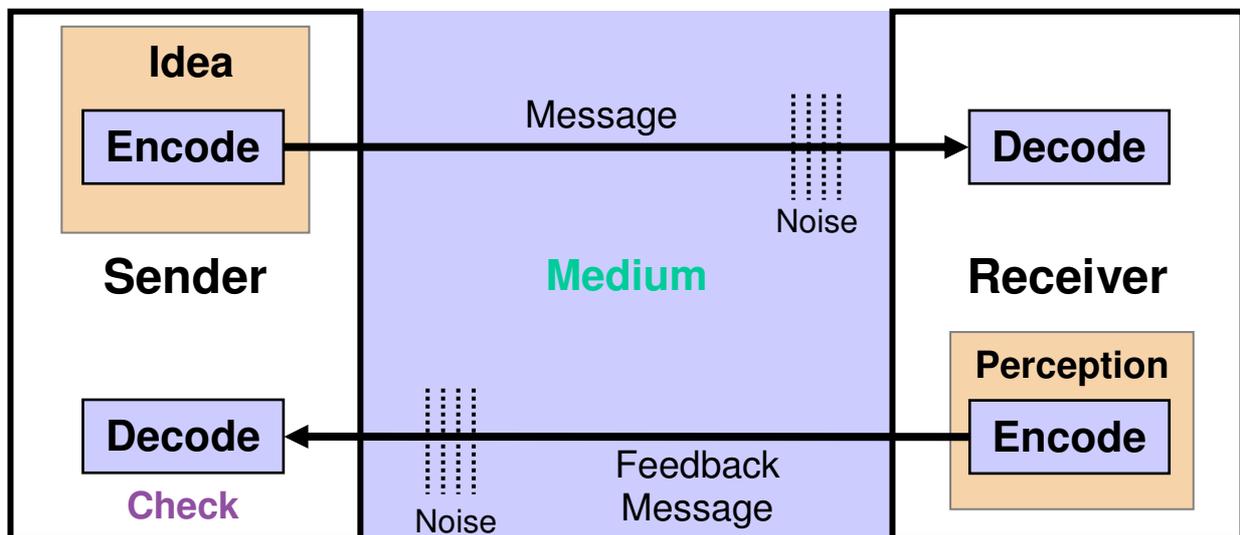**Stakeholder** *Management* Pty Ltd

White Paper

Communication Theory

Overview

Communicating requires skill[1]. To make communication effective, careful thought has to be given to the choice of media and message, how the message will be delivered (and who will deliver it) and the best writing, or presentation style to use based on the personality of the person you wish to communicate with, the *receiver*.

The sender-receiver model

The sender-receiver model is the simplest communication model and underpins most others. The *sender* has an idea or concept he/she wants the receiver to appreciate. Before any useful outcome can be achieved from the communication, the *receiver* has to accurately understand the sender's idea! This means the message has to be effective in the *receiver's* space; if the message does not engage the *receiver*, the *sender* is wasting his/her time.

The elements in this model are:

- **Encode:** To translate thoughts or ideas into a form of language that can be understood by the *receiver*; eg, written English, spoken French or a drawn diagram.
- **Message:** What is sent: the output of encoding
- **Medium:** The method used for sending the message (face-to-face, telephone, email)
- **Noise:** Something that interferes with the sending or understanding of the message (distance, culture, language differences)
- **Decode:** The translation of the message by the *receiver* from the medium into their thoughts.

A single communication is complete once the feedback-message has been decoded by the *sender* and checked for accuracy against the original idea. Once this loop has been closed both people have a common understanding of the idea. This does not require agreement or concurrence, but if there is to be a disagreement, it helps if everyone has the same basic understanding of the issue or idea in dispute.

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[1] A number of posts focusing on communication have been published on the Mosaicprojects's Blog. To view the summary see: http://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/category/stakeholder-management/communication/

Effective communication requires both the *sender* and the *receiver* to be engaged. The *sender* needs to check that the 'message' has been received and validate the feedback: *"Can we just summarise our discussions to make sure that I have not left anything out?"* The *receiver* needs to check that he/she has absorbed and understood the content of 'message' *"Can I just summarise our discussions to make sure that I am clear on the details and objectives?"* This is active listening and feedback[2].

Dimensions of communication

Communication can be categorised in a number of different ways. The four primary considerations are:

Written or Oral

- Written messages are read[3], the effectiveness of the communication is influenced by the document's design[4].

- Oral messages are heard. The communication is heavily influenced by what the *receiver* sees (if the *sender* and *receiver* can see each other). Body language and facial expressions can count for more than 50% of the message received. Paralingual influences, including the pitch, tone and phrasing of the voice counts for another 30% of the message. These influences and the immediacy of visual feedback make oral communications much richer in context then written communication.

Formal or Informal

- Formal communications are relatively infrequent and usually have pre-planned legal or governance[5] implications. The communication can be oral or written using any appropriate medium including, letter, email, telephone, etc. Some typical formal communications include:
  - o A formal presentation to stakeholders (typically scripted[6]) that the stakeholders can rely on for decision making, eg, a presentation to the project review board who will use the information to assess the on-going viability of the project.
  - o A contract instruction emailed to a supplier changing a specified requirement.
  - o A telephone agreement with a sales organisation changing your insurance policy (usually recorded to ensure a record of the new contact).

- Informal communications are all of the other communications that are not formal. This includes all conversations, discussions and meetings. Plus most written communications.

Directions of communication

- Upwards. To senior managers and others with authority over the project.

- Downwards. To project team members, suppliers and contractors.

- Outwards. To people and organisations outside of your organisation that are not involved in the work of the project or program as a supplier (included in 'horizontal').

- Sidewards. To peers and colleagues, usually within the organisation (included in 'horizontal').

Internal or External

- Internal communications are to people within the organisation. Typically you have some 'rights' in respect of these communications.

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[2] For more on Active Listening see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf

[3] For more on writing skills see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1010_Writing_Skills.pdf

[4] For more on document design see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1065_Page_Layout.pdf

[5] For more on governance see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1033_Governance.pdf

[6] For more on presentation skills see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1009_Presentation_Skills.pdf

- External communications are to people outside of the organisation. Typically you have less rights to require feedback, etc.

These different classifications individually or in combination help with the development of the overall communication plan.

Barriers to communication

The purpose of any communication is to create understanding leading to appropriate responses or actions by the *receiver*. However, the understanding is formed in a person's mind and no two minds are the same[7]. Even simple words in a language can have very different meanings to two people[8]. Each person's brain will filter and sometimes distort information based on the synapse developed over their lifetime; this can be thought of as the brain's hardwiring and affects both conscious and unconscious thought processing.

To manage and survive the permanent state of sensory overload the brain is subjected to by the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, the brain classifies most of the information as unimportant at 'this-moment' and relegates it to the subconscious; it is effectively ignored until something out of the ordinary occurs. Those elements that are of importance are then processed as efficiently as possible by the brain using pattern matching and 'packaging'.

Pattern matching allows the brain to respond quickly and simply to a stimulus based on previous similar occurrences. Subtle differences are ignored.

Similarly detail within the 'package' is ignored unless an additional stimulus makes looking within the 'package' important. An example is looking for your car in a carpark; you can match the pattern of 'your car' when you see a small part projecting out from behind others….but you ignore details such as dust on the paintwork. The eye sees all of the detail all of the time, the brain filters out the extraneous information and simply deals with the 'package' of 'your car' and the process of getting from where you are to where it is effectively and safely.   Stereotypes based on cultural differences are a form of packaging that is particularly damaging to communication; there are no positive stereotypes! But everyone has a predetermined view of 'engineers', 'technicians', 'senior managers', etc.

Effective communication needs both the *sender* and the *receiver* to be aware of this problem and work to minimize its effect – you can never totally remove these hard wired processes.

How we send and receive messages is also affected by the objectives of the communication, how we feel (right now), other conscious and unconscious thoughts (our personal reality), cultural differences, personal preferences, and the personality and communication style of *sender* and *receiver*. Other potential 'barriers' to the effective receipt of the message include environmental and personal distractions, particularly lack of interest and fatigue.

For effective communication, particularly across cultures we must be aware of these potential 'barriers' and plan to reduce their effect. This requires the gathering of information about each of the stakeholders you need to communicate with, including their relative importance, influence and level of support and receptiveness. From this understanding an effective communication can be designed that has the best chance of working effectively for you in the *receiver's* reality.

Effective communication

Effective communication is central to:
- Interviewing stakeholders for requirements and presenting reports to management

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[7] For more on the effect of cognitive biases see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1069_Bias.pdf

[8] See **Communication or Confusion**: http://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2010/02/05/communication-or-confusion/

- Negotiating scope, budgets, deadlines and resource allocations[9]
- Advising team members or senior managers[10]
- Conducting and participating in meetings (provided effective meeting management techniques are used[11])
- Resolving conflict[12]; motivating the team[13]; influencing others.

All of these activities are enhanced by effective communication. However, for a communication to be effective, at least two of these elements need to be present.

- **Power:** if a communicator is perceived to be powerful (important), the message being communicated will be seen to have importance. Power comes from a range of sources including technical expertise.

- **Credibility:** built by making all communications accurate, timely and complete, as well as consistent, open and auditable. Errors are managed (and credibility least damaged) by openly identifying the problem and correcting it. Secrecy destroys credibility.

- **Relevance:** Appropriate to the audience, subject-matter and environment. The relevance of the information to the recipient is enhanced through additional characteristics including being timely and presented in a concise and consistent format.

Power is useful if you have it and can reduce the effort needed to tailor individual messages for each recipient (although effective leaders do this anyway), the receivers want to understand your message. For the rest of us, relevance requires understanding the receiver's needs and credibility simply has to be earned.

Convincing a Sceptic

Changing the pre-set opinion of an executive to accept a new idea is tough, especially if she's a sceptic. To help overcome her cynicism, you need to expand on the concepts of *power*, *credibility* and *relevance* by including some or all of the following ideas:

- Co-present with a trusted source. Sceptics are highly suspicious of any information that challenges their worldviews. You can increase your chances of success by sharing the stage with someone the executive believes in – build the value of your ideas on the credibility the co-presenter has established with the executive.

- Demonstrate endorsements. You need as much credibility as you can garner. Ask others in positions of power, who support your idea, to let the executive know.

- Stroke egos. Some sceptics respond to flattery so authentically move ownership of the idea into their space. You can do this by starting sentences with phrases such as *"You've probably seen this data already…"*

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For more on the **Stakeholder** *Circle®* including White Papers, Published Papers and books, see:
http://www.stakeholdermapping.com/

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[9] For more on negotiation see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1024_Negotiating.pdf

[10] See **Advising Upwards**, a new book by Dr. Lynda Bourne: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Book_Sales.html#Adv_Up

[11] For more on running effective meetings see: www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1075_Meetings.pdf

[12] For more on managing conflict see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1041_Managing_Conflict.pdf

[13] For more on Motivation see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1048_Motivation.pdf