sender is originator of the message and may be one person or several people working together, such as a musical group or a television news team.
  2. The *message* is the stimulus the source transmits to the receiver and is composed of symbols designed to convey the intended meaning, such as words, body language, Morse code, sign language, winks, gestures, or electronic impulses.
  3. The *encoding process* transforms the intended message into the symbols used to transmit the message.
  4. The *channel* is the means by which the message travels from a source to a receiver, which could include personal conversations, mass media (such as radio, television, and newspapers), or electronic media (such as the Internet, facsimile machines, voice mail, videotape, teleconferencing, and electronic mail).
  5. The *receiver* is the person who receives the message and has the responsibility for interpreting it.
  6. The *decoding process* involves translating the message and interpreting it.
  7. *Feedback* from the receiver back to the sender is actually another message indicating the effectiveness of the communication. One-way communication does not provide an opportunity for feedback.
  8. *Noise* refers to anything that disrupts the transmission of the message or feedback, which includes everything from ambiguous wording of a message to a poor telephone connection or static from a poor TV antenna.

The accuracy of communication depends on the successful completion of each step in the communication process. It is not enough to carefully prepare and transmit a message and then simply assume that effective communication has occurred. The encoding, transmitting, decoding, and feedback processes are all essential for effective communication.

## **Persuasive Communication**

Changing attitudes and swaying public opinion is an important issue for many organizations, such as political parties, religious organizations, business groups, and neighborhood committees. Consequently, persuasive communication has been investigated by scholars for many years; Aristotle was one of the first to construct a basic outline of the elements of persuasive communication. In his classic book, *Rhetoric*, Aristotle identified the three important dimensions for analyzing persuasive communication: the source, the message, and the audience.<sup>1</sup> Some of the characteristics associated with these three dimensions are summarized in Exhibit 15.2.

**Characteristics of the Source.** Extensive research has shown that the effectiveness of a message is largely influenced by the receiver's perception of the source's *credibility*. When changing attitudes, a highly credible communicator is more effective than one with low credibility.<sup>2</sup> Countless TV commercials attempt to get viewers to buy products because of recommendations by doctors or the

American Dental Association or a panel of leading experts. Presumably, these authorities know the facts and should be listened to.

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**Exhibit 15.2 Characteristics of Persuasive Communication**

<b>Characteristics of the Source</b>
Credibility: expertise and trustworthiness Similarity or dissimilarity from the receiver
<b>Characteristics of the Message</b>
Logical and reasonable Pleasant versus fear appeal One-sided versus two-sided arguments Primacy versus recency Overheard messages
<b>Characteristics of the Audience</b>
Level of intelligence Initial position

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Communicators acquire credibility largely by possessing two characteristics: expertise and trustworthiness. Research scientists, for example, are more believable because they are considered experts who know the facts and are well informed about the issues. The fact that a doctor endorses a particular medication on television is effective both because doctors supposedly know what they are talking about and because they are perceived to have nothing to gain by recommending the particular product. The credibility of a communicator is destroyed, however, if the communicator has an ulterior motive or if the recommendation appears to be self-serving.

Several studies have shown that the effectiveness of a highly credible source lasts for only a short time. When measures of attitude are obtained immediately after the persuasion attempt, the studies show that highly credible sources produce significantly more attitude change than low-credibility sources. If the measures are obtained four to six weeks later, however, the credibility of the source appears to have no impact, and both groups show essentially equal amounts of attitude change.<sup>3</sup>

Another variable associated with the source is the similarity or dissimilarity of the communicator with the audience. People are more persuaded by communicators who share similar backgrounds and personality characteristics. Therefore, if you want to sell a computer to a word processing center, it may be better to get the endorsement of other users rather than a computer expert. Whether a communicator is more persuasive because of similarity or expertise depends largely on whether the issue in question is one of values or one of facts. If the persuasive message is a value issue, such as accepting new technology; learning new skills, or increasing productivity, the most effective communicator is one who shares similar characteristics with the audience. However, if the persuasive message concerns facts, such as which printer is the fastest and most reliable, the most effective communicator is one who possesses high credibility as a trustworthy expert.<sup>4</sup>

**Characteristics of the Message.** In general, the most persuasive communications consist of logical, well-reasoned presentations delivered in an eloquent and organized fashion. To persuade others, messages need to be reasonable and logical. However, some attitudes are not changed very easily by logic or reason because they are based on emotion and feeling.<sup>5</sup>

In preparing a persuasive communication, you need to know whether to present only one side of an issue or both sides, and if both sides, which side should be presented first. Should you reach a conclusion, or let the receivers draw their own conclusion? Several studies have examined the relative effectiveness of one-sided versus two-sided presentations. Most of the evidence seems to indicate that they are almost equally effective. One-sided presentations may be superior when the listeners are not aware that a reasonable case could be made for the other issue. Yet two-sided communications were found to be far more effective in producing change that could withstand a counterattack on a subsequent occasion.<sup>6</sup>

If a communicator is going to present both sides of an argument, which side should be presented first—pro or con? Studies suggest that the order of presentation does not seem to make much difference as long as both messages are presented about the same time. But, if there is a long time span between the two messages, and attitudes are measured immediately following the second presentation, a recency effect typically occurs, in which the most recent message is accepted.<sup>7</sup>

Messages that make the receivers feel good tend to be more persuasive. Messages that evoke happy feelings and pleasant associations seem to attract attention and evoke a favorable response from the receiver. Favorable surroundings can also contribute to the persuasiveness of communications, such as pleasant music, good food, and beautiful scenery. The persuasive effect of pleasant surroundings explains why most TV commercials use beautiful scenery and pleasant music, with people who look as though they are having fun.

However, studies have also shown that communications tend to be more persuasive when they arouse the listener's level of fear. For example, advertisements about the effects of cigarette smoking on health tend to be more effective when they specifically describe the harmful effects of cancer and emphysema. Similarly, messages about taking injections for tetanus, adhering to safe driving standards, and improving dental hygiene practices tend to be more effective when the listeners are told specifically about possible serious consequences.<sup>8</sup> However, the level of arousal can be too intense if the listeners are shown vivid portrayals of accidents, disease, and other repulsive scenes. The relationship between the degree of fear and the amount of attitude change appears to be an inverted-U relationship. As the level of fear increases, there is initially an increase in attitude change. As the level of fear becomes too intense, however, people cannot cope with the problem and respond by avoiding or denying the information.<sup>9</sup>

Another variable influencing the credibility of a message is whether the listeners believe it was intended for them. Overheard messages tend to be very persuasive because the listeners are not worried about being intentionally manipulated and, therefore, the source is more credible. People are also influenced by messages that appear to be censored and kept from them. The effect of censorship, whether it be movies, books, or magazine articles, generally stimulates greater interest in obtaining the censored material, which then has a more persuasive impact than would have been anticipated if it had not been censored.

In interpersonal communication, the total message is more persuasive when both the verbal and nonverbal messages are consistent. When they are inconsistent, however, the effectiveness of the verbal message is diminished. In fact, when the verbal and nonverbal communications are inconsistent, the listeners are usually influenced more by the nonverbal behavior, such as facial expressions, physical posture, and body

language, rather than by the words. Furthermore, nonverbal cues portraying emotion are recognized more easily and remembered longer than inconsistent verbal messages.<sup>10</sup>

Videotaped messages such as television are generally considered the most persuasive form of mass communication because they combine the visual picture of the communicator with the verbal message. Audio messages, such as tape or radio, have generally been considered second in effectiveness, and the printed word, such as newspapers and magazines, has been considered third. Studies indicate, however, that the relative effectiveness of videotaped, audio, and written messages depends on the complexity of the message. Highly complex messages are more effective in a written form, which allows the receiver to reread and analyze the content of the message. Simple messages, however, are more effectively and persuasively communicated through videotape, where they are presented in living color.<sup>11</sup>

**Characteristics of the Audience.** The effectiveness of a persuasive communication is limited by the receiver's ability to understand the message. A highly educated audience would be expected to understand complex arguments. The relationship between intelligence and persuasiveness, however, appears to be mixed. Although highly intelligent people are more receptive to communications than less intelligent people, they are more resistant to influence. Therefore, people with moderate intelligence are generally the most easily influenced by the average communication. Those with very low intelligence do not understand the influence attempt, while those at very high levels of intelligence tend to resist the influence.<sup>12</sup>

The initial attitudes of the receivers influence the effectiveness of persuasive communication. People tend to have a *latitude of acceptance* that includes a range of attitudes slightly more or less favorable than their own. Their latitude of rejection consists of attitudes that differ significantly from their personal position. Persuasive communications are more successful when they advocate a position that falls within the listener's latitude of acceptance. When the message falls outside the latitude of acceptance, the listeners typically respond by changing their attitudes in the *opposite* direction. The results are quite different, however, if the source is a highly credible expert. Persuasive communication has a greater impact when the expert's position is significantly different from the listener's initial position. The wider the discrepancy, the greater the distress listeners have about the differences between their opinions and the expert's. If the communicator is not an expert, the listeners are inclined to disregard such a discrepant communication, thinking that only a fool could have such a far-out position. But, if the source is an expert, the wide discrepancy cannot be so easily dismissed, and the listeners are more prone to change their opinions.<sup>13</sup>

## Supportive Communication

While the goal of persuasive communication is to change attitudes, *supportive communication* is designed to avoid defensiveness. When defensiveness occurs, people feel anger and hostility toward the other person, and communication breaks down. Defensiveness on the part of the sender results in incongruent messages, in which there is a mismatch between what the sender thinks and what is communicated. People are congruent when their feelings are consistent with their behavior. Defensive communicators feel irritated and angry but refuse to express their feelings and attempt to deny them. Rather than dealing with their upset feelings openly, they allow their hostility to be expressed covertly through sarcasm and insincerity. When defensiveness occurs on the part of the listener, the message is typically not received. Defensive listeners do not listen effectively, and important elements of the message are either ignored or distorted. To the extent that a defensive communication is received, it usually results in a defensive response that further aggravates the problem of ineffective communication.

Defensiveness is avoided, or at least reduced, by supportive communication. This type of communication is descriptive, problem-oriented, flexible, and owned rather than disowned.

**Descriptive.** Supportive communication is descriptive and specific rather than evaluative or general. When people are told that their ideas or behaviors are good or bad, the evaluation process causes them to feel defensive. Evaluative statements create defensiveness and often result in arguments. For example, telling a cashier, “You did a terrible job handling that customer’s complaint,” would be an evaluative comment that creates defensiveness and antagonism. A descriptive comment would have been less threatening and more supportive, such as “The customer became upset because you interrupted him several times and raised your voice at him.”

Using descriptive communication allows the situation to be discussed without arousing the need to defend or argue. Descriptive communication consists of three elements: (1) describing the event as objectively as possible; (2) describing your feelings about the event or consequences of the event; and (3) suggesting an alternative that would be more acceptable to you.

As a general rule, communication becomes more useful and arouses less defensiveness as it becomes more specific. For example, the statement “You are a poor cashier” is not a helpful comment because it does not indicate what behaviors need to be changed. In contrast, the statement “You interrupted the customer three times and spoke louder each time” is a specific statement telling a cashier what was wrong.

**Problem-oriented.** Supportive communication focuses on the specific problem rather than the personalities or status of the members. For example, the statement “You are too hotheaded when customers have a complaint” is a criticism of the cashier’s personality. Problem-oriented communication focuses on the problem and its solution rather than discussing personal traits or ascribing blame. Focusing on the problem rather than personalities is particularly appropriate during performance appraisals since employees need to understand how to improve their performance, not how to change their personality. “You are unreliable, and we can’t trust you to do your job” is a person-oriented statement that will generate defensiveness and hostility; whereas the statement “Your weekly reports have been late, and some of the information is so inaccurate we can’t use it” is a problem-oriented statement that helps the individual know exactly what is wrong.

Problem-oriented communications also help to avoid making the listener feel inferior. The solution to a problem should be generated by a careful analysis of the problem, not by the invocation of status or power. Defensiveness is created when one person attempts to create an impression that says, “I know and you don’t know” or “I am right and you are wrong” or “I have more power so we’ll do it my way.” These statements are examples of win-lose conflict, where one individual attempts to win at the expense of another or to look good by making others look inferior.

**Flexible.** Supportive communication is flexible, not rigid. When people adopt a know-it-all attitude and behave in a dogmatic manner, the other person becomes defensive, and effective communication is inhibited. “That sales projection has got to be wrong; I know it can’t be that high” is a very rigid statement. A much more flexible statement is “It seems to me the sales projection is wrong; I don’t see how it can be that high.” People who are dogmatic in their conversation generally prefer to win an argument than to solve a problem, and being seen as the winner is more important to them than building a relationship. The consequence of such rigid communication is reciprocal rigidity, defensiveness, and interpersonal conflict.



Flexible communication means that the communicator is willing to accept additional information and acknowledges that other alternatives may exist. Being flexible is not synonymous with being insecure or easily influenced, but indicates a willingness to learn and grow by considering the contributions of others. Attitudes and opinions are stated provisionally rather than presented as firm facts. One consequence of flexible communication is that it affirms and acknowledges the potential contribution of other people. Other individuals are encouraged to share their attitudes and opinions because they are led to feel they can make a significant contribution to the conversation.

**Owned.** Supportive communication is owned, which means that the communicator takes responsibility for what is said. An example would be “After reviewing your qualifications, I have concluded that you have not satisfied the entrance requirements.” Disowning communication, in contrast, is indicated by speaking in the third person or using plural pronouns, such as “We think that” or “They said” or “We’ve heard that.” By attributing the source of a communication to some unknown party or external source, the communicator avoids having to take responsibility for the message and thereby avoids becoming invested in the communication. “The feeling of the committee is that you have not satisfied all the requirements and should not be admitted.” One result of disowning communication is that the listener does not know whose point of view the message represents and often feels frustrated by not being able to pursue the problem further. Furthermore, disowned communications contain an implicit message that a certain psychological distance should be maintained rather than offering a close, interpersonal relationship.

## Listening

Although listening is essential for effective communication, it is probably the most overlooked process in interpersonal communications. Reading, writing, and public speaking are taught in our educational system, and students spend many hours developing these skills, but students are usually left to falter along on their own when it comes to listening. Listening skills are developed to some extent by teaching students how to read and how to speak. But listening skills are different from reading and speaking skills, and students who are good at reading and speaking may still be very poor listeners.

Studies on listening indicate that most people are at best only mediocre listeners. One study found that most people remember less than half of what they hear immediately after hearing it, no matter how carefully they thought they listened. Two months after listening to a person talk, the average listener will remember less than one-fourth of what was said. Listening tests likewise indicate that people usually recall only about 25 percent of a conversation. Furthermore, when asked to rate the extent to which they are skilled listeners, 85 percent rate themselves as average or worse.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, listening is an important skill that needs to be more carefully developed. Effective listening comes from developing empathy and using effective listening skills.

**Empathy.** Effective listeners have been called *active listeners*, *reflective listeners*, and *empathic listeners*. Each of these labels implies that the listener must have the ability to listen to another’s message empathically. Empathy is the capacity to participate in another’s feelings or ideas; it involves understanding and relating to another’s feelings. Empathic listeners imaginatively project themselves into the speaker’s frame of reference and comprehend the full impact of the message. *Empathic listening* involves accurately perceiving the content of the messages and also understanding the emotional components and unexpressed meanings contained in the message.

Empathic listening involves being able to reflect or restate the communicator’s message on two different levels. The first level is called the *expressed level of empathy*, in which the listener simply paraphrases,

restates, or summarizes the content of the communication. The second level, called the *implied level*, is more advanced and involves attending not only to what the communicator expresses but also to what was implied or left unstated.

The differences between the expressed and the implied levels can be illustrated by comparing alternative responses to a student who complains about not performing very well on a test. “I read and outlined every chapter in the text and spent twenty hours reviewing my notes and still scored ten points lower than my roommate, who didn’t even read all the chapters.” At the expressed level of empathy, the listener responds to the content and emotion of what was expressed: “You feel frustrated because you tried so hard to learn and still didn’t do as well as your roommate.” At the implied level of empathy, however, the listener responds not only to what was said but also to the implied or unstated component: “You sound discouraged about trying so hard and not doing as well as your roommate. It can be very frustrating when you try so hard and not do as well as you expected. When that happens, it’s easy to get depressed and feel sorry for yourself.”

Good empathizers need to know when to display each level of empathy. At the beginning of an interaction, listeners need to use the expressed level. After a feeling of trust and acceptance has been created, however, the implied level is appropriate. If the listener attempts to use the implied level of empathy too early in the interaction before a feeling of trust and acceptance has been developed, the communicator will probably feel threatened and feel as though he or she were being psychoanalyzed. If a listener continues to use the expressed level as the relationship becomes more intense, the expressed level may appear somewhat superficial and insincere.

**Effective Listening Skills.** Many listeners believe listening is just a matter of sitting back and absorbing information like a sponge. Effective listening does not just happen, however; it requires much effort and hard work.

Different situations call for different kinds of listening. In a classroom, for example, students listen to obtain information and comprehend the most important concepts. In a political debate, the public often listens to confirm previously held biases supporting their points of view. In a courtroom, the opposing lawyer listens for faults, weaknesses, and contradictions in the testimony. In building a relationship, an empathic listener tries to understand the content and feeling of the message to enhance personal growth for both the communicator and the listener.

Several lists of guidelines have been proposed to explain the principles of good listening. Ten principles of effective listening are summarized in Exhibit 15.3. These ten principles identify the major differences between good and bad listeners. Good listeners look for areas of interest; overlook errors of delivery and objectionable personal mannerisms; postpone judgment until they understand the central point; listen for ideas and identify the main points; take careful notes to help them remember; are actively responsive in trying to listen; resist distractions; challenge their minds by trying to learn difficult material; capitalize on mind speed; and assist and encourage the speaker by asking for clarifying information and paraphrasing the ideas.<sup>15</sup>

**Exhibit 15.3 Principles of Effective Listening**

Principle	The Good Listener	The Bad Listener
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1.	Look for areas of interest	Seeks personal enlightenment and/or information; entertains new topics as potentially interesting	Tunes out dry subjects; narrowly defines what is interesting
2.	Overlook errors of delivery.	Attends to meaning and content; ignores delivery errors while being sensitive to any messages in them	Ignores if delivery is poor; misses messages because of personal attributes of the communicator
3.	Postpone judgement.	Avoids quick judgments; waits until comprehension of the core message is complete	Quickly evaluates and passes judgement; inflexible regarding contrary messages
4.	Listens for ideas.	Listens for ideas and themes; identifies the main points	Listens for fact and details
5.	Take notes	Takes careful notes and uses a variety of note-taking or recording schemes depending on the speaker	Takes incomplete notes using one system
6.	Be actively responsive.	Responds frequently with nods, "uh-huhs," etc.; shows active body state; works at listening	Passive demeanor; few or no responses; little energy output
7.	Resists distractions.	Resists being distracted; longer concentration span; puts loaded words in perspective	Easily distracted; focuses on loaded or emotional works; short concentration span
8.	Challenge you mind.	Uses difficult material to stimulate the mind; seeks to enlarge understanding	Avoids difficult material; does not seek to broaden knowledge base
9.	Capitalize or mind speed.	Uses listening time to summarize and anticipate the message; attends to implicit messages as well as explicit messages	Daydreams with slow speakers; becomes preoccupied with other thoughts
10.	Help and encourage the speaker	Asks for clarifying information or examples; uses reflecting phrases; helps to rephrase the idea	Interrupts; asks trivial questions; makes distracting comments

*Source:* Developed by Kim Cameron and used with permission.

**Making Appropriate Responses.** An important element in effective listening is responding to the communicator by making appropriate responses. Some responses stimulate the communicator to discuss the issue more extensively and expand to related areas of interest. Other responses tend to restrict the topic of communication and terminate the conversation.

The appropriateness of the response largely depends on the purpose of the communication and the goal of the interaction. If the purpose of the conversation is to evaluate performance, an evaluative or reinterpreted response is generally best. However, if the purpose of the interaction is to help another individual solve a problem or make a decision, a reflective or probing response is generally most appropriate. Seven different response types have been identified that range from very directive responses, which close communication, to very nondirective which tend to open additional topics for consideration, as shown in Exhibit 15.4. Each of these seven responses is appropriate for different purposes.<sup>16</sup>

## Nonverbal Communication

Face-to-face communication involves more than just the words we use. The verbal portion actually constitutes only a small part of the total message. The way in which the words are arranged and presented, including the tone, the rate of speech, inflection, pauses, and facial expressions, actually provide most of the message's content for the receiver. The words themselves do not stand alone but depend on nonverbal components for their true meaning. To illustrate, the expression "Isn't this just great!" could be used as an honest expression of happiness and joy. But if it is used with the appropriate facial expression and intonation, it becomes a sarcastic comment conveying disgust and contempt. The study of nonverbal communication has identified five major variables that influence the meaning of messages. These five variables include physical distance, posture, facial cues, vocal cues, and appearance.

**Physical Distance.** The study of the ways in which people structure their space and the distances between people in daily interactions is called *proxemics*.<sup>17</sup> The physical distance between the source and the receiver communicates a message itself, in addition to influencing the interpretation of what is said. We tend to stand closer when talking with people we know and like and further away from people we do not know or do not like. Shaking hands and touching is another way to communicate to people that you like them and have an interest in them. Physical distance is also an indication of status, and subordinates tend to maintain greater distance between themselves and people of higher status. Elevation can also be used as an indication of status, particularly in some cultures (such as Tonga). People of higher status are seated on higher-level platforms than people of lower status.

**Posture.** The study of posture and other body movements, including facial expressions and gestures, is called *kinesics*.<sup>18</sup> Posture, or body language, can be used to indicate numerous things, including liking or status. We tend to relax by leaning backward, maintaining an open-arm posture, and directly facing those we like. However, we tend to become rigid and tense around those of greater status or those whom we perceive as threatening. Higher-status individuals are generally more relaxed in posture than those of lower status. Standing, pacing, and putting your hands on your hips are all nonverbal cues of high status. When talking to another individual, we can communicate an element of responsiveness and interest in what they have to say by making spontaneous gestures, shifting our posture from side to side, and by moving closer to the individual.

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### Exhibit 15.4 Seven Alternative Types of Responses

*These seven responses illustrate different ways of responding to an irate customer who states, "I ordered that part last month, and you said it would be here in a week. I think you're trying to take advantage of me."*

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1. Evaluative responses: Pass judgment, express agreement or disagreement, or offer advice; for example, “We are not trying to take advantage of you. You need to be patient longer.” evaluative responses are useful after a topic has been explore in depth, and it is appropriate for the responder to express an opinion.
2. Confrontive responses: Challenge the other person to clarify the message and identify points of inconsistency or contradictions; for example, “Just because we haven’t been able to deliver the part yet doesn’t mean we’re taking advantage of you. No one else feels that way.” Confrontation is useful for helping people clarify their thoughts and feelings or to think more broadly about the issue.
3. Diverting responses: Change the focus of the communicator’s problem to a problem selected by the responder; for example, “Your comment reminds me of a problem I had last summer. I remember when . . .” Diverting responses often involve changing the subject and are helpful when a point of comparison is needed an the communicator needs to know that someone else has experienced a similar event.
4. Probing responses: Ask the communicator to clarify what was said or to provide additional information or illustration; for example, “Yes, or deliveries are late, but could you tell me specifically why you think we’re trying to take advantage of you?” Probing responses are useful when the respondent needs specific information to understand the message or when the communicator needs to respond to another topic in order to make the communication clearer.
5. Reinterpretive responses: Restate the message to examine an underlying cause, meaning, or interpretation of the message; for example, “Apparently you’re upset because you think we promised you an unrealistic delivery date just so you wouldn’t go to one of our competitors.” Reinterpretive responses help clarify the message for both parties and encourage the communicator to pursue the topic in greater depth.
6. Pacifying responses: Reduce the intensity of emotions associated with the message and help to calm the communicator; for example, “There’s no need to think that we’re trying to take advantage of you, the delay is simply out of our control.” Pacifying responses are useful when the communicator needs to by reassured that discussing the message is acceptable or when the intensity of feeling being experienced is inhibiting good communication.
7. Reflective responses: Reflect back to the communicator what was heard, but in different words; for example, “You’re saying that we intentionally misrepresented our delivery date and are treating you unfairly.” Reflective responses help communicators know they have been both heard and understood. Reflective responses should not simply mimic the communicator or be a direct restatement of what was said. Instead, they should contribute understanding meaning and acceptance to the conversations.

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**Facial Cues.** Although some people tend to be rather expressionless, others are very expressive and communicate many messages just using facial cues. In a job interview, for example, eye contact is an important indicator of an applicant’s competence and strength of character. A pleasant facial expression also communicates a feeling of liking for another individual. We tend to maintain eye contact with people we like and avoid contact with those we dislike. High-status people tend to display less eye contact than do those of lower status. Smiling, frowning one’s eyebrows, and other facial expressions also indicate a degree of responsiveness to the communicator.<sup>19</sup>

**Vocal Cues.** The study of the human voice, including range, pitch, rhythm, resonance, and tempo, is called *paralinguistics*.<sup>20</sup> Interpersonal attraction and concern for another individual can be expressed through vocal cues. Speaking in a pleasant tone of voice at a moderate rate of speed indicates a desire to communicate with the other individual. Anger is usually expressed in a loud, high-pitched tone of voice, while boredom is expressed through a deep, lethargic tone of voice. Lower-status people tend to have a lower voice volume than do those of higher status. Speaking loudly, rapidly, and in a moderate tone of voice generally conveys a sense of intensity and enthusiasm.

**Appearance.** Physical appearance, especially clothing, sends surprisingly strong nonverbal messages. High-status people often display appropriate ornaments, such as the badges and bars used in the military or police units. “Dress for success” seminars emphasize the importance of appearance in manipulating one’s personal power and status in a group. For example, it is suggested that men wear long-sleeved rather than short-sleeved shirts if they want to increase their personal power and have greater influence on the outcome of a committee meeting.<sup>21</sup>

Although listeners may be unaware of it, they often look for nonverbal indicators as they listen to the message. The evidence suggests that women are rated more effective than men at both encoding and decoding nonverbal messages.<sup>22</sup> If the nonverbal component of the message supports the verbal message, it can reinforce the intended meaning of the message and assist the receiver in properly decoding the message. However, if communicators say one thing but nonverbally transmit a different message, the receiver tends to give more credence to the nonverbal components. For example, if supervisors use an apathetic, monotonic voice to say, “Thanks, I really appreciate what you’ve done,” their vocal cues destroy their intended message.

In a courtroom, jurors may ignore the testimony of witnesses when their verbal testimony is inconsistent with their nonverbal behaviors. Post-trial interviews with jurors have revealed that the testimony of a key witness may be discounted because the paralinguistic behaviors of the witness overwhelm the content of the testimony.<sup>23</sup>

## Organizational Communication

### The Effects of Organizational Structure on Communication

There is a common misperception about communication problems in organizations. The “myth of open communication” suggests that organizational problems are caused by inadequate communication and the solution is to make all information universally available. In fact, just the opposite is true. An important function of organizational structure is to *restrict* communication flows and thus *decrease* problems of information overload. Some organizational problems are solved not by increasing but by restricting the flow of communication and clearly specifying how information is to be gathered, processed, and analyzed.

Consider the situation of sixty people who gather informally in an auditorium. As long as they interact with whomever they choose, they will remain a disorganized collection of people regardless of their purpose for meeting. Unless the communication channels become organized and constraints are placed on the flow of information this group will find it virtually impossible to accomplish anything, whether they are a state legislature, a college fraternity, or a group of concerned citizens. With an unorganized group of sixty people visiting at random the number of potential communication links between two

people is  $N(N - 1)/2$ , or 1,770. However, if they are organized into six groups of ten with a formally appointed leader, the number of communication channels is reduced to just nine in each group.

The situation is similar to an orchestra. If sixty musicians play whatever they want, such as they do when they are warming up, the result is unpleasant noise rather than beautiful music. To make beautiful music, the members must play exactly what they are supposed to play at exactly the right time. The same is true of communication patterns in organizations. To move from an unorganized state to an organized state requires that restrictions be placed on the flow of communication. People must use the appropriate communication channels, and only job-relevant information should be transmitted. Unrestricted communication produces noise and confusion in the organization. Without precision and timing, there may be sound but no music. Likewise, without structure and regulations there may be conversations but no meaning.

### **Direction of Communication Flow**

One way to analyze organizational communication is to study the direction of information flow, that is, who communicates with whom. The three most important directions of formal communication flow are downward, upward, and horizontal. Informal communication is circulated through the grapevine system.

**Downward Communication.** Downward communication follows the organizational hierarchy and flows from people in higher levels to those in lower levels. The most common downward communication includes explanations of organizational policies and practices, instructions about how to do the job, the rationale explaining why the job is important, feedback to subordinates about their performance, and explanations of the goals and objectives of the organization.

This information teaches subordinates how to perform their jobs properly and makes them feel part of the organization. However, organizational members frequently complain that the information they receive is both inadequate and inaccurate. A typical complaint is “We have absolutely no idea what’s happening.” Although managers usually communicate job instructions adequately, they fail to provide an adequate rationale for the job or sufficient feedback to subordinates.

A problem in downward communication is inaccuracy as the information is passed from level to level. Orders are typically expressed in a language appropriate for the next level down rather than the lowest level, where the message is aimed. Therefore, as the information travels down the organizational structure, it needs to be adapted to the members at each successive level. A classic study of downward communications in 100 organizations estimated that 80 percent of the information was lost after passing through five levels of the organization.<sup>24</sup>

**Upward Communication.** Upward communication is designed to provide feedback on how well the organization is functioning. Lower-level employees are expected to provide upward communication about their performance and the organization’s practices and policies. The most common forms of upward communication include memos, written reports, suggestion boxes, group meetings, and grievances.

The most serious upward communication problem is filtered information. Since it is typically used to monitor the organization’s performance, upward communication can best be described as what subordinates want the supervisors to hear rather than what the supervisors need to know. Another problem with upward communication is that organizations typically rely on lower-level members to initiate it. Instead of actively soliciting information and providing channels for receiving it, managers

frequently adopt an open-door policy and assume that people who have something to say will voluntarily express it.

**Horizontal Communication.** Horizontal communication is lateral communication between peers; it does not follow the formal organizational hierarchy. Formal bureaucratic structures do not provide for horizontal communication, and one of the challenges in creating an effective organization is providing acceptable channels for lateral communication. Adhering strictly to a formal chain of command is inefficient and creates a serious communication overload for upper-level executives. However, unrestricted horizontal communication detracts from maximum efficiency. Therefore, organizations must provide for horizontal communication channels where they are necessary while restricting unnecessary channels.

In addition to helping people coordinate their work, horizontal communication among peers furnishes emotional and social support to people. Horizontal communication contributes to the development of friendships and informal work groups.

**Informal Communication.** Informal communication is called *grapevine communication*, and it exists in every organization. The *grapevine* is created by informal associations and cuts across formal lines of communication. Some of the major characteristics of grapevine information are as follows:

1. Grapevines are found in every organization, and they are virtually impossible to eliminate. It is only natural for employees to discuss matters of mutual concern, and even the closest monitoring of their conversations will not prevent them from occurring.
2. Information usually travels more rapidly through the grapevine than through official communication channels.
3. The grapevine is a more spontaneous form of expression and hence more intrinsically gratifying and credible than formal communication.
4. In situations where official censorship and filtering occur, grapevine information is more informative.
5. On noncontroversial topics related to the organization, most of the information communicated through the grapevine (estimated to be at least 75 percent) is correct. Emotionally charged information, however, is more likely to be distorted.
6. The number of people who serve as actual links in the grapevine is generally relatively small (estimated to be less than 10 percent of the group).<sup>25</sup>

Occasionally grapevines benefit the organization, and managers use them as a regular substitute for formal communication. For example, the grapevine can be used to test reactions to a proposed change without actually making a formal commitment. Managers have been known to leak ideas to the grapevine just to test their acceptability before implementing them.

Grapevines tend to cause trouble in organizations characterized by a lack of trust and confidence among managers and workers. The unfortunate irony is that organizations most in need of an effective grapevine are usually plagued by a grapevine prone to distortion. Grapevines provide a disservice when they become a constant source of false rumors. Rumors seem to spread fastest and farthest when the



information is ambiguous, when the content of the rumor is important to those involved, and when the people are emotionally aroused.

Although rumors can be destructive to an organization, it has been shown that some stories and myths perpetuated in organizations contribute greatly to the organization's effectiveness by preserving valuable aspects of the organization's culture. At Hewlett-Packard Corporation, for example, feelings of job security among employees are perpetuated by a story describing how the workers at one point years ago went on a reduced workweek to avoid layoffs and preserve jobs.<sup>26</sup>

## Communication Roles

Communication integrates and coordinates the various activities of an organization and helps it function more effectively. If communication were eliminated, the organization would cease to exist. Studies of communication networks in real organizations have identified four communication roles that disseminate information within the organization and help it communicate with the outside world.

**Gatekeepers.** A *gatekeeper* is someone who controls the flow of messages between two people or two groups in an organization structure. A gatekeeper in a communication network acts like a valve in a water pipe. One function of the gatekeeper is to decrease information overload by filtering the flow of messages from one group to another. An example is a quality control clerk who collects daily reports, summarizes them, and presents them to the plant manager.

**Liaisons.** A *liaison* is someone who connects two or more cliques within a system without belonging to either clique. Liaisons are the cement or the linking pin that holds the groups of an organization together. Liaisons are somewhat similar to gatekeepers, but while gatekeepers typically govern the flow of upward communication, liaisons are typically positioned between two groups that are not arranged hierarchically one above the other. An example of a liaison between a football team and the faculty is a sports writer who tells the faculty about the team and when they will be gone and tells players how they are doing in class.

**Opinion Leaders.** Opinion leaders fill an important role in what is called the two-step flow model of attitude change. Persuasive messages flow from the mass media to opinion leaders, who interpret the information and pass it on to the public audience.<sup>27</sup> Within a group, opinion leaders are able to influence the attitudes of group members by helping them interpret new information and define the situation.

**Boundary Spanners.** *Boundary spanners* are people who communicate with the organization's environment. These people are typically top executives who travel widely and enjoy many types of contact with other organizations. They help the organization obtain acceptance within the environment and sense changes in the environment that will influence the organization. In one sense, boundary spanners are a special type of gatekeeper, as they control the communication flows by which new ideas enter the organization. Boundary spanners help the organization cope with its environment and predict future changes.

## Improving Communication Effectiveness

Improving communication in organizations involves more accurate encoding, transmitting, decoding, and feedback at the interpersonal level and, at the organizational level, creating and monitoring appropriate communication channels. Several strategies can be used to help managers communicate more effectively.

**Increasing Feedback.** Misunderstandings are reduced when adequate feedback is available; communicators know if their messages have to be revised or repeated. Feedback mechanisms are just as important for organizational communication as they are in interpersonal communication. Top managers should not issue orders or policy statements and merely assume they have been understood. Feedback mechanisms and reporting systems need to be established so managers know whether their messages have been understood, accepted, and followed.

**Regulating Information Flow.** Managers who expect everyone to “see the big picture” often create a serious communication overload. Rather than trying to keep everyone involved, top-level managers need to follow the “*need-to-know*” principle in transmitting downward communication. Managers should ask whether lower-level positions need this information to perform their tasks effectively. If the answer is no, the message should not be transmitted. Another useful principle in regulating the flow of information is the *exception principle*. This principle states that only significant deviations from standard policies and procedures should be brought to the attention of superiors. As long as performance falls within the acceptable range, the regular procedures are followed.

**Repetition.** Repetition helps listeners interpret messages that are ambiguous, unclear, or too difficult to understand the first time they are heard. Repetition also reduces the problem of forgetting. Since forgetting is such a serious problem many managers adopt the policy of having very important messages repeated at least three or four times. Effective communicators build repetition into their presentations by expressing the same idea in different ways. A popular strategy in both writing and speaking to help the audience remember the main point is to tell them what you’re going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you’ve told them.

**Simplifying Language.** Complex language, technical terms, and jargon make communications difficult to understand and frustrating to the listener. It is not true that complex ideas require complex terms to explain them. Almost every idea can be explained in relatively simple language so that most people can understand it. When it is important for the listeners to understand the message, the communicators should make certain that the language they use is clear and easily understood.

There are times, however, when complex language using jargon and technical terms is appropriate. When a message is communicated to an audience that understands them, technical terms and jargon are useful. Scientific research reports, for example, are written for an audience of scientists who understand the technical terms that are used. One advantage of using technical terms is that they have a precise meaning that conveys precise information without using many words. Although simple language tends to increase comprehension, complex language tends to save time and make communication more efficient for those who comprehend it.

One of the best ways to simplify an explanation is to provide an example or illustration. Complex ideas are not only difficult to understand but also difficult to remember. A simple illustration helps the listener comprehend the idea and remember it. Sometimes when listeners feel baffled and confused, the most effective thing they can do is to simply ask, “Can you give me an example to help me understand that?”

**Effective Timing.** A useful strategy for improving communication is to manage the timing of messages so they are received in an orderly manner. Speakers often begin to speak before the listeners are ready to

listen. Many managers find that messages come to them in a disorganized fashion, and they cannot switch effectively from one topic to another as rapidly as they need. This principle is similar to the procedure many executives use in responding to their in-basket. Incoming mail is sorted into piles of related topics. A similar procedure can be used, to some extent, with verbal communication where specific time periods are scheduled for discussing a specific topic. Organizations can schedule conferences, meetings, and retreats to focus on identified problems without the influence of other distractions.

## **Barriers to Effective Communication**

The following are nine of the major barriers to effective communication.

**Omission.** The transmitted message is almost always an abbreviated representation of the intended meaning. Listeners may hear a message and feel secure, thinking they understood the communication, but what they may not realize is that what they heard was neither complete nor what the sender really intended to say.

**Filtering.** Filtering is the manipulation of information so that selected data, especially negative comments, are either removed or altered before they are transmitted to the next individual.

**Time Pressures.** Limited time, which is a reality in every aspect of life, causes vital information to be distorted or deleted. Occasionally people who should be included in the formal communication channel are overlooked, creating a situation called *short-circuiting*.

**Jargon.** Jargon consists of abbreviated words or simplified phrases summarizing more complex concepts that convey a unique meaning to other group members. Consequently, jargon tends to increase the speed and accuracy of communication within groups and to strengthen cohesiveness. But it creates a difficult barrier for members outside the group. New group members typically feel confused and alienated from the group until they master the jargon.

**Value Judgments.** While the source is speaking, the receiver should be listening. However, many receivers assign an overall worth to the message based on small samples of it and then begin to develop a rebuttal. Effective listening requires the listener to suspend judgment until the entire message has been received and then evaluate the worth or accuracy of the message.

**Differing Frames of Reference.** Accurate communication requires that the encoding and decoding processes be based on a common field of experience that the sender and receiver may not share. For example, two people will have difficulty talking about living in the mountains of Idaho if snowy winters mean skiing, snowmobiling, and ice skating to one while the other thinks about wet feet, cold hands, icy roads, and cars that won't start.

**Selective Listening.** The problem of selective listening is part of the larger problem of selective perception, in which people tend to listen to only part of a message and ignore other information for a variety of reasons. We hear only what we want to hear and tend to disregard information that creates cognitive dissonance or is threatening to our self-esteem. We try to ignore information that conflicts with established beliefs or values.

**Semantic Problems.** Occasionally people think they speak the same language, but the symbols they use do not have a common meaning. Semantic problems are particularly troublesome in communicating abstract concepts or technical terms. Words such as “discounted present value,” “exercise option,” and “trusts” have special meanings to a finance executive that they do not have to someone in production.

**Information Overload.** When people receive more messages than they can possibly handle, they experience communication overload. New and innovative communication channels, such as facsimile, voice mail, Internet, teleconferencing, and electronic mail, are making communication easier, faster, and more convenient. But they are also causing a severe information overload and organizations are being forced to create usage guidelines for the effective use of communication channels.

## **Reactions to Communication Overload**

Organizational processes are frequently responsible for generating excessive amounts of communication. Too much communication can be just as troublesome as inadequate communication. Individuals and organizations use a variety of reactions to communication overload and some are more adaptive than others. Adaptive responses focus on solving the problem, whereas dysfunctional responses fail to solve the problem, although they may delay the collapse of the system momentarily.

**Disregarding** involves ignoring what cannot be easily absorbed, which is a dysfunctional response since information is disregarded on an irrational basis. The information that is typically ignored is usually the information that seems the most difficult to comprehend or the least pleasant to attend to.

**Queuing** consists of collecting the information in a pile, with the expectation of processing it at a later time. Queuing is only appropriate for recorded information such as letters, reports, and memos. Telephone calls and other verbal messages cannot be conveniently placed in a queue. Queuing, or delaying the processing of information, can be either an adaptive or dysfunctional response depending on the amount of overload. If messages continue to arrive faster than they can be processed, the pile becomes infinitely long. However, if there is adequate time between the surges of incoming messages to process them, queuing may be an effective way to respond.

**Filtering** involves screening information that appears to be irrelevant and it can also be either adaptive or dysfunctional, depending on whether useful guidelines have been created for deciding what to screen. People tend to screen information that they do not readily understand and that does not make them look good.

**Approximating** consists of processing a sample of the information and using it to make inferences regarding the rest of the information. Approximation is typically an adaptive response because most information is highly redundant and a random sample usually provides a good estimate of the total message.

**Multiple Channels** involves assigning different people or departments to be responsible for collecting and analyzing portions of the information and is a highly adaptive response in terms of organizational effectiveness. An example of this decentralized process of handling information is to have employee complaints sent to the employee relations department; questions about stock options referred to the finance department; and issues regarding product quality submitted to the quality control department.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the principles of supportive communication and how does it differ from persuasive communication? Provide some illustrations of when you would want to use supportive communication and describe what you would say.
2. How good are your listening skills? What can you do to be a better listener? What are the principles involved in being a good listener?
3. Why must communication be restricted in an organization? Can you provide any examples, fictitious or real, illustrating how the free flow of communication can disrupt an organization?
4. What are the major conditions that contribute to information overload? Explain the methods of responding to an information overload and provide illustrations of them to indicate when they are functional or dysfunctional.

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